

Son of the Sannin

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Naruto lost his parents the night of his birth due to the Kyubi escaping, but fortunately Jiraiya and Tsunade are willing to take care of him in their place. Watch how his life unfolds while being raised by the Sannin, and how such actions will change not only Naruto's life, but the lives of those around him. Slight AU

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An Unconventional Family

Author's Note: Welcome to "Son of the Sannin" dear reader! You're about to embark on an amazing journey following how Naruto's life would have been if he had been raised by everybody's favorite pervert and his friend the blond gambler. Though then again, there will be changes to the Naruto Universe that have nothing to do with this event. You'll see as the story unfolds. But I promise that said changes won't be too big, and it will be mostly to cover plot holes and make for a better reading experience.

Now, as for pairing, as you can see, the main pairings will be Naruto/Hinata and Jiraiya/Tsunade, though there will be more pairings out there, such as Sasuke/Sakura or Shikamaru/Temari. But with the exception of NxH and JxT, nothing's written in stone.

Also, I'd like to thank Hektols, whose amazing story "New Chance" gave me the inspiration to write this work (among other stories) as well as for providing with some ideas to make this story much better. Seriously, if you like Naruhina, go to read his story.

DISCLAIMER: Okay, I'm going to put this here because I got a lot of reviews bitching about the issue. Despite being a story about Naruto being raised by Jiraiya and Tsunade, NARUTO ISN'T GOING TO BE OP. He will be stronger and smarter than he was in canon, and he will learn most of his canon abilities earlier, but he won't be a Gary Stu with 400 bloodline limits and a harem. Hinata is going to be his equal, not some arm candy. You have been warned.

Also, this story is an ENSEMBLE PIECE. What does it mean? That it has a lot (and I mean A LOT) of characters, and while Naruto will remain the main character through and through,

many times the focus will be on other character or group of characters.

Anyway, enough ramblings and disclaimers, let's get this story started!

Chapter 1:

An Unconventional Family

or

Foxes, Toads and Slugs

Jiraiya stood in front of the gates of Konoha, contemplating the place that it had been his home for such a long time. That's it, until Orochimaru's betrayal and Tsunade's self-imposed exile made it unbearable for the Toad Sage to continue living there. He never had a permanent home from that moment onwards, hopping from one town to another, doing his "research" and having one night stands with beautiful and easy to charm women. He only returned sporadically to pay a visit to his student and friend, Minato Namikaze.

It has been three months since the latest, and now last, of those visits. They talked about Jiraiya's failed book, *The Tale of the Gutsy Ninja*, and how Minato wanted to name his firstborn son after the main character of said book, Naruto. In the meantime, Jiraiya wrote his first erotic novel, *Icha Icha Paradise*, which became a bestseller in no time, engorging his already large bank account. He had been planning to drop by once the kid was born in order to give the newborn some nice gift.

In fact, he was on his way to Konoha when a courier ninja arrived and told him about the tragic news, and that his presence was required in the village. Upon reading the letter with all the details, at

first he thought it was some sort of tasteless joke, but the letter he was carrying had the stamp of the Hokage's office.

And now, just as he stood in front of the gates, he realized it wasn't a joke as he had secretly hoped. Even from the outside, Jiraiya could tell that Konoha had been victim of a devastating attack recently, which was confirmed the moment the Toad Sage walked into the village.

The streets were nearly empty. Destroyed buildings left and right. Trails of smoke coming everywhere. The gray sky appeared to reflect the somber and depressing mood the village seemed to be in. Jiraiya hurried towards the Hokage's Tower.

...

Hokage's Tower

Hiruzen Sarutobi was in his former, soon to be his once again, office as he absent-mindedly looked through the window, lamenting the current state Konoha was in. An ANBU appeared behind him.

"Hokage-sama, Jiraiya-sama is here as you requested," the ANBU announced.

The Third turned around, and sighed. "Tell him to come in, please."

"As you say," the ANBU said before disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

A few second later, the white haired Sannin walked into the office. Hiruzen couldn't help but smile a little upon seeing his old student.

"Hello, Jiraiya, it's good to see you again, even if it's under such awful circumstances. How was your trip here?" Hiruzen said as he sat down on his chair.

"Not to be rude, but that matters very little now. It's that true, sensei? Are Minato and Kushina truly dead?" Jiraiya asked, trying to

suppress the anguish of his voice.

"Yes."

Jiraiya averted Sarutobi's gaze, sighed, and whispered a profanity. He looked at his former sensei once again and asked: "May I... see the bodies?"

"You may, but not now. There are urgent matters we must attend first before you can pay your respects to your student and his wife," Hiruzen gravely said. "Matters that concern their son."

"Their son? Where is Naruto now? Is he okay?" Jiraiya asked worriedly.

"Naruto is fine. He's possibly one of the few people how came out of this unscathed," Hiruzen said.

"I don't know if I'd call having a demon sealed inside him 'unscathed', sensei," Jiraiya pointed out. "Not to mention that that kid just lost his parents."

"True. Excuse my lack of tact. And to answer your first question, he's downstairs, on the lower floor. A couple medical ninjas are taking care of him. Now, Naruto was the reason I called you here."

"Because I'm his godfather."

"Exactly. According to Minato and Kushina's will, they left everything to Naruto; all their physical assets, such their house and other properties, as well as all their liquid assets, which will be managed by his legal guardian until Naruto comes of age. And according to their will, this person is you."

"I see."

An uncomfortable silence followed Jiraiya's laconic answer.

"So... do I suppose that you're up to become Naruto's legal guardian and raise him until he's eighteen? Regardless of Minato's will, we can assign another legal guardian if you refuse."

Jiraiya found the offer tempting. He had decided a long time ago that he would never settle down. That he would throw himself to the pleasures of life, to wander the world and enjoy it as much as possible. Taking care of a baby would make such thing impossible. He'd need to stay at a permanent place -more than likely Konoha, since neither sensei nor the elders would allow the Kyubi out of the village for other nations to take it- and had to prioritize Naruto's needs and well being over *everything else* . No, the perspective of becoming a single father was everything but alluring.

But then again, if he didn't take care of Naruto, who will? Almost nobody in the village would want to be near Naruto after the Kyubi's rampage out of fear, and he knew that other people would try to turn him into a weapon, depriving him of a normal childhood. No, he had a moral responsibility towards Naruto. Nobody else would want to take care of Naruto and raise him like a normal child but him.

Jiraiya soon would learn how wrong he was. He was about to give his sensei an answer when shouts from outside the office drew both men's attention.

" *Miss, I'm sorry but Hokage-sama is in a meeting. You can't disturb him now,* " a male voice said, which Jiraiya vaguely recognized as the ANBU he has been talking to.

" *Do you know who I am? I'm sure that sensei will make time for one of his old students!* " a female voice angrily replied, a voice Jiraiya knew too well.

"Oh my, I didn't expect her to come here so soon. Or to come at all," Sarutobi said, visibly worried.

"What is she doing here?" Jiraiya asked, equally worried.

" You see, Hokage-sama's guest is also another one of his old students and- "

" WHAT!? GET OUT OF MY WAY! "

BOOM!

Jiraiya and Sarutobi winced, and they both hoped that the poor ANBU wasn't too hurt.

The office's door slammer open, and a big breasted blonde burst in. She fixed her eyes on Jiraiya, and snarled. She then looked at Sarutobi with rage in her eyes.

"Oh Kami, I knew it! You're going to do it!"

"Tsunade, harming my ANBU and breaking into my office like that is not an appropriate thing to do," Hiruzen said calmly.

"Oh can it, sensei! I came here to stop you from making a huge mistake!" Tsunade said angrily.

"And that mistake would be...?"

"Leaving a child under the care of this... this... maniac!" Tsunade said, pointing at Jiraiya.

"I'm fine, Tsunade-hime, thanks for asking," the Toad Sage said in a deadpan tone, earning another glare from his former teammate.

"I see. I suppose that you have a better candidate in mind?" Sarutobi asked, intrigued.

"You are damn right! I myself would make a much better caretaker than this smut writer!"

"That's fine, but you don't have any legal base for claiming Naruto's guardianship. I am his godfather and Minato left Naruto under my

care should something happened to him and Kushina," Jiraiya retorted.

"Yes I have. Naruto's my family."

"Yeah, sure. And I am the grandnephew of the Sage of the Six Paths."

"It's true, you moron! Kushina was an Uzumaki, just like Mito, my grandmother. I am Naruto's only family, and thus I have a greater claim to be his guardian."

"While I admit I am no expert when it comes to parenthood, I'm pretty sure that taking care of a baby costs money. Lots and lots of money. And last time I checked, you were hounded by quite a few creditors."

"I'm aware that Minato had quite some money on his bank account. I can use that to cover Naruto's expenses."

"Yeah, if you don't blow up on a casino again!" Jiraiya angrily said, and turned to his former master. "Sensei, you can't seriously leave Naruto under this compulsive gambler!"

"I do have experience raising children! I've been raising Shizune since she was a little girl, and she turned out fine!" Tsunade said before Sarutobi could answer. "Even with my flaws, there's no way I can't be worse than Jiraiya!"

"Alright, I heard enough!" Hiruzen said, raising his voice and slamming his hands on the desk to make his former students to shut up. "Both of you have good points, and I'm sure we can reach a compromise."

"What kind of compromise?" asked Tsunade. "Shared custody?"

"Not exactly. It's obvious that you want what's best for Naruto, so why don't you raise him together? You can cover each other's

weaknesses, and I'm sure that Naruto will benefit better if he has both of you taking care of him instead of just one of you."

"But... that means that we'll have to live together..." Jiraiya said. He didn't like where this was going.

"Yes, of course."

"But we're not a couple! What the hell are we supposed to do, pretend that we're a happy marriage for Naruto's sake?" Tsunade protested.

"You don't have to pretend anything. If it put your mind at ease, think of each other as being roommates with a couple common interests. Or teammates fulfilling a long term mission," Hiruzen said, hoping his solution would appease both Sannin.

"I don't know if this little meeting didn't made it obvious enough, but Tsunade-hime and I aren't exactly on friendly terms," Jiraiya mentioned.

"Yeah, I saw. But there was a time in which you'd take a kunai to the gut for the other. I have faith you'll mend your relationship, at least for Naruto's sake," Sarutobi said.

"It's not that easy, sensei," Tsunade said.

Hiruzen sighed heavily. "I never said it was easy. Listen, I've been aware of the lives you have been living after you left Konoha, and frankly you had me worried. From what I could see, all what you did is try to run away from your personal demons, indulging in superficial pleasures for shallow comfort. But I can tell that neither of you have been happy, regardless of how much you might try to deny it.

"We all have lost somebody dear to us. I myself lost my beloved wife and many old friends to the Kyubi a few days ago, yet here I am, taking the mantle of the Hokage once again. I'm not saying that we're all the same or that you shouldn't deal with grief, but... how

long has it been since both of you left? Six years? Maybe more? I think it's about time you two start to move on.

"You can think of this as an opportunity. A new, fresh start. A chance to do something great. Don't you think it's about time to stop wandering around the world aimlessly wasting your lives in vain pleasures, and start doing something productive with your lives again? Both of you want to take care of Naruto. If that's the case, show me that you're worth him. Show me that you're able to not let your demons to get in the way of rekindling your friendship. Show me that the great and powerful Sannin, the ninjas I helped to shape are still there, instead of the gambler and the pervert before me."

A deafening silence followed Sarutobi's speech. Both Sannin wanted to reply, but they just were unable to. They couldn't find the right words. Any words. They glanced at each other, hoping that the other would have a clever reply that would get them out of admitting that their sensei was right, but there was none.

Jiraiya sighed in defeat. There was no way out of here. "Okay... I'm... I'm willing to raise Naruto together. What do you say, Hime?"

Tsunade had calmed down a bit, and looked just as pensive as Jiraiya. "Alright, if this is what I have to do so I can be with my only family... but don't dare to get any ideas! Understood!?" Tsunade said, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

Jiraiya raised his hands in defense. "Hey, I didn't say anything! And you'll see that I can be a perfect gentleman."

"You better be."

"Then it's settled," Sarutobi said, visibly satisfied, as he stood up from his desk. "Now, would you like to see Naruto?"

They didn't need to answer. Sarutobi guided his two former students to a room in the lower floor, in which a teen girl was being instructed

by one of the medic ninjas how to hold baby Naruto. At the girl's feet there was a small pig wearing a maroon jacket and a pearl necklace.

"I see that you're getting to know Naruto, Shizune," Tsunade said when she saw her apprentice.

"Oh, Tsunade-sama! Did you get Naruto's custody?" Shizune said, smiling at her.

"Er... yeah, more or less," Tsunade replied.

"More or less? What does that mean?"

"I got joint custody with Jiraiya over here," Tsunade said as he motioned to her fellow Sanin. "We... we'll be living together from now onwards."

"Oh, you're Jiraiya-sama?" the teen girl asked. "I'm so glad to meet you! Tsunade-sama told me a lot about you!"

"Shizune!" Tsunade shouted.

"Really? That's nice to hear. And exactly what did she say about me?" Jiraiya asked with a perverted grin.

"Wipe that grin from your face, you pervert! The first thing we're going to do once we settle is to establish a series of rules to make sure we have a... tolerable coexistence. You got that?"

"Of course, Hime. You know I'd hate to do something to get on your bad side."

"That's good to hear. So, shall we move to Minato's old house already?"

"Actually, I don't think that's a good idea," Hiruzen intervened.

"Come again?"

"You see, Minato had a lot of enemies that would love to get revenge on him through his son, so I believe that we should keep Naruto's existence, as well as his parentage and his condition as a Jinchuriki a secret outside Konoha's walls. That's why I think we should sell all of Minato and Kushina's properties, and use that money to buy a new house for the four of you to live in. Also, I think that we should give Naruto his mother's last name instead."

"But sensei, Naruto has the right to know who his parents are. We'd make a disservice to Minato and Kushina's memory," Jiraiya calmly protested.

"I guess you got a point there, Jiraiya. Alright, for the time being, you can tell Naruto that his parents were powerful ninja who died the night the Kyubi attacked, but keep their names a secret for the time being. Same goes with the Kyubi."

"Sorry sensei, but I have to disagree there as well. You simply can't keep such a thing a secret from him, especially since the rest of the village knows about it already," Jiraiya protested once again.

"It's for his own protection."

"How being ignorant to the incredibly dangerous being inside him is going to protect him exactly?" Jiraiya didn't bother to hide his skepticism.

"Listen, I want Naruto to have a normal life. That's what his parents would have wanted. Naruto carries a heavy burden on his shoulders, but he shouldn't be aware of it yet. That's why I'm going to enact a law in order to forbid the Kyubi from being even mentioned by either ninja or civilians, under penalty of immediate execution."

"Let me tell you why that's an monumentally stupid idea," Jiraiya replied. Sarutobi couldn't help but feel outraged at Jiraiya's bluntness. "Your solution amounts to ignore the Kyubi. We can ignore it, but that won't make the Kyubi disappear, and everybody else knows that. Forbidding people from talking about the Kyubi

might protect Naruto to some extent, but it won't make people forget that the Kyubi is still inside him, nor stopping them from seeing Naruto as a bomb ready to go off at any moment."

"Even if that's true, how can Naruto have a normal life then?"

"Let's face the facts: such thing is impossible. Naruto won't have a normal life," Tsunade interceded. Both Jiraiya and Sarutobi turned at her in surprise. "Not that that's a bad thing, though. *Normal* doesn't have to mean *happy*. Jiraiya and I will ensure that Naruto's childhood is as fulfilling as possible."

"Thanks for backing me up, Hime," Jiraiya said, smiling at her.

"I'm just stating the truth."

"But if his generation grows up knowing that Naruto carries the Demon Fox, it might alter their perception of him and will judge him unfairly. It will be nearly impossible for him to make friends," Sarutobi interjected once again.

"Tell me, sensei, do you think anybody would let their children near Naruto knowing what he's holding inside? At the very least, with all the facts, the children will be able to judge Naruto by themselves. And if they're unable to differentiate between the prisoner and its jailer, then they aren't worth his time," Jiraiya said.

"You seem very sure of yourself, Jiraiya. Are you sure this won't backfire?"

"I would be lying if I said I was one hundred percent sure, but I do believe that it is the best option. Let's have faith that the new generation will accept Naruto and won't judge him unfairly. You always drilled into our heads the importance of protecting the next generation. If we protect them, then we can place some trust in them, right?"

Sarutobi spent a few moments silent, pondering Jiraiya's words. A smile slowly crept his wrinkled face, and soon the old ninja was laughing, much to his students' bemusement.

"To think that I just had one of my teachings used against me... yeah, guess that you proved your point, Jiraiya. There will be no special laws regarding Naruto. You two will be tasked with his protection and well being, and we'll have faith that Naruto will be accepted among his peers, regardless of his burden," Sarutobi said. "There's one more thing I'd like to talk about. Even if I can guess your answer, it's there a chance that you may rejoin Konoha's ninja ranks again?"

Besides getting back two of the most powerful ninja Konoha ever produced, Hiruzen was hoping that the return of the Sannin would help boost the incredibly low morale of Konoha's citizens.

"Sorry, but no. I came back here to take care of my only blood family left, not to be a killer and relive painful memories," Tsunade firmly stated.

"I'm with her. I left the ninja life behind. I'm a writer now. We will get involved with Naruto's training once he's old enough."

He was about to add "should Naruto choose to become a ninja", but for somebody like Naruto, that wasn't a choice. He'd have to be a ninja for his own sake. Both Sannin hoped they could convince him to take that path.

"But think in all the good you could do! Konoha's in its darkest hour. I'll ask you to reconsider," Sarutobi said, almost begging. He knew that if he passed this opportunity, he'd never had the chance to convince them to go back to being ninjas again.

"Here's my counterproposal: I'll take a job at the Konoha Hospital, and I'm willing to even train future medic nins. But I'm never going back to a battlefield," Tsunade said.

Hiruzen seemed to agree with her terms. He then turned to Jiraiya. Now that Tsunade made a concession, he'll have to do one as well.

"If there's a mission that absolutely nobody else can do, you can call me," was the Toad Sage's offer. "Also, my spy network is at your service."

"Good to see that I can count on both of you, even if it's on such terms. Even if it was tragic circumstances that made you return, I'm glad to have you two back on Konoha," Sarutobi said in a heartfelt manner.

"Then it's all settled. When do we move in?" Tsunade asked, impatient.

Three Weeks Later

Neither Jiraiya nor Tsunade had much luggage, due to both of them being wanderers, and hoped that they could move to a house to begin their new life. However, it took Naruto's new family some time before they could be settled in. With Minato's money, they bought and remodeled a two story house with a yard, that had been damaged during the Kyubi attack. It needed a lot of work before they could live on it, such as giving the front a paint job, replace broken glasses, fix the plumbing and the electricity, and move out the previous occupants' possessions (who had sadly died during the Kyubi attack, and were given to their closest relatives).

While they worked on the house, they were forced to live on an improvised shelter for other people who also lost their homes to the Kyubi.

Still, after weeks of hard work, they were ready to move in. Jiraiya had called dibs on setting up Naruto's bedroom. Despite Tsunade's very loud protests, in the end she had relented, and allowed the Toad Sage to have his way. The fact that he locked the door and didn't allow anybody to enter until he was done was enough to raise an alarm on the blonde's head.

As Jiraiya was getting ready to show Tsunade and Shizune Naruto's room, Tsunade couldn't help but have a feeling of overwhelming regret.

"Alright, here it is!" Jiraiya said as he opened the door. Tsunade braced herself for the worst. "What do you think?"

Tsunade had to admit that it wasn't as bad as she had expected. The originally white walls were decorated with murals of beautiful forests and mountains with smiling toads on them. There was a toad-shaped crib on a corner with a few stuffed toads on it, a desk, and an empty wardrobe with toads carved on its doors.

"While I find the amount of toads excessive, at the very least you had enough taste not to put any poster of a half naked girl," Tsunade said in approval.

"Oh, those will come when he gets older," Jiraiya said, and he was suddenly hit by a wave of killing intent coming from Tsunade and her ward." Err... I mean, of course not! I know I can be a pervert, but I do know that there are some things not appropriated for children."

"Good to hear."

They had to spend the rest of the day buying food, clothes (especially for Naruto), diapers, and other baby items. By the time they were finished, it was nighttime, and the three of them were exhausted. Tsunade placed Naruto on his crib, and went to sleep alongside Jiraiya and Shizune.

While it took no time for Tsunade and Shizune to fall asleep, Jiraiya remained awake. His head asked the same question time after time.

Would have been any different if I was in the village when the Kyubi attacked?

Based on the details Sarutobi had been willing to share of that tragic night, Jiraiya's mind went over and over with the possible scenarios

of how that night could have ended if he was there. He spent an hour torturing himself by wondering if he could have been able to save at least one of Naruto's parents.

"Stop doing that, Jiraiya. You couldn't know something like that would happen. The only thing you can do now is take care of Naruto to the best of your ability," the Sannin told himself.

He then got up, and quietly went to Naruto's bedroom, making sure he didn't make any noise that could awake the other three people living under that roof. Jiraiya leaned on the crib, and looked at the infant laying there.

"Hey there little guy, how are you doing?" Jiraiya said in a whisper. Naruto shifted in his sleeping seat. "Don't worry, I know that you had to go through a lot, but the nightmare is already over. Tsunade-hime and I are here to take care of you, and we will make sure that everything will be fine."

Jiraiya continued to look at the sleeping baby.

"Can I tell you a secret? Don't tell Tsunade or Shizune, because they would get really mad if they knew. But I have plans for you. Great plans. Once I'm done with you, you will be the biggest pervert Konoha has ever seen, hahaha! I will teach you everything I know so no girl will be able to resist your charms! You will be a legend only second to yours truly!

"Oh yeah, and you'll be a great ninja too. I guess that's important as well."

Author's note: So here's the first chapter. What do you think? Yeah, I know that nothing too exciting happened, but hey, it's the first chapter! I promise things will get better as the story progresses.

Anyway, don't forget to review if you liked this chapter! Reviews makes me very, very happy!

Midnight Drinks

Author's note: When I published this story a couple days ago, I was expecting that it would get 3 or 4 reviews, and a few more follows and favorites. Yet after just ONE CHAPTER this story has 22 reviews, 53 favorites and 107 follows, making it my most followed story (and I have a few fanfics longer than 100K words). I'm simply speechless.

I was planning to release this chapter next week, but due to the overwhelmingly positive reception the first chapter got, I'm going to release it now as way to thank all the people who gave this story so much feedback and support. You guys deserve it :)

Chapter 2

Midnight Drinks

Or

Uchihas are weird, weird, weird

Six months after the Kyubi attack

Jiraiya and Tsunade were both exceptional ninja. The kind that they only appear once every few generations. They both graduated the academy at an age most kids still can't tie their shoelaces, made Chunin before hitting puberty and managed to become Jonin before being sixteen.

From that point onwards, the two Sannin, and their fallen teammate Orochimaru took a myriad of dangerous missions. If there was a task with a high chance of dying, they would do it without receiving a single scratch. If there was a mission that appeared to be impossible, they made it look as if it could be done by a mere Genin.

They never stopped to better themselves and improve in their areas of skill. Jiraiya became a Seal Master of renown and one of the few Senjutsu practitioners alive. Tsunade became one of the best medical ninja the world ever knew. And both of them became incredibly powerful ninja, overshadowed by few and admired by many.

Still, despite all the skills they had learned and honed over their lifespans, nothing could prepare them for the horror that it was to take care of a baby. Naruto used to cry a lot, often for no reason, and at completely random times (though he was rather fond of doing it at nighttime). He had to be watched constantly, or else he would somehow disappear, only to mysteriously appear outside the house. He would try to grab anything within his short reach, and more often than not he would try to eat it.

One of the few things that would calm Naruto whenever he had a crying fit was Tsunade holding him against her chest. Jiraiya had joked that Tsunade's knockers would of course have a soothing effect on any men, no matter their age. Yet it turned out to be more than a joke when the Slug Princess breastfed Naruto, and the little Jinchuriki just wouldn't let go of her breast.

The fact that the baby was positively elated whenever Tsunade started to undo her blouse wasn't a good sign at all.

"This is bad... you're not even a year old, yet Jiraiya is already rubbing off on you!" Tsunade said after the first time it happened.

Or then again, it could be something else, since Naruto's stomach was a bottomless pit. He would eat a lot, and would never be satisfied. He always wanted more, and whenever his food was denied, he would go into a crying fit. Everybody wondered where the hell his little body stored all that food.

On the bright side, Naruto was at least easy to feed, if a bit costly.

Today was one of Tsunade's two days off after a rather long shift at the hospital. She would have spend the day sleeping, but neither Jiraiya nor Shizune were there, so she had to watch over Naruto, who just had calmed down from one of his random crying fits. She sighed in relief when she heard the main door opening.

"Tsunade-sama, I'm back!" said Shizune's voice as she entered the house.

Shziune was wearing a green flak vest common among the Konoha Chunin and Jonin over her usual clothes. A forehead protector was wrapped around her head.

Unlike Tsunade and Jiraiya, Shizune showed interest in joining the Konoha ninja. Shikaku Nara, Konoha's current Jonin Commander, alongside other Jonin, tested her abilities to determine her rank, and they decided she was good enough to be a Chunin. Plus she was a good medic, something Konoha was in desperately need of. Everybody hoped that Tsunade's presence in the village would solve the issue.

"Good, because I need you to go buy some baby food. I was about to go myself, but you know how Naruto gets when we go out and he's hungry," the blond woman replied.

"What? And what happened with all the baby food that I bought before I left for my mission?" Shizune asked, incredulous. Tsunade stared at her in a way that said "do you really need to ask?"

Without further ado, the younger woman nodded and went to buy the much needed food.

Tsunade wondered what was Jiraiya doing. Given that the Toad Sage rarely left the house - Tsunade had forbidden him from doing any "research" anymore, meaning that he could only use his imagination to write his erotic novels - she was hoping that he would take care of the baby while she had a much needed nap.

But unfortunately for the Legendary Sucker, an ANBU appeared, claiming that the the Hokage requested Jiraiya's presence. Of course, such a convenient timing. It seemed that fate was conspiring against her.

Meanwhile, in the Hyuga compound, a toddler sneezed.

...

"You know sensei, I wasn't expecting that you would call me into action so soon. Are you sure that this mission is something *no other ninja but me* can do?" the Toad Sage asked, a bit skeptical.

Once the old Hokage activated all the privacy seals, he answered. "Yes, yes indeed. You're the best information gathered this village has seen. If somebody can unfold this mystery, it's you."

"Let me guess: you think that the Kyubi escaping Kushina wasn't an accident?" Jiraiya ventured to ask. "Because we all knew that it was something that could happen."

"Yes, and we set the proper measures. But no, that's not why we came to the conclusion that there was somebody behind the attack."

"Enlighten me then."

"After the Kyubi had been... contained, we recovered the bodies of my wife, Biwako, who was the midwife during the delivery, as well of the few ANBU that we had stationed to make sure nothing happened. The autopsy revealed wounds inflicted by ninja weapons."

"Shouldn't you have told me this much earlier?" Jiraiya asked.

"Maybe, but I didn't want call you into action so soon. You see, there has been another investigation going on during these past months, carried out by Danzo and his branch of ANBU."

Jiraiya frowned upon hearing that name. Danzo was known for being an extremist, often inducted orphans to bolster his organizations' ranks, was an open critic of Sarutobi's conciliatory efforts with other villages and never bothered to hide that he wanted to be Hokage more than anything. Fortunately, he never had enough support to achieve such ambition.

"I see. Did they find something?" If Jiraiya was asking this, he knew there would be two possible answers: they either found nothing, or they found something that Sarutobi didn't like, and wanted a second opinion. The super pervert prayed for the former, but just like with Tsunade, fate felt like conspiring against the Sannin.

"Yes," Sarutobi said, sighing. "Danzo and I had been discussing the events of that night. According to the many witnesses he interrogated, it's not like the Kyubi simply broke through our walls, it suddenly appeared in the middle of the village, coming out of a cloud of smoke."

"That sounds awfully similar to the Summoning Jutsu," Jiraiya pointed out.

"Indeed it is."

"But then again... summoning the Kyubi? The only person I can think of being able to pull something like that is Madara Uchiha, and he has been dead for decades."

"Maybe he had an apprentice? Someone he trained on how to tame the Tailed Beasts?"

"It sounds rather far-fetched. We all know that Madara left the village alone, and tried to attack it alone. He never married nor had any children that could avenge his death."

"Anyway, Danzo decided that Madara was a good starting point. He made some interesting discoveries. Besides Hashirama-sensei, Madara also had a way to control the Tailed Beasts. We believe it

was his Sharingan. You see, Madara's Sharingan wasn't normal. Apparently, he managed to awake a higher level of Sharingan, that granted him extraordinary new powers."

"So? Madara was an unbelievably powerful ninja who had plenty of unique abilities, just like Hashirama. That doesn't mean said abilities can be replicated by his clansmen, just like how Hashirama's descendants did not inherit the Wood Release."

"The thing is, they can be replicated. You see, this new Sharingan, named Mangekyo Sharingan, is an ability every Uchiha can attain, but very few do because of its high price. If what Danzo uncovered is accurate, the prerequisite to awaken this Mangekyo Sharingan is to murder with your own hands someone you're close to or you love. The Uchiha might be a bit too battle eager, but not even them would go so far just for the sake of power."

"But Danzo believes that one of them did."

"Yes."

"Even if that's true... what was the point of throwing the Kyubi into the village? What did this person would have gained? Wait... please tell me Danzo doesn't believe the whole clan was behind the attack!"

"Sadly, he does."

"Stupid one eyed zealot..." Jiraiya muttered. This made the Toad Sannin feel grateful for not having Danzo as the Hokage, or else the situation could have been much worse. "That's stupid on every level."

"I know. That's why he ordered the Uchiha to stay in the rear and help the civilian evacuation. He didn't want any Uchiha to be near the Kyubi."

"Of course, a thief believes everybody steals," Jiraiya said. He had no doubt that that's what Danzo would do if he had the power to

tame the beast. "You have to stop Danzo. The Uchiha are already cranky as they are without him poking them with a stick."

"That's why I called you, Jiraiya. The only way I can stop Danzo is with enough tangible evidence to discredit his own investigation. And I can't think in anybody better than you to gather said evidence."

"While I'm flattered that you think so highly of my skills, I'm not omniscient. This will take quite some time."

"I know. While you're working, I'll make sure to keep Danzo on a tight leash."

"Alright then," Jiraiya said as he headed for the door. "Oh, and one more thing."

"Hmm?"

"Do you realize that if I work on this, it will cut into my writing time, meaning that I will take much longer to finish the next Icha Icha book, right?"

Sarutobi gasped in shock, his eyes opened wide in horror. But said horror was short lived, and his face soon relaxed. A sad smile formed in his mouth. "Sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the greater good, Jiraiya, regardless of how painful they may be."

...

Shizune was in a mart close to her home, carrying out Tsunade's requests. After finding Naruto's favorite brand of baby food, she decided to buy all of it in one go to save further trips. Though she couldn't help but wonder how long it would last. He needed to teach that kid the meaning of the word "moderation."

"Err... excuse me miss," a voice behind Shizune said.

The black haired kunoichi turned around, and saw a boy looking at her. The boy would be about five or six years old. He had dull black

hair long enough to be styled in a ponytail, deep black eyes, and wore a black shirt, black pants and blue sandals. He appeared to be an Uchiha.

"Yes? Can I help you?" Shizune said, putting up her best smile.

"Do you really need all that baby food? I'd like some too, if it's not asking much."

"There is more baby food left here."

"Yes, but that's the only brand my brother will eat without throwing a tantrum," the black haired boy said.

"Oh, I can totally relate to that," Shizune said, giggling. "Guess that I wasn't too nice of me to take all of it like that. How many would you want?"

"Two would be enough."

Shizune complied, and gave two jars of baby food to the boy.

"There you go."

"Thank you, miss."

"My name's Shizune, by the way."

"Itachi. Itachi Uchiha," the boy said, confirming Shizune's guess.

"Nice to meet you, Itachi-kun. Your brother is lucky to have such a nice and caring big brother like you taking care of him."

Itachi blushed a little. "Thanks."

Both of them headed to the cashier. Itachi decided to keep talking.

"You know... that baby of yours must be really big if he eats that much," Itachi commented, looking at Shizune's basket, loaded with

jars of baby food.

"That's the funny thing, he's so little! Tsunade-sama said that one day she's going to find where all the food he eats goes, because he's always hungry, and never gets fat!"

"Tsunade-sama?" Itachi repeated. Then a realization suddenly dawned on him. "Wait a minute, that baby of yours... is the kid with the Demon Fox sealed inside?"

Shizune's bright mood suddenly darkened, and pondered if he should answer him. But then again, most of the village already knew her as one of Naruto's caretakers, so lying would be pointless.

"Yes, he is."

"And... how is he?" Itachi asked with genuine curiosity.

"What do you mean?"

"Does he have something that makes him different from other babies?"

"Nothing that I have noticed. Trust me, deep down he's like everybody else."

"My parents didn't say anything, but I heard many grownups saying that he's dangerous, and that we should stay away from him."

"That's nonsense! Naruto's a normal kid like any other! Just because he has a demon sealed inside him doesn't make him dangerous! The seal the Fourth placed on him will make sure the Kyubi won't see daylight in a long, long time. "

"Then why did they bring Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama taking care of him?"

Shizune didn't like the course the conversation was taking.

"What do you mean by 'bring'?"

"They say that the Hokage had to recall the two legendary Sannin to keep the Demon Fox under watch and make sure he doesn't try to destroy Konoha again."

Shizune was livid. Where did that rumors come from? Wasn't people aware of Jiraiya being the kid's godfather and Tsunade-sama being his only blood relative alive? It was obvious that neither Tsunade-sama nor Jiraiya-sama had heard of this rumors, or else they would have done something.

She remembered the first time she decided to take a walk while carrying Naruto on a stroller. People shouted at her to get away from them, that she was putting them in danger by taking that 'thing' out of his 'cage'. At first she tried to ignore them and go somewhere else, but whenever he went, the treatment she got was the same. How could they be afraid of such an innocent creature?

The next time she went on a walk with Naruto, Tsunade went with them as well. And they got the same treatment the moment they placed a foot on another street.

That was a fatal mistake.

Only Shizune's pleas stopped Tsunade from leveling the entire district. Still, quite a few people had to be hospitalized.

From that day onwards, the verbal abuse stopped. But things didn't change that much. Whenever Shizune would walk with Naruto, people would simply return to their homes or leave the street until she and her ward were far enough. Some people muttered under their breath words the medic in training couldn't hear but could guess. They also shot her cold stares.

She feared that Naruto would have a hard time making friends.

But then again, this was a new scenario for her. While she already knew what most adults thought about Naruto, she was now talking to a child with no visible parent present. It was a golden opportunity not only to learn what any children would think of Naruto, but to erase whatever prejudices were implanted inside his young mind.

"Let me tell you that's a lie. Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama are taking care of Naruto because both of them had strong ties with their parents. If that wasn't the case, then Naruto would be on an orphanage or under the care of any foster family. He doesn't *need* to be under watch. Like I told you before, the Fourth's seal will make sure the Kyubi never returns."

Itachi's expression didn't change.

"I see. Then if you live with him, you're not afraid that the Kyubi won't be back... then I shouldn't be afraid either."

"Exactly! I'm so glad that you understand it," Shizune said, elated. Maybe there was hope at all!

After paying for the baby food, Shizune and Itachi went their separate ways.

"Goodbye, Shizune-san. It was nice to meet you."

"Feeling's mutual, Itachi-kun. I hope we meet again sometime soon!"

Shizune was in a considerably better mood now. That Itachi looked like a really nice and smart kid. Too bad he was too old to be Naruto's playmate. If only Naruto could meet some kids like him, then maybe she won't have to worry about him growing up without friends. Nevertheless, that possibility felt more plausible now.

Maybe Jiraiya-sama was right about trusting the next generation.

...

Tsunade was already regretting spending the afternoon napping, since once night arrived, she was too rested to fall asleep. She constantly shifted in her bed trying to get into a comfortable position, fluffed her pillow multiple times, opened the window in order to allow some fresh breeze in, closed the window once the room got too cold, opened the window *again*, until she punched the pillow in frustration.

Maybe her best friend since she became an adult would be of some help. She got up from the bed, put on a robe and went to the living room. Turned out that Jiraiya was there, also awake, as well as her and Jiraiya's best friend: a bottle of sake.

"What are you doing up so late?" Jiraiya asked.

"I could ask you the same," Tsunade retorted.

"True, but I did ask first."

Tsunade groaned. "Okay, fine, I couldn't sleep and thought that some sake could help. So you may pour me a cup now. What about you?"

"Sarutobi-sensei tasked me with a big-ass mission that's going to take years to complete, and if I fail Konoha's relationship with the Uchiha Clan may go down the drain," Jiraiya said as he carefully poured some sake on Tsunade's cup. "I thought that you'd sleep like a log, given how overworked you've been this week."

"I spent all the day sleeping, so yeah, guess that I messed my sleeping cycle," Tsunade said as she emptied her sake cup in one go. Jiraiya refilled it without a single word from the blonde.

"Do you hear that?" Jiraiya asked.

"Hear what?" Tsunade said, taken aback. Was somebody trying to break into their home? "I hear nothing."

"Exactly. Naruto hasn't cried a single time since sunset. I think that's a first."

"I didn't realize of that. And here we are, unable to sleep in our first silent night since we took care of that noisy brat."

"You've never been someone who appreciated irony."

"Oh, I do appreciate irony. When it happens to somebody else."

"Hehe, you're quite the smart girl, aren't you?" Jiraiya chuckled. "By the way Hime, can I ask you something?"

"I'm not drunk enough for that."

"Wow, shot down before I even asked. But I didn't mean that. Did you ever imagine your life turning out like this?"

Tsunade wondered about the question. The answer was a definitive "no". Since she was young, her picture of the future was her being married to her boyfriend Dan Kato, who would be Hokage, with her little brother Nawaki on his way to succeed him in the future. They would have at least two children. Tsunade would be retired from active duty and would work at the hospital, either treating the sick and wounded, or helping to shape the minds of the future generation of medics.

Yet fate had different plans for her. Dan and Nawaki's lives were brutally cut short before her very eyes. Unable to deal with so much death around her, she decided to flee Konoha and wander aimlessly around the world. She stopped thinking about the future and focused on the present. But the few times she did think in the future, she could only picture herself either dying alone on an alleyway after drinking way too much.

But... being back in Konoha, and raising a kid alongside Jiraiya? No, that never entered her mind. Hearing about the fate of Naruto's parents awoke a spark of determination within Tsunade that the Sannin thought it was long extinct. Maybe she failed to save Dan and Nawaki, but she swore that she'll do her best to ensure Naruto's safety.

Yet something that at first appeared some sort of self-imposed atonement task turned out to be rather... pleasant. Taking care of Naruto was a taxing job, but Tsunade considered it as much rewarding. And while living with Jiraiya didn't appeal to her one bit, the Toad Sage was a much nicer housemate than she had expected. In all these months, he had never broke once the rules she had set. It almost felt like the old times.

"No," Tsunade finally answered. "Not that I complain. I didn't achieve much after leaving the village. I feel that I'm doing something with my life again. Guess that that old monkey was right, huh? What about you?"

Like Tsunade, Jiraiya also had dreams. He dreamed of marrying Tsunade and maybe have a couple brats with her. They'd live in a huge mansion. His reputation as a writer would even surpass his reputation as a ninja. People would fawn over him, gush about his talents and ask him to sign their books. He'd convince Orochimaru to drop his evil ways and return back to Konoha.

Like Tsunade, Jiraiya didn't think in the future, not even once, since he was too afraid to think about it. His life was plagued by failures and very little accomplishments. So far, his life was a cycle of doing his "research" to write his books to earn money, then blow up that money on alcohol and women, then start to work on his next book.

Yet here he was, living under the same roof as Tsunade without even being in a relationship with her and taking care of a kid that wasn't his -nor Tsunade's-. It was a good thing that Jiraiya did appreciate irony. But then again, now he suddenly didn't feel so afraid of thinking about the future. The thought that Tsunade and Naruto were part of it brought some comfort to his tortured mind.

"No, but even if being a swinging bachelor unchained by responsibilities such as fatherhood was something I greatly enjoyed... being here with you and taking care of Minato's brat is a nice change of pace."

"By the way, how's that new book coming along?"

"Slower than usual, between being back on duty and you not letting me to do more research..."

"Not gonna happen. At least as long as you want to continue living in this house and raising Naruto."

"I didn't say anything!"

"No, but you were thinking it!"

"It was you who asked about the book. And I didn't know you read minds now. Are you part Yamanaka as well, besides being Senju and Uzumaki?"

"I don't need mind reading powers to know what you're thinking. You've always been like an open book."

"I see. Do I make for an interesting read then?" Jiraiya said with wide grin on his face.

"When you behave properly, you certainly do."

Jiraiya chuckled, but didn't say anything in return. They both continue drinking until Tsunade thought about something worth talking again.

"What do you think Orochimaru is doing right now?"

Jiraiya almost choked on his sake. "Oh come on Hime! We were having a moment here, and you ruin it by bringing up that treacherous snake?"

"I believe that you and I don't share the same definition of 'having a moment'. And given that we're reflecting on our lives and future, I thought it would be fitting to talk about him. He used to be our teammate."

"Don't remind me. Well, from what I knew, the snake's probably cutting up the corpse of some poor bastard in a vain effort to understand 'the natural order of the universe' or bullshit like that."

"You know, it's kinda sad that he's the only one of us whose life is turning out the way he planned it. He doesn't seem to have any regrets over anything. Maybe if we decided to go rogue instead of legally retiring we would have been happy."

"Trust me, Orochimaru is everything but happy. He wanted to become Hokage, yet he got that denied. And he's embarked on a foolish quest for immortality that will end in disaster, simply because the guy is too afraid to die. The only thing that stop me from enjoying his eventual demise is all the innocent lives he's going to take with him."

"You know, you don't have to say that to make me feel better. Or to make you feel better about yourself."

"I'm not saying it because of that! Well, maybe a little. When you're down, seeing other people down, especially hated enemies, can be a bit of a consolation. But I know that everything I said is true."

"Do you think... we'll see him again?"

"I'm afraid so. I don't think he'll ever let go of the grudge against Konoha and sensei. He'll come back for revenge. Maybe not now, but sometime in the future. I'm certain of it."

"Well, that's an uplifting thought."

"Once again, it was you who asked."

"Yeah, bringing up Orochimaru might not have been a very good idea."

"Eh, it's okay. Alcohol can do that to you. Speaking of which, more sake?"

"I think I'll pass," Tsunade said with a wave of her hand. Jiraiya gave her a look. "Don't stare me like that! I might like to drink, but even I know when I had enough. I think I'm going back to bed."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Jiraiya said. He was expecting Tsunade misinterpreting his words and loudly say how she didn't invite him into her bed, but said comment never came.

"You know... I think that maybe we should do this more often. Or at the very least whenever we can't sleep."

"I'll have to buy more sake then. Good night, Tsunade-hime."

"Good night, Jiraiya."

Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe it was the heart-to-heart, but both Tsunade and Jiraiya were feeling a little better about themselves, and managed to fall asleep rather quickly. And would have remained asleep until the next morning if it wasn't for certain somebody waking up all of sudden.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

Naruto's cries could be heard across the whole neighborhood.

"I hate that kid so much..." Tsunade grumbled as she lazily got out of her bed.

Author's Note: And with this chapter, the seeds of the first two subplots have been planted! Oh, and since some people didn't realize that Jiraiya's line about turning Naruto into a pervert was meant to be a joke, I'm going to clarify now that Tsunade's line about hating Naruto is also a joke and not meant to be taken seriously (she's simply cranky due to lack of sleep).

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and don't forget to review! Reviews make me ver, very happy!

When a Toad loves a Slug

Author's note: Hello, my cute little readers, and welcome to a new chapter of "Son of the Sannin"! As you can see, this one is a bit longer than the other two. But before we begin, I'd like to recommend you some really good Naruhina fanfics. That way, you will have something to read while you wait for this story to get updated!

War of the Biju : An AU set just after Pain's invasion, in which Naruto becomes Hokage instead of Danzo. Lots of action, the Konoha 12 (especially Hinata) are way more badass than in canon without becoming Mary Sues.

The Hat Hangs Heavy : Naruto becomes the Fifth Hokage instead of Tsunade.

The Tale of Nagato Uzumaki : An AU in which the Rain Orphans follow Jiraiya to Konoha and decide to stay there. While it doesn't have much romance yet, the author mentioned it will have Naruhina. Very well written and enjoyable.

Because I Love You - Chasing After You : AU in which the Third Hokage realizes that there's somebody more powerful than mere bandits going after Tazuna, and thus he decides to send Team 8 alongside Team 7 to protect him. Very slow paced, but very well written nonetheless.

Himawari, Hokage for a day : Oneshot. Self explanatory. Hilarious as hell.

Chapter 3

When a Toad loves a Slug

Or

Why prophecies are always so damn cryptic?

Two years after the Kyubi attack

If an outsider traveled to Konoha, he or she wouldn't be able to tell of the catastrophe that hit the village two years ago, caused so much property damage and took away many lives.

The reconstruction efforts were already over. Most people had already stopped mourning their lost ones and continued with their lives. Unfortunately, that didn't mean that Konoha's inhabitants were more accepting of little Naruto. People would often scatter whenever one of his three caretakers would take him on a walk through the village, often between murmurs.

While nobody was stupid enough to risk the wrath of the Sannin by speaking their opinions of the blond toddler out loud, they couldn't be forced to show sympathy to him either. While the Toad Sage and the Slug Princess were outraged upon learning through Shizune that they're seen as Naruto's jailers rather than his foster parents, they had to admit it wasn't something illogical or stupid to think. Both Sannin spend many of their late night drinking sessions discussing ways on how to make the population stop fearing Naruto.

Speaking of Naruto, taking care of him became an even harder task once the little Jinchuriki learned how to walk. Despite his short, chubby legs, the kid was *insanely* fast, always running from one room to another, never taking a moment to stop. They tried to keep him at bay with a baby fence, but he somehow ended up escaping. The only way to make him stay still for a prolonged time was for somebody to play with him. And said person would end up utterly exhausted after an hour or so.

Despite this, there was always somebody willing to play with Naruto. The kid had a talent to brighten the mood of anybody who spend more than a few minutes with him, and the few times in which the three adults were present at the same time were always the most fun and

pleasant, and the only ones in which Naruto would be the one to fall asleep first.

And today was going to be one of those days. After ending her shift at the hospital, Tsunade headed home with a smile on her lips. Shizune had recently returned from a mission outside the village, and Jiraiya wasn't scheduled to meet one of his spies until tomorrow. The whole family would be together.

She then stopped in her tracks after realizing the implications of what she was thinking.

" Wait... I am actually happy to think that Jiraiya will be at home waiting for me? And I'm thinking of him as family? "

During the time they lived together, the two Sannin not only managed to repair their broken relationship, but they became even closer than when they were teammates. The nights they spend drinking and talking about their issues not only was a good way to vent some steam, but to get better acquainted with one another. She was starting to grow fond of the white haired pervert. Hell, he had been good on his word and hardly did anything perverted anymore. At least in her presence.

But that didn't mean that she was developing feelings for Jiraiya, right?

Tsunade pushed those thoughts aside the moment her house came into view. It was time for a fun afternoon with Naruto!

"Hey everybody, I'm home!" Tsunade said as she entered the house and walked into the living room.

"Oh, good. We were waiting for you," said Jiraiya's voice.

Tsunade was surprised to see that Jiraiya wasn't with Shizune and Naruto as she had expected -the young kunoichi and the blond baby were playing with some toys at the other side of the living room.

Jiraiya, meanwhile, was alongside two small toads wearing black cloaks: one was green, had gray bushy eyebrows and a goatee of the same color, while the other was greenish yellow, had a bulbous purple head, and thick purple lips.

"I believe you already know Fukasaku and Shima, the Two Great Sage Toads," Jiraiya said as he motioned to the toads.

"It's good to see you again after so many years, Tsunade-chan," Fukasaku said.

"You turned into a quite lovely lady, don't you?" Shima added.

"Fukasaku-sama, Shima-sama, it's an honor to meet you again," Tsunade said solemnly as she bowed her head. "May I ask what is the reason for your visit?"

"The Great Toad Sage had requested to see both you and Jiraiya-chan. Now that you finally came, we must head to Mount Myoboku immediately," Shima answered.

"We'll travel there via reverse summoning," Fukasaku added.

"Wait a minute, I don't have a Toad Summoning Contract! How are you going to bring me there?" the Slug Sannin asked.

"Don't worry, we have a solution for that. Please give me your hand," Fukasaku said.

Tsunade walked towards the old toad, and did as she was told. Fukasaku placed his hand on Tsunade's hand, closed his eyes, and focused his chakra.

"Sage Art: Seal of the Toads!" Fukasaku said as his hand glowed blue.

Tsunade felt something tingling the palm of her hand. When the toad's jutsu was over, the kanji for "Oil", which represented Mount

Myoboku -and was the kanji on Jiraiya's forehead protector-, was engraved on her hand.

"That's a special seal that will allow you to be reverse summoned by the toads, as well as to summon any toad you want. It will only last one day before it fades, but for our current endeavor it will be more than enough," Fukasaku explained.

"Okay, we're ready to go!" Shima said as she and her husband started the reverse summoning process.

In less than a second, Jiraiya and Tsunade were no longer inside their house's living room, and found themselves in the middle of Mount Myoboku. While Jiraiya had been there quite a few times, Tsunade spend some minutes exploring the immediate surroundings, marveling at the natural beauty of the toads' home.

The place was filled with gigantic plants and mushrooms. Beautiful flowers that she had never seen before, nor knew they existed. Multiple rivers and streams flowed through the mountains. There were also many statues of toads scattered around the place. Yet for some reason, Tsunade found the place oddly familiar.

The Slug Sannin then realized what was Jiraiya's inspiration to decorate Naruto's bedroom.

"So, what do you think of our home, Tsunade-chan?" Shima asked.

"It's... amazing. The natural energy from this place is simply overwhelming. There's so much life..."

"Would you say it's better than Shikkotsu Forest?"

"Ma, don't ask her such a thing! Don't you see you're putting her in a predicament?" Fukasaku said angrily.

"Oh can it, Pa! It's not that we invite a non-Toad Summoner to our place that often, and I just want to compare!"

"Err... 'better' or 'worse' aren't words that I'd use to compare both places. Guess that the word would be... 'different'," Tsunade said, hoping that her answer wouldn't upset the Toads. However, she wasn't going to badmouth the Slugs behind their backs just to appease their current hosts.

"So... you said that the Great Toad Sage wanted to see us?" Jiraiya said, trying to get back to their current business.

"Oh, yes you're right. Come on, let's not make Gamamaru-sama wait any longer," Fukasaku said as he lead the way.

"Like that senile old geezer won't forget that he wanted to speak with the kids in the first place!" Shima scoffed.

While they headed to see the spiritual leader of the Toads, Fukasaku thought it was a good chance to bring up certain topic regarding their only summoner. He hopped onto the white haired man's shoulder.

"Jiraiya-chan, since you're here again, have you thought that it might be a good chance to complete your Senjutsu training?"

"Eh... maybe another time," Jiraiya replied uneasily. "I'm kind of busy right now."

"Always with that excuse..."

"Hey, I am taking care of a baby right now, so cut me some slack!"

"Were you taking care of a baby during the past ten years as well?"

"I don't need it. I already mastered Senjutsu."

Fukasaku scoffed in return. "Then you and I have a very different idea of what 'mastering Senjutsu' means. You need both Ma and I to enter and maintain Sage Mode. Plus your control of nature chakra has plenty of room for improvement."

"Listen, I will finish my training, okay? Just... just not now. I need to focus on Naruto first and foremost."

"I understand, Jiraiya-chan. But try not to delay it for much longer. The difference between incomplete and complete Sage Mode could mean the difference between life and death."

After a short trip, the two small toads and the two Sannin were in front of Gamamaru, the Great Toad Sage, who was sitting on a shallow pool. Tsunade eyed at the large red toad in front of her. Judging by the amount of wrinkles, warts, and near closed eyes, it was obvious that Gamamaru was very old. Some said that he was so old, he even had met and advised the Sage of the Six Paths himself, though they were mostly rumors.

"Gamamaru-sama, Jiraiya-chan and Tsunade-chan are here, just like you requested," Fukasaku announced.

"Honorable Sage," both Sannin said at the same time as they bowed before him.

"Ahhh, I see. Good. There is much we need to talk," Gamamaru said, each word coming out of his mouth at a rather slow pace.

Jiraiya and Tsunade waited expectantly about what was what the Gamamaru wanted to tell them. They waited for a few minutes, but the old, large toad didn't say anything else.

"Gamamaru-sama?" Fukasaku asked.

"Zzzzzzzzz..."

Jiraiya and Tsunade sweatdropped.

"WAKE UP YOU OLD GEEZER!" Shima screeched, startling Jiraiya, Tsunade and Fukasaku, but apparently waking up Gamamaru.

"Uh? It's lunchtime already?" Gamamaru asked, disoriented as he slowly looked around.

"Gamamaru-sama, you wanted to talk with Jiraiya-chan and Tsunade-chan, remember?" Fukasaku said once again, hoping to get everything back on track.

"Ahhhhh, yes. Listen up young ones, because there is a turbulent future ahead, both for of you, and the little tadpole under your care," Gamamaru said.

Tsunade's worry spiked upon hearing those words. "I don't care what happens to me, is something bad going to happen to Naruto?"

"Young Naruto will have a hard road ahead of him. He will do great things... and will meet terrible enemies. You will need to protect him from said enemies as long as he can't take care of himself."

"We will, Great Sage," Jiraiya stated with determination. Tsunade nodded as well.

"I have seen... Konoha on fire. Divided against itself. Friends will turn into enemies. Sons will fight their fathers. And behind the fire... a one-eyed demon. Be aware of him, said demon will go after Naruto. You must protect him at all costs.

"I have nothing more to say. Return now to your home, and meditate on my words," Gammaru said, before falling asleep once again.

Jiraiya and Tsunade looked at each other, as their brains processed Gamamaru's ominous predictions., and what they could do to make sure everything was alright.

...

Half an hour later, Jiraiya and Tsunade were send back to their home. Much to their surprise, they found Naruto crying his eyes out while Shizune tried to comfort him in vain.

"What's going on here? Naruto, why are you crying?" Jiraiya asked, and frowned.

Upon hearing his voice, Naruto turned his head around, and looked at him. He stopped crying, and his sad grimace turned into the brightest smile they ever saw. He wiped his tears, jumped from Shizune's lap, and rushed to hug them.

"You back!" Naruto said as he was scooped by Jiraiya.

"What's going on, Shizune?" Tsunade asked, placing her hands on her hips.

"He saw you disappearing in a cloud of smoke, and thought that you were gone for good. I've been trying to explain him that you would be back soon, but he didn't believe me," the young kunoichi replied.

"Oh, my poor kid! Of course he thought that, we left without even telling him goodbye!" Tsunade said as she took Naruto from Jiraiya's arms. "Forgive me, sweetheart, I promise we will never do that again, okay?"

"Okay!" Naruto said, wrapping his little arms around Tsunade's neck.

"Alright, enough of that, who's up for our Game Night?" Jiraiya said, and everybody cheered in return.

...

After a fun and lively game night, Shizune and Naruto went to sleep. Jiraiya and Tsunade tried to, but they couldn't. Both of them couldn't stop thinking about Gamamaru's warnings regarding not just Naruto, but the world in general. Like usual, they were in the living room, with a couple bottles of sake.

"So, Naruto is in danger from a 'one-eyed demon'. Does that mean that we should be aware of any one-eyed people we run into? Because losing eyes is quite common in our line of work," Jiraiya commented as he emptied his cup of sake. "My first choice would be Danzo, the leader or ROOT."

"The only person with one eye that I know is Kakashi. Maybe he was talking about him?" Tsunade said.

"Kakashi has two eyes, even if he only uses one most of the time. Plus he's a nice kid, he wouldn't harm Naruto. He was Minato's student, after all."

"And a huge fan of your books."

"And a huge fan of my books, yes. But I'm not defending him because of that, Hime."

"I know, I was just teasing you. Couldn't that old frog could have been a bit more specific about this one-eyed demon? Some more hints could have been useful besides lacking an eye."

"First, Gamamaru is a toad, not a frog. Never call frog a toad, they don't take it very good. And second, Gamamaru doesn't have the context of the visions he gets, so all he can do is interpret them to the best of his ability."

"Well, that vision of his got me on the edge. He told us that Naruto is in danger, but didn't specify about what kind of danger, and we can't protect him from everything. I mean, it's not that we can lock him down in his room or something."

"Even if you did, he'll find a way out. He always does," Jiraiya mentioned, causing Tsunade to chuckle. "But then again, that's nothing new. His parents, especially Minato, had a lot of enemies that would love to get revenge through Naruto. And he already has yet another bullseye on his back due to being the Kyubi Jinchuriki."

"Even worse then."

"What also worried me was the part about Konoha being on fire. Do you think that somebody is planning to attack us?"

"I wouldn't rule that out. We're still recovering from the Kyubi attack, which made a number on our forces. I'm hoping our presence here serves as a deterrent for any village who might want to invade Konoha."

"I hope so. We may not be the Yellow Flash, but the name of the Sannin still can inspire fear among our enemies."

"And that part about 'friend turning enemies'... do you think that we may be betrayed by one of our allies?"

"From what I know, our current allied village is Suna, but even with our recent losses, they still lack the numbers and power to wage war against us. At least on their own. Maybe they can ally with one of the other three great villages, but I find that unlikely."

"Even then, maybe it would be a good idea to try to strengthen our ties with them. Pay them a visit, mail some sake to the Kazekage, stuff like that."

"Sake seems to be your answer to everything."

"Because it works! I mean, remember when we returned here, how we couldn't spend five minutes without yelling at each other?"

"Actually, it was you who did most of the yelling," Jiraiya said with a cheeky grin as he poured more sake on his empty cup.

"Yet when we started to have this late night drinks, everything became far smoother. Now I'm even happy to see that you're home when I get back from work! If that's not enough proof of sake's miraculous conciliatory powers... Oh! Oh! OHHHH! Of course!" Tsunade said in realization as a huge smile formed in her face.

"What?"

"That's how we can make everybody accept Naruto! He only needs to go drinking with every villager here!"

"Wow, even in my wasted state, I still can see how much that idea sucks."

Tsunade's smile disappeared, and was replaced by an angry frown. "And why is that, smartass?"

"Well, I might not know much about babies, but isn't alcohol like, very toxic to them? We still have to wait about sixteen years until he can do that. And even then... he'll have to drink a lot in order to befriend the entire village."

"Dammit, I haven't thought that," Tsunade said, as she slumped on her chair, and drank from her cup again. "Oh well, I'm sure I can think something. I just need more... inspiration, hehe."

"Hey, Hime... don't you think we had enough? Maybe we should go to bed!"

"I will decide when I had enough! Now come on, keep the sake going! I have to forget that damned prediction from that damned frog!"

"Toad."

"Whatever!"

...

"Tsunade-sama! Are you awake? Come on you need to get up, you're going to be late for the hospital!"

Shizune's voice awakened the blonde Sannin. The sunlight coming through the window felt into her eyes like being stabbed with burning hot daggers. Which didn't do any good to alleviate the massive hangover she was starting to notice. She could swear her head would explode at any moment.

"Yes, I'm awake," Tsunade said in a barely audible grumble. "And stop yelling so much!"

The Slug Princess tried to get out of the bed, but she couldn't. There was *something* that was keeping her from moving. Further inspection revealed that it was a rather large, and definitely male looking arm. She followed the arm with her eyes, and just as she feared said arm was attached to a man. A *naked* man. A man with white hair she knew very well. While asleep, there was a very wide grin on his face.

Taking into account the fact that Tsunade was also naked, it didn't take a genius to realize what happened last night, even if she didn't remember it. Nor she wanted to remember, anyway.

She wanted to scream, but her extremely dried throat could only produce a cough.

Just how much did I drink last night? The blonde Sannin asked herself in horror.

Covering her naked body with the blanket, Tsunade tried to push the Toad Sage awake.

"Jiraiya. Jiraiya. Jiraiya!" Tsunade said as she rocked the white haired man, each time with more force.

Jiraiya opened his eyes slowly, blinking several times until they accustomed to the current light. He groaned, rubbing his head with one hand, effectively being victim of a hangover just as bad as his drinking buddy. He then looked at Tsunade, and his mouth formed a smile.

"Good morning, Hime," Jiraiya said absentmindedly. Then, slowly but surely, the more aggravating elements of the situation started to sink in. Upon realizing what was going on, he looked at Tsunade's barely naked form with his eyes wide opened as his face turned red.

"WHOA! What the hell!? What happened-"

"Trust me, I feel the same. We can talk about that later -and make no mistake, we *will* talk about it, - now get out of here before somebody sees us!" Tsunade said, panicked.

"R-right!" Jiraiya babbled as he hastily started to pick his clothes from the bedroom's floor and got dressed. Tsunade proceeded to do the same.

"Tsunade-sama, get out of the bed already!" Shizune's voice said from the other side of the door. "Even back in Konoha, I still have to be the responsible one."

"I'm awake! I still need a few minutes to get ready! Just don't come in!"

"And what is taking you so long...?" Shizune asked as she opened the door and came into the room, only to be greeted with an image of her mentor and Jiraiya half naked, trying to get dressed as half as possible. Both Sannin smiled at her sheepishly. Shizune let out an "EEP!" and quickly left, slamming the door shut. "It's okay, it's okay! I didn't see anything! Just... take all the time you need!"

...

To say that breakfast time that morning was awkward would be a massive understatement. They all ate their breakfast without uttering a word, Shizune feeding Naruto while she actively avoided looking at the two Sannin in front of her. Tsunade, however, couldn't bear the silence anymore, and opened her mouth to speak.

"Shizune, what you just saw-"

"None of my business," Shizune said matter-o-factly. "We're all adults here. Just... tell me beforehand so we don't run into more... unfortunate situations," the young kunoichi said, without turning her head to look at her mentor.

This time it was Jiraiya who tried to speak.

"Listen Shizune, Tsunade-hime and I aren't-"

"Do you think we should talk about that in front of Naruto?" Shizune interrupted again.

Both Sannin looked at the blonde toddler, happily enjoying his food and ignoring the conversation that was going on in front of him. They could pretty much be talking about Minato and Kushina and he'd pay as much attention. But then again, they had to admit Shizune had a point, that wasn't something to discuss in front of a little kid.

"Now, if you excuse me, today I have gate duty," Shizune said once she had finished feeding Naruto and eating her own breakfast, and left.

"Err... I think that I'll get going too. I don't want to keep my contact waiting. Hopefully I'll get some more hints on the Kyubi attack," Jiraiya said, clearly dying to get out of that house. "Will you take care of Naruto?"

"Uh, yeah. I'll leave him in the hospital's daycare," Tsunade replied. "So... see you later?"

"Alright then... goodbye."

...

Shizune was hoping that if she focused on work, maybe she'll remove the image of Tsunade and Jiraiya naked sharing the same bed, but gate duty was so boring and uneventful that she couldn't distract her mind with something else.

Over the two years that Tsunade and her had been living under the same roof as Jiraiya, Shizune had noticed that their relationship became smoother little by little. During the first few weeks they used to argue a lot, and tried to avoid each other as much as possible. If Jiraiya was in the living room, Tsunade wouldn't go there until the Toad Sage left first. If Tsunade and her were having dinner in the dinning room, Jiraiya would wait until they were finished before he

would have dinner himself. The only time the two of them were together was when they spent time with Naruto.

Then, the arguments became less and less frequent until they disappeared completely. Tsunade and Jiraiya were able to have civilized conversations, and seemed to tolerate each other enough so they stopped avoiding each other, as if they were finally getting used to each other's constant presence, and even enjoying it.

One day that the medic ninja apprentice couldn't sleep, she heard voices coming from the living room, which she instantly recognized as the two Sannin. She then learned that whenever the two of them couldn't sleep, they would get up, have a drink and talk. Then this became a tradition, with both staying awake until late in the night regardless if they were suffering from insomnia or not, drinking and talking with each other.

But even with how much their relationship improved, Shizune could never guessed in a million years that they would end up... sleeping together.

After her uncle Dan had died, Shizune never saw her master showing the barest of interest in the opposite gender again. Due to her beauty and... generous pair of assets, Tsunade attracted many men, which she ended up rebuffing sometimes without even looking at them first. Those who took her rejection badly ended up in the hospital.

"Alright, your papers seem to be in order. I hope you enjoy your stay at Konoha!" Shizune said to a merchant who had just crossed the gates. She then returned to her initial track of thoughts.

Shizune had ambivalent feeling towards this morning's... shocking developments. On one side, she wanted to shake that image from her mind. Tsunade was the closest thing she had to a mother, and nobody wants to think about their parents having sex. But on the other hand... she was feeling happy that apparently somebody was

able to tear down the emotional barriers the blonde Sannin erected around her heart for years. She deserved to be happy.

"Ahem, excuse me," a voice said that snapped Shizune out of her trance. She blinked, and saw a Konoha Jonin looking at her. He had dark brown hair tied into a ponytail, and a goatee.

"Oh, sorry, what I can I do for you?" Shizune asked the Jonin.

"My name is Yuki Minazuki, Jonin-sensei of Team 2. My team is about to take its first mission out of the village," the Jonin explained.

"Alright," Shizune said as she wrote down everything Yuki said. "I'll need the names of your Genin, please."

"Sure. They're Shinko Inari, Tenma Izumo and Itachi Uchiha."

Shizune was taken aback when she heard the last name. She then looked at the Genin that were waiting a few meters behind their sensei. She saw a boy that was about ten or eleven years old with gray, spiky hair, wearing a dull blue shirt and black pants. Besides him was a girl of a similar age with the same hair color, styled into two pigtails that curved upwards, and was wearing a maroon t-shirt that exposed her belly, dark blue shorts, and a cap on her head. And lastly, there was another kid, much younger than the other two, whom Shizune identified at the kid she first met on a grocery store a year ago, and saw a few more times whenever she went on a walk.

"Itachi-kun? Is that you?" Shizune asked.

"Oh, hi, Shizune-san," Itachi said as he waved at her.

"Are you a genin already?" Shizune asked, her eyes wide open. Itachi just nodded. "But... how old are you?"

"Seven and a half."

"But... you're so young!"

"Well, Itachi is quite talented," Yuki spoke up. "I was quite surprised when they told me he was the Rookie of the Year of his promotion."

Shizune was left speechless. Not only this kid graduated five years before the average Genin, but doing so as the best of his class was something beyond amazing. Granted, she knew that both Tsunade and Jiraiya had graduated academy when they were just six, but she never expected to meet another prodigy of the same caliber.

"We're going on our first C-rank mission, it isn't great?" Itachi said, beaming.

"Now, if everything is in order, I'd like to continue with our mission, please," Yuki said.

"Oh, yes, of course. Good luck out there. You'll tell me how it went when you get back, Itachi-kun." Shizune said as she waved at Itachi and his team.

"Thank you, Shizune-san. And yeah, I will," Itachi said, waving back.

"Guess that they weren't exaggerating when they talked about the prowess of the Uchiha. Hmmm... wonder if under the tutelage of Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama Naruto-kun will be able to become a Genin that soon..." Shizune mused to herself.

...

Night fell over Konoha once again. While Shizune and Naruto were asleep once again, Jiraiya and Tsunade were having their usual late night drinking session. Except there were two key differences: the first one was that they were sitting at the opposite ends of the living room's couch, in an awkward attempt to put as much space between each other as possible. And second, there was no sake. Despite both Sannin undying adoration of the burning brew, they weren't going to take any chances after what happened the previous night.

Jiraiya cleared his throat. "So... how was your day, hime?"

"... good. Today came a pregnant woman who gave birth to triplets," Tsunade answered, without looking at him.

"Oh, triplets. You don't see that every day," Jiraiya replied. "And... how's your hemophobia going?"

"Good too. Therapy is working fine. I'm making some progress, even if it's at a slow pace. My therapist says I will be able to perform surgery again in two years."

"That's... that's something great to hear."

"And... what about you? How was your meeting with that spy?"

"Good I guess. He shared with me some information about a new mercenary group that seems to be interested in the Tailed Beasts. I'll have to investigate that in the future."

"It's good to know that we're getting closer to-OH SCREW THIS!" Tsunade shouted, throwing her hands in the air. Fortunately, she didn't wake up the two youths sleeping upstairs.

"... it is something I said?"

"No. It's... this! I mean, we're in our forties and here we are, acting like a couple of emotionally disabled teenagers! Having some small talk in a pathetic attempt at ignoring what we did last night!"

"You wanna talk about it?"

"Like hell I do. But before we talk," Tsunade said as she walked towards the drinks cabinet and grabbed two cups and a few sake bottles. "Let's have a drink."

Tsunade poured the sake on the two cups, and both Sannin drank them in one go.

"So, do you feel better?" Tsunade asked.

"Yeah, I guess, but I could do with another cup," Jiraiya said. Tsunade obliged and poured him more sake.

"Alright Jiraiya, now I want you to answer me this honestly, no lies. Do you still like me?"

Jiraiya sighed as he gulped down the second cup of sake. Tsunade would expect a yes/no answer, but not even the Toad Sannin knew the extent of his feelings towards his former teammate.

"I... I don't know... I guess."

"You *guess* ? Come on Jiraiya, try a bit harder. Take another drink if you need it."

"I know I used to like you, and I tried to get over my feelings for you since I knew we weren't meant to be together, and I thought that I moved on. Then... plenty of shit happened, and suddenly I'm raising a kid with you. I thought that taking care of Naruto would be like doing a mission, but seeing you every day, our late night talks, being Naruto's parents... I think they rekindled those feelings."

"I see..."

"What about you, Tsunade? Did you find yourself attracted to me all of sudden? Because I know that there's no man on this world who can trick you, much less force you, to share a bed with him."

"I... I'm not sure. But guess that I'd be an hypocrite if I didn't give you a specific answer after I forced you to give me one. I don't know when it happened, but suddenly I started growing more fond of you with each passing day. I didn't know if it was just fondness or if it was... something more? To be honest, I've been an emotional mess since I left Konoha."

Jiraiya chuckled. "Heh, I can relate to that."

"Jiraiya, the rules I established when we started living together..."

"What about them? Did I break any?"

"No, and that's what surprised me the most. You didn't do any of your 'research' or any other perverted stuff I was expecting you to do. Were you hoping to win some points with me by sticking to my rules?"

"No. Listen, Tsunade, what happened yesterday surprised me as much as it did surprise you."

"Then why did you decide to follow those rules then?"

"I might not had been trying to woo you anymore, but I never stopped caring about you. I know I'm not the easiest person to live with, that's why I had been trying to suppress my least admirable traits in order to give you an easy time. You deserved as much as that."

"I... well, thank you for that. I know I hadn't been the easiest housemate either. Looking back, I was a total bitch to you when we first moved here. You know, you could have set some rules for me as well."

"Eh, it's okay. I didn't find it necessary."

"Really? Wasn't there anything I did but you wanted for me to stop?"

"A couple things, but minor enough not to warrant something like a rule. Plus those offenses aren't hard to ignore when the offender is so easy to the eyes," Jiraiya said with a wide grin, as he shot Tsunade a devious look.

Tsunade scowled and punched him in the shoulder. "See? That's what I was talking about. You were doing so good, and you had to ruin it."

"Come on, you wouldn't like me if I changed everything about me, right?"

"I like you better when you're not a pervert."

"AHA! You admitted to like me at last!"

Tsunade opened her eyes wide, stunned. "I did...?" after a few seconds of silence she let a small smile form on her face "I guess I do. There's no point in denying it."

"So... what do we do now? Do we go on a date or something...?"

"Actually... let's take this slow, okay? I might have admitted that I have some feelings for you, but still need to put my thoughts in order before we can take this any further."

"It's okay. I've been dreaming for this moment for decades. I can wait a little more."

"Good to know that. As for now, we might not go on a date, but there are a couple bottles of sake that have on a date with our livers," Tsunade said as she poured more sake on her and Jiraiya's cups.

They spent the rest of the night casually chatting while drinking, resembling what they usually did during the previous nights.

...

Shizune woke up next morning as usual. After getting dressed, she walked towards Tsunade's bedroom.

"Tsunade-sama, are you awake? It's time to get up," Shizune said after knocking the door, but there was no answer. She knocked the door again. "Tsunade-sama?"

Fearing for the worst, the young Chunin opened the door slowly, and after working up some courage, she dared to peek inside. But much to her surprise, the room was empty, and the bed was made. Weird. Tsunade never wakes up earlier than her.

"Oh well, guess that there's a first time for everything," Shizune said as she went downstairs.

However, upon reaching the living room, she saw something way worse than the image of the previous morning, which also made her realize why the bed was made. Tsunade didn't sleep in her room at all.

"OH DEAR KAMI!" Shizune shouted in horror as she rushed back upstairs. "THAT'S THE ONLY COUCH WE HAVE!"

Author's note: Aw, poor Shizune. Guess that it's pretty easy to imagine what she saw when she entered the living room, right?

So yeah, Jiraiya and Tsunade are an item now. You may think I rushed their relationship much, but keep in mind that they've been living 2 years together. Still, I did my best to make sure that it didn't feel unnatural, it will be up to you to decide if I succeeded or not. The reason is that I don't want to dedicate too many chapters to cover the era in which Naruto is still a baby.

The next chapter, which will be uploaded the next week, we will cover the Hyuga Affair! Meanwhile, take a couple minutes to leave a review if you liked this chapter. Reviews makes me very, very, very happy!

The Hyuga Affair

Authro's Note: And after three measly chapters, this story has also become my most favorited story as well. Let's see how long it takes to become the most reviewed.

Anyway, as each week, here you have a new chapter of this story you like so much. See you again at the end of the chapter ;)

Chapter 4

The Hyuga Affair

Or

Bloodline Limits are not a substitute for anger management

Three years after the Kyubi attack

It took them some time, but Jiraiya and Tsunade were able to sort out their issues, and decided to give themselves a chance. Things were slow at first, just as Tsunade wanted, but they soon became comfortable with each other and their relationship moved way faster than anyone would had anticipated, and a year after they made their relationship official to Shizune and Naruto, they agreed to marry.

For Shizune's sanity's sake, they also decided to limit any activity remotely linked to sexual intercourse to their bedroom. The girl had an innate talent for finding them doing it, if you could call that a talent.

While Tsunade and Jiraiya wanted a small, intimate ceremony with their closest family members and friends, in the end it became a huge event due to how many people wanted to witness their union. After the wedding was over, there were two consecutive days of

partying across all of Konoha, and it would have been more if Sarutobi didn't use the ANBU to force everybody (especially other ninja) to return to their usual duties.

Jiraiya and Tsunade traveled to a village in Land of the Hot Springs, which used to be a ninja village like Konoha, but failed due to the lack of quality of the ninjas trained there, and was converted into a tourist resort, which was far more successful.

That had been a week and a half ago. Naruto was elated, since today was the day their beloved parental figures would return from their trip. He had begged and cried to take him with them. It took nearly three hours until they convinced him to stop begging.

The moment the door opened, Naruto immediately bolted from the couch -Shizune had it washed four times since "the incident"- and dashed towards the door.

"Mom! Dad! You're back!" Naruto cheered as she hugged Tsunade's legs.

"Well, I was going to ask you if you missed us, but guess that there's no need to," Tsunade chuckled as she bended down to hug Naruto.

"Welcome back, you two! How was your trip?" Shizune asked.

"Couldn't have been better! The weather was perfect, the food was delicious, the service pretty nice... but all of it pales in comparison to the wonderful company," Jiraiya said as he pulled Tsunade near him and kissed her.

"Ugh, didn't you guys get enough 'fun time' already? I don't need more mental scars."

"Shizune is right, Jiraiya. At least, wait until tonight," Tsunade replied as she gently pushed Jiraiya back.

"I make no promises," Jiraiya said with one of his trademark perverted grins.

"What amazed me the most is how that place seems to be always summer. One day I'll find out why did they do to have a micro-climate like that."

"You buy me a present?" Naruto asked.

"It was your birthday not even two months ago! You already had presents," Tsunade said, hands on her hips. Naruto's eyes then watered as his mouth curved down. Tsunade sighed, rolled her eyes and produced a wrapped box from under her jacket. "There you go brat."

Naruto quickly snatched the box and unwrapped it, revealing to be a set of toy shurikens and kunais made of plastic.

"Yay! My first ninja stuff!" Naruto cheered as he opened the box.

"We thought that maybe you could start training with the basics. You'll be enrolled in the academy in a couple years after all," Jiraiya mentioned, ruffling Naruto's hair.

Naruto didn't say anything, he simply took his present and rushed towards his room upstairs in order to enjoy his new toy.

"Boy, I wish everybody else could be so happy with so little," Jiraiya said as he saw his adoptive son disappearing upstairs. Then he turned his eyes to the young kunoichi. "So, did something interesting happened while we were out, Shizune?"

"Actually, yes. I've been promoted to Special Jonin!" the black haired girl announced, even jumping in joy.

"Congratulations! You really deserved it!" Jiraiya said, patting her in the back.

"Hell, she deserves to be an actual Jonin!" Tsunade added, a bit upset. "Tomorrow I'm going to have a talk with that old monkey and make sure that-"

"Please, don't. I don't want everybody else to think that I got my promotion because of you. Besides, Hokage-sama said that if I keep working hard, I can be an actual Jonin within the next year."

"That's awesome! Come on, we need to have dinner out to celebrate your promotion," Jiraiya suggested.

"It's not necessary. Besides, aren't you tired from the trip back? Shouldn't you try to rest a bit first?"

Tsunade frowned. "Seriously Shizune, do I look THAT old? Isn't my transformation working properly?"

"Okay, okay, let's go have dinner outside! I'll get Naruto ready while you two unpack," Shizune conceded as she walked upstairs.

"And show more enthusiasm, dammit! We're going to celebrate YOUR promotion!"

...

The next day, Jiraiya was summoned by an ANBU to the Hokage's office. The white haired Sannin already expected what his old mentor would ask, and he wouldn't like the answer. After waiting some minutes, an ANBU told the Toad Sage that he could enter the office. Hiruzen was already waiting for him.

"Welcome back, Jiraiya. Take a seat. So, tell me, how was your honeymoon?"

Well, that definitely *wasn't* what he was expecting him to ask.

"Eh, it was good, we had a great time there. We might go there again on one of our anniversaries," Jiraiya replied.

"Good to know. Though I'm glad that at least two of my students found happiness with each other, you'll probably guessed that that wasn't the reason I called you here. How is your investigation going?"

Yeah, that was more like it.

"Truth be told, I hadn't found anything that might exonerate the Uchiha from the Kyubi attack. What I did find, however, was that there's a group that has been gathering information about the Tailed Beasts. They call themselves Akatsuki," Jiraiya explained.

"Hmmmm, that's something worrisome. What did you learn about this group?"

"Nothing much, other than they're a recently formed mercenary group. They managed to become well known in the past year due to their high rate of success and absurdly low prices. Many villages, both major and minor, are losing quite some customers to this group."

Hirzuen frowned, and crossed his hands under his chin. "We'll have to keep this group under close watch. Have they tried something like abducting a Jinchuriki from another village?"

"From what I heard, no."

"That's good. We'll inform other villages about our discoveries. Maybe this isn't anything, but you can't never be too cautious."

"Uh, I don't think they'll believe anything we might say, and think we are trying to trick them. With the exception of Suna, our relationship with the rest of the villages, both major and minor, isn't exactly good. And Suna doesn't give me good vibes either."

"Actually, that may change soon. We're making preparatives for an alliance with Kumogakure."

Jiraiya couldn't help but open his eyes wide in shock. "Are you serious!?" Jiraiya almost shouted as he leaned towards Sarutobi.

"Indeed I am. The Raikage sent a few days ago a small retinue, leaded by Kumo's Head Ninja. They want us to sign an alliance treaty."

"This doesn't smell good. Did you read the treaty?"

"I did, and I found their terms to be reasonable. Neither me nor the council think there's a reason for not to sign that treaty."

"I see."

"... but you don't think I should sign it. Right, Jiraiya?"

"Exactly. I mean, I can't give you an specific reason. It's more like a... gut feeling. I mean, don't you find a bit weird that that rageaholic jackass that is the Raikage would want an alliance with us all of sudden? This smells fishy."

"I did think the same, Jiraiya, but if never learn to forget past transgressions and make an effort to create bonds with our former enemies, we will never attain true peace. Maybe the Raikage finally saw reason. Besides, this can be beneficial for your ward."

"Beneficial for Naruto? Explain."

"I know that Kumogakure has two Jinchuriki. Both of them had tamed their Tailed Beasts, and can use their power without any risk. If this goes well, maybe in the future Kumogakure will share with us what kind of training they did in order to achieve such feat. I know that Minato would have wanted Naruto to learn to use the power of the Kyubi, if that wasn't the case he would have used a different seal."

"If that's the case, I hope that I'm wrong. Naruto needs to be as strong as possible, and such training would prove invaluable."

"Besides, we will need other alliances besides Suna if this Akatsuki group is the threat you fear it is. And with Kumo and Suna on our side, maybe we can pressure Iwa and Kiri to join us. Can you imagine that, Jiraiya? All five villages, finally united?" Sarutobi looked visibly excited at the prospect, as if seeing the culmination of the work of a lifetime.

"It's a pretty good picture, sensei. But with Kiri's ninja being more unhinged than ever and how much Iwa hates us, it's unlikely."

"Unlikely doesn't mean impossible, my former student. Anybody would have said that you marrying Tsunade was also 'unlikely', yet look what happened. As long as there's a chance for something wonderful, we should fight for it with all our strength, don't you think?"

"I guess you're right."

"Keep up with the Akatsuki. I have a feeling that the mysterious attacker who unleashed the Kyubi was part of that group. With enough luck, we might gather enough evidence to exonerate the Uchiha."

"Speaking of which, how are the Uchiha doing?"

Sarutobi's expression soured. "Sadly, not good. There seems to be an information leak, and the Uchiha learned that they're being held suspect for the Kyubi attack, and my ANBU are hearing murmurs and rumors about the Uchihas being potential traitors among the population. As you can imagine, Fugaku-san was far from amused."

"This is not good. The Uchiha will grow restless, and that will only make them to look more suspicious on Danzo's eyes."

"That's why your investigation is so important, Jiraiya. I decided to be lenient and let you enjoy some time alone with Tsunade, but now it's time to get back to work. We need information on the attack, and we need it as soon as possible," Sarutobi sternly said.

"The Akatsuki lead seems to be the best one. I'll continue with that."

"Good. You're dismissed. Now, I have a treaty to sign."

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Unfortunately for the Third, his hopes for peace would be cruelly crushed. The very same night the treaty was signed, a masked ninja attempted to kidnap Hiashi Hyuga's three year old daughter, Hinata. Hiashi killed the man before he could even get out of the Hyuga Compound. The kidnapper turned out to be Kumogakure's head ninja.

Now it was obvious that the whole treaty was just a ruse to infiltrate a Kumo ninja on Konoha who could abduct an Hyuga. The Raikage's answer came quickly in the form of a rather scathing letter demanding for the killer, Hiashi Hyuga, to be extradited to Kumo to be judged for attacking a diplomat, while at the same time vehemently denying any kidnapping attempt on their part. Refusing the demands would result in war.

There was an emergency meeting at the Hyuga Compound. Besides the highest ranking members within the clan hierarchy, such as Hiashi Hyuga, head of the Main Family, his brother Hizashi, head of the Branch Family, and their father, a clan elder and former head of the Main Family, there were also the Hokage, Jiraiya, Koharu, Homura and Danzo.

"Our main priority is avoiding a war with Kumo. We haven't recovered yet from the Kyubi attack, we can't afford going to war so soon, especially not after a village that strong," the Hokage declared.

"We all read that letter. The only viable solution is for me to be handed to Kumogakure. It was me who killed the Head Ninja, so it should be me who shoulders this responsibility," Hiashi declared solemnly.

"Hiashi, don't. We can't let the Byakugan to fall into those bastards' hands," the Hyuga Elder said.

"I agree. If we hand the Byakugan to the enemy, we will give them a weapon to use against us. What guarantee we have that they won't declare war on us once they forced you to produce enough Byakugan bearers?" Danzo asked.

"That's why we already have devised a solution. Hizashi will go in your place. We shall execute him in front of the Raikage, and hand the corpse to him. That way, Kumo won't get the Byakugan and we'll avert the war," the Elder said. Upon seeing Hiashi's reaction, he added: "Hizashi already agreed with the plan."

"Are you really thinking in surrender to their demands? So one of them commits a crime against one of our clans on our own village, and WE are the ones who have to compensate THEM? What kind of message would be sending to the rest of the villages, that we let everybody to trample over us with impunity?" Koharu angrily shouted.

"I agree with Councilor Utatane. Konoha must never kneel before potential enemies," Danzo added.

"I can't believe what I'm going to say, but I agree with Danzo," Jiraiya added. Danzo shot him a neutral look. "This may set a dangerous precedent. When other villages hear out of this, what will stop them of making unreasonable demands under threat of war?"

"But we can't afford going into a war!" Homura interceded. "Even if we win, we would be so weakened afterwards that we'd be an easy prey for even the minor villages!"

"Actually, I believe that the Raikage's threat of war is just a bluff," Jiraiya stated.

"What make you be so sure of that, Jiraiya-sama?" Hiashi asked.

"We just killed one of their higher ranked ninjas on a diplomatic mission. That's a pretty valid excuse to wage a war, and at least one of the previous wars was waged over even less than that. If they really wanted war, the Fourth Ninja War would have already been declared."

"Do you have any ideas, Jiraiya?" the Hokage asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do sensei. Let's reply their bluff with one of our own. I believe that since neither Tsunade nor I officially went back to active duty, they probably don't know that we're back in Konoha. Let him show that two of the Legendary Sannin are back in business, and see if he's so eager to wage war against us then."

"That's a dangerous gamble, Jiraiya. While you and your teammates built quite the reputation during the Second War, it isn't a guarantee that might intimidate the Raikage."

"Guess that after living with Tsunade so much time something of her rubbed off on me, hehe," Jiraiya said with a chuckle. "Fortunately, my luck will be better than hers."

"I like your plan, Jiraiya. It's good to see that after all the pacifistic ideas Hiruzen surely filled your head with, you're still capable of some ruthlessness," Danzo told him.

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow, then shuddered. A compliment from Danzo. He never felt so dirty.

"Hokage-sama, what is your decision then?" Homura asked.

Sarutobi closed his eyes, and pondered his options for a few minutes. He finally reached a decision.

"We will follow Jiraiya's plan. I'll send a letter to the Raikage asking him to meet me on neutral ground. Once there, we'll attempt our bluff."

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The next week, the Hokage and a group composed of Jiraiya, Tsunade, Hiashi Hyuga, Shikaku Nara, Kakashi Hatake and Shibi Aburame were heading towards the Land of Hot Springs, which would serve as the neutral ground where the meeting would take place. Several Chunin were carrying the corpse of the Head Ninja on a stretcher, as well as the other two Kumo ninja that came with him.

"Ugh, they didn't have women my size in mind when they made these goddamned flak jackets!" Tsunade grumbled, trying to close her jacket over her massive rack, before finally giving up.

"If it was a man who did, I can guarantee he did. All men have women your size in mind at some point in their lives," Jiraiya said with a perverted grin. Tsunade shot him a cold glare. " Don't give me that look, I'm just stating facts."

Both of them were wearing a green flak jacket over a blue long sleeved shirt, blue pants, and a Konoha forehead protector.

"I can't believe I let you make me agree to do this. We had left this shit behind," Tsunade protested.

"Relax, Hime," Jiraiya whispered as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "We aren't going to fight, just to instill some fear into their bones. This will be over before you realize it."

He decided not to tell her that Sarutobi was wearing his battle armor under the Hokage robes. Sarutobi also hoped that the meeting wouldn't end in a fight, but you could never be too cautious, especially with somebody so rage-prone as A.

"That better be right," Tsunade replied in a threatening tone.

Hiashi's Byakugan located the Raikage and his entourage, who were already in the meeting point, a clearing between a forest and a river. Everybody instinctively checked on their weapons, even if they

weren't mean to fight.. After a few minutes more of walking, everybody else saw them.

"He brought more people than us," Tsunade noted upon glancing at the group of Kumo ninjas.

"Focus not on quantity, but quality. Do you see the man with sunglasses and a scarf, and that blond woman with a ponytail? Besides the Raikage, you should worry about those two the most."

"Let me guess, they're the Kumo Jinchuriki?"

"Correct."

"The Raikage brought the heavy hitters. I don't like it."

"Hey, so did we. Besides, this confirms my early theories. The Raikage wants to intimidate us as well. Now it all depends on who gives into fear first, sensei or the Raikage."

Upon noticing the Hokage's group approaching, the Kumo ninja walked towards them. Both groups stopped at a safe distance from each other.

"So, you finally came, Hokage, and you brought the murderer with you. Good. Hand him to us, and we can get over this already," the Raikage said, his voice dripping with impatience.

"Not so fast, Raikage-dono. Yes we are aware of your terms to settle this dispute. I discussed them with my councilors, and we decided to reject them."

"WHAT!?" The Raikage roared. "Do you realize this means war, right!?"

"I haven't finished yet. Now you will hear *my* terms: Not only you will cease your demands, but you will apologize to Hiashi-san, the Hyuga Clan Head, for attempting to kidnap his daughter, right here, and right now. As a gesture of good will, we will give you back the

corpse of the Head Ninja of Kumo so he can receive a proper burial, as well as the two ninja who came with him. As you can see, they received no harm during the time they were under our custody."

A looked livid. He was releasing so much killing intent that the Konoha ninja instinctively reached for their weapons. The Hokage, however, remained impassible. Then, the Raikage appeared to calm down, and chuckled.

"I know what you're trying to do, Hokage. You got me there for a second, but I saw through your trap. Still, gotta give credit to you for the effort."

"Excuse me?" Sarutobi tilted his head, genuinely puzzled.

"Tell those two subordinates of yours to dispel the transformation. They are not the real Jiraiya and Tsunade. They're only embarrassing all of you."

Sarutobi raised an eyebrow. "I don't know what you're talking about. Those are the real Jiraiya and Tsunade."

"Oh please. The guy posing as Jiraiya is putting some effort, but the Tsunade poser looks in her twenties, while she should look much older than that!"

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING OLD, YOU STEROID MONSTER!" Tsunade bellowed as she tried to attack the Raikage. Fortunately Jiraiya managed to restrain her.

"Calm down, Hime. Ignore him, he's not worth your time," Jiraiya whispered to Tsunade's ear.

"Well, if you believe I'm bluffing, why don't you check their identities yourself?" Hiruzen asked.

"I see your bluff, Hokage, and I'll take it. Darui, come here!" A shouted.

A dark skinned man with shaggy blond hair that covered his left eye, looking no older than eighteen, who was carrying a rather large sword on his back, stepped forward.

"Yes, boss?"

"Check if those two are the real Jiraiya and Tsunade, or if they're two other people posing as them as I suspect."

"Alright," the young man calmly said, and walked towards Jiraiya. He placed his hand on the white haired man's shoulder, and send a pulse of chakra through his body. Said pulse should have dispelled any transformation, as well as any genjutsu in case Jiraiya was under one. Yet the Toad Sage remained the same. Darui looked at the Raikage uncomfortably. "Uh, sorry boss, but this man isn't under any transformation jutsu."

The Raikage was trembling with fury. "Now the woman!"

Darui moved towards Tsunade, and hesitated a bit before placing his hand on her shoulder. Besides shooting him a murderous glare, the blonde Sannin was projecting an immeasurable amount of killing intent, as if saying "go ahead, put a hand of me, I dare you".

Still, Darui was a dutiful ninja, and didn't let Tsunade's anger to get in the way of following his boss' orders. He repeated the process, and Tsunade started to change into a visibly older woman.

"HA! I KNEW IT!" The Raikage yelled in triumph. But said triumph proved to be short lived when Tsunade didn't change any further. She was still Tsunade, only with a few wrinkles.

"Well, are you happy now!?" Tsunade barked at Darui, who jumped back, startled.

"Uh, boss, this woman seems to be Tsunade as well," Darui said. Then he turned towards Tsunade again. "Sorry for dispelling your... beauty transformation, Tsunade-san."

Tsunade just growled in return as she quickly reapplied the transformation. Darui quickly returned at his boss' side before the Sanin could lash out at him.

"Since when did those two rejoined Konoha!?" the Raikage shouted. His anger was an all time high.

"Three years ago, shortly after the Kyubi attack. The village needed help, and they heeded our call. In fact, they even married not long ago, and have an adoptive son," Hiruzen calmly replied.

"I even have pictures of him here! Wanna see them? He looks so cute when he tries to ride our pet pig!" Jiraiya mentioned.

"Jiraiya, please. Naruto *a/ways* looks cute," Tsunade corrected.

"Anyway, now that the identities of my students is no longer an issue, can we go back to the matter at hand?" Hiruzen asked, not bothering to hide a smile.

Gritting his teeth, the Raikage pondered his options. His ploy to get the Byakugan was falling apart, and he couldn't see any way to save it. His intimidation tactics weren't working, and it appeared that the Hokage had realized that the threats of war were just that, threats.

Now, if Kumo went to a war against Konoha, the Raikage was sure that they could win. But it would be a very costly win, now that two of the Sannin were back among Konoha's ranks. And he didn't want to start a war in the first place. As much as it pained him, there was no other way out other than quit now.

"Alright Hokage... I... I agree with your terms," the Raikage said, almost spitting those words.

Hiruzen's smile widened. "I'm glad you could see reason, Raikage-dono. Hiashi-san, please step forward."

The Hyuga Clan Head moved towards them. He had his chin up, and his face was sporting a smile of superiority.

"Well, Raikage-dono? I'm waiting," the Hyuga said, in an almost mocking tone.

"On my and the entirety of Kumogakure's behalf, I'm sorry for the actions of my representative on your village. Please accept our apologies."

A looked as if he was in pain. Darui wondered why his boss, and everybody else for that matter, had such a hard time apologizing. After all, was really saying two short words that hard?

"Apologies accepted, Raikage-dono. I hope this incident never happens again."

"Well, now that everything's settled, we should head back to our respective villages, and try to forget that this unfortunate incident ever happened," Sarutobi said.

"Wait a minute!" Jiraiya said as he moved towards the Kumo ninja. "It would be a shame if you guys went home empty handed after getting here, so you can have this!"

Jiraiya handed the Raikage a book.

"Icha Icha... Violence?" The Raikage asked, puzzled as he glanced inside the book.

All other Konoha ninja sweatdropped.

"That's right! The second installment of my successful series will hit the bookstores next month, but you can have now a copy of that book, completely free, and signed by yours truly!"

"What is this... smut!? You pretend to appease me with this badly written porn!?" the Raikage roared.

"Hey, the proper term is adult literature with erotic scenes, and as for poorly written-"

"Look what I do with your stupid book!" the Raikage said as he angrily tossed the book into the ground.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Time suddenly slowed for Jiraiya as his beloved book fell to the ground with enough force to shatter upon impact. But then a miracle happened, and a pair of dark skinned hands caught the book before it could touch the ground.

"Yes! Saved!"

"B! What the hell are you doing!?"

The one who saved Jiraiya's book was the ninja with the sunglasses and the scarf, one of the Jinchuriki.

"Come on bro, don't be such a fool, this book you just threw is pretty cool!"

Now it was the Kumo ninja's turn to sweatdrop. The Raikage, however, wasn't in the mood to get in an argument with his brother.

"Well, if you like it so much, you can have it then!" the Raikage said, then he turned towards the rest of his ninja. "Everybody else, gather your stuff, we're going back to the village!"

Jiraiya then walked towards the Raikage's brother.

"Nice to see that there are fans of my books outside the Land of Fire," Jiraiya said as he stretched his hand. "Name's Jiraiya, though you probably heard it already."

"Killer B is the name, and being awesome is my game!" Killer B replied. "Your book is sublime, but it misses some cool rhymes!"

"Uh, that's nice, I'll keep it in mind for the next book. By the way, I wonder if I could ask you a favor," Jiraiya said. Killer B nodded. This was a risky move since it meant sharing sensitive information with a foreign village, but the chance was just too good to pass. "Konoha has a Jinchuriki too. Do you think that once he's old enough you could train him in order to control his Tailed Beast?"

"I'd love to, pal, but I don't know if shall, because you see, my bro has to agree!"

"I see... well anyway, I had to try. Enjoy the book then."

Killer B couldn't be happier. Not only he had gotten an exclusive Icha Icha book for free, weeks before it would be for sale, but that blonde Sannin didn't notice that he had been staring at her boobs during the whole ordeal.

Thank Kami for whoever invented the sunglasses.

...

A few days later, the Hokage's group returned to Konoha, relieved that they had averted a war and they didn't have to surrender one of their Bloodline Limits to an enemy village. And despite his face remained as stoic as usual, Hiashi Hyuga was the one who felt the most relieved. His brother was already waiting for him at the compound entrance.

"Welcome back, brother. I believe the trip was successful?" Hizashi ventured to ask.

"Indeed it was. Thanks to Jiraiya's plans and Hokage-sama's resolve, I believe we averted a potential disaster," Hiashi replied.

"I'm glad to hear that. Come on, I'm sure Hikari-sama and Hinata-sama are dying to see you again."

They walked through the front courtyard, when some young Main House boys and girls were practicing the Gentle Fist, under the watch of a Clan Elder.

"Hizashi, during the whole time I've been out there has been something in my mind that I couldn't shake off. Were you really willing to die in my place?"

"You were willing to die too in order to prevent a war," Hizashi replied.

"But it was me who killed that Kumo Ninja. And it was me who Kumo wanted. Besides, you didn't answer my question," the older twin said.

"Yes. Yes I was."

"But... why? I thought you hated the Main House!"

"And I do, make no mistake. But that doesn't mean I hate *you* . You're my brother and I love you, Main House or not. And I'd be willing to die for you, just like how you'd die for Hikari or Hinata. Isn't that enough?"

"I'd die for you too, you know, Branch House or not."

"I prefer if you wouldn't. I don't want to have your death on my conscience," Hizashi replied. "Come on, let's stop talking about death, we averted a war, the Byakugan is safe and none of us had to die."

"Yeah, guess you're right. Did something interesting happen while I was out of the village?"

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At the same time the Raikage and his ninja had also returned to the village, through their mood was considerably less cheerful, for obvious reasons. While A wasn't a man who indulged often in

alcohol, now he could use some sake, at least to forget the past few days. He remembered he still had a few bottles of sake the Lightning Lord gave him as a gift for his appointment as Raikage.

Opening the door of his office, he saw that there was a man already there. More precisely, the man who started all this mess to begin with. A young man with shaggy white hair, pale skin, and had his eyes closed for some reason. Though maybe "man" was stretching it, since he couldn't be older than sixteen.

"Back already, Raikage-dono?" the young man's lips formed a half smile. "And I guess that your contingency plan failed."

The Raikage slammed the door closed, and walked towards the intruder, trembling with fury. "What are you doing here!?"

"I wanted to check the progress of the mission, that's all. But even if you didn't say anything, I can guess that it ended in failure. So, you failed to capture the Byakugan Princess, and failed to procure me a pair of pure Byakugan. Disappointing."

The Raikage's face contorted in fury, and grabbed the man by his robe's collar. "Watch your mouth, brat! Or you will find that my rage is all but disappointing!"

"Is this how Kumo treats their clients?" the man replied, not losing his cool.

"This is the way Kumo treats those who pissed the Raikage! And look at me in the eyes when I talk to you!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, due to some... impairments," the man said, opening his eyes, revealing two empty eye sockets. Even the Raikage was startled by such an horrible visage, and released the white haired man on instinct. "Even if you failed the mission in every possible way, you can keep the payment if you wish. Let's hope I can find somebody who can actually help me in my endeavors."

And with that, the man suddenly vanished, as if he was never there to begin with.

"Now I *really* need a drink..."

...

Later that night, Tsunade and Jiraiya were in their bed, on each other's arms, trying to sleep. The Slug Princess then started to giggle, which evolved into a laughing fit.

"May I know what do you find so funny all of sudden, Hime?" Jiraiya asked.

"It's just... I can't believe you tried to promote your book back then!" Tsunade said between laughs. "I mean, we were trying to stop a war, and you tried to sell them porn! It was so surreal!"

"It's not porn, it's adult literature with erotic scenes! How many times I have to repeat that?" Jiraiya complained. "Besides, that Jinchuriki was a fan of my book, and I almost convinced him to train Naruto."

Tsunade suddenly turned at Jiraiya, and looked at him with her eyes wide open. "Really? Because if Naruto learned how to use the Kyubi's chakra then-"

"Unfortunately, he has his hands tied. He needs the Raikage's permission first, and I doubt that such thing will happen anytime soon. Though I do plan to train Naruto to use the Kyubi's chakra myself."

"Really? Do you know how to do such thing?"

"Yes, I've collected some scrolls about Tailed Beasts and Jinchuriki, and have some hints that might be useful."

"I hope you can teach him. Naruto's going to need all the help we can bring him."

"Naruto will grow up into a strong ninja, just like his parents. You'll see that when he grows up."

They both kissed, and within minutes they fell asleep.

If they only remained awake for a couple more minutes, they would have noticed that the crystal on Tsunade's necklace started to glow with a dim, teal light...

Author's Note: It's pretty obvious that the whole Hyuga Affair only existed to build Neji's characterization, despite all the potential it had for future plotlines, specially once Kumo became relevant to the story. Then again, I just realized that I was making the same mistake, writing this chapter so I didn't have to do Neji's character arc all over again (if there's something I hate, is stories that copy-paste canon). So I decided to add that little scene at the Raikage's office at the end to tie it with a larger, future subplot.

Anyway, next week, the last of the four main characters makes her grand debut! Meanwhile, leave your thoughts on this chapter in a review! Reviews makes me very, very, very happy!

The White-Eyed Girl

Author's note: Hello once again, my cute little readers! Like every week, here you have a new chapter of this story you love so much. While I had fun writing about Tsunade and Jiraiya... well, I believe it's about time for this story to move onto the stuff you are REALLY looking for, right?

It seems that that little scene I added the last minute completely stole the chapter. The reception to that scene has been... mixed, and many people rightfully had some questions. But hear me out: it's possible that you may see something that doesn't make sense or that it's out of place in any chapter, but trust me, everything will be explained in the future.

And after just four chapters, this story reached 100 reviews already! Thank you guys, you rock! I wonder how long it will take to reach 1000 reviews... BTW, shout out to "CandoresMal", who left the review #100!

Chapter 5

The White-Eyed Girl

Or

Hey, Naruto made a friend!

Six years after the Kyubi attack

Three years had passed after the incident with Kumogakure, known as the "Hyuga Affair", in which fortunately, there was nothing that threatened Konoha's stability, and it could continue its recovery from the Kyubi attack. That doesn't mean that nothing eventful happened in Konoha. Plenty of things, actually. Among those worth mentioning was the new members of the Senju Family.

Shortly before the meeting with the Raikage, Tsunade became even moodier than usual, had morning sickness, and her hunger skyrocketed. After performing a few tests, it was confirmed that Tsunade was indeed pregnant.

Though not everybody reacted to the news with joy and jubilation.

FLASHBACK

"Shizune, where the hell is my sake!?" Tsunade roared as she furiously inspected all the house's cabinets, looking for her best friend.

"I... I hid it away!" the young kunoichi replied between stutters.

"YOU DID WHAT!?"

"I did it for your own good!"

"Shizune, we already talked about this! I'm old enough to-"

"I don't mean that! Tsunade-sama, you're pregnant now, you can't drink alcohol, or else it may damage the baby!"

Tsunade was rendered silent as Shizune's words started to sink in. Nine months without her best friend to help her go through the pains of pregnancy? She fell on her knees.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Her anguished yell was heard across all the elemental nations.

END FLASHBACK

Coincidentally, the crystal on Tsunade's necklace, who used to belong to the First Hokage and it is said to bear his chakra, started to glow. Very dimly at first, but progressively brighter as the pregnancy went on. It also glowed brighter when closer to Tsunade's growing belly.

And the surprises didn't end there. Turn out Tsunade gave birth to twins.

FLASHBACK

Tsunade was in a hospital bed, with holding newborn babies with blankets wrapped around them, on each arm. At her sides were Jiraiya, Shizune and Naruto.

"So, have you thought how are you going to name them?" Shizune asked.

"Yes. The girl is Kaida," Jiraiya said.

"And the boy 's name is Hagane," Tsunade said.

"Can I hold a baby? Can I? Please? Please? Please!?" Naruto said, jumping up and down.

"Okay, but be careful, and hold him tight, okay?" Tsunade said as she handed Hagane to Naruto.

"I know, I'm not stupid!" Naruto said as she held the baby, which weighed more than he had expected. "Hey there, I'm Naruto, your big bro!"

Shizune, meanwhile, was holding Kaida. "They are perfect, aren't they?"

"Indeed. I've been waiting nine months for this moment," Tsunade said as she looked at her children, smiling sweetly. Then she looked at Shizune. "Shizune, bring me my damn sake."

END FLASHBACK

Turned out, the necklace also reacted whenever it was near the twins. Nobody could figure out why, but they knew it meant something.

Soon after the twins' birth, Naruto turned four, and the two Sannin decided that it was time to start his ninja training, at least the basics. He would join the Academy in two years, and they wanted him to be as prepared as possible. The little blond kid couldn't be happier. However, said happiness didn't last long when instead of cool jutsus or at least taijutsu combos, all what Jiraiya and Tsunade taught him was chakra control exercises, hand seals and basic taijutsu forms.

Naruto's training routine consisted in mostly practicing simple punches and kicks against a small cushioned training dummy, practicing hand seals, and chakra control exercises that consisted mostly in keeping a leaf stuck to his forehead using chakra. Whenever he completed that exercise, they simply told him that the next time he would have to keep it longer.

Unfortunately for Tsunade and Jiraiya, Naruto's attention span was nonexistent, and he could barely focus on a task that he deemed too boring and uncool, regardless of how many times the two Sannin told him that he had to master the basics first before they could teach him the "cooler" stuff.

It wasn't until a year and a half (though to Naruto it felt much longer) than the blond Jinchuriki would learn his first jutsu.

FLASHBACK

"Alright Naruto, your mother and I decided that your chakra control is good enough to teach you your first jutsu," Jiraiya said.

"YAY! Finally!" Naruto said, starry-eyed, as he pumped his fist while leaping in the air.

"To show you how this jutsu works, I need you to attack me first, so give me your worst hit."

"Alright!" Naruto said as he took some steps back. He then charged at Jiraiya and leaped in order to hit him with a flying kick. "DRAGON KICK OF AWESOME FURY!"

Naruto barely noticed his adoptive father going through a series of hand seals, and a second after Naruto's foot landed on Jiraiya's chest, the white haired Sannin disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a log in its place.

"What?"

"I believe this is something you'd call 'cool', right?" Jiraiya said from behind him.

Naruto turned around, startled. "How did you do that?"

"This is a technique called Body Replacement Jutsu. You replace your body with some other object the moment you're hit. Not only is very useful to avoid fatal blows, but it's also perfect to set an ambush to an unsuspecting enemy."

"WHOA! Please, teach me how to do it!"

"First, you must learn to do the hand seals quickly. The sequence is Tiger, Boar, Ox, Dog and Snake. We will repeat it until you can do it fast enough. Then..."

END FLASHBACK

After practicing the technique for a few months, Naruto hadn't mastered the Body Replacement yet. He still had some trouble with the hand seals. But that didn't let him down. After all, most kids didn't learn that technique until they were in the Academy, so he'd have that advantage over them.

Besides, today was a good day. It was the first time he ever saw snow in Konoha, and he had a really fun snowball fight with his family. Then, after lunch, he went to enroll the Academy, and now was on his way home to tell his parents. He was so excited to finally become a real ninja!

"Your eyes are so creepy!"

"Huh?" Naruto said, looking around for the source of the voice. He could tell it was the voice of a boy his age

"I'm sure you're a monster!" another voice said.

Naruto felt a chill going up his spine. Monster. He remembered the talk he had with his parents a couple weeks before his sixth birthday.

FLASHBACK

"Naruto, listen up, you will be six soon, and your mother and I decided it was time for you to know some important things," Jiraiya stated, as he placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. He was rather serious, as opposed to his usual carefree demeanor.

"We want you to learn these things from us rather than somebody else," Tsunade's mood mirrored her husband's.

"It is something bad I did?" Naruto asked, genuinely worried.

"No, no, of course not," Tsunade reassured in a sweet tone. "It's just... well, it's that we... you..."

"We are not your real parents," Jiraiya stated. Naruto gasped in shock.

"JIRAIYA!" Tsunade shouted at the white haired man, who flinched.

"What? You were taking too damn long!"

"Nevermind. Listen Naruto, you know what happened almost six years ago?"

"Yes. A demon fox named the Kyubi attacked Konoha, and the Fourth Hokage killed it, but he died in the process."

"You see, Naruto, that's not entirely true," Jiraiya said, looking Naruto in the eyes. "Turns out the Kyubi is far too powerful to be killed like that. Not even by somebody as strong as the Fourth. The best he

could do was seal the demon inside somebody else. And that somebody else... it was you, Naruto."

"WHAT? And why would the Fourth Hokage do that? And who are my real parents then? Wait, does that mean that the Demon Fox is going to hurt me!?"

"Of course not! The seal that keeps the demon imprisoned inside you is very strong and will protect everybody, yourself included. Besides, you didn't even suspect that there was a demon inside you until we told you, right? You didn't feel that there was something wrong going on?" Tsunade told him in a reassuring tone.

"No..."

"As to answer your questions... the reason the Fourth choose you was because you have a special kind of chakra that will help keep the Kyubi imprisoned. If he choose somebody else, the Demon Fox would have escaped and continued its rampage. He also believed that in the future, you could use the Kyubi's power for good."

"I-I see..." Naruto said, feeling that he was about to cry. "So that's why when we I go out, people avoid me, and grownups tell kids not to stay near me? Because they're afraid of the Kyubi?"

Both Sannin nodded sadly.

"And to answer your second question... your father was the Fourth Hokage himself, Minato Namikaze," Jiraiya said. Naruto was now speechless. Tears started to come from his eyes. "Your mother was Kushina Uzumaki, the last known member of the Uzumaki clan. That's why your father decided you should inherit her last name instead of his, since he was born to a no-name civilian family of fishers," Jiraiya explained.

"So my father died fighting the Kyubi... and my mother?"

"She died during the attack too. Many people died. And people who lost somebody precious that day will mistakenly blame you for the Kyubi's actions. But don't let them affect you, Naruto."

Naruto broke down crying. It was too much for his little heart to take. Jiraiya and Tsunade did the only thing they could and hugged their adopted son. Naruto cried his eyes out for nearly twenty minutes.

"Listen Naruto, we understand you may be angry with us for not telling you this sooner," Jiraiya whispered, without breaking the hug.

"But we will always love you, and we will always be here whenever you need us," Tsunade added.

After wiping the tears from his face and the snots from his nose, Naruto opened his mouth to speak again.

"D-don't worry guys... I-I'm not angry... a-and... I don't care what other people said. You guys don't consider me a monster, and that's what matters. And if they still think I am... I will prove them wrong! I'll become the greatest ninja who ever lived! I will become Hokage, just like my father!"

Naruto suddenly felt guilty for calling his father to a practical stranger in front of the people who raised him, but they didn't seem to mind.

For a second, when Naruto declared his bold dream, Tsunade saw his little brother Nawaki and his former lover Dan in Naruto. She felt worried that Naruto's path would lead him to the same doom as them, but part of her reassured her that it wouldn't be the case. That Naruto would succeed where others had failed. That she should have faith in him.

"Of course you will, kiddo," Tsunade cheered softly.

"Yeah, you'll show him who's the boss," Jiraiya added.

"Thank you, err... even if you're not my real parents... can I still call you Mom and Dad?"

This time, it was the two Sannin's turn to break down in tears.

END FLASHBACK

Tracking the voice, Naruto found a trio of boys surrounding a girl his age. The girl had short dark blue hair and very pale eyes. She was on the verge of tears.

"Yes, the Byakugan monster, right?" one of the boys said.

The girl couldn't take it anymore, and fell on her knees, crying. Such shameful display made Naruto's blood boil with anger.

"Hey, stop it!" Naruto yelled as he rushed towards them.

"Uh, what do you want, dork?" one of the boys asked.

"Hey, I know this guy! He's the Demon Fox!" another kid said.

"Of course, the Demon Boy would defend the Demon Girl, right?" teased the first kid.

"I'm not a demon, and neither is she! I'm Naruto Uzumaki, the future Hokage!"

"Future Hokage? Ha!" the third kid laughed.

"You know, my parents said to stay away of you, that you're dangerous. But now that I see you, you don't look that dangerous. In fact, you look like a wimp!"

"Come on, let's teach this demon brat not to mess with much stronger people!" the first kid said as he reared his fist back.

The blue haired girl gasped when the kid's fist connected with Naruto's face. Naruto didn't flinch.

"You call that a punch? My mom punches way harder than that."

With a quick movement, Naruto pushed the first kid's fist out of his face as he punched him in the face as well. The punch knocked the first kid on his butt.

"Ha! Take that!" Naruto cheered.

However, the blond Jinchuriki didn't see the other two bullies coming at him. One of them punched him in the guts, while the other pushed him back into the snow. Naruto gasped for air as he grabbed his pained stomach. He could hear the other two kids coming at him. Suddenly, he remembered something Jiraiya had told him during their trainings.

Look around you and try to use your surroundings to your advantage.

There were lots of snow, so he could use that.

"Hey, he's getting up, I think he wants to be beaten more!" one of the bullies laughed.

As fast as he could, Naruto turned around and tossed some snow at the bullies' faces. His throw was accurate enough to hit the intended targets.

"My eyes!" both of them screamed in unison, as they threw their hands to their eyes.

Taking advantage of their momentary blindness, Naruto grabbed the larger of the two bullies and pushed him against the smaller one, and both of them ended on the ground. One of them got up quicker than Naruto had anticipated, and landed a punch on Naruto's face. Naruto replied with a punch to the gut, and quickly kicked that kid onto his fallen friend.

"YOU'RE DEAD!"

Naruto turned around and saw the bully he punched first charging at him, holding a rather large tree branch. His instinct screamed at him to dodge, but instead he decided to try something else, and his hands formed five seals.

When the first bully hit Naruto in the face with the branch, Naruto disappeared in cloud of smoke, leaving a pile of snow instead.

" *Yes! It worked!*"

"What the hell!? Can he use ninjutsu!?" the bully said, angry but now also shocked. He looked around. "Where did he go?"

"DRAGON KICK OF AWESOME FURY!" Naruto yelled as he leaped at the bully from the branch he had just teleported, kicking him in the face, knocking him backwards. "Did you have enough already, or you want more? Because I can go for longer if you want!"

Deciding that they had enough, the three bullies got up and ran away.

"And pray I don't catch you again making a girl cry!" Naruto yelled as he saw the three bullies disappearing from his sight. "Especially a blind girl!"

Naruto walked towards said girl, who didn't move from her spot since the fight broke out.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Y-yes... thank you..." the blue haired girl said. "But... umm... I-I am not blind."

"You're not?" Naruto asked, a bit shocked. He moved closer to her, making the girl blush. "I saw your eyes and I thought... oh sorry then!" Naruto said sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his head.

"And you? You have an eye swollen and a bloody nose," the girl pointed out, a bit worried.

"This? Ah, this is nothing! Mom is a medic and will heal it in an instant, hehe!"

The girl stared at Naruto without uttering a word.

"Well, I gotta go! As you just saw, I'm a ninja! I just enrolled in the Academy and I have to tell my parents! See ya!" Naruto said as he left the scene at a quick pace.

...

"W-wait... !" Hinata said, but the boy, named Naruto, was already too far away and he didn't hear her.

Hinata cursed her indecisiveness. There were so many things she wanted to talk about with him. She didn't ask him his name -even if she heard it-, and she didn't give him hers. But he had said he was a ninja, and that he had enrolled the academy. He looked to be the same age as hers, so maybe they would be in the same class.

Those kids called him the "Demon Fox". Does that mean that he was the kid with the Kyubi sealed inside him? She remembered some of the clan grownups telling her that if she ever crossed paths with him, to avoid him at all costs, that he was dangerous, and a monster.

But he defended her from not one but three bullies, and fought them all at once. How can somebody so kind and selfless could be dangerous or a monster?

A certain feeling that Hinata's young mind couldn't identify formed inside her. For some reason, she felt she needed to see this boy again.

...

A couple months later

At the Dango Shop, Shizune was having lunch with Itachi Uchiha, and two of his clansmen. The first one was Shisui, a teen a few

years older than Itachi and a couple years younger than Shizune, who had short, dark gray hair and black eyes, which were so common among the Uchiha. The other one was a kid of about the same age as Naruto, who also had dark hair with two bangs falling over his face, and the same black eyes. This kid was Itachi's younger brother, Sasuke.

While Shizune felt out of place, being the only one not being an Uchiha, Itachi insisted on her joining them. She couldn't pinpoint when it happened exactly, but she and Itachi had become friends during the past few years. They even sparred quite a few times, and Shizune even helped him and his team prepare the Chunin Exam.

Itachi was treating them at one of his favorite spots to celebrate his first successful mission as a team leader. Shizune felt hard to believe that this kid, who was barely eleven, could have ascended to the rank of Chunin so quick, when most kids his age didn't even had graduated the Academy yet.

"So, tell us, Itachi -and be honest-, were you afraid during the mission?" Shizune asked.

"Well, I'd lie if I said I wasn't. Maybe a little," Itachi replied.

"Only a little? Man, when I led my first mission, I was such a nervous wreck I couldn't sleep the night before. But then again it wasn't as bad as it appeared," Shisui said with a laugh.

"But Itachi-niisan completed lots of dangerous missions, while he should be scared?" Sasuke asked.

"Sasuke, when you're the leader of a team, everything changes. Not only you're responsible of the mission being a success, but you have to make sure that all your teammates come back home alive and, if possible, without any missing limb," Shisui explained.

"But if you have to take care of your teammates... that doesn't mean they're a burden to you? Then why didn't Itachi go to the mission

alone?"

"Because some missions can't be done by one ninja," Shizune explained. "If you need to break down a door reinforced with protective seals, you need a seal master to disable them. If you're in a search and rescue mission, you'll need a sensor and most likely a medic. And sometimes is also a matter of numbers, since there will be times in which two or more people will need to be at two or more different places at the same time. Do you understand, Sasuke-kun?"

The youngest Uchiha nodded.

"Shizune-san is right. Being a powerful ninja on your own is fine, but there will be times in which your power won't be enough and you'll need the help of others," Shisui added.

"By the way Sasuke, how is the Academy?" Itachi asked.

"Eh, it's okay, I guess. They teach me mostly stuff I already know, so it's kind of boring. At the very least, the shuriken and kunai toss practice and taijutsu practice are nice," Sasuke said with a shrug.

"You know, my... little brother also goes to the academy," Shizune mentioned. "His name is Naruto. Did you see him?"

"Naruto? Does he have spiky blond hair, is super loud and claims every five seconds that he's going to be Hokage?"

Shizune chuckled. "Well, that's an accurate description of him. I presume that you met him then."

"I did. For some reason he likes to sit besides me. And no offense to Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama, but given who their parents are, I expected him to be stronger."

"Well, you could say that Naruto-kun has some trouble focusing. His body moves way faster than his brain does. But we're working on it," Shizune said, and laughed.

"He looks like an interesting fellow. Maybe you should befriend him," Shisui suggested.

"In fact, I was about to take him to the park. Do you want to join us, Sasuke-kun?" Shizune asked.

"Eh, pass. Itachi promised to train me when he came back. Maybe another day," Sasuke replied with a dismissive hand wave.

"Come on kid, I'm sure you'll have fun. There's more to life than training," Shisui insisted.

"Eh, it's okay. I don't want him to come against his will. Like he said, maybe another day. I'll better get going. Itachi-kun, congratulations again for your first mission as team leader. Shisui-san, Sasuke-kun, it was nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Shizune-san," Shisui replied. Then, once the young woman was gone, he leaned towards Itachi, and whispered: "Man, that friend of yours is really cute. Do you know if she has a boyfriend?"

...

Just like how Hinata had predicted, she and Naruto were in the same class. However, the terribly shy girl couldn't gather the confidence to talk to him again. And much to her dismay, Naruto never noticed her. Not only did he forget about her, it was almost as if she didn't exist to him!

But deep down she knew there was nobody to blame but herself. She followed him many times after class. He usually went to that ramen restaurant named Ichiraku's, sometimes he went directly to his home, while other times went to one of Konoha's training grounds where one of his parents was already waiting for him for a training session. Hinata's surprise was major when she found out that his parents were Jiraiya and Tsunade, two of the Legendary

Sannin and the heroes of the Second War that appeared in the history books.

Hinata also noticed that, whenever Naruto went to a park to play with other kids, their parents would pick them up and take them somewhere else, leaving poor Naruto playing alone. Did they seriously believe that he was a monster? Couldn't they see that he was a kid like any other?

Today one of those days. Naruto arrived at a park with a small pig and his... older sister? And the kids who didn't left on their own were taken out of there by their parents.

Hinata really wanted to go there and play with Naruto. She really did. But the moment she took a step forward, her chronic shyness manifested in full force and left her frozen in place. She needed somebody to give her a little push.

Fortunately for her, she was now seeing that somebody.

...

Shizune sighed as she watched all the kids leaving the playground, not before some of the parents shot angry glares at her and her almost-little brother, while Naruto slumped sadly. This happened way too often.

"Don't worry Naruto, we don't need them. What do you want to do?" the black haired kunoichi asked, trying to hide her annoyance and remaining optimist.

"The swings!" he said as he rushed towards them.

She didn't need to ask if she wanted her to push him.

Shizune was expecting that now that he finally started the Academy, Naruto could make some friends his age, but such thing didn't happen.

In fact, both her and the two Sannin were a bit worried with Naruto's current performance at the Academy. The boy would more often than not ignore the teacher when explaining something he wasn't interested in, loudly complained about how "boring" their lessons were and demanding them to teach him "some cool jutsus".

He would also boast about how strong he was for his age and how he was going to become Hokage -fortunately he never revealed who his biological parents were- and often challenged the other boys, especially Sasuke Uchiha, to one on one duels, and was rather fond of pulling pranks, to both the teachers and his classmates.

It was obvious that the kid desperately needed a friend his age, that way he wouldn't be victim of a constant need to prove how "awesome" he was to everybody.

Suddenly, Shizune heard something. A noise coming from the trees near the park. While she wasn't a sensor, her senses were sharp enough to perceive that somebody was watching them hidden behind those trees.

"Naruto-kun, I need to find a restroom. I'll leave you alone with Tonton for some minutes, okay?"

"Sure, take your time, neechan!" Naruto happily replied. Shizune then disappeared in a cloud of smoke, puzzling the blonde. "She used the Body Flicker? Guess that she *really* needed to go."

...

Hinata was a bit startled when Naruto's older sister disappeared like that. She didn't quite catch what she told him. Naruto was there, all alone, by himself. The perfect opportunity to go and talk to him. But even then, Hinata still couldn't muster the courage to go and talk to him like that. No, she needed to find a way to draw his attention, to make him take the first step.

"Ahem," a voice behind her said.

"EEEEP!" Hinata squealed in shock as she turned around and saw Naruto's older sister staring down at her, arms crossed over her chest.

"Didn't your parents teach you that spying on people is rude?" Shizune asked.

"Sorry! Err, I... uhmm... I didn't mean to... ehh..." Hinata babbled, her words tumbling into an unintelligible stuttering mess.

Shizune took a better look at the panicking girl. "Hey, Naruto said that he saved a girl with weird looking eyes from a bunch of bullies the day he enrolled in the Academy. It was you?"

"N-Naruto-kun said my eyes are weird looking...?" Hinata said, disheartened.

Shizune cursed inwardly for using Naruto's choice of words instead of something far less insensitive.

"Uh... I'm sure he didn't mean it as an insult," Shizune assured. "You didn't answer my question. What are you doing here?"

"I... well... I-I wanted to... to thank Naruto-kun again for h-helping me against t-those three bullies..."

Shizune couldn't repress a smile. *"Three? Weren't they ten, Naruto? And as big as Jiraiya-sama?"*

"Then why aren't you doing that instead of stalking him from here?" Hinata blushed, and averted her gaze.

"Oh, I see, this girl is way too shy to talk to him directly. Let's see if I can do something about it."

"What's your name, girl? I'm Shizune Kato."

"H-Hinata Hyuga. Pleased to meet you, Shizune-san."

"Just Shizune is okay," the medic-nin said, smiling. "Say, Hinata, would you like to do something for Naruto as a way to thank him?"

"Y-yes, of course!" the Hyuga replied.

"Take a look at Naruto. What do you think he'd like the most this moment?"

Hinata saw Naruto swinging sadly in the empty park. The answer was obvious.

"H-he'd like for a f-friend to play with him..." Hinata stuttered.

"Correct. Now you know what you must do."

"W-WHAT?"

Was this woman expecting to just walk over Naruto and play with him? Just like that? Was she mad?

Shizune smiled at her. "Come on, I can see in your eyes that you want to play with him more than anything."

"Y-yes... b-but..."

"Or I can tell Naruto that not only were you spying on him and didn't even bother to say him hello."

"PLEASE NO! O-Okay, okay, I'll do it!" the Hyuga almost shouted, extremely flustered.

"Then you better hurry. I don't think Naruto will be there for much longer until he gets bored."

Hinata nodded, and gulped. The shy Hyuga started her walk towards the blond, silent enough not to reveal her presence too soon, she didn't want him to think she was some creepy stalker. After reaching what she deemed a safe distance, she dropped the stealth and

walked normally. Or as normal as she could. Still, the boy was too enraptured in his own thoughts to notice her.

"H-Hello!" Hinata timidly waved her hand at him.

Hinata's sudden salute snapped Naruto from his thoughts, and turned his head at her, and smiled. "Oh, hi!"

Hinata blushed furiously. There was something about that smile that was so damn *dreamy*. Forcing herself to calm down, she proceed to introduce herself. "Hinata!"

Naruto tilted his head and looked at her puzzled. "What?"

Hinata was so angry at herself. Did she just shouted her name like that? She was aware that she wasn't the most social or eloquent person out there, but that was just too much.

"I mean... m-my name is Hinata Hyuga... what is y-yours?" the shy girl asked, even if she knew the answer.

"I'm Naruto Uzumaki, future Hokage!" Naruto proudly proclaimed. "Say, your face looks kind of familiar, did we meet before?"

"A-actually we're c-classmates... didn't you s-see me before?"

"Nope, sorry. Then again, there's a lot of people at class. I only remember the people that sit near me."

Hinata was a bit hurt that Naruto wasn't even aware that she was in the same class as him, but deep down she knew that it was also her fault for not talking to him first. If she always sat far away from him and never opened her mouth except when the teacher asked her something, how she could expect him to know her?

"Y-you also helped m-me against s-some bullies t-that w-were insulting m-me some months ago..." Hinata said as she started twiddling her forefingers.

"Oh, you're THAT girl!" Naruto said in realization. "Did they harass you again? Because if they did then I'm going to beat them even harder!" Naruto loudly said as he punched his palm.

"N-no, it's fine, n-nobody bullied me since t-then... by the way- w-what are y-you doing?"

"Well, I came here to play with other kids, but nobody wants to play with me, and playing alone gets boring rather quickly. So I'm waiting for Shizune-nee-chan to come back from the bathroom so we can go home and maybe train a bit with mom and dad."

The Hyuga decided it was time to make her move. Hinata's heart was beating so hard she could swear it would come out of her mouth at any time.

"Oh... err... c-can I p-play with y-you u-until she c-comes b-back?" Hinata asked, blushing harder than ever. She couldn't believe she was doing this.

Naruto's eyes opened widely, gleaming with joy, as his mouth curved into a wide smile. "You want to play with me!? Really!? But I am-"

"Y-yes, I know, t-the Nine Tails... b-but I don't think that having a demon s-sealed inside you m-makes you a d-demon... a demon w-wouldn't have defended m-me against those b-bullies..."

"So you want to be my friend? Like, for real?" Naruto asked, still in disbelief. Hinata nodded. Naruto's smile grew even wider. He finally had a friend! For a moment he thought that if this girl wanted to be his friend and was one of his classmates, then why she never talked to him before. But he was too happy to care about that.

"So... w-what are you playing?"

"The swings! Don't you know how do you play on a swing?" Hinata shook her head. "Then we'll have to fix that! Come on, sit over there!" Hinata did what Naruto said, and sat on the vacant swing

besides him. "Now you need to move your body forwards in order to move the swing. Use your legs to help."

Hinata tried several times, but she was unable to make the swing budge.

"I-It doesn't work... I'm sorry Naruto-kun..." Hinata said, a bit saddened.

"It's okay, I can push you!"

Before Hinata could say anything, Naruto got down from his swing and started to push Hinata. The shy Hyuga felt a knot forming in her stomach upon seeing how high the swing went -Naruto was pushing her with all his strength- but at the same time, she couldn't help but enjoy the excitement of that simple game. She was having so much *fun...* and she didn't remember the last time she had such a great time until now.

"Alright, now that you have enough momentum, try to keep it going yourself! Remember, use your legs to make more force!" Naruto said as he quickly returned to his swing and joined her.

Shizune choose that moment to return.

"Hey Naruto-kun, I'm back!" the young kunoichi said.

"Shizune-nee-chan!" Naruto said as he jumped from the swing, still mid air, and landed on his feet in front of her. His joy was so big that he didn't realize that Shizune's "bathroom break" had lasted almost an hour. "You're not going to believe this! I made a friend! Hinata, come here!"

Hinata got down from the swing and walked towards Naruto and Shizune.

"Really? That's so great, Naruto-kun!" Shizune said with fake surprise. Fortunately for her, Naruto was naive enough to buy. Her

joy, however, was very real.

"Hello, Shizune-san, I mean, Shizune. I'm Hinata Hyuga," Hinata said, bowing respectfully.

"And she even goes to my class at the Academy! That means we can see each other every day!" Naruto said, bouncing in joy.

"I'm so glad for you, Naruto-kun," Shizune said, ruffling Naruto's hair. "Say, it's getting a bit late, shall we go back home?"

"So soon? But I want to play with Hinata more!" Naruto pouted.

"I-It's okay, Naruto-kun, we can see each other tomorrow again. In fact, I s-should be going b-back home too, I d-don't want to w-worry my parents," Hinata said, twiddling her fingers.

"Bummer. Okay then, see you tomorrow, Hinata!" Naruto said as he left with Shizune.

"See you tomorrow, Naruto-kun," Hinata replied as she headed back to the Hyuga compound.

Hinata would always remember this day as one of the best of her life. Not only she had made her first friend and had a great time playing with him, but she could tell that she made Naruto so happy as well. In fact, Hinata even managed to forget her worries about her mother's declining health after the birth of Hanabi. She couldn't wait to get back home and tell her parents about Naruto.

Then she stopped on her tracks. Almost the entire village avoided Naruto because of the Kyubi. Would her parents disprove of her friendship with him? The thought filled her with dread. She didn't want to lose him. But on the other hand... she was sure that once they meet Naruto, they would see how kind and funny he was -not to mention strong-, and they wouldn't have any reason to object.

Author's Note: And thus, Hinata joins the main cast! What do you think about her introduction? From now onwards, the good stuff begins, hehe! This episode also introduced Sasuke, but he won't be important to the story until much later (and he will be behind Hinata in terms of plot relevance).

So yeah, if you liked this chapter, please leave your opinion on a review! Reviews make me very, very, very happy!

The Butterfly Effect

Author's notes: Hello once again, my cute little readers. This chapter is a bit shorter than usual, mostly because it will set up future events, but there are also a couple plot developments. Still, I hope you like it.

Chapter 6

The Butterfly Effect

Or

Do you believe in fate?

Jiraiya was as timely as usual to his meetings with the Hokage regarding the Kyubi attack investigation. However, there was something different this time. The first, less noticeable difference is that Jiraiya had a look of excitement on his face. That was good, as it meant that Jiraiya had made some important breakthrough in his research. Which might explain the second, more noticeable difference, Inoichi Yamanaka and Anko Mitarashi walking behind him.

"I got it, sensei!" Jiraiya claimed enthusiastically. "I got the definitive proof that will exonerate the Uchihas, and expose the real culprit behind the Kyubi attack!"

"Those are indeed excellent news, Jiraiya. Not only we will finally be able to put an end to Danzo's suspicions of the clan, but we will close Konoha's darkest chapter," Sarutobi replied as he gave a puff to his pipe.

"Anko, show him the report," Jiraiya instructed. Anko nodded, and handed the Hokage a folder with several files inside.

Hiruzen inspected the files, and as he did, his good mood slowly vanished while his expression grew somber. He looked at Jiraiya with a grave expression. "So you think that the perpetrator of the Kyubi attack was... Orochimaru?"

"Listen Hokage-sama, I know it sounds far-fetched, but when you put all the evidence together, it makes perfect sense," Anko hurried to explain.

"Enlighten me then."

Jiraiya cleared his throat and began his explanation. "I've been investigating that shady mercenary group, Akatsuki, for the past four years. Like I told you before, they were interested in the Tailed Beasts, and often incorporated missing-nin to their ranks. And guess who was among them? The snake bastard himself!"

"Jiraiya-sama brought a no-name missing-nin to Torture & Interrogation a couple months ago. My team and I have been scanning his mind, and made some interesting discoveries," Inoichi interceded. "The first one, as Jiraiya said, was that Orochimaru is part of the Akatsuki. I could see many memories of Orochimaru not only wearing the organization's uniform, a black cloak with red clouds, but having meetings with other members. Though he never met more than one member at once."

"The second one was that Orochimaru is creating his own ninja village somewhere, called 'Otogakure' or something," Anko added. "I think we should find and deal with that village as soon as possible before it snowballs into a bigger problem."

"While these discoveries are indeed worrying, I fail to see the connection between Orochimaru and the Kyubi," Sarutobi pointed out.

"Don't you see it, sensei? It's obvious that Orochimaru was a member of Akatsuki before he defected from Konoha. Besides his own ambitions, he wanted to be Hokage in order to increase

Akatsuki's resources and had access to the Kyubi. But things didn't go as he planned, he defected, and a year later, when the seal on Kushina was at its weakest, returns, sneaks his way to the place she was being kept, kills the guards, takes her away and releases the Kyubi."

Anko decided to intercede. "Think about it, Hokage-sama. Orochimaru was the perfect man for the job. He's a really good infiltrator, knows Konoha ins-and-outs better than anybody else, and is strong enough to deal with even the strongest of our ANBU."

"After destroying Konoha, he would have handed the Kyubi to Akatsuki, and thus killing two birds with one stone. But once again, he didn't count on Minato's interference, who more than likely defeated him and then sealed the Kyubi inside Naruto, foiling his plans. And now he's building his own village in order to raise an army to try to destroy Konoha and reclaim the Kyubi again!"

"While those are believable motives, there's still the mystery on how Orochimaru managed to place the Kyubi under his control. It's well known that normal genjutsus, no matter how powerful, hardly work on Tailed Beasts, and the only two men being able to control them were Hashirama-sensei and Madara, ninjas on a league way above Orochimaru's."

"It is well known that Orochimaru was experimenting with Hashirama-sama's cells, and we know he produced at least one success in the form of Tenzo. What if that asshole finally perfected the process and gained the First Hokage's power?" Anko suggested.

"A terrifying thought, but unlikely. If Orochimaru had Hashirama-sensei's power for so long, he would have used it against us already," the Third stated. "While all of you made an commendable effort, I'm afraid that this won't be enough to publicly place the Uchiha Clan above suspicion."

Anko muttered a curse under her breath, while Jiriaya looked downwards, upset. Inoichi remained neutral.

"But you made a good job with this investigation. This 'Otogakure' is something that deserves further investigation. Inoichi, you and the rest of T&I should continue extracting all the information you can regarding this issue from the captive. I want daily updates on this."

"Yes, Hokage-sama!" Inoichi and Anko said in unison, and they left the office.

"Jiraiya, we only need one more piece to finish the puzzle: the means used to control the Kyubi. If you can uncover that, then the investigation will be complete and we can pin Orochimaru as the main culprit of the attack."

"I will, sensei. I'm not going to stop now that we're so close to end this," Jiraiya stated.

"Meanwhile, I'll use the information you've gathered to dissuade Danzo from stopping bothering the Uchiha clan. You are dismissed."

"One more thing, sensei," Jiraiya mentioned.

"Hmm?"

"My investigation of the Akatsuki and Jinchuriki had me find some... interesting discovery tangential to the investigation."

"And that would be...?"

"Suna had created a Jinchuriki."

Hiruzen raised an eyebrow. "Do you have any information...?"

"Yes. His name is Gaara. He's the youngest son of the current Kazekage. It seems that he's doing his best to keep Gaara's status a secret, but the boy is having a lot of trouble keeping the Tailed Beast under control, and such thing can't be concealed easily. My guess, the result of a shoddy sealing process. Plus there's the fact that we're only learning about this now. Only Kami knows how long that kid has been a Jinchuriki."

"More worrying news. I knew that Suna had the One Tail in their power, but it wasn't sealed on a person. If they decided to create a Jinchuriki now... I don't want to think about the implications."

"We know that Sunagakure is the weakest of the Five Great Ninja Villages. Maybe they decided to put their Tailed Beast to use in order to appear strong, to both potential enemies and clients."

"Even then, that's something we can't afford to overlook. Jiraiya, I'm going to prepare a trip for you to Suna. Once everything is settled, you'll inspect the Jinchuriki and uncover the reasons behind his creation. Suna is our ally and I'd hate to think that they're plotting against us, but you can't never be too cautious."

"Understood, sensei."

...

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Shizune jumped in time to avoid the incoming fireball, which exploded against the ground a couple meters in front of her. Her opponent was an eleven year old boy of average height with dull black hair tied in a ponytail and black eyes, wearing the Konoha Chunin Flak Jacket over his usual black shirt. Said opponent took advantage of the dust raised by his fireball and dashed at her at an ungodly speed. Two kunai clashed against each other multiple times, filling the air with sharp, metallic noises.

Shizune leaped backwards, and while she was mid air, fired a barrage of senbons at her opponent from her wrist-mounted needle launcher. Said opponent also jumped backwards to avoid them, and used a kunai to expertly deflect the ones he couldn't dodge. Once Shizune touched the ground, she was alerted by the sound of spinning shuriken flying at her. The shuriken hit the target, but the young medic-nin vanished in a puff of smoke, leaving a log behind.

Upon quickly retrieving his weapons from the log, Shizune's much younger opponent looked around, trying to locate his enemy. His ears picked a sharp whistle that signaled an incoming barrage of senbons. Activating his Sharingan, the male ninja threw a few kunai in the air, which clashed against the senbons, stopping their momentum and making them falling to the ground.

Shizune suddenly appeared behind the Uchiha, quickly forming a series of seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!" Shizune's cheeks puffed, and she expelled from her mouth a large amount of water at the Uchiha, who suddenly burst into a murder of crows, flying in different directions.

Shizune quickly formed a hand seal and shouted "Release!" making the crows disappear. Knowing where her opponent was, she quickly turned around while delivering a high kick, which was parried by her opponent's arms. From there, the medic-nin and the Uchiha traded punches and kicks, until Shizune made the Uchiha trip. The black haired woman quickly pinned the boy to the ground, carefully avoiding eye contact.

"I think this is over," Shizune declared, placing a kunai on the Uchiha's throat.

"I guess it is," her opponent conceded.

Shizune put the kunai back on her pouch, and helped her opponent to stand up. "Nice spar, Itachi-kun."

"Thanks, Shizune-san. This time I managed to stay five minutes without using the Sharingan!" Itachi said proudly.

"I'm sure it will be ten minutes next time," the medic-nin said, smiling.

"Eh, I'm not so sure. I still can't beat you even with the Sharingan."

"No, but you will. You're improving at a really fast pace, which shouldn't be s surprise, given how you quickly you managed to earn a promotion! I'm sure you'll become a Jonin way before I do, haha!"

"Yeah..." Itachi sheepishly said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Plus I can tell that today you weren't entirely focused."

"Really? Because I thought I was as focused as ever..."

"Itachi-kun, you cannot lie to me. I can see that there's something troubling you. Care to tell me what it is?" Shizune's question was met with silence as the Uchiha prodigy looked at the grass below, and sat down. Shizune started to feel bad for pressuring him to talk about something he clearly wasn't comfortable with. She sat besides him. "Sorry Itachi-kun, it was not my place to ask. If it's something of personal nature..."

"Shizune-san... did somebody you love ever forced you to do something you don't want to?" Itachi asked.

Shizune was taken aback by such question, and wondered if Itachi had some problems with his parents. "Well... no. I'm lucky such thing never happened to me."

"Well, it's t-that..." Itachi stuttered a bit. He never talked about this with anybody else, not even Shisui, his cousin and closest friend. But then again, there was something about Shizune and her generally friendly demeanor that made him more comfortable to talk about personal matters. "My parents... they want me to join ANBU."

"And you don't want to," Shizune reasoned.

"Exactly. I know the kind of missions the ANBU do, and I don't want to do that, at least not yet," while that was technically true, Itachi purposely left out the *other*, much more meaningful reason for him not wanting to become an ANBU.

"Well, I'd say that the ANBU would greatly benefit from somebody of your talent, Itachi-kun. I'm sure you'll be promoted to squad captain in no time," Shizune replied, making Itachi sigh. "Then again, if that's not what you want to do... do you have any other idea?"

"Well, I was planning that, after being promoted to Jonin, I'd ask for a squad of Genin to train. I always liked the idea of being a teacher. Well, not an Academy teacher, but a... field teacher, you know what I mean?"

"Yes, of course. In fact, I think I might do the same once I'm promoted."

"I'm sure you'll be an amazing teacher, Shizune-san."

"And about your problem... well, I don't know what else I could tell you other than talk to your parents, and make sure they know how you feel. If they really love you -and I'm sure they do- they'll understand you and let you choose your own path."

They spend a couple minutes there, silently sitting besides each other. A gentle breeze started to blow.

"Well... I don't know if it will work, but I'll try talking to them. Thanks for your advice, Shizune-san," Itachi said as he stood up.

"You're welcome, Itachi-kun. Same hour tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid not. I've been assigned for a mission outside the village."

"Aw, nuts! Now where I'm going to find a worthy sparring opponent that doesn't leave me all sore? Seriously, never spar with Tsunade-sama. That woman never holds back, not even with her children."

Itachi chuckled. "Well, she's the best medic in the world, right? She doesn't hold back because she will patch you up afterwards. Anyway, I better get going. See ya!" Itachi said as he headed back to the Uchiha compound.

...

Meanwhile, the firstborn of another clan head returned to her home as well. Hinata Hyuga was still smiling upon remembering the heated argument between Naruto and the history teacher regarding the Second Ninja War. Naruto insisted that the information on their textbook was wrong, since he claimed his parents were veterans from said war, and their version of a certain battle clashed with the textbook's description.

Hinata had the feeling that the Sannin, while undoubtedly skilled and powerful, had exaggerated their contributions during said war. Still, there was something heartwarming of seeing Naruto defending her parents' reputation so vehemently.

Hinata was now regretting not talking to Naruto sooner. After that afternoon in the park, Naruto sat besides her instead of his usual seat near Sasuke Uchiha. Though while she enjoyed his company most of the time, Naruto had an habit to loudly disrupt the class when the lesson failed to catch his interest, which could be kind of annoying.

One day, Hinata politely asked Naruto to stop interrupting the teacher when he was explaining the basics of chakra control. Apparently, Naruto already knew that already, and wanted to do something else. She was afraid that Naruto would take her request as some sort of betrayal and would cease their friendship, but his reaction surprised her.

"What? Oh sorry Hinata, I didn't know you were so interested in this, I'll shut up now!" he had happily replied.

Everybody was stunned at the Hyuga's amazing feat of convincing the hyperactive blond to remain silent. The teacher called it a miracle.

Now whenever Naruto didn't feel like listening the teacher, he often followed Shikamaru's example and took a nap instead. Unlike

Shikamaru, there was times in which Naruto would snore loudly, prompting the teacher to throw the board rubber at him.

After class, Naruto and Hinata often went to the park to play together. People would murmur upon seeing the "Demon Boy" playing with the Hyuga Heiress, but neither paid any heed to those people. They were too busy having fun.

Other times Naruto would invite Hinata to his house. Whenever she went, they usually played with Naruto's two year old siblings, Hagane and Kaida. Hinata thought that maybe one day she could bring Hanabi to play with them given that they were only a year older than her.

Usually, the four of them were under Jiraiya or Shizune's watch. Tsunade would arrive much later, once her shift at the hospital was over. The three of them were always really kind and polite to her, and made their best to make her feel welcomed.

However, today was none of those days. Naruto had to meet his mother for some training at Training Ground Three, their usual training spot, so finding herself with nothing better to do, Hinata decided to head back home and maybe spend some quality time with Hanabi until her father called her for Gentle Fist training.

Hinata realized that, for all the times she has been in Naruto's house, she never asked him to visit hers. Then again, her friendship with Naruto was a secret to pretty much all of her clan. She was still thinking how to tell her father that she had befriended the "Demon Boy" everybody feared and avoided.

A nasty surprise awaited the little Hyuga, though. Upon entering the compound, she found it oddly deserted. No Hyuga youths training, no Branch House patrolling the place... she had a bad feeling about that.

After dropping her backpack and removing her shoes at the entrance, she started calling for her parents, or anybody else.

Finally, she found another clansman: Ko Hyuga, a Main House member who was his usual caretaker whenever her parents were busy.

"Oh, Hinata-sama, I see you're back," Ko somberly greeted the Hyuga heiress.

"What's going on, Ko-san? Where's everybody?" Hinata asked, worried.

"Hinata-sama... something bad has happened... your mother..." Ko began. Hinata's skin turned even paler.

"Mother? W-What happened to Mother!?" Hinata panicked.

Ko grabbed her hand, and lead her towards her parents' bedroom, where most of the Hyuga, both Main and Branch house, were waiting outside.

After giving birth to Hanabi, Hinata's mother wasn't the same again. Her body was often in pain, ate very little -and more often than not would end up throwing up- and felt perpetually exhausted. They had called a doctor before which prescribed her some medicaments. They appeared to work at first, but after that the symptoms returned, and became worse each day. Hinata was afraid that something like this would happen anytime soon.

"You know Hikari-sama has felt really bad these past months. It appears that she got even worse. Hiashi-sama called the family medic in order to check her. We can only wait to see what he can do."

They didn't have to wait much until they heard Hiashi's angry and desperate yells.

"What do you mean that you did all what you could!? There has to be something you can do to save her!"

" I already told you Hiashi-sama, the symptoms are too advanced! You should have called me earlier than this!"

" We already called you once! Your medicine didn't do anything to get her better!"

" I'm sorry, Hiashi-sama, but I did all what I could. I can prescribe you some painkillers to make your wife's last days more bearable."

" GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!" Hiashi bellowed.

The medic left, and the gathering of Hyugas started to murmur among themselves. Hinata was on the verge of tears.

"You must remain strong, Hinata-sama. Is what Hikari-sama would have wanted," Ko said, who was also fighting tears.

Hinata felt her world falling apart. No, this was too cruel. Now that things were finally going better for her, she had to lose her mother? All because that doctor couldn't see that her state of health was way worse than he initially thought. If Tsunade had treated her mother, then...

Wait, that was it!

"What about Tsunade-sama? Can we call her to check Mother?" Hinata asked.

"We already looked for her. She wasn't at the hospital, and there was nobody in her residence. We don't know where she is right now."

Hinata's face saddened upon seeing her mother's last hope disappear. Until she remembered why Tsunade wasn't on the hospital nor her house.

"Ko-san, I know where Tsunade-sama is!" Hinata exclaimed in realization.

"You... do?"

"Yes! Come on, let's hurry!"

...

On Training Ground Three, Naruto was lying on the grass, panting heavily, with bruises all over his body. Every centimeter of his body was in horrible pain.

"Come on brat, get up! We haven't finished the warm up!" Tsunade vigorously shouted as she lightly kicked him on the sides.

"Can you please... tone down... the brutality... a little bit... please?" Naruto said between gasps.

"When you become a ninja and go out of the village, you will find enemies that will try to kill you, and won't hold back. So answer me, why should I hold back then? I would be a bad teacher if I don't prepare you properly," Tsunade explained, hands on her hips as she stared down at Naruto.

"I'd like to stand up... but I can't..feel my legs... or my... anything..."

Naruto swore that he would never call Jiraiya's meditation and chakra control exercises boring again.

Tsunade sighed, and rolled her eyes. She crouched before Naruto, and placed a hand on his chest, which started to glow with a green light. Soon, a pleasant feeling started to cross his body, slowly but surely erasing the pain. While the pain didn't disappear completely, it diminished enough to be bearable.

"You're such a wimp, you know? What would the Fourth think if he saw you complaining like that over a little rough training? You won't become Hokage anytime soon if you don't build some pain tolerance," Tsunade scolded as she healed him. "Better now, kid?"

"Yeah, thanks mom!"

"Don't expect me to go this easy on you all the time. Okay, let's continue. Get in the taijutsu basic stance, and try to dodge my-"

"NARUTO-KUN!" a high pitched voice yelled.

Both Naruto and Tsunade turned towards the source of the voice, and saw Hinata and an adult Hyuga running towards them.

"Oh, hey Hinata! Nice to see you! Did you come here to spar with mom and me?" Naruto asked, grinning at the idea.

Both Hinata and the unknown Hyuga stopped to gasp for air. They were both completely red and sweating, as if they have been running non-stop for quite some time.

"Tsunade-sama, you have to come with us, it's an emergency!" the adult Hyuga pleaded.

"Hey, hey, calm down! What's going on?" Tsunade asked.

"I-It's my mother, s-she's very sick, and our usual doctor c-can't do anything to m-make her get better!" Hinata explained, almost in the verge of tears.

Naruto gasped in horror, and turned to Tsunade. "Mom, you have to help Hinata! Please!"

"Alright, alright! Just let me go to my house first to get my medical instruments and medicines," Tsunade said.

...

Soon it became nighttime. Upon arriving, Tsunade pretty much kicked Hiashi out of the bedroom (since she didn't want an audience when treating patients in critical condition), and spent there the following hours. That didn't stop the Hyuga Clan Head as well as many other clansmen to gather in front of the closed doors.

Hinata was sitting in the hallway near the bedroom, with Naruto sat at her side, trying to comfort her to the best of his ability.

"Mom is the best medic there is! She'll heal your mom in no time, you'll see!"

Hinata didn't say anything, just nodded, and prayed to whatever deity is out there for her mom to get out of this alive.

Hinata then realized something: this was the first time Naruto was in her house. Besides that, now all the Hyuga clan, her father included, knew that she was friends with Naruto. But none of that mattered to her anymore. Her mother was the only thing in her mind right now.

Finally, after several hours that felt like days, an exhausted Tsunade exited the bedroom. She was immediately swarmed by nervous Hyugas. A glare was enough to make them to keep some space.

"Alright, I have good news and bad news. What do you want to hear first?" Tsunade asked.

"The... good news," Hiashi replied, trying his best to conceal his desperation.

"Your wife is out of danger now, she'll live," a chorus of relieved sighs filled the place, Hiashi's being the most audible.

"See Hinata? Your mom is going to be okay!" Naruto said to an equally relieved Hinata.

"She's very weak right now, but if you follow my instructions, she'll be fine in a few months," Tsunade added.

"And the bad news...?" Hiashi asked.

"Her uterus was beyond repair. She won't have anymore children again," Tsunade announced. Her statement was followed by several murmurs.

"If she's going to be okay, then that doesn't matter."

"Hiashi, your wife was afflicted by an infectious disease that I traced back to her uterus. It was in a very advanced state. Two days later, and she would have been beyond saving. Was there any complications when she gave birth to your youngest daughter?"

"Yes, there were, but the doctors said that she would be fine!" Hiashi protested.

"Evidently, those doctors missed something. Anyway, there's no point in fretting over that. I'll come here every week to check her progress. If I can't come for whatever reason, Shizune will come in my place. Now this is what your wife must do if she wants to recover..."

After Tsunade finished her explanations, she and Naruto were escorted to the compound's main gate. It was late and treating Hikari for so long had left Tsunade utterly exhausted. She prayed Jiraiya wasn't in the mood for sex. Oh, who was she kidding, that horny bastard was ALWAYS in the mood for sex. Oh well, at least she had a very good excuse to put him down.

"In the name of the entire Hyuga clan, thank you, Tsunade-sama. What you just did today will never be forgotten," Hiashi solemnly said as he bowed before Tsunade.

"Yes, thank you, Tsunade-sama," Hinata echoed as she bowed as well.

"Eh, it's okay, I was just doing my job. Besides, our kids are friends, right?" Tsunade said with a chuckle. Then she yawned. "Boy, after that, I feel like I could sleep for a whole week. Let's hope there are no emergencies tomorrow at the hospital. Come on brat, it's way past your bedtime."

"Coming! See you tomorrow, Hinata!" Naruto chimed as he waved at her.

"Come on Hinata, you should be in bed already too," Hiashi stated as he led his daughter inside.

"Can I see Mother first?" Hinata asked.

"Hinata, your mother needs to rest now. You can see her tomorrow morning."

"... alright then," Hinata conceded, a bit disappointed. After all that had happened, she wanted to see that her mother was okay with her own eyes. But she knew that her father was right.

"By the way, you didn't tell me you were friends with that kid," Hiashi noted in an oddly neutral tone.

"Err... s-sorry father, i-it's t-that..." Hinata stuttered, unable to form a coherent sentence.

"Were you afraid that I wouldn't let you be friends with the boy holding the Nine Tails within him?" Hiashi asked.

Hinata nodded. "O-Other parents t-tell their k-kids to stay away from N-naruto, and I thought t-that you..."

"I only would have forbidden such a thing if the boy proved to be a bad influence on you, and for the time being, it doesn't seem to be the case."

"So you're okay with him being my friend?"

"As long as he doesn't give me any reason to mistrust him and behaves properly, yes. And I'll let this time pass, but I don't want you to keep any secret from me again, understood?" Hiashi stated sternly. Hinata nodded.

The little Hyuga sighed in relief. Not only she didn't lose her mother, but her friendship with Naruto was safe for the time being. She wouldn't have any problem sleeping tonight.

Meanwhile, Hiashi couldn't stop thinking about Naruto and how his presence had affected his family. If it wasn't for him, neither Jiriaya nor Tsunade would have come back to Konoha, and thus the Hokage would have never attempted to intimidate the Raikage, and Hizashi would have ended up killing himself to placate Kumogakure.

And then there was his wife, would have been dead right now if it wasn't for Tsunade, as well as the fact that her daughter had recently befriended her adoptive son.

Then again, he wondered if he would really have allowed Hinata to befriend that boy before. Now he couldn't make an unbiased opinion on Naruto given that he owed him his wife's life. He never thought much about that boy, and the idea of Hinata becoming his friend never crossed his mind not even once.

While the Hyuga was one of the most traditionalists clans of Konoha, Hiashi wasn't a superstitious man. He had heard many people say, even those among his clan, that Naruto would only bring bad luck and misfortune to whoever was near him. Sure, the risk of the Nine Tails coming out was very real, regardless of how small it was, but Naruto being a bringer of bad luck was just ridiculous.

But now, it seemed that the opposite was true. Naruto's presence had saved the lives of two of his closest and most beloved people, on top of becoming his daughter's first and only friend. And while her progress in mastering the Gentle Step was going at a far slower pace than he would have wished, maybe he could convince Naruto to let her join him on his training with the Sannin.

But for some reason, Hiashi couldn't shake the thought that all this good fortune had a price tag attached to it, and that one day somebody would ask him to pay.

Author's Note: So, Hinata's mom is safe, as well as Naruto and Hinata's friendship, yay!

Funny thing, in "Naruto Shippuden Ultimate Ninja Storm 4", Obito and Madara have a combination attack named "Heavenly Insertion of the Hammering Star". Upon learning this, I set a new goal for this story: to make a jutsu with an even more sexually blatant name. Maybe a Chidori variant named "Thundering Penetration Thurst", or a Rasengan variant named "Double Massive Celestial Balls", or somethinglike that.

As for the next episode, well, I hope you like the Sand Siblings, because they will be making their debut, and play a big part in it.

Meanwhile, don't forget to review! Reviews make me very, very, very happy!

Desert Winds

Author's note: Hello once again, my dear readers! Last week's chapter was shorter than usual, so to compensate, here you have an extra-long chapter! In fact, it's the longest chapter so far! (though some of the future chapters I already written will be even longer than this one)

Hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 7

Desert Winds

Or

Why turning your children into weapons is not cool

Seven years after the Kyubi attack

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"No!"

"Are we there yet?"

"NO! STOP ASKING THAT ALREADY!" Jiraiya yelled in anger. Between the heat and Naruto's constant chattering, he'd swear he'd

go insane at any moment. Then he noticed something in the distance, and narrowed his eyes to see it better. Then, he turned to Naruto and said: "Yeah, we are there already. Sunagakure is just behind those dunes."

"Finally!" Naruto threw his hands in the air.

The heat was downright oppressive, and his thirst was becoming nearly unbearable. He wished he had listened to Jiraiya's advice and didn't drink all the water from his canteen the first day they were in the desert. But after two hellish days waddling through an ocean of sand, their journey was already over.

After much, much time, and much, much stalling on the Kazekage's part, Sarutobi finally managed to convince his Sunagakure counterpart to accept the visit of a Konoha diplomat, in order to strengthen the relationship between the two villages, as well as to "help" with his Jinchuriki problem. While the intention to help was genuine -or else Sarutobi wouldn't have send Konoha's best seal master alive as its representative- Sarutobi had other less selfless motives behind such action, namely, evaluate the threat said Jinchuriki could pose, as well as the Kazekage's intentions on how he was planning to use him.

Jiraiya requested to bring Naruto with him to the mission, believing that having a Jinchuriki who also happened to be a kid of the Suna Jinchuriki's age would help to connect with him. Koharu and Homura vehemently opposed to such thing, since not only it would mean taking Naruto out of the village despite not being a ninja, but bringing him into a foreign village. Sarutobi, however, agreed with Jiraiya's reasoning. Besides, if something happened, Naruto had one of the Sannin taking care of him.

Tsunade also opposed her husband's idea, but for different reasons. She felt that Naruto was too young to do such a journey to another village, and all the possible dangers he could face, besides losing Academy days. Jiraiya spend a whole hour convincing the Slug Princess that he would make sure that Naruto would return from the

trip unscratched, and that Naruto would work extra hard to make up for his absence at the Academy.

Naruto was elated when Jiraiya informed him about the trip. He had never been outside Konoha's walls, and he was dying to see the world out there. He was amazed by the lush forests of the Land of Fire -which made Naruto wonder why it was called the "Land of Fire" instead of the "Land of Forests", and that such name would only make sense if somebody set those forests on fire. Jiraiya begged Naruto not to try to make their country's name more meaningful- and was marveled by the watery landscape of the Land of Rivers. But when they reached the Land of Wind...

"This place should be called the Land of Unbearable Heat!"

But fortunately, they arrived at the large rift in the middle of a large stone wall which was the entrance to Sunagakure, flanked by a couple of Suna Chunin. After they verified the Toad Sage's identity, they allowed both him and his son access to the village.

The hallway that was the rift was completely covered in shadows, and thus had a much cooler temperature, something both Konoha residents greatly appreciated. After a short walk, they arrived at the village proper.

Naruto took some moments to contemplate the village before him. The village was composed almost exclusively by spherical, cylindrical or conical buildings made of clay -Jiraiya would explain him later that clay was easy to mold and hardened fast in a heat climate, making construction work easier and faster, plus clay-made buildings, while weaker than brick-and-concrete buildings like those from Konoha, helped to keep the inside of said buildings cool- and there were none of the abundant plant life that was so common on his home village. Even if it was in the middle of a desert -again, Jiraiya would explain him that no plant could live in such place, and thus most plants were kept on greenhouses-.

They immediately headed towards the Kazekage Estate, a massive spherical building with the kanji of "Wind" inscribed on its front, which was placed in the middle of the village. Just like the Hokage Tower in Konoha, not only it was where the current Kazekage worked, but it also doubled as his and his family's residence, should he choose to live there.

While Suna looked wildly different from Konoha, the atmosphere was rather identical: carefree kids played in the streets, traders sold goods, civilians walked through the streets headed to their usual jobs, some ninja patrolled said streets while others watched everything from the buildings' roofs...

Naruto guessed that deep down, most ninja villages were just the same.

...

Kazekage's Estate

Jiraiya and Naruto were sitting on a couch on a large room, while they waited for the Kazekage to receive Jiraiya, which, according to the Suna Jonin that received them at the entrance, it should be soon.

"So, tell me Naruto, what do you think about Suna?" Jiraiya asked, not afraid of a potentially tactless response, since they were alone.

"Eh, it's okay, I guess, but I prefer Konoha. It's really hot in here, and there's no green," Naruto dryly replied.

Jiraiya guessed that Naruto wouldn't be very happy there. From an early age, he always had a fondness for plants. He loved to play in their house's garden when he wasn't training, and even had a corner when he was growing some plants. But then again, it could have been the fact that he grew up in a place with trees as far as the eye can see, and the contrast was rather jarring.

"Have you even been here before?" the blond asked.

"Yes, multiple times. But this place has hardly changed from the last time I was here. Well, I'm seeing some new power lines, but that's it," Jiraiya mentioned.

"Do you know the Kazekage?"

"I'm afraid not. I met his predecessor once during the Third War, but that's about it. Then he mysteriously disappeared."

"Weird. Did they think it had something to do with you?"

"Fortunately not."

A door opened, and another Suna Jonin, a woman in her twenties with purple marks on her cheeks appeared.

"Jiraiya-san, Kazekage-sama is waiting for you at his office"

"About time. Is there a place where Naruto can wait while I'm with the Kazekage?"

"Yes. Kazekage-sama said that Naruto-kun can spend the time with his children. I'll take him with them," the Jonin offered.

" *Good, that way Naruto can get closer to the Jinchuriki*" Jiraiya thought. "Alright Naruto, this might take some time, so be patient, and be nice to the Kazekage's children."

"Sure thing dad," Naruto nodded as he saw Jiraiya leaving.

"Please, come with me Naruto-kun," the female Jonin said, extending her hand at him.

"Ok, eh..."

"Maki. My name is Maki," the female Jonin replied, smiling a bit.

"Alright Maki! I'm Naruto Uzumaki! But you already know that, right? Hehe!"

"You're quite a lively child. I'm sure you'll have no problem in making friends with the Kazekage's children."

"I hope so!"

...

Jiraiya entered the Kazekage's office, and saw the man himself, Rasa of the Gold Sand, the Kazekage, already waiting for him, sitting on his desk with a frown on his face. The Sannin put his best smile, and sat on the only empty chair.

"Kazekage-dono, is a pleasure to finally meet you," Jiraiya greeted, as cordially as possible. The Sannin, however, was cursing on the inside. He was really good at infiltration and information gathering, but diplomatic affairs were so out of his range of talents. He had to measure his words carefully as not to spark an international incident. Konoha already dodged a shuriken with Kumo, and the last thing he wanted was to unwittingly provoke Suna and made those two villages to ally against Konoha.

"Jiraiya of the Sannin. While I always wanted to meet a living legend, 'pleasure' isn't the word I'd use. We both know why you are here, and nobody but my ANBU are listening, so you might as well dispense with the pleasantries and go towards the matter at hand."

"As you wish, Kazekage-dono," Jiraiya replied in a neutral tone. "As the Hokage's letter said, I'd like to know the reasons behind creating a Jinchuriki, as well as what do you have planned to do with him."

"What, are you afraid that we might use him against Konoha?" Rasa asked, raising an eyebrow. "Should I worry about a preventive war?"

"We both know that's not gonna happen, so cut the act, Rasa," Jiraiya sharply asserted, and immediately cursed inwardly. Not only he had talked the Kazekage in a disrespectful tone, but addressed him by his first name instead of his title. Judging by Rasa's expression, he didn't take it well.

"Act!? I'm not the one who's acting, Jiraiya. Since the end of the war Suna has been steadily losing clients to Konoha, including the Wind Lord himself. The disappearance of the Third Kazekage turned the village into a mess. Defections were a daily occurrence. Bandit attacks over our supply caravans multiplied drastically. And when I made an attempt to recover part of our lost strength, Konoha *forces* me to accept an emissary demanding information about our internal affairs. We may be allies during the last war, but Konoha had done very little for us after it ended."

"Hey, we weren't having a great time either! Do I need to remind you that the strongest Tailed Beast attacked Konoha not even ten years ago?"

"If you're trying to make me feel sorry for Konoha, then stop it. You're only embarrassing yourself."

Jiraiya repressed the urge to yell at the man's face, and breathed heavily. "I don't want to do that. The Hokage's concerns lies exclusively over your intentions with the Jinchuriki, and your standing with Konoha."

"This is the proof I needed that I was doing the right thing. See? Before news that we had a Jinchuriki leaked, nobody gave a shit about us. But after that happened, we have oh-so-mighty Konoha meekly asking us about our intentions. Alright Jiraiya, you can go back to Konoha and tell this to your Hokage: I will do whatever it takes to make Suna a strong village, and if Konoha, or any other village gets in my way, there will be reprisals."

"That's a bluff. Jinchuriki or not, Suna lacks the ability to wage war against Konoha," Jiraiya boldly stated.

"On our own, maybe. But finding allies willing to crush you won't be hard. I heard about what happened with Kumo, you know. And the minor villages aren't too fond of Konoha either."

Jiraiya was starting to sweat bullets. This was the kind of stuff he wanted to avert. Fortunately, the meeting wasn't over yet, and the Kazekage didn't hear what Konoha was willing to offer.

"You misunderstood me, Kazekage-dono. Konoha does not wish to engage in any war with you at the moment. We only want a guarantee that our alliance still stands."

Rasa raised an eyebrow, and stared at Jiraiya with an amused look. "Alright. Do you want to hear my demands, or do you have an offering already prepared?"

"The latter. I'd like you to hear what the Hokage had allowed me to bargain with. Such as some S-class secrets that nobody outside Konoha knows."

The Kazekage leaned forward. "You have my attention."

"First of all, that Konoha also has a Jinchurki, which holds the Nine Tails, for some years. A kid the same age as your youngest son."

"So you managed to get something out of that mess. Alright, tell me more about him."

"He's the blond kid I brought with me."

A deafening silence followed Jiraiya's statement. Rasa's eyes opened so wide, the Sannin thought they'd fall out of their sockets.

"So you sneaked the Jinchuriki of the strongest Tailed Beast inside my village, without my knowledge."

"I believe I did that."

"And is currently in the same building as I am."

"That is correct."

"And is in the same room as my own children."

"Trust me, I guarantee you that neither you, your children or any citizen of Suna is danger."

Rasa remained surprisingly calm

"Do you know that doing such a thing is *not* a good way to improve the relationship between our villages, right, Jiraiya?"

"Believe me, I had my reasons to bring that kid here."

"And that would be...?"

"To help your son."

"Excuse me if I don't believe you, Jiraiya."

"You can believe what you want. Listen, I know that the kid is having trouble keeping the Tailed Beast under control, that's why the Hokage send me here instead of somebody with actual diplomatic skills. I can tell that whoever did the sealing, he or she made a rather crappy work. I happen to be one of the world's best seal masters, and if you allow me to take a look at the child, I can create a seal that will contain the demon properly. You can consider it a gift from Konoha as token of our good will."

"A tempting offer, Jiraiya, but how do I know that it's not a trick in order to get close to my Jinchuriki?"

"The fact that you have Konoha's Jinchuriki in your grasp. Who also happens to be my adoptive son. Do you think I'd dare to risk his life like that?"

"A ninja should be willing to sacrifice anything, including his loved ones in order to accomplish his goals and destroy his enemies. That's why I had no qualms about turning my kid into a Jinchuriki."

"That's a grim thought. But then again, I didn't have to bring Naruto here. In fact, I actually took a huge risk doing so. But I did it because I thought it would be very beneficial for both Naruto and your son to

meet somebody else with a demon inside, plus you can see the difference between a seal that can hardly contain a Tailed Beast, and a seal that can contain it properly."

The Kazekage crossed his hands below his chin, and stared at Jiraiya intently. "I need to think about this. You'll hear my answer tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, both you and that kid will stay here. I'll have somebody prepare a guest room. You're dismissed."

"Thank you for your time, Kazekage-dono. I'm sure that you'll decide what's best for everybody," Jiraiya said as he stood up and left the office.

...

While the meeting between Jiraiya and the Kazekage took place, Maki brought Naruto to a large room with a long table, a couple couches, some drawers and a few bookshelves. The room's two occupants immediately turned their attention to Naruto the moment he entered the place. One was a tall blonde girl with blue eyes and her hair styled in four pigtails. The other one was a boy with spiky brown hair and black eyes, who was shorter than the girl.

"Naruto-kun, these are Temari-sama and Kankuro-sama, two of Kazekage-sama's children. Temari-sama, Kankuro-sama, this is Naruto, the son of Konoha's emissary."

Naruto walked towards the two kids, extended his hand at an intermediate space between the two of them, and introduced himself with a well-rehearsed line. "Hello! I'm Naruto Uzumaki! Nice to meet you!"

It was the girl, Temari, who took his handshake offer, and gave him a rather strong handshake.

"Nice to meet you too, Naruto. Welcome to our village," Temari cordially greeted.

"I'll leave you alone. If you need me for whatever reason, I'll be outside in the hallway," Maki informed before leaving.

An awkward silence followed Maki's departure. Naruto thought it was his responsibility to break it. And he would break it *good* .

"So... which one of you two is the Jinchuriki?" Naruto asked, blissfully oblivious to his extreme bluntness.

Temari and Kankuro almost choked upon hearing Naruto's question.

"H-How do you know...?" Kankuro stuttered.

"My dad told me. It was the reason for why we came here, you know. I remember he told me it was his son, so it has to be you, right?" Naruto pointed at Kankuro.

"Actually, the Jinchuriki is our little brother Gaara," Temari clarified.

"Where he is then?" Naruto asked.

"As of lately, we barely see him. He spends most of the time with our uncle Yashamaru. He's helping Gaara control his powers," what Temari was saying was an S-class secret, but given that Naruto knew about Gaara already, he saw no point in keeping the rest of the details hidden.

"What a pity. I was dying to meet somebody who's like me," Naruto commented, a bit disappointed.

Temari and Kankuro choked even harder this time. Kankuro looked as if he was going to have a heart attack.

"Don't tell me you also have a monster sealed inside-!"

"WHAT THE HELL!? AND THEY LEFT US ALONE WITH YOU!?" Kankuro yelled.

"Kankuro!" Temari shouted in a chiding tone.

The door slammed open, and Maki burst into the room, kunai in hand. "I heard a scream. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, Maki-san, everything's fine. Except my brother, who's still an idiot," Temari explained as she hit Kankuro on the back of his head.

Maki nodded, and left the room once again.

"Eh, it's okay, I got that pretty often. But don't worry, the Nine Tails won't get out of here anytime soon, hehe," Naruto reassured as he patted his belly. "In fact, that's why we're here. Dad says he can make a better seal for Gaara so he won't have any trouble controlling his powers."

Both siblings looked even more shocked than before.

"Really?" Temari asked, as her eyes gleamed with a hopeful glint. "Can he do that?"

Naruto nodded and smiled.

"That would be a gift from heaven. Not only is Gaara getting worse trying to control that monster, but it's also taking a toll on his mind," Kankuro said.

"Yes. Maybe he will even be able to sleep," Temari hoped

"Wait, he can't sleep?" Naruto asked, confused. Temari shook her head.

"If he falls asleep, even if it's only a moment, the monster will take over his body and will go on a murderous spree. Only the monster's power keeps Gaara barely functional while permanently awake, but like my brother said, it's doing nothing to help his mind."

"Let's hope your father can convince ours to let him take a look at Gaara's seal and patch him up somehow," Kankuro added.

"Anyway, while we wait... what do you want to do?" the blond girl asked.

Naruto's eyes darted to the large table, where two wooden dolls with a few strings attached to their body parts laid. The Jinchuriki quickly rushed towards the table and grabbed them. "Hey Temari, are these your dolls?"

"Actually, they're Kankuro's."

"Really? You play with dolls?" Naruto asked, barely holding his laughter.

"They aren't *dolls*, they're PUPPETS!" Kankuro angrily said as he snatched the puppets from Naruto's hands.

"They look like dolls to me. Only they look more boring. Though they do have a lot of moving parts."

"I'll show you the difference between a doll and a puppet," Kankuro growled while attached the strings to his fingers. He then made the puppets to stand on their feet, and made them fight each other. "See? It requires skill and lots of dedication, but the results speak from themselves!"

"Whoaaaaa, that's so cool!" Naruto said, his eyes fixed on the puppets. "So you're training to become a performer?"

"Actually, I'm training to become a ninja, and so are my siblings."

"I'm a ninja too!" Naruto proudly claimed. "But what puppets have to do with being a ninja?"

"Puppetry is a ninja art too, exclusive from Suna! Some of the deadliest ninja from Suna were puppeteers!"

Naruto, however, continued staring at him puzzled.

"You'd understand it better if you saw an actual ninja puppeteer. Their puppets are as big as an adult, and they're full of lethal weapons. What my brother is using is no different from the tools of a street performer," Temari commented.

"Well, I have to start somewhere, right?" Kankuro protested. "I'll be using a combat puppet before you realize it!"

...

Konoha Academy

Even without the Sharingan, Sasuke had no trouble dodging the fist aimed at his face, and with a quick movement, he delivered a low kick at his opponent's legs, making him fall on his back. Sasuke placed his foot on his defeated foe.

"Winner, Sasuke Uchiha!" declared the teacher overseeing the fight, a tall, fat and broad-shouldered man named Daikoku Funeno.

Sasuke's fangirls -which were pretty much all his female classmates minus Hinata- burst into a series of loud squeals as they repeated his name ceaselessly. For those near them, it was almost like having a flock of seagulls screeching into their ears.

Sasuke himself didn't understand why they got so crazy. Sure, he won, but he was fighting against somebody who telegraphed his attacks a month in advance. Even a blind baby could have won against such unworthy foe.

"I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'm starting to miss Naruto. Sure, the guy's loud and obnoxious, but at the very least he made me work for my victories," Sasuke commented.

It has been almost a week since Naruto left, and all of sudden Taijutsu practice became infinitely more boring. None of his opponents lasted more than ten seconds.

Daikoku scratched his head. He was really hoping the spar would last a bit longer. "Er... does somebody else wants to spar against Sasuke?"

All the boys averted their gazes. His question was met with silence. Daikoku then turned at Sasuke with an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry then. We'll have to let other people spar for the time being-"

"I-I will spar against him!" a high pitched voice said, making everybody to gasp in unison.

"Hinata, what are you doing?" Sakura asked in disbelief. "You can't fight against a boy!"

"I... can't?"

"Technically, we usually don't make boys fights girls, but there's nothing written in stone about that. I mean, you will have to fight against a ninja of the opposite gender sooner or later, so we may as well start now," Daikoku commented. He then turned at Sasuke. "If it's okay with you?"

"Pass. I'm not going to hit a girl," the Uchiha replied.

"What's wrong, Uchiha, afraid a girl might kick your ass?" Kiba mocked.

"Well, you didn't volunteer to fight me, so I know that you're afraid that I will kick your ass. This girl has more guts than you," Sasuke retorted, making Kiba snarl in anger.

"Hinata, why do you want to fight Sasuke? If you want to spar now, I'm sure one of your female classmates will be happy to be your opponent," Daikoku asked.

"N-Naruto-kun always fights Sasuke-san b-because he says that S-Sasuke-san is strong, and y-you can only get b-better b-by fighting

strong opponents. I-I want to g-get stronger t-too."

Hinata never felt the need to spar against Sasuke. While she meant what she said, Naruto was usually her usual opponent when they trained together outside Academy hours. However, she didn't have Naruto for the time being.

"Alright Hyuga. You get your fight. It can't be worse than my previous three fights," Sasuke shrugged as he got into his usual fighting stance. Hinata also slid into the Gentle Fist stance.

Sasuke eyed her opponent, the only girl who wasn't a fangirl of his, but of Naruto's instead. Though then again fangirl was an unfair label. Hinata and Naruto had a genuine friendship. They talked, laughed and were there for each other. The Uchiha also suspected that the Hyuga had a crush on Naruto, but then again he didn't care much about that stuff.

Before the fight began, Hinata activated her Byakugan. Sasuke felt a tinge of jealousy. All the Hyugas awakened their Byakugan when they reached certain age, yet he still didn't awake his Sharingan yet. The fact that his brother awoke it when he was younger than Sasuke is now didn't help.

"Alright then, begin!" Daikoku said, making a chopping motion with his hand.

Sasuke and Hinata dashed towards each other they clashed in the middle, and traded many punches and kicks. For the first few seconds, they successfully parried all the hits, until Sasuke saw an opening and landed a kick on the Hyuga's abdomen, pushing her backwards.

"Hinata? Can you continue?" the teacher asked. Hinata nodded in reply.

Once again, Hinata dashed towards Sasuke. Sasuke was expecting that, being Hinata the heiress of a rather powerful clan specialized in

taijutsu, she'd be a worthy opponent, but nope. Her footwork was sloppy, her attacks slow, and had some trouble remaining focused. After trading a few blows, Sasuke once again sent her to the ground with a well placed punch to her gut. And once again, Hinata got up.

It seemed that what the Hyuga Heiress lacked in talent, she made up with sheer determination. It seemed that after all the time they spend together, Naruto was starting to rubbing off on her.

This time, thanks to Sasuke getting confident, Hinata managed to land a strike on Sasuke's shoulder, and he felt it as if it was on fire.

"This is the Gentle Fist?" the Uchiha thought, wincing in pain. "This girl is more dangerous than she looks. I'll have to finish this quickly."

Sasuke went on the defensive, careful not to let any of those palm strikes from hell to touch him again. He didn't have to wait much for the Hyuga to reveal an opening, and went for the kill. He delivered a series of fast punches to her ribs, and finished with a powerful kick that send her once again into the ground.

"Okay, I think that was enough. Winner, Sasuke Uchiha!" Daikoku declared.

Once again Sasuke's crowd of fangirls cheered furiously. Sasuke ignored them, walked towards Hinata, and extended his hand. Hinata looked at him for a moment, and took his hand, letting him help her back on her feet.

"Nice fight. You even managed to hit me once." He meant that as a genuine compliment despite being so easy to interpret as a belittlement.

"Uh... t-thank you, Sasuke-san..." Hinata replied. "I knew that I c-couldn't win, but if I could hit y-you once at least it w-would be something."

"Well, it was certainly more than what the rest of my opponents managed to accomplish," Sasuke said, glancing at the crowd besides him.

"Okay, I think that was enough for you two," Daikoku intervened. "Now do the Seal of Reconciliation."

While Naruto was usually very unwilling to do said seal with Sasuke whenever they sparred -not that Sasuke was any less guilty of such thing- Hinata had no problem. After locking their fingers, they returned to the crowd.

"Okay, who else wants to show their abilities? Come on, I need two new volunteers..."

...

Hours later, Sasuke was on his way home, hoping that today he could train with Itachi. Things hadn't been good at home recently. Itachi and their parents would often get into heated arguments that Sasuke couldn't fully understand, but the words "duty", "honor", "clan", "family" and "shame" were uttered by both parties. After that, Itachi would usually leave the Uchiha compound and would not return until sunset.

However, it appeared that today wasn't going to be one of those days, since Itachi was already waiting for him at the compound's entrance. He was carrying a backpack, and had a suitcase besides him.

For some reason, Sasuke had a very bad feeling about that image.

"Sasuke, you're back. I was hoping you'd be here soon," Itachi greeted his younger brother in a neutral tone.

"Nii-san? What are you doing with that suitcase? Are you going somewhere?" Sasuke asked, afraid of the possible answer.

"I'm afraid yes, Sasuke. I had an argument with Father and Mother again, the worst one so far... and they just disowned me. I'm no longer Itachi Uchiha, just Itachi."

"W-WHAT!?" Sasuke couldn't believe his brother's words.

"I just wanted to see you before I left this place. I wanted you to know this from me than from our parents. And most importantly, I wanted to say goodbye"

"But... you can't leave!" Sasuke cried, tears almost forming in his eyes. "You are my brother!"

Itachi kneeled before Sasuke. "Listen me, Sasuke. Uchiha or not, disowned or not, there are two things that nothing will ever change: the fact that you're still my brother, and that I love you."

"B-but... I don't want you to go!" Sasuke cried again.

"I know you don't want to. Being away from you is the most painful part of this mess. But Father and Mother don't want me being part of the clan anymore, and honestly, I can't live under the same roof as them either."

"But you can't leave!" Sasuke repeated. "Let's go and talk with Father and Mother! I'm sure that whatever happened, we can fix it!"

Itachi smiled sweetly at his little brother. "My little brother, you're still so innocent... unfortunately, the reason for my banishment is way too complex for you to understand yet."

"But... what are you going to do now...?"

"I already rented an apartment. I'll bring you there so you can see it once I'm settled. Now you have to be strong, Sasuke. Keep working hard on being a ninja like you have done so far. Make me feel proud of calling you my brother."

Sasuke didn't say anything, just stayed there, crying. Itachi then pulled him into a hug. The Uchiha prodigy then stood up, grabbed his luggage, and left the place that he had called home for all his life.

After watching his brother disappear, Sasuke spent some more minutes there, motionless. Then, he returned to his house. He didn't greet his parents like he usually did. He didn't even demand for explanations as for why they had kicked out Itachi from the clan. He merely went to his room, and locked himself there.

He dropped on his bed, and cried his eyes out until he run out of tears, and finally fell asleep.

...

Kazekage Estate, Next Morning

Shortly after Jiraiya and Naruto woke up, Maki the Suna Jonin entered the guest room they had slept in in order to inform them that the Kazekage had invited them to have breakfast with him and his family. She also informed that Gaara would be there.

"Alright, that's good," Jiraiya said, confident, as he started to get dressed.

"Why is that good, dad?" Naruto asked.

"The Kazekage is rather protective of Gaara, given that he wasn't with his siblings, and has a personal caretaker. The fact that he's willing to have Gaara present means that he trust us to some degree, and maybe he will accept my offer of fixing his seal. If everything goes as planned, not only we will help that poor kid, but will secure an alliance with Sunagakure."

...

Meanwhile, in the estate's dinning room, Rasa and his two elder children were sitting on a large, rectangular table, waiting for their

guests and remaining family to join them.

"So, dad, are you going to let Naruto's father fix Gaara's seal?" Temari asked with hopeful eyes.

"I'm not comfortable with the idea, but it appears to be the best solution so far. Gaara has a lot of trouble controlling the demon. If this Naruto you talk about is proof of the man's sealing ability... by the way, are you sure he was a Jinchuriki?" Rasa asked.

"He showed us his seal. It appeared to be the real thing. Only Jinchuriki have stuff like that," Kankuro commented.

"Well, we will learn the truth soon," Rasa said.

The room's door opened, revealing Jiraiya and Naruto, escorted by Maki. After being thanked, the Suna Jonin left.

"So, what's for breakfast? Because I'm so hungry! Do you guys have ramen here?" Naruto asked excitedly.

"Who the hell eats ramen for breakfast?" Kankuro asked in disgust.

"You'll have to excuse Naruto. He gets rather... out of control with an empty stomach," Jiraiya said, laughing nervously as he and Naruto took a seat.

"Jiraiya, these are Temari and Kankuro, my oldest children," Rasa motioned to the two kids at his sides, then he fixed his eyes on Naruto. "And I believe that this is the Jinchuriki, right? Your son Naruto."

"Yup, that's me! Remember that name, because when the old man retires, I'll be the next Hokage!" Naruto proudly claimed.

Rasa couldn't help but chuckle. "The kid had some big ambitions Too big, some might say."

Before Naruto could reply, the door opened again, and a redhead child entered the room followed by an adult.

The child, who appeared to be Naruto's age, had short blood red hair and black rings around his blue eyes. The adult -both Jiraiya and Naruto guessed it was Gaara's caretaker- had shoulder length, sandy blond hair and purple eyes.

"Ah, we're all finally here," Rasa mentioned.

"Sorry for the tardiness, Kazekage-sama," the adult said as he and Gaara walked towards the table.

"It's okay, Yashamaru. I know that taking care of Gaara is not an easy job. Fortunately, one of our guest might make that task easier. Or so he says."

"Why is that woman called Yashamaru? Isn't that a male name? And who is this woman by the way, didn't you guys say that your uncle was taking care of Gaara?" Naruto asked.

Temari and Kankuro could barely repressed their laughs, while Rasa glared at him, annoyed. Yashamaru merely smiled.

"I have a male name because I am a man. And yes, I am Gaara's uncle. But yes, my looks makes others to mistake me for a woman, it has happened before."

"WHAAAAAAT? You're a guy!?" Naruto shouted in shock. Then he turned at Temari. "Wait a minute, you're a girl, right?"

"Of course I am! Don't I look like one?" Temari harshly replied, visibly offended.

"Well, so does this guy!" Naruto protested, making Kankuro to laugh even harder.

Jiraiya facepalmed. Naruto was the nightmare of every diplomat. Fortunately for them, neither Rasa nor Yashamaru were taking his

antics seriously.

"Gaara," Rasa said, fixing his eyes on his youngest son. "These are Jiraiya and Naruto. They have come from Konoha to meet you."

Gaara looked at Jiraiya with impassible eyes, and then looked at Naruto.

"I see," was all what he said.

"Gaara, do you notice something special about this kid?" Rasa asked, and waited expectantly at his son's response.

Gaara parsimoniously walked to Naruto, and inspected him. So far, there was nothing remarkable about that boy except for how loud and obnoxiously cheerful he was. And then... he felt a shiver.

"Father... there's... something inside this kid... something Mother doesn't like... Mother wants to kill this child..." Gaara grimly commented.

The blonde almost jumped out of his chair. "Hey, what the hell did I do to your mother!?" Naruto protested.

"So it is true, your son is a Jinchuriki," Rasa concluded, mildly fascinated. "Yet he looks so... normal."

"Of course I am normal! I might have a demon inside me, but that doesn't change who I am!"

"I already told you that Naruto is the difference between a good seal and a shoddy one," Jiraiya interjected.

"Can he access to the demon's power?" Rasa asked again.

"Yes, thought I'm not going to teach Naruto how to use it until he's older. "

"A foolish decision. For a Jinchuriki to reach his potential, they should be trained to control their demon as soon as possible," Rasa replied.

"He still struggles to control his own chakra, so I don't want to take an unnecessary risk and put him in danger."

"Whatever," Rasa dismissed with a wave of his hand. "So if you fix Gaara's seal, Gaara will have access to the demon's power without losing control, right?"

"Exactly."

"If that's the case, then you have my permission to do it."

"Excellent. Then, this is all what I need to start the process. First, a safe room to work in, then..."

...

Many hours later...

The process was hard and exhausting, mostly because a shield of sand would often appear at random times, interfering with the sealing process. A byproduct of the Tailed Beast, Jiraiya had guessed. Though Gaara said that, according to his uncle, it was his mother's spirit protecting him. On top of that, he had to work while two Suna Jonin watched him intently.

Jiraiya had demanded the two ninja to leave, but they weren't going to leave the Kazekage's son and the village's Jinchuriki alone with a foreign ninja.

After much work, Jiraiya had replicated the Four Symbols Seal that kept the Nine Tails prisoner inside Naruto on Gaara, and he removed the shoddy seal that could barely contain the Tailed Beast. Both of them exited the room, and a Suna Chunin escorted both of them

towards a room where Rasa, his children, Yashamaru and Naruto were waiting for them.

"The process is finished. It has been a success," Jiraiya announced, smiling. Gaara, however, remained impassible.

"Great! I knew you could do it, dad!" Naruto cheered.

"Those are some great news indeed," Yashamaru commented, smiling.

The Kazekage took a step forward. "Gaara, how do you feel?"

"I can't hear Mother anymore. But other than that... I feel good," Gaara answered.

"I see. Let's do some tests and see if Jiraiya's handiwork is as good as he claims to be, okay?" Rasa asked. "Gaara, lie on this couch. I'll use a genjutsu to make you sleep."

"But you told me that I should never sleep..." Gaara calmly replied.

"I know. But if Jiraiya's seal works as intended, you should be able to," Rasa explained, motioning to the couch.

Gaara nodded, and did as his father asked. Rasa cast the genjutsu, and Gaara felt asleep. Nothing happened. Five minutes passed. Nothing happened. Ten minutes passed. Nothing happened.

"It's amazing! Gaara is sleeping and the demon isn't taking over! Jiraiya, you're incredible!" Temari gushed, completely elated.

"I never get tired of hearing that," Jiraiya replied with a foxy grin.

"Your work is indeed worth its praise, Jiraiya," Rasa conceded. "Though I still want to do one more test."

"Do all the tests you want, the results won't vary," Jiraiya said, confident.

Rasa rocked Gaara until he woke up.

"Father... I was asleep... did something happen?" Gaara asked, a bit worried.

"Nothing. The seal worked. But I want you to do one more thing for me. Go to the door, please," Rasa instructed.

Gaara nodded, and did as he was told. Once there, he turned towards his father. "I'm on the door. What should I do-"

Gaara was interrupted when he saw his father tossing several kunai at him. The redhead kid yelped and instinctively raised his arms in self-defense. Fortunately for him, a wall of sand formed between him and the bladed weapons, protecting him from any harm.

Gaara was pale with shock. Rasa seemed pleased. Everybody else were dumbfounded.

"... what the hell?" Naruto asked, almost in a whisper.

"Good. He still has the sand. You were good on your word, Jiraiya," Rasa said, satisfied.

"You threw a kunai at your son's face..." Jiraiya whispered, shocked. His shock then turned into anger. "YOU THREW A KUNAI AT YOUR SON'S FACE! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!?"

"I needed to check if Gaara had still access at the demon's power," Rasa replied. His voice was completely devoid of regret.

"And what if that wasn't the case? You could have killed him!"

"But I didn't. Stop fretting over that already. It belongs to the past."

"To the past...? IT HAPPENED JUST NOW!"

Rasa decided to ignore Jiraiya's protests. "The seal worked as you promised, and in the name of my village I thank you for that. You can

now go back to your village and tell your Hokage that he has nothing to fear. Suna and Konoha will remain allies for the foreseeable future."

Jiraiya glared at the Kazekage, and muttered a curse under his breath. "Naruto, go and pack your stuff. We will leave tomorrow morning."

"What, so soon? But we've been only here two days! And I barely got to know Gaara!"

"Naruto, we came here to do a job, and said job is done. There's nothing here left for us, so we must return. Besides, I promised both the Hokage and your mother that we will be back as soon as possible."

"Okaaaaaay..." Naruto said, dejected.

...

Once again, Jiraiya and Naruto were invited to have dinner with the Kazekage and his family. Jiraiya declined the invitation, but encouraged Naruto to go so he could spend at least some more time with the Kazekage's children, especially Gaara. The Kazekage finished his dinner quickly and left the dinning room, claiming he still had some things to do, leaving the kids alone under the watch of a couple Suna Jonin.

"Tell your father that I thank him for what he did for me. It's good to know that I won't hurt people unwittingly again," Gaara spoke up.

"Yeah, I will," Naruto replied as he stuffed his mouth with food.
"You're welcome!"

"By the way, since you're like me... does people treat you... differently?" Gaara asked.

"Differently? Oh, I think what you mean... if they act as if I'm going to go insane and try to kill them or something?" the blond boy asked. Gaara nodded. "Sadly yes. Do people in Suna treat you like that?"

"Yes."

"What? But you're like, the son of the Kazekage! They should treat you with more respect!"

Sure, Naruto was also the son of a Hokage, but in his case, very few people knew that, as it was an S-Class secret. Gaara's parentage was public knowledge.

"Actually, it doesn't matter much. They can only see the potential danger he represents. Though I can blame them, given that there has been quite a few incidents when Gaara lost control of the monster," Temari commented.

"Good thing you and your dad came here. Now maybe we can convince people that Gaara won't harm them anymore," Kankuro added.

"Eh, well, I don't think their opinions will change much. If this village is anything like mine, they'll continue avoiding Gaara like he's the plague. That's what they do to me at least," Naruto mentioned, a bit sad.

Gaara looked thoughtful. "I see then. How do you cope with it?"

"Truth be told, sometimes I want to yell at them. To make them realize that they have nothing to fear from me. That whatever happened in Konoha seven years ago won't happen again," Naruto expalined, bitterness leaking through his words. Then he smiled. "But not everybody is like that. I have mom and dad, and Shizune-nee-chan, and Hagane-chan and Kaida-chan, and Hinata... and as long as I have them, I don't care what other people think."

"Then should I stop trying to get everybody else to acknowledge me?" the redhead asked.

"What? No, of course not! You deserve to be respected. It's just... don't feel too bad if they don't do now. If you ever feel down, you should go to the people who likes you. Your dad is kind of an asshole," Naruto blurted, then he gasped upon realizing what he said, turned towards Kankuro and Temari and smiled bashfully. "No offense."

"None taken," Kankuro replied. Temari just nodded.

"But you have your aunt -I mean uncle- and your brother and your sister are pretty cool, and I'm sure they'll help you deal with this crap," Naruto motioned at Kankuro and Temari. Both of them smiled sweetly.

"Yeah, I mean, we don't see each other much, but that's going to change soon!" Kankuro declared.

"And if our father has a problem with that, well, he'll have to deal with it!" Temari added.

"Thank you, to both of you, it... it means a lot to me," Gaara said. Naruto smiled at him.

"By the way, Gaara, what's all that talk about your 'mother'? I thought that she died when you were born..."

"Uncle said that the sand that protects me from harm is the spirit of my mother. Sometimes I hear voices in my head urging me to punish those who wrong me... but since your father reinforced my seal, I can't hear her anymore."

Naruto remembered a conversation he had with his parents when he was four. They told him that, if he ever heard a voice inside his head, he should tell them immediately. They didn't elaborate any further,

leaving the blond boy rather confused. It became much clearer once he learned the truth about the Nine Tails being sealed inside him.

"Actually... that's not your mother, but the monster they sealed inside you."

"Oh..." Gaara looked dejected.

"But that doesn't mean that your mom isn't with you! My parents tell me that since my birth parents died to protect me, their spirits will be always watching over me, protecting me in mysterious ways. I'm sure your mom will protect you and your siblings as well!" Naruto quickly added.

"That's... a comforting thought. I never thought that my real mother would want me to harm others."

"Of course not! People like us exist to protect others from these monsters. And that's what I want to do when I grow up. I'm going to be Hokage so everyone will know that I'm protecting my village!"

"That sounds nice. Maybe I should try to become Kazekage too."

"And you will be the best Kazekage there is!"

"And we will be there to support you, little bro," Temari added. Kankuro nodded.

The four kids continued talking and laughing until it was time for all of them to go to bed. During the trip back to Konoha, Naruto would tell Jiraiya how much fun he had during the time he spend with the Sand Siblings -as he nicknamed them. That moment Jiraiya knew that the alliance between Konoha and Suna would last for many decades, but it would be thanks to Naruto's unwitting efforts.

...

Konoha

Itachi, formerly known as Uchiha, studied his new home, a three room apartment consisting on a bedroom, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. It was a huge step down from his rather cozy home in the Uchiha Compound, but it was enough for him. Due to having so few personal belongings, he took almost no time to settle in.

While Itachi had done a myriad of B-Rank and A-Rank mission, the former Uchiha was penniless. When you're part of a big clan, all the money from missions goes to the Clan Fund. The Clan Head, or a designated treasurer would manage the fund and use it to cover the clan's expenditures, such as food, clothes, weapons, water and electricity. Adult clansmen had a small allowance that they could spend however they pleased. Most of them used said allowance to buy things for their children.

Naturally, Itachi didn't get any money from said fund, so he had to ask for a small loan to the Konoha Bank. Fortunately, his reputation as a young ninja prodigy was enough guarantee for the bank. He had used that money to buy food, some clothes, a stock of weapons, and to pay the first month of the rent. The loaned money would run out soon, and the bank would demand the money back just as soon, so he needed to do well-paid missions as soon as possible. Fortunately the Third would have no problem with it.

Lying on his bed, Itachi couldn't help but wonder if he did the right thing. Maybe he should have tried a bit harder to convince his parents to drop the hostilities with the Konoha higher-ups. Maybe he should have become an ANBU and use his position as a mediator.

His exhaustion beat his troubling thoughts, and the disowned Uchiha soon fell asleep, unable to shake the thought that something terrible was going to happen soon.

Author's note: Even if this chapter doesn't feel like a conclusion, this marks the end of what I call the "Introduction Arc", which pretty much one big set up for the story and some of the most important story and character arcs. The next

chapter will be the beginning of the next arc, which I won't name yet since it's a huge spoiler, but I'm sure that you'll guess what is it about ;)

I had the idea of including Chiyo, given that it was her who sealed the Shukaku inside Gaara, plus with her hatred towards other villages she'll have something to say about Jiraiya's intervention. But neither I could find a proper moment to introduce her, nor I could think anything meaningful for her to do or say that could add to the plot. Then again, I'm not very fond of Chiyo, so I wasn't even that motivated.

Oh, and Daikoku Funeno and Maki aren't OCs, they're actually canon characters ;) I will try to keep the number of OCs in this story to a minimum.

Anyway, I hope that you enjoyed this chapter, and while you wait for the next one next weel, don't forget to review! Reviews make me very, very, very happy!

The Calm Before the Storm

Author's Note: I'd like to address some complains about Naruto's characterization. Some people were expecting bigger changes about him since he's being raised by Tsunade and Jiraiya, both in terms of personality and skill:

First, is that besides the fact that I personally don't think that Naruto's personality would change that much if he didn't grew an orphan, his canon personality is what I like the most about his character, as well as what makes him so likeable. I'm tired of reading stories in which Naruto either becomes an emo nihilist, or a smug bastard that lords his new power over everybody.

And second, his power level. As of this chapter, Naruto is EIGHT, and as you can see, he's still quite stronger than he was in canon at this stage. Did you guys expect a toddler Naruto with Sage Mode and the Rasengan?

Okay, enough ranting for now. Enjoy the chapter, and see you at the notes after the end.

Chapter 8:

The Calm Before the Storm

or

Elementary Elements

Eight Years after the Kyubi attack

It was a warm Saturday morning. Flowers were blooming, birds were signing and the sky was clear. So while he waited for the daily training session with one of her parents, Naruto decided to spend

some time on one of his hobbies besides training and eating ramen: gardening.

Shizune bought him some new seeds from the Yamanaka Flower Shop, and he was planting them on his corner of the backyard. Helping him were his two four year old siblings, Hagane and Kaida. Both of them had inherited Jiraiya's spiky white hair and Tsunade's brown eyes. Though Hagane usually had a short haircut, while Kaida had it styled into two long pigtails.

"Alright, now that you have put the seeds in the holes, you must cover the holes with soil again," Naruto instructed as the twins did so.

"And then what, niisan?" Kaida asked.

"Then you come every day and water the seeds. In a few weeks, it will grow a plan with really pretty flowers."

"Awww, but I wanted to see the flowers now!" Kaida complained.

"Maybe if we water them more, they'll grow faster?" Hagane wondered.

"Nice try, but it doesn't work that way, hehe. Okay, wait here, I'm going to get the watering can," Naruto said as he went to back to the house. He returned back with a full watering can, and he almost dropped it in shock. "WHAT THE HELL!?"

Naruto was in shock. Besides a smiling Kaida and a surprised Hagane, there was an almost full grown bush of white roses.

"Look at this, niisan! I told the flowers to grow already, and they did!" the little girl said proudly.

"Whoa, it's almost like the First Hokage!" Naruto shouted, amazed.

"Who?" both twins asked in unison.

"The First Hokage! Your great grandpa! He had the power to make plants grow super fast, but none of his children inherit that power. Maybe you did!"

"Really? That's so cool! I'm going to grow more flowers then!"

"Maybe I have that power too!" Hagane wondered as he tried to emulate his sister.

"I have to tell mom and dad!" Naruto excitedly stated as he rushed back inside. "MOM! DAD! GET OVER HERE! YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BELIEVE THIS!"

Naruto pretty much ignored the Sannin's protests as he dragged them, followed by Shizune, to the backyard, where the twins were trying to make more plants to grow.

"Naruto, please, I can walk on my own!" Tsunade protested.

"What's so important that got you so riled up?" Jiraiya asked.

"Look at THAT!" Naruto pointed out towards the white rose bush.

"Those are some nice roses, but I don't think they're impressive enough to be worth getting dragged here," Tsunade deadpanned.

"I don't mean that! I planted those roses five minutes ago, and Kaida made them grow!"

"You mean that she has power over plants? Like the First Hokage?" Jiraiya asked.

"Exactly!" Naruto exclaimed. "Come on sis, show them!"

Kaida nodded, and tried to make another white rose to grow. "Come on, grow! Grow! Groooooooooooooow!" Kaida piped as she motioned her arms at the ground, without any visible effects. "Oh come on, it worked just now!"

Jiraiya shook his head. "Come on Naruto, the kids pranked you. While I admit that that bush wasn't there yesterday, there's no way they have the power of the Wood Release."

"No! I have the power! And I'll show it to you! Grow!" Kaida ordered, her face turning red as she tried to channel the power she thought she had.

"Come on sis, I know you can do it!" Hagane encouraged as he patted her on the back.

The moment Hagane touched Kaida, something inside her changed. She felt an overwhelming force coming from within, and almost unwittingly, channeled said force outside through her extended arms. Another white rose bush emerged from the ground, except this one grew to be twice as big and lush as the first one.

Tsunade's necklace shined with such an intense glow it was comparable to the sun.

Tsunade, Jiraiya and Shizune's jaws dropped, and their eyes opened so wide they appeared to pop out of their socket. They remained in a state of stupor until Naruto snapped out of them.

"I... I can't believe it!" Tsunade babbled, almost in a whisper.

"Tsunade-sama... this... this is..." Shizune stuttered.

Jiraiya was also shocked, but then he smiled wide. "Haha, did you see that? My genes are so good, they awakened a long lost Bloodline Limit!"

"Jiraiya..." Tsunade whispered, ignoring the Toad Sage's remark. "When Hagane touched Kaida... you felt something, didn't you?"

"Yes. Something similar to nature chakra," Jiraiya replied. "Kaida, when Hagane touched you, what did you feel?"

"I felt... being full of energy. And so strong! Like I've been sleeping for a whole week! It felt amazing!" the little girl said.

"Hagane, honey, give me your hand," Tsunade instructed as she crouched in front of her younger son.

Hagane did so, and Tsunade's necklace glowed once more. None of the presents were sensors, but they could feel Tsunade's chakra dramatically increasing all of sudden, manifesting in the form of a blue aura flaring around her. Jiraiya also noticed the bit of nature chakra there. The effect vanished once they stopped holding hands. Tsunade stood up, with a dazzling look on her face.

"When Hagane touched me, I felt my chakra reserves growing so much, I thought I wouldn't be able to hold them! This is incredible!"

"Wait a minute, we all touched Hagane many times before. Why he didn't have this effect until now?" Shizune asked.

"I don't know... maybe it was dormant until something triggered it?" Jiraiya guessed.

"Like what?"

"Like... Kaida making those plants grow?" Naruto asked. "I mean, you told me about twins having some sort of invisible special connection. What if Hagane couldn't awake this power until Kaida awakened hers?"

"It's a possibility," Jiraiya conceded. "By the way, Tsunade, I think that this might be the reason as for why your necklace glows so much when it's near either of them."

"It is possible that the First's chakra of the necklace somehow influenced them since the moment they were... err... conceived?" Shizune asked.

"That's an interesting theory, but we'll have to wait to see if it's true or not. I'm going to check the twins now to see the extent of their abilities. As for the time being, I don't want anybody else to learn about this, understood?"

"What? But Kaida just developed a Bloodline Limit which was thought to be lost! And Hagane has some freaky power too! We have to tell the Hokage at least!" Naruto protested.

Shizune stepped in. "Naruto-kun, keep in mind that the power of the First Hokage has been sought by many people. If there was a rumor that Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama's kids had manifested that power, then they would be in great danger. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Shizune-nee-chan. I didn't think of that," Naruto admitted, as he rubbed the back of his head.

"Which means that you two shouldn't use those powers out of this house, and only with an adult present, understood?" Tsunade said to the twins.

Kaida went to protest. "But-"

"No buts, Kaida!" Tsunade's tone did not leave room for replies.

"Alright, mom..." the white haired girl conceded in defeat.

"You two, come with me for a medical check. Jiriaya, why don't you take Naruto out for some training?"

...

Traning Ground Three

While Tsunade inspected the twins, Jiraiya tool Naruto to their usual training spot.

"Alright Naruto, let's review your ninjutsu repertoire. First use the Clone Jutsu," Jiraiya instructed.

Naruto nodded, made the necessary hand seals, and channeled his chakra. "Clone Jutsu!" Naruto shouted, and four perfect copies of himself appeared at both sides. "Yay!"

"Alright, that jutsu gave you some trouble, but it seems that your chakra control is getting better," Jiraiya mentioned. "Now, Transformation."

Dispelling the clones, Naruto nodded again, and turned into Shizune. Jiraiya gave a nod of approval, and Naruto returned to normal.

"And lastly, the Body Replacement."

Naruto made the hand seals, this time much faster, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a large rock in his place. Naruto then appeared behind Jiraiya.

"Excellent," Jiraiya approved, turning around, already aware of his godson being there. "Those are the three Academy ninjutsu you need to master if you want to graduate. As you can see, piece of cake when you have such an awesome teacher as me."

"Wait, does that mean that I can graduate already?" Naruto said in realization, starry eyed.

"I said that those three jutsus are necessary to pass, not to only thing you need. But yeah, I'm sure that you'd be good to graduate in two years."

"YAY! Take that Sasuke! I'm going to graduate two years before you!"

"Whoa there, don't get yourself carried away. You're not going to skip any Academy year."

"What? But why? If I already know what they teach at the Academy, going there is a waste of time!"

"You have a point. But I'm not teaching you everything the Academy does. Stuff like maths, physics, biology and geography might not seem useful for a ninja at first, but they are. That's why the Academy is still important. If that wasn't the case, I wouldn't bother sending you there.

"Besides, I'm going to have a talk with the Hokage and see if he can do something about making the Academy curriculum a bit more challenging. I mean, a ninja needs more than the three basic E-Rank jutsus to do their job. They don't even teach tree walking! Besides, I want to teach you other abilities that will take some time."

"And that would be...?"

"Sealing Jutsus, some more advanced ninjutsu, being able to dispel genjutsus, and if possible, control of the Nine Tails' chakra. It's my goal to make sure you gain some level of mastery over those abilities before you graduate."

"I see. No matter what you decide to throw at me or how hard the Academy gets, I'll pass with flying colors!" Naruto claimed, pumping his fist.

"Boy, that inner fire is something every teacher wants to see in his students," Jiraiya smiled. "Alright kid, now that you showed me what you're capable of, I think that I can fulfill your request!"

"YES! Elemental ninjutsu!"

Last week, Sasuke -who for some reason had become incredibly cranky since the previous year- showed everybody that he had learned the Great Fireball Jutsu. Even if he was far from completely mastering it, Naruto had to admit that it was pretty cool. From that day onwards, Naruto begged her parents to teach him elemental ninjutsu. And now the gap between him and Sasuke would close once more.

Jiraiya then produced a small light brown rectangular paper. "This is a litmus paper. It is used to determine your elemental affinity. You channel chakra into the paper, and based on how it reacts you can determine your affinity. For example," Jiraiya did as he explained, and the paper started to burn. "My affinity is fire, so the paper burns when it's in contact with my chakra. Fire is the most common affinity on this land, hence its name. Now-"

"Gimme gimme!" Naruto hastily took another litmus paper from Jiraiya's hands. He channeled his chakra, and the paper split in two. "Aw dammit! Give me another, I think broke this one!"

"Calm down, Naruto! The paper didn't break. If the paper cuts in two, then it means you have an affinity for wind. Which is the least common affinity of all nations, even in the Land of Wind."

"Awesome! I have a rare affinity, unlike Sasuke who has fire like everybody else!" Naruto cheered, then he realized that Jiraiya also had a fire affinity. "Er, sorry dad, I didn't mean to-"

"It's okay. But don't get all excited, having a rare affinity does have it downsides."

"Really? Like what?"

"Since there are so few people with wind affinity, that means less people who can teach you, and less people creating new jutsus. I believe that there's only another wind user in Konoha, one of the sons of Sarutobi-sensei. I think I could get him to teach you some of the advanced stuff. But for the time being, let's stick to something simple."

Jiraiya walked to a tree and plucked a leaf from one of its branches. He then handed that leaf to Naruto. "I want you to use your chakra to cut that leaf in two, just like you did with the paper."

"What? Why?" Naruto asked, puzzled.

Jiraiya sighed. "Your mother and I told you this a million times. Before learning 'the cool stuff' as you so eloquently put it, you need to learn the basics first. And this exercise will help you mold wind chakra. What, did you expect that I was going to teach you how to produce a tornado or something like that?"

"Welll... yes. I mean, Sasuke can create fireballs, and I need something to counter that if I am to beat him!"

"Actually, that wouldn't be a good idea."

"And why not?"

"Because elemental chakra is like rock paper scissors. Just like how rock beats scissors but gets beaten by paper, some elements are weak against some and strong against others. In your case, wind is strong against lightning, but weak against fire. If you try to counter Sasuke's fire jutsus with wind jutsus, you will only make his attacks stronger."

"WHAAAAAAAAT!? Then I'm never going to beat him!" Naruto whined, depressed, as he fell on his knees.

"Don't say that. You can learn water jutsus as well if you want."

"But you said that my affinity is wind..."

"Yes, but that means that wind jutsus will be more powerful, consume less chakra and will be easier to learn. You can learn jutsus from all five basic elements. Think of it as the use of your arms. Your right arm is the dominant one, but that doesn't mean that you can use your left arm as well, but you use the right one more because you have more dexterity."

"Then teach me water jutsus instead!"

"No. You have to learn jutsus of your elemental affinity first. Once you have that down, you can master the element that counters the

element you're weak against. For example, after mastering fire, I learned earth jutsus, since earth beats water, which beats fire."

"I see... man, this is far more complicated than I thought!" Naruto realized, rubbing the back of his head.

"Of course it is. Why do you think I don't want you to graduate too early? I want you to be properly prepared once you go out there to fight the bad guys."

"By the way, you have fire, but what affinity do mom and Shizune-neechan have?"

"Your mother has lightning, and Shizune has water. And since Kaida has Wood Release, which is a combination of earth and water, those elements are her affinity."

"What, it is possible to have more than one affinity?"

"Yes, but outside Bloodline Limits, they're extremely rare, even more than people with wind affinity. Now come on, I won't teach you any new jutsu unless I see you cutting that leaf with your chakra! The key is to try to compress your chakra into a blade as fine as possible."

"Right!" Naruto said, as he fixed his stare on the leaf on his hands, and channeled his chakra.

...

Meanwhile, in the forests of Konoha's outskirts, two figures were having a talk, covered by the trees' lush foliage. Both of them were teenagers with dull black hair and black eyes, wearing headbands of Konohagakure. One of them was also wearing the symbol of the Uchiha Clan on the back of his t-shirt.

"So, how things are going, Shisui?" the first figure asked.

"It was as you feared, Itachi. It was way beyond a rumor. The Uchiha are indeed planning to stage a coup. I don't know when, but it will be

soon. Very soon," Shusui grimly noted.

Itachi cursed inwards. "Our time is running out. What about that investigation that Jiraiya-sama is conducting?"

"Even if the true culprit of the Nine Tails attack was found, it is too late. The damage was done the moment Danzo put the Uchiha Clan under surveillance. I'm afraid that there's nothing stopping the coup."

"If such things happen, it will be an open invitation for the other villages to declare a war on us. What can we do?"

"I already have a plan. There's a meeting tonight of all the Uchiha members at the Naka Shrine. I believe that Fugaku-sama will make the coup official, and reveal what he has planned. What he doesn't know, however, is that I will be there and I will use my Kotoamatsukami on him and make him convince the Clan to rebuild the burned bridges with the village. I already have the Third's approval," Shisui explained.

"Do you think it will work? If you're caught, you will die on the spot."

"I know it will. Besides, I can't die yet, not without convincing Shizune-san on going on a date with me first," Shusui added, chuckling.

Itachi returned the smile. "I believe you'll need to use your Kotoamatsukami on her for that to happen," Itachi's face became serious again. "But take care. Once you're done, meet me at my apartment, and we'll discuss what to do next."

"Yes. See you this night, Itachi," Shisui said before disappearing.

"Good luck, Shisui. Let's hope everything goes right..."

Little did the two rogue Uchihases know that a third Sharingan wielder, hidden in the shadows, had listened their entire conversation.

...

Shortly after finishing his training session with Naruto, Jiraiya was confronted by an ANBU who told him that the Hokage requested his presence for an urgent mission. In no time, he arrived at the Hokage's tower, and entered Sarutobi's office through one of the windows.

"Jiraiya, is the door to much of a hassle to you?" Sarutobi asked in a deadpan tone.

"Sorry, sensei, but you said that it was urgent," Jiraiya replied as he jumped inside the office.

"Alright, sit down," Sarutobi instructed with a weary sigh. "Jiraiya, there is no need for you to continue your investigation of the Kyubi attack."

Jiraiya was taken aback by such words. "What? Why?"

"I'm afraid that it won't do any good now. According to my sources, the Uchiha Clan has been planning a coup d'etat for the past couple years. They will stage it sometime during this week."

Jiraiya couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And why are we still here, doing nothing!? We have to stop that from happening!"

"I already have a plan in motion, Jiraiya, don't worry. The coup won't come to pass, I made sure of it."

Jiraiya wasn't convinced, but decided to not to pressure the issue. "I see. The ANBU who contacted me said you had a mission for me."

"Correct. You see, from the past few months onwards, the demand of A-Rank and S-Rank missions had increased dramatically."

"I fail to see how that's a bad thing. More income for the village."

"Yes, but I believe that there's something more to this. This amount of high-ranked missions is unseen in times of peace. An S-Rank mission means an S-Rank threat. If there are so many S-Rank

missions requests... well, you do the math. And some of the mission requesters mentioned men in black cloaks with red clouds on them."

"Akatsuki."

"Exactly. They began their move already, whatever it is. Your mission will be to find out what they're trying to accomplish with this."

"Are you afraid that they're doing this in order to bring our best ninja out of the village walls so they can be killed off one by one with ease?"

"It is one of the possibilities, yes, but not the only one."

"Alright, I'll meet some of my spies and see what they have. You'll receive a report from me shortly," Jiraiya said as he disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Sarutobi knew that he didn't convince Jiraiya about the coup being already over. Truth be told, he wasn't convinced either, but he had to trust Shisui. He had seen his abilities in action, and he knew that he could pull it off.

Still, the old Hokage couldn't shake off the feeling that this was the last time he would see the Toad Sannin.

...

It took him two hours and an inordinate amount of effort, but Naruto had finally cut the goddamned leaf. When Naruto asked Jiraiya if he was ready now to learn wind jutsus, Jiraiya pretty much laughed in his face, and told him that in order to be ready, he'll have to cut that leaf in less than ten seconds. At this rate, he was never going to surpass Sasuke!

Still, Naruto knew perfectly what would get his mood up: some ramen with his best friend.

Now, if a random kid barged into the Hyuga Compound, he would be swiftly kicked out by the Branch House members that guarded its gates. And if Naruto tried to do that a couple years ago, they wouldn't even let him to get *close* to the place.

But when your mother has saved the wife of the Clan Head from a certain death... well, let's say that the Hyugas start to show you some respect.

"Good afternoon, Naruto-san. Coming to see Hinata-sama?" greeted a Branch House Hyuga who was guarding the gates. The Hyuga had shoulder-length, spiky brown hair with two long bangs framing either side of his face. It would be easy to mistake him for a woman.

"Hello to you too, Tokuma! Yeah, you nailed it! I just came from a hard training session, and I was heading for Icharaku's and wondered if Hinata could join me."

"Hinata-sama is currently training with Hiashi-sama as well. Though I believe they'll finish soon. You can go and see her train while you wait, if you wish."

"Yeah I'll do that, thank you, Tokuma," Naruto said as he entered the Compound.

After asking for directions -he often got lost in the large compound,- Naruto finally arrived at the main dojo, where he saw Hinata, dressed in a dark blue long sleeved shirt and knee-long dark blue pants sparring against another Hyuga, a male -or so he thought, after meeting Yashamaru he wasn't so sure anymore- who appeared to be both older and way more skilled than her. Naruto's presence was acknowledged by the other Hyuga present with a silent nod. One of them, a woman with long dark purple hair, signaled him to sit next to her. Naruto complied.

"Good afternoon, Hikari-san," Naruto greeted as he sat besides the woman.

"Welcome to our home, Naruto-kun. Did you come here to see my daughter?" Hikari asked.

"Yeah, I wanted to ask her if she would want to go with me to Icharaku's and grab some ramen, but I see she's busy now."

"She's close to finish her daily training. I'm sure she'd love to eat with you."

Hinata lost her focus the moment Naruto entered the dojo, blushing the moment she saw the blond smiling at her. This moment of distraction made left her wide open for her opponent to knock her down with a swift palm strike.

"Don't get distracted! In a real fight, if you get distracted, you die! Come on, stand up and come at Neji again!" Hiashi chided in a reprimanding tone.

"Y-yes father!" Hinata bumbled as she stood up and dashed at her adversary again.

They traded blows once again, expect this time Hiashi noticed that she was more focused and her attacks were far more aggressive. As if suddenly this spar became a death-match with her life on the line. Yet the only thing that changed was that Naruto had entered the room. Did that kid have some effect on her daughter?

Meanwhile, Naruto continued watching Hinata spar.

"Wow, that kid fights pretty hard," Naruto commented to no one in particular.

"Indeed. Neji-kun has quite some talent. Some believe that in a few years he will become the strongest Hyuga alive, surpassing even my husband," Hikari whispered to him. "But don't tell him I said that, he has quite the ego already."

"By the way... is Neji a guy?"

Hikari chuckled. "Yes, yes he is. Does he look like a girl?"

"Well, it's that I met some guys who look like women. And many of them were Hyugas."

"Well, yes. Many Hyugas have rather feminine looks. Not every Hyuga can have the luck to have my Hiashi's handsome manly features."

There was a collective gasp when Hinata managed to land a hit on the Hyuga prodigy.

"Way to go, Hinata! Kick his ass!" Naruto cheered in a whisper. He remembered the first time he loudly cheered her, and was reprimanded by the rest of Hyuga for almost half an hour for his noisy behavior.

"I think I'll bring you here whenever Hinata-chan has to train. She fights with far more spunk whenever you're present," Hikari observed, smiling at Naruto.

"Well, obviously. I also fight better when I have my friends cheering me," Naruto replied.

After a few more minutes, Hiashi decided that the spar was over. Hikari silently signaled Naruto that it was okay to speak with Hinata if he wanted to.

"Hey, Hinata, way to go!" Naruto cheered as he ran towards his best friend.

The Hyuga Heiress blushed once again. "T-Thank you, Naruto-kun!"

"Say, I was going to Ichiraku's to have some ramen. Wanna join me?"

Hinata didn't reply, and merely looked at her father. Hiashi pondered for a few seconds before revealing his answer.

"Yes. But your mother will go with you," Hiashi stated in a neutral, but commanding tone.

"Come on Hiashi, what's the worst it could-" Hikari tried to protest.

"Hikari, I'm not going to leave our eight year old daughter alone with a *boy*," Hiashi almost spat the last word. If only he knew all the times Naruto and Hinata had been alone since they met. "So either you or another adult goes with her, or she can't go."

"Alright. As you wish, dear," Hikari rolled her eyes. "Naruto-kun, wait a minute before Hinata-chan gets a quick shower and gets dressed."

...

Half an hour later, the two Hyuga girls and the Uzumaki boy were at the latter's favorite food place.

"Alright, two chicken ramen bowls for the ladies, and five miso ramen bowls for our favorite customer," Icharaku announced as he placed the orders on the counter. "Enjoy the food!"

"We will!" Naruto happily replied as he started wolfing down the food. Hikari watched him with curious eyes.

"Kid, how can you eat so much and not have an ounce of fat in your body?" the Hyuga woman asked.

"Because I burn all of it training a lot! I need to if I'm to become Hokage!" Naruto proudly proclaimed as he finished his first bowl and went to the second. "Especially now, that I'm learning elemental ninjutsu!"

"R-Really? That's amazing Naruto-kun. Because t-that kind of j-jutsus are pretty a-advanced," Hinata noted, as she slowly ate her ramen.

"Indeed. They're usually taught to Chunin, and the average age of becoming a Chunin is fifteen to sixteen. You're half that age, and not

even an academy graduate," Hikari observed.

"Yeah, that's how awesome I am!" Naruto claimed with a foxy grin as he emptied his third bowl. "Hey, what about you, Hikari-san? What is your element?"

"Actaully, the Hyuga Clan does not use traditional ninjutsu, just our own martial art, the Gentle Fist. But I believe my affinity is water. I don't know what affinity is Hinata's."

"Well, we might find it soon, since dad said it's going to talk with the Hokage so they teach elemental ninjutsu at the Academy," Naruto claimed.

"The Academy? Isn't that a bit too soon? I mean, not all the kids have the luck of having a clan or being trained by two Sannin, Naruto-kun." Hikari asked.

"I dunno, my dad said that the standards of the Academy decayed a lot since the days he and mom were Genin. By the way, did you know that they graduated when they were just six?"

"They're living legends. It's something to be expected."

"M-mother..." Hinata spoke up. "D-do y-you think I c-could learn elemental n-ninjutsu?"

Hikari shot her daughter an odd look. "Why would you want to do such a thing?"

"W-well, it's t-that I'm not that good with the G-Gentle Fist, so maybe if I c-could have s-something else to r-rely on..."

"I don't see why not. While we don't use traditional ninjutsu, it isn't banned or anything," Hikari shrugged, then she turned more serious. "Though I don't want you to neglect your Gentle Fist training. Your father and I still expect you to master it to some degree. You can learn any other kind of ninjutsu to supplement your skill repertoire if

you wish, but none of them are to be treated as the replacement of the Gentle First. Understood?"

"Y-yes mother."

Hikari smiled. "Good then. Though then again I believe that maybe traditional ninjutsu will give you less trouble, since you have such a good chakra control for somebody of your age."

"Hey, if that's the case, maybe she could also learn medical ninjutsu! Mom says that it requires a precise chakra control," Naruto commented.

"You now want to add medical ninjutsu as well? I think Hinata will have enough with elemental ninjutsu and the Gentle Fist, Naruto-kun," Hikari replied. Though given her history, Hikari couldn't help but feel a newfound respect for medical ninjutsu.

"Well, my parents say that a great ninja is a master of multiple skills. That's why besides taijutsu and ninjutsu, I'm also going to learn sealing jutsus as well. And I heard dad talking about something called 'senjutsu', which I don't know what it is. All you need is the will to do it."

"It's good to see that despite being so young, you're thinking so much about your future, Naruto-kun. That kind of hindsight is rare in kids your age."

"Besides, I also heard mom saying that she wanted to convince an Hyuga to become a medical nin, since he said something about the Byakugan being a good medical tool or something.."

"You have a point in there. But in the end, it all depends on what Hinata wants to do," Hikari noted, looking at her daughter.

"W-well, as for now... I t-think I'll l-like to t-try elemental ninjutsu f-first, and t-then maybe m-medical ninjutsu as well..." Hinata said.

"Alright! Can Hinata come to train with dad and me one of these days?" Naruto asked to Hikari.

"I don't see why not. She can go once she finishes her daily Gentle Fist practice."

"Yay! You'll see Hinata, you'll become a mistress of the elements in no time!"

...

That evening, at the Naka Shrine, almost the entire Uchiha Clan was gathering there. Only three members were missing: the disowned Uchiha. Itachi, his little brother, Sasuke -which was happily asleep on his bed, unaware of the nightmarish turn of events that were about to come- and Shisui Uchiha.

There were many crates scattered around the place. Some of them were opened, revealing its contents. Some of them had ninja tools such as kunai and shuriken. Others had flak jackets, similar to the ones wore by Chunin, except that this were black instead of green, and had the Uchiha Fan on its back instead of the Uzushioakure red swirl. Another crate had forehead protectors, only with the Uchiha Fan instead of the Konoha symbol.

Fugaku Uchiha, the Clan Head, was on top of a couple crates that served as a makeshift podium. The Uchiha stopped chatting among themselves and paid attention to what their leader was about to say.

"My brethren, it's a pleasure to see all of you gathered here, in this sacred place. Since time immemorial, the Uchiha has been one of the most powerful clans of the entire Elemental Nations. An unstoppable force matched by very few clans. Our power, however, wasn't without a price, and said price being doomed to a life of constant battle. That's why our ancestor, Madara Uchiha, choose to join the Senju Clan and founded this village. That granted us peace. But said peace, like our power, came with a price.

"Since we became part of this village, the Uchiha had always been second-rate citizens. Forced to live isolated from the rest of the village, barred from attaining positions with any real power. But, as dutiful and loyal ninja, we endured. But being accused of being behind the Nine Tails attack, that was the last straw!" Fugaku yelled. He was replied by multiple Uchiha shouting back in agreement.

"Allying with the Senju was a mistake, a mistake Madara realized, and so did we much later. But except death, there's no mistake that can't be rectified, and that's what we will be doing soon. We will take back what is ours! We will take back Konoha! The rest of the clans will bow before our might!"

Fugaku's words were met with more shouts, louder and with more enthusiasm than the first ones.

"You must be thinking that this is a suicidal endeavor. And in most circumstances, it would be. But tonight, we have a golden chance that we can't afford to pass. Somebody contacted me a couple years ago, and offered me the means to take this village for the Clan. Said person has vast resources that he had put at our disposal. Among them, he created a climate of chaos and instability across the Land of Fire, forcing the Hokage to dispatch most of his strongest Jonin to keep the peace.

"Which means that there are almost no elite ninja protecting Konoha. Between that, and the reinforcements my ally will provide me, in two days Konoha will be under our control!"

Again, more shouts and cheers. However, not everybody was convinced.

"Fugaku-sama, who is this ally you keep talking about?" asked an Uchiha

"Yeah, is he or she the leader of another village? That's where the reinforcements come from?" another Uchiha asked.

"I believe I can answer that question," a booming, disembodied voice said. All the Uchihas looked around in surprise -some even activated their Sharingan- to see where this mysterious voice came from.

Besides Fugaku, a semitransparent, swirling vortex appeared, and from said vortex emerged a figure. A man wearing a black hooded cloak with red clouds over a set of armor. His face was hidden by an orange mask with black flames on it, as well as a single hole on the right side, revealing a red eye.

"My brethren, this is the ally I've been talking about. Why don't you introduce yourself?" Fugaku asked to the mysterious newcomer.

"Of course," said the masked man. "My name is Madara Uchiha, and I came back to help you reclaim what is rightfully yours."

Author's note: Before everybody points out that Tobi didn't wear the Akatsuki cloak until Sasori's death, I decided to change that and make Tobi a member from the get go, since I think it makes more sense. Remember that this is an AU.

Second, the Hyuga guard, Tokuma, is not an OC, but a canon character. Though I'm not sure of Tokuma is Main House or Branch House, since we never got to see his forehead.

Third, Hinata's mother. I know that what little we know about her personality is that she was kind and gentle, but a lot of people seem to interpret that as "pampers Hinata a lot and can't say 'no' to anything she asks". So while she's indeed caring and gentle, I also made her a follower and an enforcer of the Hyuga traditions, at least when it comes to the Gentle Fist, and she won't let Hinata to do whatever she wants. Oh, I also edited Chapter 5 to mention her as well, in order to make the plot of Chapter 6 less out of the blue.

Well, I believe that's all.

Brace yourselves, the Uchiha Coup D'etat begins next week! In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews makes me very, very, very happy!

The Uchiha Coup D'etat, Part I

Author's note: As you can probably guess by the title, this chapter is going to be very action heavy. Hell, I think this may be the first chapter with an actual real fight, as opposed to mere spars. And I can't believe I took nine chapters and more than 50K words to include some actual action in the story.

To the chapter then. I hope you don't hate me much for what's going to happen. As usual, see you at the author's note at the bottom.

Chapter 9:

The Uchiha Coup, Part I: First Blood

or

Sharingan vs Byakugan

or

Sharingan vs Ino-Shika-Cho

It was the end of another nice, quiet and uneventful day at Konoha. The sun was starting to set, and its inhabitants got prepared for their usual evening activities.

At the Hokage's Tower, Hiruzen Sarutobi had just finished with the daily paperwork, and was now relaxing by reading a novel on one of the tower's living rooms.

Shikaku Nara, Inoichi Yamanaka and Choza Akimichi were on their favorite tavern, sharing a few drinks, reminiscing about the old days, bitching about their wives and boasting about their children.

Anko Mitarashi was at her favorite spot, Dangoya, having some sake and stuffing her mouth with her favorite food.

Iruka and Mizuki were also hanging out at a bar, with the latter trying -and failing- to flirt with a the kunoichi there, and Iruka trying to remind Mizuki in vain that he was going to marry in a few weeks.

Kurenai Yuhi was at her house, doing her laundry.

Yugao Uzuki and Hayate Gekko were on a date to celebrate the first year anniversary of their relationship.

In the Hyuga Compound, Hiashi Hyuga was revising some of the clan's paperwork regarding the clan's expenditures for the past month, while his wife played with their daughters. Meanwhile, Hizashi and Neji finished some late afternoon training at the boy's request.

On a one-room apartment near the walls, Itachi looked through the window at the village, wondering why he didn't hear any news from his friend and cousin Shisui yet, and prayed for his safety.

At the Senju Residence, Tsunade was in the living room teaching Hagane and Kaida how to play Poker, while Shizune and Naruto were in the kitchen about to prepare dinner, while Shizune told Naruto that if he got ramen for breakfast and later for lunch, he wasn't going to have ramen for dinner.

The Uchiha Compound, however, was completely empty, except for one person, Sasuke Uchiha, who was fast asleep in his bed after having a rather brutal training session with his father. Little did he knew that Fugaku wanted Sasuke to be asleep as soon as possible to keep him away from what was about to happen.

...

At the west gate of the Konoha, two Chunin were finishing their shift. One of them was big, had spiky brown hair and a broad nose. The

other was a skinny man who wore an eyepatch over his left eye, and a bandana over his head.

"The sun is setting down. So, I believe it's time to close the doors, right, Bekko?" the skinny one said.

"I guess so, thought our replacements didn't come yet, Iwana," the man named Bekko replied.

"Oh, who cares? It's not our business if they're late. Come on, let's close the gates and go to have some drinks. My throat is dry," Bekko said as he walked towards the gates, but heard no response from his partner. "Iwana?"

The big-nosed Chunin turned around to see his eyepatch-wearing partner flat on his back, lifeless. "What the hell?"

"I'm sorry, but the gates are to remain open for the rest of the night," a chilling voice said behind Bekko.

Bekko turned around, and when he did so, the man behind him slashed his throat open. The last thing the Chunin saw before expiring were a pair of red eyes, staring into his very soul.

"West Gate, secured. Send the signal," the Uchiha Chunin said to his partner.

The other Uchiha nodded, and formed several hand seals, and cast a Great Fireball into the sky. A few minutes later, hundreds of criminals, mercenaries and low-level missing-nin that were hiding among the forests of the outskirts of Konoha left their hiding place and rushed into the unsuspecting village.

It took no time for the Konoha ninja to find themselves overwhelmed while dealing with this wave of enemies that came seemingly out of nowhere.

...

Meanwhile, on a secret Root underground, Danzo walked through a hallway while being flanked by his two most loyal bodyguards, Fuu Yamanaka and Torune Aburame.

"Everything has been prepared for the surgery, Danzo-sama. The medics are already waiting for you," Fuu mentioned.

"Excellent. What about the seals?" Danzo asked.

"Already prepared as well. It will be applied immediately after the surgery. They will make sure that nobody will be able to remove the Sharingan eye from your eye socket," Torune replied.

"Good. Come on, I want to get over with this as soon as possible," Danzo said as he finally reached the door of the operating room.

"What on Earth...?"

Danzo was expecting the two Root Medic-nins to greet him and ask him to lay on the operation table so they could start. Instead, they were lying on the floor, motionless, surrounded by a pool of their own blood. On the operation table was sitting a masked man wearing a black cloak with red clouds on it. On his hand was a jar with a Sharingan eye on it.

"Oh, hey, what's up? I hope you don't mind, but I really need this eye, so I'm going to confiscate it for the time being," the masked man nonchalantly announced. "And if you do mind... well, you'll have to deal with it. That's how life rolls."

"Fuu, Torune, execute this man and retrieve the eye!" Danzo's voice was firm, but not without panic.

His two minions unseathed their tantos and charged at the masked man.

"I'd love to stay and play with you guys, but I'm kind of busy now. Places to go, people to kill, I'm sure you understand," the masked

man said, and disappeared in a swirling vortex before Danzo's bodyguards could reach him.

"Sound the alarm, he can't be too far!" Danzo shouted, now more desperate.

...

Iruka and Mizuki were fighting against a pair of nearly identical ninja, wearing gray and dark blue camouflage clothes, rebreathers, Kirigakure forehead protectors, and large bladed gauntlets on their respective dominant arms. Said gauntlets were linked by a long, spiky metal chain.

"I think I know this guys, Kirigakure's Demon Brothers. They fled their village after a failed attempt of a coup d'etat. It seems that they're trying again here," Iruka said.

"That's nice and all, but how strong they are?" Mizuki asked, a bit nervous.

"The Bingo Book list them as B-Rank Chunin, so they're similar in power to us," Iruka mentioned. "It says that their specialty are ambushes, but are mediocre in direct combat."

"Let me show you how wrong that bingo book of yours is it! Come on, Meizu!" one of them said as he and his brother charged at the duo of teachers.

Mizuki jumped in mid air, pulled out his Fuma Shuriken, and tossed it against the chain, pinning it to the ground and stopping the brother's charge. They quickly pressed a button on their gauntlets that detached the chain from them, and allowed them to fight individually.

Balded gauntlets clashed against kunai and shuriken. While the Demon Brothers' weapons were indeed dangerous and intimidating, they stopped them from performing hand seals, and thus jutsu. They

had been working on one-handed seals, but they still had a long way to go until they could use ninjutsu with just one hand.

One of the brothers left himself wide open for a second, but that was all what Iruka needed. The teacher kicked his opponent, who was pushed against his near identical brother, while Iruka made some hand seals.

"Demonic Illusion: Night Cover!"

The brothers quickly felt prey to Iruka's illusion, dropped on their knees, and soon they fell asleep. He then started to tie them with their own chain.

"Well, so much for this 'demon' brothers," Mizuki said, as he twirled a kunai on his finger.

"Mizuki, behind you!"

The white haired Chunin jumped in time to avoid a backstab from an enemy, this time an Uchiha Chunin. Iruka ran through hand seals.

"Water Release: Water gun!" Iruka shouted before releasing a powerful stream of water out of his mouth that blasted the Uchiha against a nearby wall. Mizuki finished him on by stabbing a kunai on his side.

"Why the hell the Uchiha are fighting alongside these guys? Shouldn't they be on our side?" Mizuki asked, frustrated.

"It seems that the Uchiha brought them," Iruka said, with a tinge of sadness.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I heard some rumors about the ANBU watching the Uchiha Clan because they were afraid they were doing some shady stuff. Apparently, this is what they had planned. These guys seem to be their foot soldiers."

"Great, just great. And why the hell are all the Jonin? Your pal Kakashi would be of great help here."

"Kakashi had to leave the village the last week due to a long-term mission. I don't know what are the other Jonin doing."

"Okay, in that case, this what we are going to do: so far, we don't know how this will end, so we'll find a safe place to hide there. Once the battle is over, we get out and join whoever has won."

"What? Mizuki, you can't be serious! Are you going to abandon Konoha in its time of need?" Iruka exclaimed, perplexed.

"It's the most intelligent solution! What if the Uchiha win? Being Konoha ninja, do you think they'll be nice to us and let us go back to our jobs like nothing happened? And if we side with the Uchiha and they lose, we'll be executed for treason."

"That's why we have to fight, to make sure that the Uchiha don't win!" Iruka said, staring angrily at his coworker. "Every man counts!"

"No, until things calm down, it's every man for himself," Mizuki replied as he grabbed his Fuma Shuriken and tossed it at a disbelieving Iruka.

The teacher managed to move aside before the giant shuriken would hit him... and stabbed itself on the chest of a bandit who already had a knife raised ready to stab Iruka in the back.

"That was on the house, don't expect me to save your sorry ass again," Mizuki harshly stated as he retrieved his main weapon from the corpse. "Now, be smart once in your life and find a hiding place."

With that, Mizuki leaped out of Iruka's sight. Iruka sighed, and decided that the best course of action would be to find other more alone ninja to watch each other's back.

...

Meanwhile, on his apartment, unaware of all the chaos unfolding on the village, Itachi was washing the dishes after having a light meal for dinner. He had planned to meditate for half an hour and go to bed early. The Hokage had already assigned him another A-Rank mission for the next day.

Things weren't going too bad for the Uchiha outcast. He still had a rather big debt with the bank, but he was saving up a rather large amount of money that allowed him to cover for basic needs, to pay rent and the bank each month, and still have some money that he decided to save for future emergencies.

Though maybe he could use some of that money to decorate his apartment a bit more. One of the reasons he didn't allow Sasuke to visit him yet was because he thought Sasuke wouldn't be comfortable on such gloomy place.

He was snapped from his train of thoughts when somebody loudly knocked the door.

"Coming!" Itachi said, as he dried his hands on a rug.

The person at the other side continued pounding the door as if he or she was trying to take it down. Not that it would take much effort, but Itachi preferred the door of his apartment to be intact.

"I said I'm coming! Where is the fire?" Itachi asked as he opened the door. He gasped in shock when he saw a badly beaten Shisui, covered in bruises and cuts, as well as missing his left eye.

"To answer your question... all around Konoha," Shusui said before collapsing.

"Shusui!"

Half an hour later, the weakened Shisui was lying on Itachi's bed. Itachi was no medic-nin, but he did have some first aid training as well as a medkit, so he could patch all of Shisui's wounds, including

the one from his eye, without much trouble. Fortunately for both, none of Shisui's wounds were too grave (ignoring the missing eye, that's it).

"I patched you up as best as I could, but I think it's enough. I think you may have some broken ribs and maybe a fractured arm, so it would be best if you don't move. Now tell me what is going on, and what happened to you."

Shisui sighed. "Danzo, that bastard. That's what happened," noticing Itachi's confusion, the one-eyed Uchiha decided to elaborate. "I was on my way to the Naka Shrine when I was told that Danzo wanted to speak with me. He deemed me a threat, claiming that I wanted to use the Kotoamatsukami on him and the Hokage, and tried to remove my eyes. At least, I managed to keep one eye before I lost his goons. And that's not even the worst of it."

While Itachi remained stoic on the outside, on the inside he was livid. Danzo would definitely pay for such treachery. He would make sure of it.

"The coup d'etat. It's happening as we speak," Shisui announced, and saw how Itachi lost all the color of his skin. "In fact, I have been attacked by Konoha ninja on my way here. And before you ask, yes I managed to lose them before I got here."

"This happened because of me," Itachi thought. "I chose the easy way out instead of staying and trying to make things better. I shouldn't have listened to Shizune-san... not, Shizune-san is not to blame. She wasn't aware of the context of my situation when she offered her advice. I'm the only one to blame. And thus, I'm the only one who has to, and can, fix this mistake."

"Itachi?" Shisui asked, yanking the younger Uchiha out of his thoughts. "What are we going to do?"

"We?"

"Yes, we. Did you expect that I was going to stay here while our clan burns Konoha to the ground?"

"No, there is no 'we', Shisui. You're going to stay here, and rest. I'll take care of everything."

Itachi opened his closet, and started to get dressed with his ninja gear.

"You can't leave me here! Danzo still wants my Sharingan, and I'm in no condition to defend myself! Come on, at least take my eye!"

Itachi's hand quickly grabbed Shisui's before he could pluck his remaining eye from its socket.

"That eye is okay where it is now. I will be fine, and so will you. Now lie down and rest, or else your wounds will open."

"You can't be serious. Are you planning to go there alone? You have no friends or allies out there! The Konoha ninja will try to kill you the moment they see your Sharingan!"

"That won't be an obstacle. I promise that nobody will die needlessly, especially not me," Itachi assured as he put on his Chunin Flak Jacket. "I'll place a multi-layered genjutsu on this place in case somebody gets lucky and track you here. If you're not on this bed when I return and you haven't been killed or taken prisoner by the enemy, I will kill you myself."

"You can't be serious."

"I will toss you down a cliff, How does that sound?"

"Meh, there are far worse ways to die."

"Well, that's all, I'm leaving. But don't worry, I'll send somebody I trust to watch over you. I don't know when I'll be back, but if I'm never back... take care of Sasuke for me," Itachi grimly asked.

"You don't need to tell me that. But just in case, try to come back alive. I have no idea of what to do with children."

Itachi chuckled at Shisui one last time, and left through a window.

...

Hiashi Hyuga was having dinner with his wife and daughters. It was a moment he enjoyed the most, since it was one of the few rare opportunities where he could spend some time with his whole family, not counting his brother. Sure, he spend a lot of time training his daughters, but contrary to the popular belief, Hiashi Hyuga also enjoyed the rare moments he had to relax. After all, being a Clan head was a rather demanding and thankless job.

"So, how was your first day of training with Uzumaki-san and Jiraiya-sama, Hinata?" Hiashi asked without taking his eyes from his dinner.

"V-very good, father," Hinata sotfly replied. "M-my affinity is l-lightning. Though l-l have to complete a f-few chakra c-control excercises b-before I learn a-any new jutsu," Hinata explained.

"Lightining. Interesting. I heard it's a good element to use in conjunction with bladed weapons. Too bad we don't use those," Hikari casually commented.

"Maybe I c-could use lightining w-with the Gentle Fist?" Hinata meekly suggested.

"Combine the Gentle Fist with Elemental Ninjutsu? That's unheard of!" Hiashi exclaimed.

"I think it's a rather sound idea. It would give our techniques another layer of power," Hikari sharply replied..

"Still, Hinata should master the actual Gentle First first before thinking in doing modifications," Hiashi countered.

Suddenly, a Branch House Hyuga barged in the dinning room, panting.

"Hiashi-sama! You need to come with us, it's a disaster!"

Hiashi tensed, and jumped on his feet. "What's going on?"

"The Uchiha are leading an insurrection against the village!"

Hikari gasped in horror. Hinata didn't fully understand what those words mean, but she knew it wasn't anything good.

"And that's not all. There are dozens of Uchiha outside the compound. They're demanding for you to come out and face them."

"Alright, let's go. Hikari, stay here and take care of the girls. I will see what this nonsense is about."

...

Ten minutes later, Hiashi arrived at the front patio of the compound, where many Hyugas, both Main and Branch house, were already on a fighting stance, ready to engage the invading Uchiha and their mercenary allies. Among them were his brother, Hizashi.

"I am Hiashi Hyuga, Head of the Hyuga Main House. What is the meaning of this?" Hiashi demanded.

Just like the Branch House member said, there were a multitude of Uchihis present. Among them, a masked man in a black cloak with red clouds stood out. Apparently, he wasn't the leader, as another Uchiha, a tall, well built man, with a buzzcut, close to Hiashi's age took a few step forwards. Hiashi guessed he was a Jonin.

"Hiashi Hyuga, both you and your entire clan have been deemed as a threat to Konoha. You will have to come with us. If you resist arrest, we will use lethal force."

"I'm sure both me and my clansmen will come peacefully if you show us an arrest order with the stamp of the Hokage's office and the Hokage's signature," Hiashi replied back.

"The Hokage no longer rules over Konoha. The Military Police is the village's highest authority now. Now, tell your clansmen to surrender. This is my last warning," the Uchiha Jonin said.

"Now you hear my warning, Uchiha. This ground under your feet belongs to the Hyuga Clan. If you and your treacherous clansmen aren't out of our property in less than ten seconds, you will be escorted out of here inside a coffin."

"I'm going to take that as an hostile response. Everybody, attack!"

Multiple Uchiha flied through hand seals. Others grabbed some shurikens from their tool pouches.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A barrage of fireballs of multiple sizes and shurikens flied towards the Hyuuga, still standing their ground. Though if the Uchiha thought that they could take them down with ranged attacks, they had another thing coming.

"Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm Wall!" shouted many Hyuga as they thrust their palms forward, releasing multiple vacuum blasts that stopped some of the incoming fireballs.

"Eight Trigrams: Heavenly Spin!" other Hyuga shouted while they turned into blue chakra twisters that deflected the remaining fireballs.

While the Hyuga were defending, half of the Uchiha and their criminal allies decided to charge forward.

"Crimson Squad and Blood Squad, stay here and secure the patio! Storm Squad and Tempest Squad, get in the compound and kill

everybody who puts up a fight!" the Uchiha Jonin ordered.

"Yes, Nakamura-taicho!" multiple Uchiha replied in unison, as half of the Uchiha there abandoned the patio and got into the compound.

However, Hiashi had hear those orders as well, and he wasn't going to have any of that. Thanks to his Byakugan, he spotted his brother in no time, and leaped at him the moment he stopped the heart of an Uchiha Chunin with a well placed palm strike.

"Hizashi! I need you to go inside and protect Hikari and the kids!" Hiashi shouted.

"We're in the middle of a battle right now, and I won't leave your side, it's my duty!" the younger twin replied.

"Your duty is to obey me!And if you need cover, I will provide you some! Now go!" Hiashi said as he engaged two Uchiha, a Jonin and a Chunin.

Shooting one last glance at his elder brother and Clan Head, Hizashi nodded and rushed back to the complex.

...

"Shikaku Nara, Inoichi Yamanaka, Choza Akimichi. You three have been declared a threat to the village, and will have to come with us. If you resist arrest, we will use lethal force," Mikoto Uchiha announced.

Shikaku looked around him. Half a dozen Uchihas, lead by the wife of the Clan Head, surrounded both him and his two closest friends just after dispatching a bunch of mercenaries that were looting a store.

"Is this some kind of joke, Mikoto-san?" Shikaku asked. "Because if it is, let me tell you is a very tasteless one."

"Yeah, you're the police, shouldn't you be dealing with these rats that are infesting the village all of sudden?" Choza asked.

"Choza... I believe it was the Uchiha who brought these rats. I didn't see any of these criminal scum attacking any Uchiha," Inoichi commented.

"Well, what is your answer?" Mikoto asked.

Shikaku sighed dramatically. "This is going to be such a drag..." then in an instant, his hands formed a seal. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Multiple black tendrils shoot from Shikaku's shadow and flied towards the Uchiha, who jumped in time before being caught. While on air, Mikoto's hands ran through hand seals as well.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

The Uchiha Clan Head's wife breathed a huge fireball at the Nara Clan Head, who was forced to move and cancel his jutsu.

"Separate them from each other! Not only are they Jonin, their teamwork is downright legendary!" Mikoto ordered.

"Yes, Mikoto-sama!" the other Uchiha replied.

"They outnumber us two to one. Inoichi, can you do something about that?" Shikaku asked.

"On it!" Inoichi said as he formed a hand seal that formed a rectangle of negative space between them. "Mind Body Disturbance Jutsu!"

The two Uchihis that were about to attack him were stopped in his tracks, realizing that they no longer controlled their bodies. Much to their horror, they started to stab each other repeatedly.

"Good work! Now is my turn!" Choza said, making a hand seal.

"Multi-size Jutsu!" Choza's body inflated into a large balloon.

"Human Boulder!"

Choza crushed the two Uchiha still fighting each other, while the other four managed to avoid the same painful fate. Mikoto didn't waste time and pulled out a radio.

"This is Mikoto Uchiha requesting for reinforcements to deal with a trio of Jonin-level insurgents! We're on Matabi Street! Over!"

"Insurgents? We're not the ones trying to take over Konoha, thank you," Shikaku said as he activated his Shadow Imitation Jutsu again.

In no time, a couple Uchiha Chunin leading a group of mercenaries joined the fray.

"More people? What a drag," Shikaku moaned. "Choza, can you take care of the rabble?"

"You can count on that! Multi-size Jutsu!" Choza's size increased several times, and used his also enlarged bo staff to wipe the mercenaries and Uchihas as if he was cleaning the floor. Still, it proved to be a harder task than expected, since his foes were quicker than they thought, and his increased size made a perfect target for the Uchiha's fireballs and shurikens.

"That should keep them busy while Inoichi and I will deal with the red-eyed pests."

"Watch out who you call pest, Nara!" An Uchiha shouted as he leaped at him, which proved to be a mistake, since he put Shikaku in the perfect position of binding him with his shadow.

"Thanks for your helpful assistance, Uchiha-san. Now die," Shikaku said as he made a hand sign.

An arm emerged from the Uchiha's shadow, which reached his neck, and strangled the unlucky Uchiha to death.

Meanwhile, Inoichi was about to take control of another Uchiha's body when he felt several chakra signatures getting closer. "Shikaku, more enemies incoming!" Inoichi warned

"Where do they come from?" Shikaku said as he tried to nail the remaining enemies with his Shadow Imitation.

"Five O'clock! Watch out for the roofs!"

"Choza, did you hear that?"

"Yes! I see them now!" the giant Akimichi said as he moved to intercept them.

"I'll see if I can take Mikoto down, she's the leader of this squad!" Inoichi announced, making the same hand seal again, pointing at two Uchiha that were fighting Shikaku. "Mind Body Disturbance Jutsu!"

Once again, those two Uchiha stopped in their tracks, stopped attacking Shikaku and lunged at a growling Mikoto, who did her best to keep them at bait without killing or hurting them much.

"Shikaku, now!"

Thanks to the distraction provided by Inoichi, the Nara patriarch managed to capture Mikoto with his shadow.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu, success. Again." Shikaku said with a slight smile. Though said smile vanished when he saw that Mikoto was also smiling at him.

"In your dreams," the Uchiha kunoichi retorted before disappearing in a cloud of smoke, leaving a trash can in her place.

"Inoichi, track her, now!" Shikaku frantically barked.

The Yamanaka Clan Head nodded and made a hand sign. He managed to find Mikoto in no time. Who happened to be just behind

him. Inoichi tried to turn around, but not before Mikoto stabbed him in the back with a kunai. She then kicked him into the ground and jumped backwards a few meters.

"AAARGH!" Inoichi instinctively threw his hands at his back, trying to remove the kunai.

"Inoichi!" Shikaku yelled.

"I'm okay, it's only a superficial cut, the jacket protected me somehow. Try to remove the kunai if you can."

Mikoto's lips formed a chilling smile. Shikaku paled. Unbeknownst to Inoichi, while the kunai only made a flesh wound on his back, there was an explosive tag attached to the bladed weapon. The Uchiha Matriarch made hand sign, which was followed by an explosion, and Inoichi Yamanaka was no more.

For a second, time seemed to stop for Shikaku and Choza as they saw their mutual best friend, longtime partner and trusted teammate being blown up. When the dust settled, all that was left was his charred, immobile corpse.

"This is the fate of those who oppose the new rulers of Konoha. I'll be forgiving and will give you a chance to surrender. If you do not surrender, you will follow the same fate as your friend," Mikoto shouted, adopting now a cold, neutral tone.

Choza let out a deafening shout, and started to stomp wildly around him, in an attempt to crush the nearby enemy ninja, not caring of the buildings he could potentially bring down.

Shikaku, on the other hand, only shot at Mikoto a chilling, murderous glare, while remained there, immobile.

"That was a mistake," was all what Shikaku said.

Mikoto didn't say anything, just frowned, and motioned her hand at him. Multiple Uchiha and mercenaries leaped towards the Nara clan head from multiple directions, weapons raised in air ready to kill him. But Shikaku wouldn't have any of that. Making a quick hand seal, multiple shadow tendrils shot from his shadow, instantly catching his attackers, pinning him in one place. With another hand seal, other shadow tendrils appeared, except that these ones were material, took the shape of spikes, and impaled the paralyzed ninja. The shadows then retreated, and the enemy ninja fell to the ground, motionless.

"You're next. Shadow Gathering Jutsu!"

More shadow tendrils shot from Shikaku's shadow, these also being material, and flew at Mikoto. While far from her prime, the Uchiha kunoichi did an admirable effort dodging them so far by constantly running or jumping to the sides. She then leaped into the air and made several hand signs before grabbing some shuriken from her pouch.

"Fire Release: Flaming Shuriken Barrage!"

The ninja stars immediately caught on fire the moment Mikoto tossed them. Shikaku gasped, canceled his jutsu, and tried to get out of the way, but he was too slow. The burning shuriken pierced his flak jacket, and embedded themselves into the Nara's flesh.

"Another one down!" Mikoto cheered. But her cheer was short lived as Shikaku disappeared in a cloud of smoke. "What? A shadow clone?"

Mikoto tried to look around for the real Shikaku, but then realized that she couldn't move. From the corner of her eyes, she could see that a shadow tendril had caught her shadow. Shikaku jumped down from the nearby roof he was on.

"A Shadow Clone... when did you make it? I didn't take my eyes from you this whole time!" Mikoto would have stomped his foot on anger if he was able to move.

"Certainly, you didn't. The Sharigan is rather hard to fool... but 'hard' does not equal 'impossible'. To answer your question, I used the explosion that killed Inoichi as a cover."

"What? But... how...?"

"The moment I saw that explosive tag I already knew that Inoichi was dead. All that was left for me to do was to avenge him, and devised a plan in order to make you let your guard down. And now... all that was left is for you to pay. Shadow Neck Binding Jutsu!"

Mikoto saw a black hand creeping through her body until it reached her neck, and in less than a minute her world turned into darkness.

...

After retrieving Neji, Hizashi found Hikari, Hinata and Hanabi in the dinning room, just where his brother said they would be. After telling them what was going on, he began to lead them to the one of the compound's emergency exits. When Hizashi saw many Hyuga fighting the Uchiha invaders -and in most cases, losing against them- he felt the urge to help them, but felt compelled to ignore them and follow Hiashi's instructions instead.

"What are we going to do once we get out of here, father?" Neji asked.

"We will try to find some help. Do not fear, Neji, everything will be fine."

Unfortunately for the Hyugas, two Uchihas, a Jonin and a Chunin, blocked their path.

"All members of Hyuga clan are under arrest! If you resist we will use lethal force!" the Uchiha Jonin echoed his commander's words.

"Would you dare to hurt children, you monster?" Hikari spat at him as she clutched Hanabi in her arms.

"There's no need to hurt anybody if you come peacefully," the Uchiha Chunin interceded.

Hizashi said nothing and sprung to action. Taking advantage of the Chunin momentary lack of focus, he managed to land a palm strike on his chest, knocking him backwards. The Jonin immediately reacted and unsheathed a katana and attempted to slice him.

Hizashi bended backwards just in time, and the Uchiha's katana only sliced some of his hair. The Uchiha Chunin managed to get back on his feet, and was going through several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!" he shouted, casting multiple fireballs at Hizashi.

Just as fast, Hikari, who no longer had Hanabi on her arms, jumped in front of Hizashi and she started to spin.

"Heavenly Spin!" she shouted, turning herself into a spinning dome of chakra, deflecting the fireballs. "Don't you dare to ignore me! I may be retired, but I used to be a Jonin!"

"Thank you, Hikari-sama. Let me repay your kind act by finishing this fight. Eight Trigrams, Thirty Two Palms!" Hizashi shouted as he delivered a quick succession of palm strikes at the two Uchis. "Two strikes! Four strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! THIRTY TWO STRIKES!"

Unable to stop the barrage of Gentle Fist strikes, the Uchis fell to the ground, prey of sudden chakra exhaustion. While that attack was nowhere near enough to kill them, or even close all their chakra points, it was enough to put them out of commission long enough for the group of five Hyugas to escape the compound safely.

"Mother, where is father? Isn't he going to come with us?" Hinata asked.

"Your father is fighting the Uchihas who attacked our home. Don't worry dear, he's strong, he will be fine," Hikari said in a reassuring tone.

As they ran away, Hizashi looked at the compound, which had several parts of it on fire, one last time, and wondered if Hiashi could escape alive and meet them again.

...

Back in the patio, the battle had finally died down. The place was littered with corpses, both Uchiha, missing-nin and Hyuga alike. Only two men were standing, Hiashi and Ko Hyuga. Both of them had some minor injuries and were exhausted, but they could stand on their own. The Hyuga patriarch looked around, and had to repress the urge to throw up. The sight of so many dead Hyugas sickened him to the core. Not even fighting in the Third War shook him so much.

"Hiashi-sama, are you alright?" Ko asked as he limped to him.

Hiashi tried to regain his composure. "Yes, Ko. Come on, let's get inside, I can hear fights still going on. We need to save as many clansmen as possible."

Hiashi then heard a sickening noise coming from Ko.

"AGRK!" Ko suddenly grunted, blood coming out of his mouth. He looked down, and saw a sword protruding from his chest. Ko fell to the ground, revealing his murderer, the masked man of the black cloak.

"Yes, Hiashi. Go and save your clan. What's left of it, at least," the masked man mocked, as he removed his sword from Ko and kicked his corpse aside. "But I don't know how can you do that if you can't save yourself first."

Hiashi didn't say anything, and slipped into the Gentle Fist stance. "You will pay for that, murderer. We both had the Byakugan activated. How did you managed to ambush Ko like that?"

"Well, I could tell you, but if I did I'd lose one of my main advantages, and that would be pretty detrimental, don't you think?" the masked man replied in the same tone, as he sheathed his katana. Hiashi tensed when he saw his enemy flying through hand seals. "Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

"What!?" Hiashi was shocked, though his battle instinct compelled him to jump backwards, trying to avoid the emerging sharp tree roots trying to impale him. Through his Byakugan, he saw that more roots were emerging, surrounding him. "Heavenly Spin!" Hiashi turned into a spinning blue dome that shattered the roots the moment they tried to grab him.

"Not bad, definitely not bad. How about this then?" the masked man commented, doing hand seals again. "Multiple Great Fireballs Jutsu!"

The masked man shot a successions of large fireballs at Hiashi. The Hyuga clan head dodged some, and blocked others with the Vacuum Palm, all while he dashed towards his foe, who remained in the same place, making no attempt to moving.

"Impressive! Guess that you guys don't exaggerate that much when you boast about your power!"

"If you thought that was impressive, wait until you see this," Hiashi slipped into the Gentle Fist stance again. "The battle is over, you're within my divination field. Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Palms!" The Hyuga Clan head lunged at the masked man. "Two strikes!" But much to his bewilderment, his hands phased through the masked Uchiha's body harmlessly. "Four strikes!" The result was the same.

"Well, I'm afraid to say that that wasn't very impressive," the masked man said as he let out a yawn.

"What is this trickery? A genjutsu? Of course, it has to be. There's no way you can use the Wood Release!"

"A genjutsu, you say? Good guess. But If I'm a Genjutsu, try to explain this!"

Suddenly, at an almost imperceptible speed, the masked man unsheathed his katana again and buried it inside Hiashi's chest.

"Does this feel like a genjutsu, *Hiashi-sama* ?" The masked man pushed his sword deeper. He then pulled his sword out and kicked Hiashi's corpse back into the ground. After cleaning the blood from his weapon on Hiashi's robes, he sheathed his sword again, and pulled out an scalpel. "Oh my, Hiashi, what a beautiful eyes you have! I hope you don't mind if I borrow them!" Then, he looked around, and noticed all the dead Hyugas around him, many of them who were Main House. "Oh what the hell, I'll take all of them! You don't see a chance like this every day."

The masked man started to hum a cheery melody as he began to harvest Byakugans from the dead Hyugas.

" *Jitensha! Jitensha! Jitensha! Koide! Koide! Koide kuru yo... !*"

...

Meanwhile, at the Hokage's tower, Sarutobi was unaware of all the chaos and destruction that was unfolding on the village he ruled. He was happily reading a novel on one of the tower's living rooms when one of the night shift ANBUs barged inside the room, a man who wore the mask of a tiger

"Hokage-sama! It's a catastrophe!" the ANBU shouted, panicked. "The Uchiha Clan is trying to take over the village!"

Sarutobi slammed the book shut, and turned at the ANBU with a shocked expression. "What? When did this happen?"

"We don't know, Hokage-sama, but we believe it was at sunset. They have an army of criminals and mercenaries backing them up."

"What is the situation now?"

"The Uchihas and their allies have taken over the Torture and Interrogation Headquarter, the Hyuga Clan Compound, the hospital, the aviary, and some compounds from minor clans. They're currently trying to take the Jonin Standby Station and the Academy. And we spotted an eight man team lead by Fugaku Uchiha himself heading here, probably to take over the tower and assassinate you."

Sarutobi was trying his best to process the gravity of the situation. What happened to Shisui Uchiha? Did the other Uchiha see through his ploy? There has to be the only logical explanation. However, there was no time to ponder what had gone wrong, but to remedy the problem at hand. He had to act now to prevent the number of deaths from growing.

"I want you and all the ANBU of the tower to go and liberate the hospital, that's your number one priority. Then, I want you to protect the civilians from being attacked. I will stay here and will try to make Fugaku-san to see reason."

"But Hokage-sama, we can't leave you unprotected in a time like this!" the ANBU protested.

"Are you questioning my orders!?" the old Hokage shouted, making the ANBU to flinch at the unusual display of anger.

"Of course not, Hokage-sama. I'll tell the others your orders. Good luck..." the ANBU said before disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

Once alone, Sarutobi calmly headed towards his office, grabbed a pencil, a blank scroll, and started writing. Once he was done, he sealed the scroll, and making some hand seals, the scroll disappeared in a poof of smoke.

Then, he lit his pipe, and took a puff on it. "So, this is how it ends... why, despite living for so long, I still feel that I haven't done enough?" he wondered aloud, as he took another puff on his pipe. He saw a picture of him, his late wife and his two sons, who were still teenagers at the time. The old Hokage allowed a smile to appear on his face. "On the good side, it seems that we will see each other soon, Biwako-chan..."

...

Meanwhile, on the roof of his apartment building, Itachi contemplated the village before him. Buildings on fire shone brightly against the night sky. Screams, shouts and explosions filled the usually silent night atmosphere. He didn't need to look far in order to see Uchihas, criminals and mercenaries engaged in a fight against Konoha ninja.

The Uchiha outcast bit his thumb, and made five hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke emerged a large crow, twice as tall as Itachi. The giant bird stared at the former Uchiha with curious eyes.

"Good evening, Itachi-san. It's nice to see you again. You look distressed. Is there something wrong?"

"Good night to you as well, Kurokaze-sama. And yes, there's something going wrong. Very wrong. What I have been fearing has finally happened. The Uchiha are trying to take Konoha by force."

The Boss Crow turned around, and saw at the battles that took place at the very bottom of the building he and Itachi were.

"I see," the crow said in a grave tone. "How can I be of assistance?"

"I need you to oversee Konoha from the sky, and track all the larger groups of Uchiha. Focus mostly on those who appear to have the upper hand in their fights. Leave the weaker ones for later."

"Consider it done, Itachi-san," Kurokaze divided himself into a much smaller crows that spread above the village, and one of them placed itself on Itachi's shoulder.

"I'd appreciate as well if you used two of your clones to watch over my friend Shisui Uchiha, who's in my home, and my brother Sasuke, who's probably asleep back in the Uchiha Compound," Itachi added.

Checking his equipment one more time, Itachi unsheathed his katana and leaped towards the battle at the bottom of the building, cutting an Uchiha down upon landing. Doing so, he already choose a side, and knew that there was no going back on that. Not that he cared, since Itachi considered himself a Konoha Ninja first and an Uchiha second. And he would protect the village and his inhabitants at all costs, even if that would mean fighting his family. He needed to stop the coup d'etat as soon as possible, and there was only one thing that would stop the ongoing madness.

A massacre.

Author's note: Some people pointed out that Jiraiya and Tsunade's presence caused nothing but a positive effect on the story, with some characters who died in the manga, such as Hizashi or Yashamaru, surviving here, but without any kind of exchange. Well, this is the exchange. And this is just the beginning. I want the coup d'etat to have an impact on Konoha way bigger than Orochimaru's invasion during the Chunin Exams. And as you will see in the following chapters, I'm not talking about just some characters dying.

Another thing I want to point out: in the anime, when Danzo stole Shisui's eye, he merely put it inside his empty eye socket, just like that. I found that scene beyond ridiculous, even for this series (yes, I'm aware that something similar happened in the manga, that doesn't stop them from looking ridiculous in my eyes as well) . So in my story nobody is going to get organ

transplants of any kind without a medic to realize some sort of procedure.

By the way, Iwana and Bekko aren't OCs. They appear in the first chapter/episode of the manga/anime, but never reappear again after that. Their only bit of characterization is that they dislike Naruto. And thus, they were perfect to be killed off and show that yeah, people are going to die here. So thank you, Iwana and Bekko, thanks to your sacrifice, you saved me the trouble of creating a pair of OCs just to get them killed.

Anyway, I hope you liked the beginning of the story's first big event, which will continue (but won't conclude yet) in "Part II: Demons", next week. In the meantime, leave a review! reviews make me very, very, very happy!

The Uchiha Coup D'etat, Part II

Author's note:... yeah. As expected, the reaction to the sudden tone shift from the last chapter was as expected. Though not as bad as I feared. Anyway, here is the second part, which thankfully won't be as jarring to read given that it continues where the previous chapter left (more or less). See you at the ending notes. Enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 10:

The Uchiha Coup, Part II: Demons

or

Sharingan vs Sannin

Anko Mitarashi whistled cheerfully as she retrieved her kunai from the corpses of the two Kumo missing-nin she had just killed. They had boasted about all the atrocious crimes they had committed before, and how they were going to bring down Konoha alongside the Uchihas, but in the end, what the Snake Lady was hoping to be a challenging fight was anything but.

Oh well, it was a good warm up.

Once she was done, Anko jumped at the roof of a one-story building, and took a look at the battles that she could see from that vantage point. She cursed upon seeing that none of them involved Uchihas. Since he heard so many people getting all hysteric about the Uchihas revolting, how is that she had never run into at least one yet?

Anko always wanted to measure her skills against an Uchiha, and now it was the best chance she got. Besides, if she defeated plenty

of those red-eyed freaks, maybe she could secure the promotion she wanted so much.

Suddenly, something caught her attention. At one of the edges of the Naka Bridge, a single man with a massive sword was fighting three Konoha ninja, who were unable to land a hit on him. They finally gave up, and fled, but the man remained in the bridge for some reason. He didn't appear to be an Uchiha, but maybe he would provide a better challenge than those no-name criminals she had been dealing with for the past hour.

Jumping through the rooftops, Anko quickly arrived at the bridge, and landed in front of the man, who stared at her with indifference.

The man was tall, with a muscular build, spiky short black hair, and no eyebrows. The lower half of his face was covered by a mask, similar to Kakashi's. There was a Kirigakure forehead protector on his head, and he was wielding an impossibly big sword. Said man's imposing appearance, combined the amount of killing intent he was projecting would make most people tremble in terror, but that only made Anko more giddy.

"Hey there, tall dark, and handsome! Do you mind if I make you come company?" Anko asked with a foxy grin as she walked towards him.

"Do as you wish. But if you get close to this bridge, you will be dead," the ninja swordsman replied, slamming his word on the ground for a more dramatic effect. Anko, however, didn't flinch.

"How so?"

"The Uchihases tasked me with protecting this bridge. Nobody with a Konoha forehead protector shall pass."

"Ah, yes, the Uchihases. I've been trying to look for one, but I had no luck. Maybe you and your overcompensating sword can provide me some challenge!" Anko said as she dashed at him.

The Kiri ninja raised his sword. "Let's see if you last longer than the other fools who dared to fight me!"

Anko tried to strike the Kiri ninja with her kunai, but all her hits were parried by the man's massive sword. She leaped backwards and tossed several kunai at him, but they were also parried. Fortunately, Anko had something that couldn't be parried by normal means. She quickly formed several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!" Anko breathed a massive stream of fire shaped like a dragon.

"And unwise move," the Kiri ninja calmly said as he formed hand seals as well. "Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet Jutsu!"

The water from the river started to rise in the shape of a twisting pillar. Said pillar took the form of a dragon, and after letting out a roar, charged forwards. Both elemental dragons clashed against each other, but the water dragon easily overpowered Anko's fire dragon, and the purple haired kunoichi was hurled against a wall by the massive water construct.

"Ughh..." Anko groaned, spitting water while trying to stand up. Much to her horror, she saw the swordsman already in mid air, ready to cut her down with that massive sword.

"Die," the masked swordsman stated, and his sword came down.

Fortunately for Anko, the gigantic sword didn't hit her, but another kunai instead, being held by a black haired kunoichi. Taking advantage of the kiri ninja's sudden surprise, the kunoichi managed to kick him back, while she landed on her feet besides Anko.

"Anko! Are you alright?"

"Yeah, thanks, Kurenai," Anko said as she got back on her feet.

"Thanks Kami you recognized me. I have lost count of all the times I have been attacked by Konoha ninjas that mistook me for an Uchiha!" Kurenai complained.

"Well, those red eyes of your kind look like Sharingan," Anko, noted, making Kurenai to frown. "Don't give me that look! I'm just stating the facts."

"Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"I thought I could take this guy alone, but I bit more than I could chew."

"Anko, do you know who is this man?" Kurenai asked. Anko guessed by her tone that it was a rhetoric question. "This is Zabuzza Momochi, a missing-nin from Kirigakure, and one of the infamous Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. He attempted a coup d'etat against the Mizukage, but failed. Of course he would be part of another coup."

"I see that you made your homework," Zabuzza appeared to be flattered by Kurenai's knowledge of him. "And yes, guess that I can't help but sympathize with fellow revolutionaries trying to bring down a corrupt government. But then again, the obscene amount of money the Uchihas paid me is a big incentive as well."

"Be careful Anko, this guy is a Jonin, and a strong one might I add. Plus he isn't randomly attacking civilians or looting stores like other mercenaries the Uchiha hired. They placed him to guard an access to the part of the village where the Hokage Tower is. Then there's all the water around us that he can use to fuel his jutsus."

"Well, he certainly is as tough as he looks. Too bad your boyfriend isn't here, we could use a Jonin right now."

Kurenai suddenly turned red. "What are you saying? Asuma is not my boyfriend!"

"I never mentioned Asuma by name, did I?" Anko asked with a sly grin, making Kurenai to blush even harder. "But that's okay, because do you know what does this mean?" Anko asked. The raven-haired kunoichi looked at her, dumbfounded. "If we beat this guy, we may become Jonin ourselves!"

"Anko... the village is suffering one of its worst debacles since the Nine Tails, and you're thinking in *promotions*?" Kurenai asked in disbelief.

Anko shrugged. "Eh, I'm an optimist person. Besides, Konoha survived the Kyubi attack. This is nothing in comparison."

"True, but back then we had the Yellow Flash."

"In that case, we'll have to fight extra hard to make up for it!" Anko said as he adopted a fighting stance. Kurenai soon followed.

"So, you're going to fight me then," Zabuza stated, as he eyed her opponents. "I don't think you appear on my bingo book. I'm going to guess that you're both Chunin, B-Rank at the most. I shouldn't have any problems killing you, even if it's one on two. But then again," Zabuza said menacingly as he formed a hand seal with one hand. "Why should I take the risk? Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

Four blobs of water jumped from the river into the ground, and they took the shape of four Zabuzas, gigantic sword included.

"Now that's much better," Zabuza smiled under his mask. "Shall we begin?"

The four clones charged forwards, two dashing towards Anko and the other two towards Kurenai. The red-eyed woman guessed that the clones were just a distraction to keep them busy so the infamous swordsman could kill them from behind. Not if she had something to say about it. The black haired kunoichi flied through hand seals, pulled two kunai, and fended off her attackers.

As Zabuza watched the battle, he saw that the Kurenai was having the most trouble dealing with his clones. She'll be his first victim then. Making a hand seal, he used the Body Flicker to appear behind her, and run his Executioner Blade through her body.

"Kurenai!" Anko cried as she continued fighting the water clones.

"One down, another one to-huh?" Zabuza mentioned as he realized that the wound on Kurenai didn't leak any blood. Suddenly, multiple snakes burst from Kurenai's wound and wrapped tightly around Zabuza. "What the hell is this...? Of course, an accursed genjutsu!"

Fighting the snakes off, Zabuza managed to bring his hands together and make a hand seal. "Release!"

And after a burst of chakra, everything went back to normal. Zabuza hadn't moved from his original spot, but his clones were gone and his two female opponents were flanking him, each holding a kunai flying at his chest. In the last second, Zabuza managed to grab and stop both arms before being gutted alive. However, that left him unable to defend himself from Anko and Kurenai's kicks, which hurled him backwards.

"Ha! That got him good!" Anko cheered.

"Too bad he saw through my genjutsu. Two seconds later, and he would be dead," Kurenai observed.

Zabuza was started to get angry. How these two nobodies dared to make fun of him! His hands furiously flitted through hand seals.

"I've wasted enough time with you two! Water Release: Great Crushing Wave!"

A gigantic wall of water rose from the river, and streamed down right on the terrified kunoichi, loudly crashing on the ground, crushing the two women under tons of water. While Zabuza was sure that attack

was enough to kill them, he swore that he heard a voice saying "Summoning jutsu!"

And just like the water receded back into the river, he saw a giant snake coiled around something. The snake uncoiled itself, revealing Anko and Kurenai, completely wet but not particularly harmed.

"Snakes... tell me, is any of you related to Orochimaru of the Sannin?" the missing-nin from Kiri asked.

Anko's happy and battle-eager expression morphed into a mask of fury. "Don't even dare to mention that name in my presence!"

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "I guess I hit a nerve, didn't I?"

The snake appeared to react to Anko's anger, and lunged at Zabuza, its jaws wide open. Zabuza leaped at the snake as well, raising his Executioner's Blade. The fight was short lived, as Zabuza quickly delivered an horizontal chop, and the snake vanished in a poor of smoke. Kurenai ran through hand signs once more.

"Demonic Illusion: World of Decay!"

The moment Zabuza landed, he found he couldn't move his legs. Much to his horror, they were starting to melt as if they were an ice cream on a really warm day. After immediately realizing that he fell into another genjutsu, he made a hand seal before his hands would melt as well. "Release!"

After quickly disturbing his chakra network, everything turned back to normal, and this time Anko and Kurenai were in front of him ready to attack him. He was completely sure they weren't part of a genjutsu. So why they didn't attack him while he was under Kurenai's genjutsu? The answer came in the form of killing intent coming from behind him.

Zabuza quickly turned around and raised his sword, blocking the two katana strikes that would have sliced his back had he not reacted in

time. The wielders of those katanas were a brown haired man with a bandana on his head wearing the typical Konoha Chunin uniform, and a purple haired woman wearing ANBU gear, minus the mask.

After parrying the attack, Zabuza pushed them back.

"Hey look, the lovebirds decided to join the party!" Anko noted, as he waved at them. "Hey Yugao, Hayate, how was your anniversary date?"

"Well, let's say that it was different from what I had in mind," Yugao bitterly answered. "We had to go home and get changed since there's no way I could fight wearing a night dress."

"Isn't this guy Zabuza, the Demon of the Hidden Mist?" Hayate asked between coughs.

"Yeah, he's part of the Uchiha's mercenaries. Care to help us?" Kurenai asked.

Hayate and Yugao both raised their katanas. "Sure, between the four of us shouldn't be a problem," the former noted.

"Do not mistake quantity with quality, twerp. Just like how ten stupid men won't sum a smart man, ten weaklings won't sum a strong warrior. You are all below me!" Zabuza claimed in a grandiose manner.

"If you're so strong, why haven't you killed us yet? Kurenai and I have been fighting you for quite some time and here we are. The odds are even greater in our favor than before. Do everybody a favor and surrender already," Anko said.

"The Demon of the Hidden Mist NEVER surrenders!" Zabuza yelled while making a hand seal. "Let's see what good your superior numbers are against this! Hidden Mist Jutsu!"

Suddenly, a very thick mist covered the battlefield. Kurenai panicked. This was Zabuza's favorite tactic, blind their opponents and kill them silently afterwards. The Demon of the Hidden Mist had decided to fight seriously.

"Oh man, this can't be good for my asthma," Hayate moaned to himself, coughing a bit. Then, he raised his sword and adopted a defensive stance. "Yugao! Track him!"

Yugao made a hand sign and closed her eyes. "On it!"

Fortunately for the Konoha ninja, the purple haired kunoichi happened to be a sensor. She had a hard time tracking Zabuza, since the mist was laced with his chakra. However, she quickly found that said chakra was much more concentrated at certain point.

"Kurenai, behind you!"

The raven haired kunoichi turned around and raised a kunai just in time to parry the blow aimed at her gut. The clang resulting of the metal clashing was enough to reveal Zabuza's position to Hayate. The only male Konoha Chunin leaped at Zabuza. "Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

The blade of Hayate's katana was wreathed in flames that dispelled the mist the moment it touched it, and found Zabuza in no time. Zabuza had to ignore Kurenai and fend off the swings of the ninja with the flaming sword. Unfortunately for him, he didn't realize Anko getting closer until it was too late.

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

A snake emerged from Anko's sleeve, and bite Zabuza in the neck. The snake's poison quickly paralyzed Zabuza, until the Kiri missing-nin lost all control of his body and fell to the ground, motionless. The mist then disappeared.

"We did! We took Zabuza down!" Kurenai cheered.

"Oh yes, I can feel that Jonin diploma in my hands! Go Team Estrogen!" Anko cheered while pumped her fist.

"Hey, I helped too!" Hayata protested, before going into a coughing fit.

"Go Team Estrogen plus Hayate!"

Yugao walked towards Zabuza's body and checked his vitals. "He's still alive. Anko, was that poison you injected him lethal?"

"Nope, just a paralytic toxin. He'll be cold for two days. I guessed that maybe I could bring this guy to T&I and get some useful information out of his head. You don't capture every day a member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist!"

"Well thought. We should hide his body while we finish off the remaining Uchiha and mercenaries."

"Understood. I know a place that-AHHHHHHH!" Anko suddenly yelled as she fell on her knees and her hand reached the back of her neck.

"Anko!" Kurenai quickly rushed to check her. "What's going on?"

"The Cursed Seal... it burns..." Anko said, visibly in pain.

Kurenai opened her eyes wide at the implications of such statement. "That... that means..."

"Y-yes... that traitorous bastard is here..."

...

Senju Residence

"Tsunade Senju, you, your husband and your adoptive son have been declared a threat to the village, and will have to come with us. If you resist arrest, we will-"

BOOM!

"AAAAAARGGGH!"

"Excuse me, were you saying something?" Tsunade asked innocently.

While Tsunade dealt with the two Jonin and two Chunin -now just one- that were sent to capture her and Naruto, Shizune was tasked with keeping the children safe.

Naruto and the twins watched how Shizune removed the carpet from the living room, and made a hand seal. Suddenly, a trapdoor appeared all of sudden. Shizune opened the trapdoor and motioned the kids to go inside.

"This is a shelter we built after Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama listened to a prophecy from one of the toads of Mount Myoboku. Jiraiya-sama covered it with all kinds of protective seals, so it's pretty much impossible for anybody with the exception of Jiraiya-sama, Tsunade-sama or myself to open it from the outside. The seals also make it impossible to find, even to those with a Byakugan or a Sharinagan. The shelter has enough food and water to last a month for the six of us, so for you three it should last even more. It also has a bathroom.

"And this is important: no matter what you hear us say, even if, no, *especially* if you hear us asking you to come out, DON'T COME OUT. We will retrieve you once all this madness is over. Understood?"

Naruto nodded, the twins did the same.

"Now get in there, and don't be afraid, I promise everything will be fine," Shizune reassured, forcing herself to smile, unsure if that was a promise she could keep.

"Are you and mom going to be okay, Shizune-nee-chan?" Hagane asked.

"Of course, sweetie. Your mom is the strongest woman there is, nobody can't hurt her. Especially with me helping her."

"Yeah, mom is like, super strong! I trained with her and her strength knows no limits! The only ones who would come close to her are dad and the Hokage!" Naruto added. Shizune couldn't help but wonder if his optimism was genuine or if he was trying to calm down the twins. Either way, it was a good thing.

"Naruto-kun, you're the eldest, so you'll have to take care of your siblings while Tsunade-sama and I are busy, understood?"

Naruto valiantly nodded before he and the twins headed to the underground shelter. Shizune then closed the trapdoor, made another hand seal, and the trapdoor disappeared once again. Lastly, she put the carpet back.

Taking one last glance at the invisible shelter, and wondering if she'll live to see her almost little siblings again, Shizune rushed outside to assist her master and mother figure

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Hokage's Tower

Fugaku Uchiha's eight man squad broke into the entrance of the Hokage's workplace and residence, only to find it deserted. They moved towards the first floor, but it was just as empty. The second floor was devoid of any life as well. Fugaku smelled a trap.

"Kenichi, track the Hokage, now!" the Uchiha Clan Head ordered.

"Yes, Fugaku-sama!" Kenichi, the Uchiha sensor, made a hand seal and closed his eyes. As his senses expanded, he didn't perceive

anybody in the building, until he reached the roof. "Found him! He's standing in the roof!"

"How many ANBU's has with him?"

"Actually... none, Fugaku-sama. He appears to be alone..."

"What? That can't be possible! It has to be some kind of trap!"

"Unless the ANBU have a way to fool sensors we're not aware of, the Hokage is alone in the roof. What are we going to do, Fugaku-sama?"

"The old monkey was waiting for us. He evacuated the building, and probably sent the ANBU to protect civilians or something like that. Anyway, that makes our job all the easier. Everybody, to the roof! But don't let your guard down, it might be a trap!"

"Yes, Fugaku-sama!" all Uchihas replied in unison.

...

Senju Residence

With a neck snap, Tsunade killed the last of the Uchihas sent to attack her home. Tsunade had some minor bruises and burns, but there was nothing she could heal in a couple minutes.

"Shizune, go and fetch me a couple sealing scrolls, now!" Tsunade ordered.

The black haired kunoichi nodded and headed back into the house, and in less than a minute she returned with the requested items. Tsunade started to store the dead Uchihas inside them, and instructed her apprentice to do the same.

"I know the body of a dead ninja is valuable, especially a dead Uchiha... but what do you plan to do with them, Tsunade-sama?"

"Me? Nothing. The Hokage will decide what use should we give them."

"By the end of the night, there won't be a Hokage, nor a village, anymore," said a voice seemingly out of nowhere.

In front of the two medical-nin, a masked man appeared coming out of a spiraling vortex. Tsunade immediately recognized the black cloak with the red clouds. Tsunade couldn't help but stare at the man's mask, or more specifically, at the single hole on it that revealed a Sharingan. Gamamaru's warning echoed through her head.

Beware the One-Eyed Demon

"You're an Akatsuki!" Tsunade shouted at him.

"Oh? You hear about our organization? Guess that Konoha ninjas have done their homework. Not that it matters, anyway," the masked man replied.

"What do you want?" Shizune asked.

"To finish what I started eight years ago. To reclaim what is rightfully mine, and use it to destroy Konoha."

"Wait a minute... are you saying that you're the man responsible for the Kyubi attack?" Tsunade asked in disbelief.

"That's exactly what I said."

"So, this is why the Uchiha are revolting? To get their hands on the Nine Tails? I can't believe that Danzo of all people was right!"

"Oh, no, you're *horribly* mistaken. I might be an Uchiha, but I stopped caring about the clan long time ago. The Uchihas are nothing but a disposable tool, mere pawns of a much grander plan. See, with this coup d'etat, the Uchiha and Konoha will destroy each other, while I

take advantage of the ensuing chaos and get the Kyubi. Everybody wins."

The blond Sannin gritted her teeth. She was about to say something when the crystal on her necklace began to glow with a teal light. "What the...?"

"Oh, how curious. I'm not into jewelry, but that's an interesting necklace you got there. I think I'll take it as well. But first, the Jinchuriki," the masked man said as he advanced towards the house.

"If you want Naruto, you'll have to go through me first!" Tsunade stated defiantly as she planted herself in front of the man.

"Trust me, that won't be a problem."

Tsunade snarled something unintelligible, and threw a punch towards the masked man's face. But much to her surprise, her fist phased through his head as if the man was an illusion or mirage.

"What?"

Shizune shot several senbons from her wrist-mounted launcher, but they phased through him as well.

"There's nothing you can do to stop me. Don't waste your energies doing so. Or do it, it won't make a difference."

"Who are you?" asked Shizune.

"My name is irrelevant, but if you wish, you can call me Tobi," Tobi said as he entered in the house. "I believe that the kid will be upstairs, right?"

Tobi teleported to the upper floor, and inspected the two bedrooms that looked like they belonged to a child, but he found nobody there. Annoyed, he proceed to inspect the rest of the house, but there was no clue of him either. His Sharingan scanned every centimeter of the

house, but didn't find any chakra signature on it. But deep down, he felt that the Jinchuriki was there... somewhere... hiding...

Muttering a curse, Tobi teleported outside, back with Tsunade and Shizune.

"Where is the Jinchuriki?" Tobi angrily demanded. His one eye flashed red.

"On a safe place far away from here, where neither you nor people like you will be able to touch him," Tsunade answered. "Can't that fancy Sharingan track him?"

"YOU LIE!" Tobi bellowed. "He's here, I can feel it, even my eye can see him. Yes, I know he's really close, even if I can't reach him myself. And if I can't do that... well, maybe your screams will make him come out on his own."

"So, a scream contest, then? I have a feeling that it's you who's going to be the winner," Tsunade replied confidently, as she cracked her knuckles.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with, Sannin," Tobi said as he formed many hand seals. "Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

As the thick roots emerged from the ground and wrapped around Tsunade and Shizune almost forgot how to breathe. Shizune escaped using a Body Replacement, but Tsunade stayed there, motionless.

"You... how can you use my grandfather's...?" Tsunade asked in disbelief, unable to shake the shock. Was this stranger related to the Senju in some way? There was also the fact that her necklace reacted to him just like it did to her children.

"Like I told you, you know nothing about me or what I can do. That's why fighting me is a fool's errand," Tobi replied as he unsheathed his katana.

"Tsunade-sama, don't stay there! Move! We can wonder how he can use Wood Release, but first we have to defeat him!" Shizune yelled.

Tobi lunged at her, his katana aiming forwards. "Now, perish!"

Shizune's words managed to snap Tsunade out of her trance, and making use of her famous chakra-enhanced strength, she broke free from her binds. Tobi stopped in the last second, and jumped backwards to avoid any possible counter attack.

"Sorry about that, Shizune. Please understand it was quite the shock. But I'm better now," Tsunade assured as she calmly removed her green haori. "Let's crush this guy."

"Right!" Shizune chimed as she pulled out three senbons and tossed them at Tobi. However, much to her shock, the senbons phased through the masked man. "What?"

The second after Shizune threw her senbons, Tsunade had dashed towards Tobi, who made no effort to dodge, and launched her fist at him. But just like Shizune's needles, Tsunade's fist phased through his face. "What is this? A genjutsu?"

Tobi smirked under his mask. "Just like that Hyuga said. And just like him, you're going to find how wrong you are," the masked man said before quickly punching Tsunade on her gut, leaving her breathless, followed by a kick to the face the moment she unwittingly bent over. "Does that feel like a genjutsu?"

Shizune threw more senbons at him, but the result was the same. "You already did that before, did you really expect a different result now?"

"Alright, this is something your fancy intangibility won't protect you from!" Shizune said as he leaped above him. "Poison Mist!"

Shizune's cheeks puffed out, and released a stream of purple mist from her mouth that engulfed the masked man. However, Tobi flew

out of the poisonous cloud like a missile, and unsheathed his katana again.

"I think I'll get rid of you first!" Tobi declared as he prepared to deliver an diagonal slash.

Fortunately for Shizune, the attack never came as Tsunade managed to grab Tobi's ankle, and slam him overhead into the ground multiple times, until his ankle slipped through Tsunade's hands, and quickly crawled away from the Slug Princess. Shizune then landed besides Tsunade.

"Tsunade-sama, you touched him!" Shizune squealed in joy.

"I did more than just touch him," Tsunade said with a confident smirk. "You can turn intangible at will, but in order to harm us, you have to turn corporeal, right? In that's the case, it's just a matter of timing our attacks."

"You're one clever bitch," Tobi painfully got back on his feet. "But this changes nothing. That was a mere lapse of judgment on my part. You won't touch me again."

"I must admit that you're way tough if you can still stand such a beating. Most people wouldn't be able to even move after that."

"I think I already stated that I'm not like everybody else. Now let's see how much pain can you withstand until you reveal to me the location of the Jinchuriki," Tobi threatened as he disappeared in a swirling vortex.

"Shizune, stay alert!" Tsunade warned. Her apprentice nodded.

It didn't take long for Tobi to reveal himself. "Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

Once again, multiple tree roots emerged from the ground, and tried to either restrain or impale the two kunoichi. Tsunade shattered them

with her enhanced punches, while Shizune tossed poisoned senbons that made the roots to wither and rot in a matter of seconds.

However, that attack was just a diversion. While Shizune was busy dealing with the roots, Tobi appeared from behind and wrapped an arm around her neck.

"This charade ends here. Now, Tsunade, tell me where you're hiding the Jinchuriki, or this woman dies," Tobi declared, his voice regaining some of its previous calmness.

"Tsunade-sama, don't do it!" Shizune pleaded. "He's tangible now, now is the chance to attack!"

"I wouldn't do it if I was you. Do you think I can't kill this woman and then use my ability to avoid your attacks?" Tobi asked. Tsunade remained there, hesitant. Running out of patience, Tobi made his decision. "I see. Say goodbye to this woman then."

The blade of Tobi's katana burst through Shizune's chest. The black haired kunoichi let out a gasp of pain.

"NO!" Tsunade threw her hands over her mouth

"See? This is what happens when you oppose somebody you can't hope to defeat. Now-" Tobi was interrupted by Shizune bursting into a cloud of purple fog. "WHAT?"

Tobi jumped back in an attempt to avoid the poisonous mist, but he accidentally breathed some of it.

"Poison Clone. Clever, right?" the real Shizune then appeared behind Tobi.

"What? You made a clone? I never took my eye from you two! How did you evade my Sharingan?" Tobi protested between coughs.

"To answer your question, I did it while you were inspecting our house."

"Wait... I've been fighting a clone the whole time?" Tobi's disbelief grew by the moment, as so did his coughing.

"You landed a few hits on Tsunade-sama, but none of my clone. My clones can last hours if they don't receive any damage. And judging by your coughs, I guess that that mask of yours doesn't filter poisonous gases. What you inhaled is a fast-acting poison that will rot your lungs until you can't breathe anymore. You are already death."

"Don't be so overconfident!" Tobi yelled before going into another coughing fit. "There's no poison that can kill this body!"

"Yes. I believe that you somehow spliced your genes with those of my grandfather, who had great resistance to poisons, hence your ability to use Wood Release. But even then that doesn't make you immune to them," Tsunade smirked at him. "Let's see how well you can fight when you can hardly breathe!"

Both Tsunade and Shizune lunged at the masked man. Tsunade threw a kick at his face, followed by Shizune who had kunais on her hands. Both their attacks phased through Tobi. The Akatsuki member tried to slash Tsunade, but his swing was way sloppier than before and Tsunade had no trouble dodging it. Shizune threw more senbons at him from her wrist-mounted launcher, which Tobi dodged by jumping backwards.

"Your breathing is becoming heavier. Even if you somehow survive Shizune's poison, you won't survive my fists."

"SHUT UP!" Tobi angrily yelled as his hands flew through hand seals. "Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

More roots emerged from the ground, and lunged at Tsunade. The Slug princess smirked once again, and raised a foot.

"Heavenly Foot of Pain!" Tsunade brought her foot down with such force that the ensuing shockwave shattered the wooden roots,

leaving a crater behind. "And you might have my grandfather's Bloodline Limit, but yours is nowhere near his level."

Both Tsunade and Shizune leaped at Tobi at the same time from opposite directions. The masked man disappeared once again in a swirling vortex.

"Alright, another ambush. Good, he's growing desperate."

"Come on coward, show yourself!" Shizune shouted.

"As you wish," Tobi said as he appeared right behind Tsunade.

The blond Sannin immediately turned around and punched the masked man, who shattered into thousands of wood shards. "A wood clone...?"

Suddenly, a blade burst through Tsunade's belly. Blood started to leak from it. Shizune's eyes grew wide with shock.

"TSUNADE-SAMA!" Shizune yelled in horror.

"I believe that you're not a clone, right bitch?" Tobi hatefully said as he pulled his sword out and kicked Tsunade in the back, making the Sannin to fall on her face. Tobi's hands then flew through hand seals. "Fire Release-"

However, a rather severe coughing fit stopped him from completing the attack. Knowing that this was her only chance, Tsunade gathered all the chakra she could muster on her fist, turned around and delivered a devastating punch at Tobi. The Akatsuki had no time to turn intangible, and Tsunade's fist landed on his right shoulder, shattering it completely, cutting the right arm from the rest of his body, and hurling him towards a wall.

"Ugghhh..." Tobi moaned, as he got on his feet as good as he could. "That... certainly hurt..."

"How are you still live...?" Tsunade asked.

"I could... ask the... same thing to you..."

"Surrender, you monster! Tsunade-sama got you good! Between that hit and my poison, there's no way you can win!" Shizune cried.

"Maybe you're right... but mark my words... sooner or later... the Kyubi will be mine... and this world of despair and lies... will disappear..." Tobi said as he disappeared in a swirling vortex.

Tsunade coughed blood. Shizune quickly rushed towards her master's side, and checked the wound on her belly. It poured large amounts of blood.

"Alright Shizune... you know what to do..."

"Yes. First, stop the hemorrhage," Shizune reminded herself as she used the Mystical Palm Jutsu on Tsunade's wound, closing it slowly.

"I guess it's a good thing I got over my fear of blood..." Tsunade weakly joked.

"Tsunade-sama, don't speak!"

"Don't tell me what to do..."

"You didn't lose your temper. Guess that that's a good thing. But seriously, don't talk."

Still, Tsunade decided to follow Shizune's advice, and didn't waste the little energy she had left on talking. While her apprentice brought her from near death, she couldn't help but wonder about that mysterious one-eyed man. Then she remembered what Jiraiya had told her about his long-term mission regarding the Akatsuki and the Kyubi attack.

Orochimaru and this man, Tobi, were both part of the same organization, Akatsuki, who apparently wanted the Kyubi, and other Tailed Beasts, for whatever nefarious purposes. Orochimaru had experimented with Hashirama's cells in order to obtain his power,

and Tobi was clearly one of his test subjects. And while Tobi could use Wood Release, the scale and power of his jutsus were nowhere near the level of the First Hokage.

But even then, it was a terrifying thought. What if Orochimaru was able to perfect the genetic splicing? The thought of Orochimaru with Hashirama's power was worrying, but an army, hell even a small group with that power was a nightmare come true.

Lastly, she also wished she could warn everybody about Akatsuki manipulating the Uchiha and stop this madness before more people could die. But she knew it was too late. Even if she wasn't so badly wounded, there was no way she could stop the coup. All she could do was pray for this to end as soon as possible with the least amount of casualties.

...

Inabi Uchiha and his teammates Yashiro and Tekka were at the roof of the Jonin Stanby Station. Multiple Konoha ninja had attempted to reclaim the building, but the Uchiha trio managed to fend off the attackers. The last attack had been more than an hour ago, to which Inabi deduced that Konoha gave up trying to take back the station.

"You know, this is kind of boring," Yashiro mentioned. "This place is safe, can we go somewhere else?"

"You heard Fugaku-sama. We were assigned to take and guard this place. Fugaku-sama will flay us alive if we disobey his orders," Tekka replied.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Tekka, as much as I'd love to continue fighting," Inabi said. "Man, this was too easy. Maybe we shouldn't have been so cautious and wait until most of the Jonin were away."

"Well, nothing can compare to might of the Uchiha. I wish I was assigned to Masaki's team. They got to fight Tsunade. They will be

the only ones who will fight against somebody who's actually strong," Yashiro moaned. "Besides Fugaku-sama, I mean."

Suddenly, all of their radios started to crackle loudly. Inabi grabbed his.

"This is Inabi Uchiha. Who is this?"

"This is Naoki Uchiha requesting reinforcements! That traitor Itachi appeared and slaughtered my unit!"

"Naoki, calm down and tell us your position so we can assist you!"

"I'm-AAAAAAARRGGH!"

"Naoki? Naoki?" Inabi frantically shouted, clutching the radio on his hand. "DAMMIT! I knew Fugaku-sama should have thrown that spoiled brat of his into a cell!"

"Itachi is our there, and apparently decided to hunt us. What are we going to do?" Yashiro asked.

"It isn't obvious? Hunt him first before he can do anymore damage."

"What about Fugaku-sama's orders?" Tekka asked.

"This is more important. If some Konoha ninja take this building while we're absent, we can retake it later. Now come on, Naoki's team was supposed to guard the hospital, so if we are fast we might catch Itachi before he leaves the place."

"Oh, you're leaving already? Sorry, but I don't think that such thing is going to happen," a cold, yet soft voice said behind them.

The Uchiha trio turned around, and saw an extremely pale man with long black hair and yellow eyes, wearing a black cloak with red clouds on it.

"Orochimaru!?" Inabi asked in shock.

"Is he back in the village too?" asked Tekka.

"Why is he dressed like Madara-sama?" Yashiro asked as well.

"Madara? That's what he told you? Kukuku... this kid certainly had some delusions of grandeur," Orochimaru said, chuckling.

"What are you doing here? Are you part of Madara-sama's army of mercenaries? I know for a fact that you're not an ally of Konoha," Inabi said.

"True. But being the enemy of your enemies does not make me your friend, as you're about to find. But anyway, you should feel honored, you three had been selected to take part in an experiment in order to further my ninjutsu research. Are you going to come with me willingly, or do I have to take you by force?"

"Yashiro, Tekka, we'll have to deal with this lunatic first before we can go to look for Itachi," Inabi declared. His two partners nodded.

"It seems that we're going to have a worthy opponent after all," Yashiro agreed with a glee.

"By force then? This should be fun," Orochimaru's mouth forming an ugly smile.

Activating their Sharingan, the Uchiha trio dashed at Orochimaru. Yashiro and Tekka impaled Orochimaru with their katanas from opposing angles, while Inabi jumped over him while making hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

The other two Uchihas jumped sideways before the fireball hit its target and engulfed Orochimaru in flames.

"So much for the 'Legendary Sannin'," Inabi said dismissively.

However, when the flames started to disappear, they saw a half melted mud clone in Orochimaru's place. When the Uchiha trio realized that they have been fooled, it was too late. Three snakes wrapped tightly around their necks, rising them in mid air.

"A nice display, indeed," the real Orochimaru praised, somehow behind them. The three snakes holding the Uchihas were coming from one of his sleeves. "You're young, strong, and with a mature Sharigan. Yes, you will be perfect!"

The snakes bit their victims in their necks, knocking them out cold, before dropping them into the ground and returned from whence they came. Orochimaru then bit his finger and made five hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, a gigantic light gray snake appeared. Orochimaru then snapped his fingers, and three ninjas wearing gray camouflage outfits, balaclavas and forehead protectors with a quaver on them appeared before him.

"Take these bodies to the meeting point. Make sure they suffer no harm. I don't think that you will have much trouble with all the battles going on, but just in case I'll send Hebiroshi with you as an escort."

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama!" the three ninjas replied in unison before carrying the bodies on their backs, and jumped away. The giant snake followed them.

The snake Sannin was about to leave, but sensing a certain presence coming closer made him stay and wait. After ten minutes, the presence landed in front of him. It was a woman with spiky dull purple hair.

"Orochimaru. Should have guessed that you'll be among the scum the Uchiha had brought with them."

"Nice to see you again after so much time, Anko-chan," Orochimaru greeted her with a sinister grin. "Though you're awfully mistaken. I'm not part of this sad attempt of a coup. In fact, I was about to leave before you ran into me."

"Like hell I'm going to let you leave!" Anko shouted angrily, pulling out a kunai.

"Please Anko-chan, save yourself the embarrassment. Do you think you can defeat me alone?"

"What make you think I'm alone?"

As on cue, Kurenai, Yugao and Hayate appeared all around him.

"I see you brought some friends with you. That's intelligent, but still futile. The result will be the same."

"SHUT UP!" Anko yelled as she dashed at Orochimaru and sunk the kunai on his neck. However, the moment he did so Orochimaru turned into mud and started to melt. "It was a clone? DAMMIT!"

...

Meanwhile, at the other side of the village, Fugaku Uchiha and his elite team climbed the Hokage's tower until they reached the roof. Just like their sensor had said, the Hokage stood there, completely alone, contemplating the village flooded by chaos and destruction.

"Enjoying the spectacle, *Hokage-sama* ?" Fugaku asked the old man.

Sarutobi turned around to face him. "Ah, Fugaku-san, I was waiting for you. You brought quite the group with you."

"You can't expect to take down a Hokage by doing a half-assed job. These men are the best the Uchiha clan can offer."

"The best you say?" Sarutobi asked, tilting his head as he studied Fugaku's team. "Then why didn't you bring young Itachi with you? I believe he's quite the prodigy."

Fugaku gritted his teeth upon hearing the name of his disgraced son, but decided not to take the bait. He needed to remain focused in order to finish the job.

"If you were expecting us, then you know what I came for. Are you going to fight, surrender, or are you going to try to talk me down? Try to avoid the latter option if possible, I'm not in the mood for lectures."

"I think you're old enough to be lectured, Fugaku-san. So I will simply ask you a question. Why? Why are you doing all of this? Do you want to be Hokage that much?"

"Do not play dumb with me, Hiruzen," Fugaku replied, pointing an accusatory finger at the old Hokage. "You might be old, but I know that you're far from being senile. You know perfectly why I'm doing this."

"I'm afraid I'm not. So please enlighten me, before more blood is spilled this night," upon seeing Fugaku's frown, he added: "I can assure you that this is not a ruse to buy time for whatever I had planned. I knew you were coming here since more than an hour ago. Had I planned a trap, it would already sprung."

"If that's true, then you're an idiot for not doing so."

"Yes, I've been calling that before. I believe the words Danzo used was 'idealistic fool'. But guess that's something I can't change about me. The reason I didn't prepare a trap was because I do want to end this in a peaceful way."

"Fine, have it your way," Fugaku scoffed. "The reason we're doing this is that we're tired. Tired of living isolated from the rest of the village. Tired from being barred from any position of power. Tired of

being Konoha's attack dogs, being kept in cages when you aren't throwing us at your enemies, and always held by a leash.

"But that's going to end now. These dogs are cutting their leashes and breaking their cage's bars. The Sharingan is not your little weapon to play with. The Senju wanted our power, but never wanted us, and made sure that we stayed loyal but were never a threat. And when they were gone, they made sure that things would never change.

"You are the pupil of the first two Hokages. And the Fourth was a student of one of your students. A cleverly crafted system that ensures that only those indoctrinated in the ideas of the Senju access to positions of power just like yours. To keep the status quo and stop any change from happening, regardless of how necessary they are."

"That's a lie and you know it," Sarutobi angrily replied. Though deep down he had to admit that Fugaku had a point. "In a few years, your eldest son would have made a fine Fifth. He has both the power and the wisdom to be worthy of the title."

Fugaku snorted dismissively. "Too late for that, Hiruzen. I wouldn't believe that even if I didn't know of your little plan."

"Little plan? What are you talking about?"

"The Kyubi brat. Who bears a more than striking resemblance to the Fourth. Who's being raised by two of your students, one who happens to be the granddaughter of Hashirama and the other who was the master of the Fourth. And here's the best part: how that little boy boasts non-stop that he's going to be Hokage. Sure kids his age have unrealistic ambitions, but that boy sounds so *sure* that he's going to be Hokage, as if somebody already promised him such position. Tell me, Hiruzen, who could have put that idea into his young innocent mind?"

"But it's not a matter of just being Hokage. Even if my son or any of my clansmen became Hokage, he would just be a figurehead or a puppet, keeping the seat warm until the *real* candidate became old enough to take the hat, while you and your little friends run everything from the shadows. But that's not going to happen. This village is rightfully ours, and we will take it back."

"Fugaku-san, please think about this. Even if you managed to kill me and my councilors and became the new rulers of Konoha, nobody would accept you, especially those who lost loved ones during your coup. Konoha would get plunged into a civil war, like it's happening with Kirigakure right now. But unlike Kirigakure, we don't have a sea or other natural defenses to stop other villages from invading us."

"The people of Konoha fear our power, so we will give them good reasons to fear us. Fear will keep the population from rebelling."

"Those who rule by fear are bigger fools than the hopeless idealists like me. Those who live under fear can't wait to throw away that yoke."

"I've heard enough," Fugaku abruptly said. "The dynasty of the Senju and those indoctrinated by them ends tonight. You can surrender and live a few more years, or you can fight us, die, and delay the inevitable for a little time."

Sarutobi's mouth curved into a sad smile. In a swift movement, he tossed away his hat and robes, revealing a battle armor underneath them.

"I think you should know what my answer was going to be," Sarutobi adopted a fighting stance. Every Uchiha minus Fugaku did likewise.

"If you planned to fight us, then why did you send your ANBU away? With them at your side you might have had some chances of surviving."

"The ANBU are helping people that need their aid more than this old but far from defenseless man. A good Hokage puts the good of

the village above his own. If you and your clansmen knew that, maybe one of you would have become Hokage."

"Make no mistake, Hiruzen. I'm not Orochimaru. I'm making this for the good of my clan, not for any sense of personal ambition," Fugaku spat as he unsheathed his katana. "Everybody, ready to attack! Tonight the crows will feast on the flesh of a Hokage."

"Either you kill me or not, Fugku-san, you *will* regret this decision."

Author's note: Okay, a lot of stuff to comment on this chapter.

First of all, I'm not going to write another fight involving Tobi unless he loses his kamui somehow. Writing the Tsunade and Shizune VS Tobi fight was a pain in the ass, thanks to the goddammed kamui. Do you guys know how many times I rewrote that part? I pretty much lost count after the tenth. That's why I had the whole poison clone of Shizune poisoning him and making him unable to use kamui as easily as usual.

Speaking of Shizune, after the last chapter, I'm pretty sure you guys thought she was a goner. Well, nope! As "New Chance" said in one of its omakes, Shizune in most fics doesn't have any role besides being Tsunade's assistant, and I would have killed her off if this was the case. But it isn't, and it might not be apparent now, but Shizune is going to play a BIG role in future arcs. I think that the poor girl deserves it.

And yeah, Orochimaru's getting a Sharingan. The story makes it as if such thing means the end of the world, but after the manga gave us Madara with the Rinnegan, Wood Release, Sage Mode and the Ten Tails (and that's not getting into all the blatant rule-breaking, like using Susano'o without eyes, and that's just the tip of the iceberg) I feel I can make my antagonists as overpowered as I want, and they still wouldn't be as ridiculous as the villains of the final arcs of the manga. Then again, I don't

think Orochimaru with a Sharingan is *that* overpowered to begin with.

Given that the Demon Brothers appeared in the previous chapter, I'm kind of surprised that nobody asked for Zabuza. And yeah, this means that the Wave Arc is not gonna happen. Because I'm sick of reading fics that copy-paste that arc in its entirety when in the end the only difference is that only Haku, and sometimes Zabuza, survive the whole ordeal. So I'll be taking a page from "True Potential", and will make Naruto's first C-Rank mission that inevitably goes wrong something original.

Anyway, this note is getting too long, so I'll wrap things up. Next chapter, Sarutobi vs Fugaku & his Uchiha flunkies. Who will win? Who will survive? Maybe both? Maybe neither? (And before you guys ask, no, I didn't forget about Itachi. I know that his presence in this chapter was minimal, but trust me, he will play a big role in the next chapter).

In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me very, very, very happy!

The Uchiha Coup D'etat, Part III

Author's Note: Hello once again, my beloved readers. Last week I posted chapter number ten, so let's see the story's stats at such milestone:

+41000 hits,

375 Favs,

547 alerts,

and 252 reviews

To all my readers, thank you for supporting this story!

I'm pleased to see that, while not without its detractors, the Uchiha Coup arc is getting a good reception. Well, now we're getting close to the end of the arc. I personally feel that the fights in this chapter aren't as good as the one before (guess due the number of people involved), and they gave me even more trouble writing, but I still hope that you like it.

The title is kind of spoilery, but I'm sure all readers could guess the outcome of this conflict, or else there wouldn't be any story to tell after that. See you at the bottom.

Chapter 11:

The Uchiha Coup, Part III: Uchiha's End

or

Sharingan vs Sharingan

After thirty minutes that felt like hours, Tsunade was finally out of danger. Shizune made an admirable effort closing her wound and leaving no effects. Still, Tsunade had lost quite some blood and felt awfully weak. She doubted she could fight again. Still, that didn't mean she couldn't be of help.

"Tsunade-sama, how do you feel?" Shizune asked as she helped her master to get on her feet.

"Much better, thanks to you."

"Should I... fetch the kids?"

"Absolutely not. The kids will stay in the shelter until things calm down a little. Besides, we have still some work to do," Tsunade replied as she soaked her finger with the wet blood of her wound, and made five hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, a massive white slug with a blue back appeared.

"Katsuyu, the village is under attack. I need you to reach all the wounded and use our link to let me heal them," Tsunade instructed. "But ignore the Uchiha. They're the ones who are behind this attack."

"Understood, Tsunade-sama," Katsuyu replied before splitting into smaller clones of herself and spreading through the village.

"Tsunade-sama, are you sure you can do this? The Immense Network Healing requires a lot of chakra, and you just sustained a potentially fatal injury," the lengths Tsunade was willing to push herself worried her apprentice to no end.

"I know. That's why I'm going to use part of your chakra too, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't! But still, the amount of energy this jutsu requires could mean your death..."

"I won't die today, Shizune. Do you think I'm going to leave you and the kids alone with Jiraiya?" Tsunade chuckled weakly. "Now come on, we have a village to save."

Tsunade and Shizune sat down in front of each other, holding their hands, and started to channel their chakra towards Katsuyu.

...

During his long life, Hiruzen Sarutobi was a man that had been present in a myriad of battles, especially during the first two Ninja World Wars. Some he won, some he lost, all in which he managed to escape alive. Some against ninjas of every major village, others against ninjas of minor villages and sometimes against independent clans. Hell, he even fought against the strongest Tailed Beast and lived to tell the tale, something only Hashirama did before.

Paradoxically, it was all these battles and the deaths that ensued that shaped Sarutobi into a man whose goal was the pursuit of peace and understanding, a goal he tried to instill on his students, with varying degrees of success -and a single, catastrophic failure-. Because no man or woman should go through what the Third Hokage went through. And truth be told, he turned out relatively fine, unlike his friend Danzo Shimura, whose experience was just as extensive and gruesome, yet he turned into an unemotional, unmerciful extremist.

This wasn't also the first time that either him or a predecessor had to fight against a traitor. He had fought against Orochimaru many years ago, when the ANBU discovered the unethical experiments he was conducting -and to this day, still wonders if he should have killed his former student when he got the chance- and the First Hokage had to fight against his former friend Madara Uchiha.

But even then, Orochimaru and Madara were just individuals with an unchecked ambition. This was the first time an entire clan revolted against Konoha. While part of him remembered Tobirama-sensei's warnings about the Uchiha being dangerous, another part couldn't

help but make him feel that this was his fault for letting this happen, and not putting more effort in repairing the relationship between the Uchiha and the village.

And now, surrounded by the Uchiha patriarch and his elite ninja, Sarutobi knew he was going to die. He wasn't afraid to just die, thought -he never hesitated to take potentially suicide missions- but the fact that the village would be just in an equally or even greater awful state then it was after the Kyubi attacked.

Just like his predecessor and his one successor, it seemed that it was the Hokage's fate to die protecting the village from its enemies. But in Sarutobi's case, he'd die fighting against fellow villagers.

"Before we start, answer me one last thing," Sarutobi said. "What happened to Shisui Uchiha?"

"Shisui? Why do you ask?" Fugaku asked, puzzled. "Was he some sort of double agent of yours or what?"

"Yes. He had a plan to stop you, but I never heard from him after the last time we spoke. Was he found out by your peers?"

"We weren't aware of Shisui's treachery, but given his friendship with Itachi it shouldn't be a surprise. But to answer your question, the last time any of my clansmen saw Shisui he was talking with some ANBU."

"ANBU? That can't be right... unless... oh no. Danzo, what you have done?" Hiruzen moaned in realization.

"On top of that, you can't even keep your subordinates under tabs. It's amazing this village had lasted as long as it did. But fear not, Hiruzen, a new golden era is about to begin. But first, we must get rid of the relics of the past!" Fugaku shouted as his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Fugaku breathed a massive fireball at Hiruzen. The old Hokage proved to be deceptively fast for somebody of his age and dodged the flaming projectile jumping aside. However, two Uchihas were already waiting for him, their katanas already coming down on his head. With a quick hand movement, a large black staff with golden tips appeared on Hiruzen's hands, blocking the double blow, much to the two Uchiha's surprise. Taking advantage of their states, Hiruzen pushed their swords aside and smacked them on their face.

A trio of Uchihas leaped at him, and while they were in mid air, they pulled some shuriken from their pouches and tossed them at Hiruzen.

"Behind you! Shuriken rain!" the staff shouted, surprising some of the Uchihas.

Hiruzen merely nodded and formed many hand seals as fast as he could. "Earth Release: Earth Dome Jutsu!"

The ground started to shake, and in an instant the Hokage was protected by a dense dome of rock that stopped all the shuriken.

"Break that dome, now!" Fugaku ordered.

A female Uchiha Jonin nodded and went through several hand seals. "Lightning Release: Mighty Thunder!"

The Uchiha woman put her hands together above her head, and they started to crackle with electricity. In a swift motion she brought her hands forward, releasing several streams of lightning that shattered the rock dome Sarutobi was using to hide. Before it was completely destroyed, Sarutobi leaped from it. He pulled out a sealing scroll, and unsealed a Fuma Shuriken. He tossed it before making a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

Suddenly, the single Fuma Shuriken became twenty. The Uchiha tried to avoid the rain of metallic death, and except one, all of them managed to avoid the giant weapons.

" Alright, one down. Let's see if I can get more lucky shots," Sarutobi thought as he landed. The corner of his eye caught another Uchiha forming hand seals.

"Fire Release: Heat Orbs Barrage!"

Several spherical yellow fireballs appeared around the Uchiha, almost like they were miniature stars, and with a hand motion he directed them at the Hokage. Running towards the attacker, Hiruzen spun his staff as fast as he could to deflect the heat orbs, and upon reaching the Uchiha, he swung his mighty weapon at him. The Uchiha jumped aside, but much to his shock, a hairy, white haired arm emerged from the staff and grabbed the unfortunate Uchiha's neck. With a sickening "crunch", the Uchiha ceased to be.

"Be careful with that staff! It's actually the Monkey King Enma, a Boss Summon! It's extremely dangerous!" Fugaku warned to his remaining clansmen. "New plan! I'll fight him directly, the rest of you cover me!"

The Uchiha patriarch dashed at Sarutobi, his katana ready to slice him. Both men clashed, their weapons hitting and parrying each other's blows. Whenever the other Uchiha saw an opening, they'd use a fire jutsu or pelt the Hokage with kunai or shuriken. Unfortunately, some of these weapons found their marks.

A poorly timed fireball almost hit Fugaku, forcing the Uchiha leader to jump backwards, leaving Sarutobi some time and space to breath. Time he was going to use wisely. It was about time to use the jutsu his two mentors developed in order to fight the Uchiha and other clans with special eye powers. He formed a hand seal.

"Yin Release: Bringer of Darkness!" a mantle of shadows covered the entire Hokage Tower.

Not even the Sharingan would be able to see through this jutsu. However, due to his dwindling chakra, Sarutobi could only keep this jutsu active for a few seconds.

"Kenichi, track the Hokage, now!" Fugaku shouted.

"O-On it!" the Uchiha sensor stammered before making a hand seal. In no time, he located the Hokage. "I got him! He's behind-ACK!"

Naturally, Hiruzen wasn't stupid enough to not target the sensor ninja first.

"Kenichi!" other Uchiha yelled, and thus marking his position for Sarutobi. The Hokage silently dashed towards him and broke his skull with a well placed hit to the head with the Adamantine Staff.

Sarutobi found himself unable to keep the jutsu active, and the darkness receded. Fugaku contemplated in disgust the bodies of the Uchiha the Hokage had just killed.

"Even in your old age, you're one resilient son of a bitch, did somebody tell you that?" Fugaku spat, glaring at Hiruzen.

"Quite a few times. In fact, it's part of the job description," Sarutobi replied, allowing himself to chuckle.

"To think that you killed four of my men already..."

"There's nobody else but you to blame for their deaths."

"I know. That's why now I have to make sure that their sacrifice isn't in vain."

...

Senju Residence Underground Shelter

Naruto couldn't help but feel amazed at the sheer foresight his parents had when they built the underground shelter. It consisted

mostly in a massive, single room, as big as any if the two floors of their house. There were multiple shelves full of canned food and bottled water, as well as good amount of medical supplies.

While there was no visible decoration, there was some furniture as well, such as a large table, a few chairs, a pair of couches, and a pair of closets.

And just like Shizune said, there was even a bathroom, which had a hefty supply of toilet paper.

The walls were almost entirely covered in paper seals. Naruto managed to identify a few of them, such as Armor Seals and Shield Seals; the former were used to increase the hardness of whatever it was applied to and the latter was used to nullify chakra-based attacks, mostly ninjutsu. There were also one-way Silence Seals, which wouldn't let any sound out of the room -but it would let the occupants of the room hear what was going on outside-.

There were many other seals that Naruto did not recognize, such as Mirror Seals and Camouflage Seals, which in conjunction made it nearly impossible for the shelter to be detected unless somebody already knew where it was located. He had heard Shizune said that not even a Sharingan or a Byakugan could be able to see through those seals.

Naruto had been told that, due to both his heritage and his status as a Jinchuriki, many people would want to either hurt him or kidnap him, and thus they needed to do their best to protect him. But this... what kind of threat deserved something like this shelter? Where his parents aware of whatever was happening right now? If yes, why didn't they do anything to stop it before it happened?

Naruto had far too many questions in his head. He need to talk with their parents whenever everything calmed down.

The blond Jinchuriki was snapped from his thoughts when he felt somebody tugging the sleeve of this shirt. It was Kaida, who was

looking at him with worried eyes.

"Naruto-niisan... is mom and Shizune-nee-chan going to be okay?" the white haired girl asked.

Naruto also wondered that. He had heard many yells, crashes, and explosions, but after some time, there was nothing but silence. Still, he was aware of how strong his adoptive mother and big sister were, and refused to believe that they were dead. Besides, he also had to be strong or else the twins would panic.

"Of course they are! Mom is the strongest woman who ever lived!" Naruto said, putting up the best of his smiles. "You should have seen her when we train! She can bring down a tree with just one punch! Can you imagine anybody being able to hurt her?" Kaida slowly shook his head. "Exactly!"

"Yeah... g-guess that you're right..." Kaida admitted, unconvinced.

Naruto frowned. He really needed to do something so the twins would take their minds off of what was going on outside. "Hey, since we're going to spend some time here, how about if we play something to pass the time? I'm sure mom and dad also left some board games or something like that, so let's take a look."

"Yes! Both twins said in unison, and the three kids split off to cover more ground.

Kaida looked in the closets, but all that was there were spare clothes of many sizes, the smaller ones for her and her brothers, and the bigger ones for the adults. Naruto inspected the shelves, but all that he found was food and water. Hagane, however, found something behind one of the couches.

"Hey, take a look at this!" the white haired boy said.

Naruto and Kaida dropped what they were doing and rushed to Hagane's side. In front of Hagane there was a cardboard box full of

items, such as scrolls, a couple books, worn out clothes and used ninja tools. One of the things that caught Naruto's attention was an opened envelope full of pictures. The Jinchuriki grabbed the envelope and took out the photographs from it. The twins also watched them intently.

"Hey look, that's dad!" Hagane pointed out.

The first one was a picture of a much younger Jiraiya, alongside three kids. While there was nothing remarkable about the two of them, the third one got Naruto's immediate interest: a kid with spiky blond hair and deep blue eyes.

"Hey, that kid looks a lot like you, nii-san!" Kaida pointed out, voicing Naruto's thoughts. "Do you know who is him?"

Jiraiya had told Naruto how he was his father's sensei, and how he would train Naruto so he would surpass his dad. A sad smile formed in his face. "Yeah, I think I have an idea."

Naruto put that pic at the back of the pile, and watched the next one. A brown haired man with three other kids, one with long white hair, the other with long black hair, and a blonde girl with a ponytail.

"Who are those?" Hagane asked.

Naruto chuckled. "Oh come on, don't tell me that you can't recognize your parents?"

Both twins' eyes opened wide. "Those are mom and dad? No way!" Kaida exclaimed.

"And who is the other guy? He looks scary," Hagane said as he pointed at the third teammate.

Jiraiya and Tsunade almost never talked about their third teammate. All what Naruto knew is that his name was Orochimaru, and that he and Jiraiya had a falling out many years before Naruto was born.

" Another things I'll have to ask dad about," Naruto thought.

"And who is this man?"

Naruto laughed once again. "You might not recognize him now, but this man is the Old Man Hokage himself!"

"Really? But... why isn't he wearing the Hokage Hat?" Kaida asked.

"The Hokage doesn't wear the hat all the time! I mean, we don't wear the same clothes all the time, right?"

"But whenever I saw the Hokage he's always wearing that hat..." Hagane mentioned.

"Maybe he wasn't the Hokage yet?" Naruto wondered. But unbeknownst to him, Hiruzen was already Hokage when he was Jiraiya and Tsunade's sensei.

They continued watching pictures, most of them were of Jiraiya with somebody else, though they were a couple of their biological parents. One that caught Naruto's attention was one in which appeared with three other kids, an orange headed boy, a red headed boy with weird eyes, and a smiling blue haired girl.

" Dad never told me he was the sensei of another team. Man, I don't think I'm going to remember all the things I have to ask him!"

"Hey, look at this book!" Hagane said as he grabbed one of the books of the box.

Naruto paled upon hearing his brother. A few months ago he learned what kind of books his father used to write for a living. What he read disgusted him, and his respect for Jiraiya dropped considerably.

"Don't touch that!" Naruto shouted as he snatched the book from his brother's little hands.

"Hey!"

"Sorry, but this book isn't for children. Nor for anyone but perverts," Naruto chided as he looked at the book in disgust. But his disgust was replaced by puzzlement when he saw the title.

The Tale of the Gutsy Ninja

" *Weird... this doesn't look like the kind of books dad usually writes,*"

But still, Jiraiya's name was in the cover. Naruto dared to see if his suspicions were correct, and opened the book on a random page. Turned out the book wasn't smut, but apparently an adventure story of a ninja called...

... Naruto.

"Hey, you're reading the book, and you said that said book isn't for children!" Kaida loudly protested.

"Sorry... I thought that this was... other kind of book... but it's okay, children can read it! Do you want me to read it to you?"

"YES!" both twins said in unison.

Naruto sat in one of the couches, with one twin at his side. He opened the book, and saw that there was a hand written dedicatory.

This book is dedicated to my godson Naruto. Yeah, your parents liked this book so much that they decided to name you after the main character. Funny, right?

Anyway, I hope you like this book as much as your parents did, and I hope it also inspires you to become a great ninja. Better than the main character, and definitely better than me.

Your godfather, Jiraiya

Naruto smiled tenderly upon reading the dedicatory. Now he really wanted to read the book -and wondered why Jiraiya never showed it

to him in the first place. He had to write down all the questions he had-.

"Okay, let's start," Naruto started reading the first page. "Naruto Musasabi jumped from tree branch to tree branch while looking for his enemy. There was only one thing in his mind: protecting Shuku, his home, at all costs. Pulling out a kunai, he readied for..."

...

"You damn traitor! I hope you rot in-!"

SHINK!

The last Uchiha of the zone was silenced by Itachi's katana. With this, it was four the squads the former clan heir had slaughtered. Three which were fighting against other Konoha ninjas or guarding conquered zones, and one team which was sent to hunt him after somebody warned the rest of the clan about Itachi's killing spree.

Even if none of them were even close to kill the Uchiha prodigy, Itachi was starting to feel tired. Reaching his pouch, he pulled a soldier pill and gulped it. He immediately felt his strength returning, but he knew he couldn't fight what was left of the clan by himself. Taking more than one soldier pill could have dangerous side effect, some of them which were immediate.

"This was the last Uchiha squad in this district. I have tracked another squad fighting against some Konoha ninja. They're three blocks away from the academy," the crow on his shoulder informed.

Itachi nodded, and headed to the Academy. "What about Sasuke and Shisui?"

"They didn't move since you left," the Kurokaze clone said.

"That's good."

"Besides, there's also-oh..."

"Oh? What do you mean? Did something happen to Sasuke or Shisui?" Itachi asked, almost panicking.

"No, it's not that. One of my clones found the Hokage. He's fighting against your father and other Uchihas. It doesn't appear that the Hokage is winning..."

"What? Dammit! Where are they?"

"At the top of the Hokage Tower."

"Then that will be my next destination," Itachi jumped from roof to roof, heading to the Hokage Tower. *"I hope I can be there in time..."*

...

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

The four remaining Uchihas had surrounded the Hokage and bombarded him with fire jutsus from every angle. Dodging them wasn't option. Fortunately, it wasn't his only option.

"Earth Release: Multiple Earth Dome Jutsu!"

Rocks appeared out of nowhere and formed once again a dome around the Hokage. However, another dome formed around the first one, and then a third one after that. The barrage of fireballs destroyed the outer dome, but left the other two relatively intact. Unbeknown to the Uchiha, Sarutobi was forming hand seals.

"Earth Release: Death Ring Jutsu!"

The second dome suddenly shattered in thousand of sharp rocks, and flew outwards in every direction, impaling the four Uchiha. Fugaku and the other two managed to avoid all the damage with a well placed Body Replacement, but the third one wasn't fast enough, and died the instant the sharp rocks pierced his body.

"Destroy that dome before he casts that jutsu again!" Fugaku ordered.

The other two Uchiha nodded, and threw several kunai with explosive tags attached to them at the dome. The explosions shattered the rock shelter. Sarutobi managed to escape the dome before the explosions could harm him, and wasting no time, made more hand seals.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Flame Bullet!" Hiruzen reared backwards, and exhaled a massive stream of white fire.

Unfortunately for the Hokage, Fugaku's Sharingan copied the attack.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Flame Bullet!"

The two streams of white fire clashed against each other, pushing back and forth, though eventually Sarutobi's attack appeared to be the strongest. Unfortunately for Sarutobi, this wasn't a one on one duel. The two remaining Uchihas ran parallel to the streams of fire and unleashed a barrage of shuriken towards the Hokage. Cursing inwards, he canceled his current jutsu and jumped, avoiding the shuriken shower -though some of them graced his skin- and nearly getting burnt by Fugaku's attack. Upon landing, Sarutobi nearly lost his balance and fell on one knee, and started to pant heavily.

"You know, Hiruzen, given all the trouble you gave me alone, I'm sure that, have you decided to keep some ANBU by your side, you would have come out of this alive. But this fight ends now," Fugaku stated.

"Why are you so sure, Fugaku-san? I already killed more than half of your men. What can possibly stop me from killing you and your two remaining squadmates?"

"For starters, your age. While you're strong, you clearly can't keep fighting for much longer. How old are you, seventy? People your age

aren't known for their resistance, you know. You barely have any chakra left.

"There's also all the blood you lost already due to the wounds made by the kunai and shuriken that you couldn't dodge. Your movements have become slower and sloppier as the fight went on. And you can't barely stand on your feet.

"And lastly, the fact that you didn't realize that I just trapped you in a genjutsu, and my men already moved for the kill," Fugaku said, making a hand seal, dispelling the genjutsu.

Suddenly, Sarutobi found his chest being impaled by two katanas, being held by Fugaku's two remaining men. The Adamantine Staff disappeared in a cloud of smoke. He felt what little energy had fading away, and in a few seconds, he fell to the ground, dead, not having enough time or energy to utter some last words.

"You've been a strong opponent, Hiruzen Sarutobi. History books will remember your valiant last stand. I can promise you that."

...

"Itachi-san... I'm afraid to tell you that the Third Hokage had died," Kurokaze's clone said.

"Damn!" Itachi loudly cursed. If the Hokage would have only lasted a couple more minutes... "How many men has my father with him?"

"Two. Itachi. Are you planning on fighting him? Even with that soldier pill, you're pretty worn out," the crow asked.

"Yes, I do. And he just fought the Third Hokage, he has to be way more drained than I am. I believe I can defeat him. With my father out, the Uchiha will be leaderless, the few remaining squads will be destroyed or forced to surrender, and the coup will come to an end."

"I see that you made your decision. Is there something else I can do to assist you?"

"Not anymore, Kurokaze-sama. You've been of great help here, but I can continue alone. Please keep watching over Shisui and Sasuke until this madness ends."

"As you wish, Itachi-san. Good luck," the crow clone said before flying away.

"Thank you."

Itachi couldn't help but wonder what was he going to tell Sasuke when everything was over. After all, he was going to kill their father. Even if it was for a greater good, he was afraid that Sasuke wouldn't see it that way.

"No, I can't think about that. If I'm not focused, I won't be able to put an end to this. This is all my fault for not acting sooner," Itachi inwardly said, pushing his conflicting thoughts aside. *"Forgive me, Sasuke."*

Upon reaching the Hokage Tower, Itachi pulled several shuriken from his tool pouch, grabbing a handful on each hand. In a few jumps, he managed to reach the roof, leap over his father and his two unsuspecting teammates, and unleash the rain of metal.

Fugaku managed to see Itachi in time, activated his sharingan, and using his katana, deflected the shurikens aimed at him. The other two Uchiha, their guards lowered due to their apparent victory, and their senses momentarily dulled by the exhaustion and wounds received, didn't notice the newcomer and died almost instantly. Itachi landed in front of him, his katana on hand.

"Look who decided to show up," Fugaku spat in disgust. "But I'm afraid that you're too late, son. The old regime is no more."

"To save the Hokage, maybe. But to end this madness, not even by a long shot," Itachi calmly replied. "I've already killed half the clan, the other half being dealt with by Konoha's forces as we speak. Sorry father, but you lost already. And now... I shall execute you for starting this insurrection against Konoha, killing the Hokage, and causing the death of so many Konoha ninjas."

Fugaku's face turned into an angry grimace. "You insolent child. I knew you were rebellious, but to see such a betrayal coming from my own flesh and blood... the others were right about you. I merely banished you because I thought that you only needed some time alone to get your thoughts in order. But yes, I was too soft. If you weren't my son. I would probably have thrown you into a cell and tossed the key away. Which is what I should have done in the first place!"

"I'm not a traitor, father. My loyalty is, has been, and will always be towards the village. It is you who betrayed Konoha by sparking this insurrection that won't bring anything good for any of the parties involved. Why did you do it, father?"

"Why? WHY? I did it for you, you ungrateful child! For both you and Sasuke! To give the clan a better future! The Uchiha Clan would wither and die under the constant oppression of Konoha! But now... you just doomed all of us."

"Stop pinning the blame of your actions on me, father. This was never meant to end well. I merely accelerated the inevitable and cut some losses. Had I not done anything, this would have degenerated into a full on civil war that would end up with Konoha's destruction. My only regret is not acting sooner."

"If I can't have Konoha... then Konoha won't have the Sharingan anymore. I'll gather the survivors, and start over again somewhere else. We will even create our own village. The Uchiha clan will thrive again."

"You are right that the Uchiha will thrive again. But they won't do it under your command," Itachi firmly stated as he raised his katana. "The time for words has passed. Not it's time for you to pay for your treason."

"No, it's time for me to correct my mistakes! I won't let you jeopardize the future of our -no, of *my* clan!"

Father and son dashed towards each other, staring each other in the eyes. When they were within their striking range, they moved their blades; Itachi's aimed at Fugaku's gut, and Fugaku's aimed at Itachi's neck. Fugaku's sword hit its mark the first. Itachi was stopped on his tracks the moment Fugaku's blade jammed on his neck.

"I'm, sorry, son," a single tear fell from Fugaku's eye. He suddenly felt his eyes burning, as if his Sharingan changed into something else...

However, Itachi suddenly turned into a murder of crows that flew away in every direction, and Fugaku saw a blade bursting through his chest. His heart had been pierced.

"It's me who is sorry..." Itachi replied, tears coming from his eyes.

As life started to slowly leave his body, the soon to be former Uchiha patriarch was invaded by an overwhelming sense of regret, as if the hate and anger towards Konoha that filled his heart and mind was dispelled, and could see things as they were. And realized that both Hiruzen and Itachi's words were right.

" *Why is only in death that I find clarity...?*" Fugaku bitterly thought. "Itachi... take care of Sasuke..."

"I will, father."

And thus, Fugaku Uchiha left the world of the living.

Itachi removed his hands from his Katana's handles, and Fugaku's lifeless body fell on his face on the ground. Itachi also fell on his knees, and started to cry inconsolably. All the rage, all the sorrow, all the emotions that he had been bottled for so much time couldn't be held anymore. But his grief was interrupted by a sharp pain attacking his eyes. They felt like they were burning. The same feeling that his father experienced seconds before dying.

He then remembered a conversation he had with Shisui about the Sharingan evolving after experiencing the loss of a loved one.

Itachi had awakened the Mangekyo Sharingan.

"Urgggghhhh..." a soft groan snapped Itachi out of his trance. He turned around, and saw that it came from the Hokage.

"Hokage-sama? Are you alive!?" Itachi shouted as he rushed towards the body of the fallen Hokage. He got no answer, but Sarutobi moved a little. "O-Okay, try to keep your energy, I'll find some help!" Itachi picked some of his own blood and made several hand seals. "Summonig Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, one of Kurokaze's clones appeared.

"So soon? What's going on, Itachi-san?" the black bird said, before noticing the dying Hokage.

"Find a medic, please! We don't have much time!"

"Yes, immediately," Noting there was no time to ask questions, Kurokaze flew away, while mentally transmitting the orders to the rest of his clones.

Much to Itachi's bewilderment, a minute later one of the crows returned, carrying a large slug between his claws.

...

The sun was started to emerge from the east.

While Tsunade and Shizune were channeling their chakra through the Immense Healing Network, they were surprised to see one of the Katsuyu clones crawling as fast as she could towards them.

"Tsuande-sama! Shizune-san!" the small slug said. "The coup d'etat has been stopped. Combats had ceased already. We have healed all the wounded and there are no more people in danger," the slug announced.

"Those are good news indeed! Thanks for your help again, Katsuyu-sama!" Shizune smiled for the first time since the coup began. Then, she looked back at Tsunade, who looked like he was going to collapse at anytime soon. "Come on Tsunade-sama, we need to take you to the hospital."

"The kids..." Tsunade murmured. "Check the kids... first..."

"R-Right... I'll be back in a minute!"

Shizune went back into the house, and much to her relief she saw that the secret trapdoor remained intact. She unlocked the seals, and entered the shelter. What she saw there was so cute, she had to restrain herself from squeeing.

The three kids were asleep on a couch, Naruto in the middle, with Hagane and Kaida resting their heads on Naruto's shoulders, with Naruto's arms wrapped around each of them. Naruto had an open book on his lap.

"Naruto did his best to try to make his siblings not to panic. Oh, you're such a good big brother..." the medic thought, as her mouth formed a sweet smile. *"It almost pain me having to wake you up..."*

After waking the kids up, the four of them headed outside, and much to their horror, they saw Tsunade, lying on the ground, motionless.

"Tsunade-sama!"

"MOM!"

"She's still alive," the Katsuyu clone quickly said, as if guessing their collective thoughts. "But her chakra is nearly depleted. She needs assistance as soon as possible."

Shizune nodded. "Come on kids, help me bring your mom to the hospital!"

...

Sasuke awoke next day as usual. He got dressed and got out of his room. His house seemed unusually silent. The young Uchiha felt that there was something wrong going on.

"Mother? Father?" Sasuke asked, but got no response. Weird, his parents always got up at least an hour before he did.

He went to the lower floor and inspected the rest of the house, and found it empty. Then, he heard a noise coming from upstairs. The black haired boy rushed back to the upper floor, and saw Itachi coming in through one of the windows.

"Itachi?" Sasuke asked, puzzled. He would be thrilled to see his brother if it wasn't for the fact that his clothes were soaked in blood, his face was red, and his entire body was trembling. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Sasuke... let's go down. There's... there's something important I need to tell you."

That morning, Sasuke awakened his Sharingan.

...

Thanks to Itachi and Tsunade's efforts, the Uchiha coup d'etat was suffocated by the time the sun rose, and many people were saved from what would have been a certain death. Among them was Hiruzen Sarutobi, while in critical condition, managed to keep his life

thanks to the Katsuyu clone Kurokaze managed to bring, until actual medics arrived.

Many couriers were sent to find the Jonin outside the village, urging them to drop -or finish if they could- whatever missions they were doing and return at once in order to help with the reconstruction efforts.

Upon hearing the news of their failure and their leader's death, the few Uchihas left decided to go down fighting rather than surrender, since they knew that they would be executed anyway for committing an act of high treason. The mercenaries and criminals who didn't escape Konoha when it became obvious that they were fighting a losing battle decided to surrender instead. Those who had confirmed kills would be executed, while the rest would be sent to prison.

A mass funeral was held in honor of all the people, both ninja and civilian, who were killed during the insurrection. While many people died, the most notable deaths were those of the clan leaders such as Hiashi Hyuga or Inoichi Yamanaka.

Naruto did his best to comfort Hinata, who, like her mother and little sister, spent the entire ceremony crying their eyes out. Hinata's grief was contagious, since Naruto ended up crying as well, even if he barely knew Hiashi. It could be said that he could feel Hinata's pain.

Naruto also recognized three of his classmates, Shikamaru Nara, Choji Akimichi and Ino Yamanaka, crying profusely as they were standing in front of Inoichi's grave. While Ino's grief was understandable, he didn't understand why Shikamaru and Choji were crying like that. Naruto didn't know that the three clans were very close, and Inoichi was an honorary uncle to both Shikamaru and Choji.

There was also another funeral held after the main one, for Fugaku and Mikoto Uchiha, at Itachi's request. Only Itachi, Shisui, and Sasuke, the three remaining Uchihas alive, attended the ceremony.

...

After the coup was quelled, there was an air of dread and hopelessness impregnating the very air of Konoha, something that it wasn't felt since the Kyubi attacked eight years ago. The near death of the Third Hokage was a huge blow to the population, especially the ninjas. Not only was he loved and respected, but unlike his successor, who was killed by (what most people believe it was) a mindless monster, Hiruzen Sarutobi was almost killed by the head of one of the most respected clans of Konoha.

Besides that, many people couldn't help but wonder what was going to be of Konoha now. Losing one of its strongest clans was nothing but the tip of the iceberg. The Hyuga clan, who was the most numerous clan of Konoha, had lost nearly a forty percent of its members. And Konoha as a whole had lost almost thirty percent of its manpower, most of them Chunin and Special Jonin.

This losses, coupled with the lack of a Hokage, made many people fear that other villages would take advantage of this and invade them. The only thing they could do was pray for such thing not to happen, and that Konoha would elect a Hokage soon that would recover their former glory.

...

Two days after the coup d'etat

Jiraiya rushed through the hospital halls, fearing for the worst. The Toad Sannin had an unpleasant sense of deja vu when a ninja courier ran into him, and delivered the news of the Uchiha coup d'etat, and the critical state of the Third Hokage. While the news were worrying on their own, the courier also mentioned that Tsunade, after being seriously wounded, used her Immense Healing Network to help all the people fighting against the Uchiha and their mercenaries. She was now in critical condition as well.

Eight years ago he lost one of his students. He could possibly lose his sensei, whom he loved like the father he never met. He *couldn't* lose his wife too.

After making sure that he was in the right wing, Jiraiya started to check the door numbers until he found the right door. He slammed the door open, and much to his relief he saw that his former teammate, current wife and mother of his children was alive and seemingly well. Shizune, Naruto, Hagane and Kaida were present too, but he wouldn't register their presence until later.

"Dad!" Naruto said, perking up.

"Hey, look who's back," Tsunade weakly mentioned, looking at Jiraiya with a small smile. Jiraiya didn't say anything, and rushed to hug her. "AWWW! NOT SO HARD!" Tsunade shouted, wincing in pain. "I've been impaled, you know!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Jiraiya frantically replied, breaking the hug. "It's that, when they told me what happened to you, I feared for the worst, and seeing you alive and well..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Tsunade replied dismissively. "Though they mentioned that it will be a few weeks before they let me out of here. Yipee yay," she added unenthusiastically.

Jiraiya smiled in return. Then he noticed something weird about Tsunade's forehead. Mostly, her Strength of a Hundred Seal looked different. It was bigger than usual, with uneven sides and angles. It almost looked like a badly done drawing.

"Tsunade, what happened to your seal?"

"Oh, this?" she asked, pointing at her forehead. "Well, Kaida was sad for me 'losing my diamond' so-"

"So I made her a new one!" the white haired girl proudly said, while holding a purple marker. "And mom made me another one too!"

Jiraiya noticed that his daughter also had a diamond drawn on her forehead, but this one looked better drawn. Jiraiya couldn't help but smile at her daughter's cutesy antics.

"Jiraiya, can you put some privacy seals around the room? I need to talk you about something," the Slug Princess asked.

Jiraiya nodded, and after a few minutes, the Toad Sage indicated that it was now safe to talk without fear of being spied.

"Tsunade-sama, do you want me to take the kids outside?" Shizune asked, guessing what the topic of the conversation was going to be.

"Yes, please. Take them to eat something. You should eat too, Shizune." Shizune nodded, and left Jiraiya and Tsunade alone in the room. "After Shizune and I dealt with the Uchiha sent to 'arrest' us, somebody else appeared. A masked man wearing an Akatsuki cloak. Said man had a Sharingan and could use Wood Release."

"What!?" Jiraiya asked in disbelief. "But that's-"

"And that's not the worst part. The man flat out admitted that he was the one behind the Kyubi attack eight years ago. He said that he was using the coup d'etat as a smokescreen to get to Naruto and finish the job."

Jiraiya was speechless. He knew that the person behind such acts had to be someone powerful, but this was beyond his wildest guesses. He couldn't help but feel worried about Naruto if such a man was after him. Naruto needed to be stronger. Hell, *Konoha* as a whole needed to be stronger. Fortunately, somebody was about to handle him the necessary tools for such task.

There was a knock at the door. Jiraiya deactivated the privacy seals, while Tsunade told whoever was outside to come in. It was an ANBU with a bear mask.

"Jiraiya-sama, the Council of Elders requires your presence at the Hokage Tower," the ANBU announced.

The Toad Sanin groaned, while a frown appeared on his face. "Ugh, wonder what those old farts want now."

"Sarutobi-sensei is no longer able to continue as a Hokage. It isn't obvious? They want you to take his place," Tsunade mentioned.

"Hahahaha! Me, Hokage, that's a good one, Hime!" Jiraiya replied, genuinely chuckling. "Thanks for the joke, I really needed to laugh. Anyway, I'll come to see you later," Jiraiya gave Tsunade a kiss on her lips before leaving the room.

...

Hokage Tower

"Oh Kami, you guys aren't joking!" Jiraiya's face turned into a grimace.

Sitting in front of him were Homura Mitokado and Koharu Utatane, Sarutobi's former teammates, and later councilors after retiring from ninja duty.

"Did we look like we were joking?" Homura crossed his arms, annoyed.

"Well, you guys look like you don't even know the meaning of the word 'fun', that's why it was all the more shocking," Jiraiya retorted, making the elders to frown.

"Listen, Jiraiya, we lost two Hokages in less than a decade, not to mention our recent losses. We need to appoint a new Hokage as soon as possible, and sadly for everybody, you're our best candidate," Koharu said.

"Come on, I'd suck at being Hokage. There has to be a candidate better than me," Jiraiya protested.

"Danzo-san also talked with us about giving him our support to become Hokage."

"A better candidate that's not a sociopath."

"Listen, we aren't going to support you because we like you, or even because we think that you'll make a great Hokage. We are going to do it because it is what Hiruzen wanted," Homura calmly explained.

"Listen, I know that Sarutobi-sensei had faith in me as a ninja, but me being Hokage? I find that hard to believe. Or did he wake up from his coma already and told you that?"

"Then it's a good thing you don't have to believe just us," Homura replied while leaving a scroll in front of the Sannin. "We found this on Hiruzen's desk. Maybe you should read it."

Skeptical, Jiraiya took the scroll and opened it. It appeared to be Sarutobi's last will. The Sannin started to read.

...

If you're reading this, then I'm more than likely dead, probably by the hand of Fugaku Uchiha, or one of his clansmen.

Many years ago, we had some evidence that suspected that at least an Uchiha was responsible of the Kyubi attack eight years ago. Some believed that it was the whole clan. I didn't share this opinion, and even started an investigation to exonerate the clan.

Still, it seemed that word of this was made public. The populace of Konoha distrusted the Uchiha, and the Uchiha resented Konoha in return. I tried my best to solve the situation peacefully, but my efforts failed. But then again, I can't think what I could have done save have all the clan swiftly executed by a group of assassins. And honestly, I can't see myself doing that and continue to be able to sleep at night.

But that doesn't change the fact that I failed this village. Now I see that maybe I should have never taken back the Hokage's hat after I was unable to handle the Third Ninja World War better. I tried to think of this a second chance to fix my past mistakes, but in the end all I did was make even more mistakes. Now I see that I should have appointed either Jiraiya or Tsunade as the Fifth Hokage when they returned to take care of Minato's son, Naruto.

But now, I'm going to fix one of those mistakes. Jiraiya, Tsunade, I know that sooner or later you will be reading this. I want one of you to take a step forward and lead the village. Both of you have the perfect combination of power, experience and wisdom I like to think I have, but without my old age to hinder you. You may think that this is too much for you, but I have faith in you. Konoha needs you more than ever. And if the years you've spent here didn't reawaken your love for this village... do it at least for Naruto. Try to keep the village in one piece until he's old enough to take the mantle. I believe that there's some truth behind that little rascal's boasts.

I feel that Fugaku and his Uchiha are getting closer, so I'll wrap this up. First of all, do not lose hope, and keep the Will of Fire in your hearts. That's the key for Konoha to recover the glory it will inevitably lose this night. Second, I know for a fact that at least two Uchihas are not part of this insurrection. Do not ostracize them (and any other Uchiha not involved in this) or blame them for the sins of their misguided clansmen. And lastly, since I won't see them again, I want you to tell my sons and grandchildren that I loved them more than anything, and that both Biwako and me will watch over them from the Pure World.

Hiruzen Sarutobi, Third Hokage of Konoha

...

The two councilors watched intently how Jiraiya's expression changed after he read the whole letter, especially the part that talked about him and Tsunade. Once they guessed that the Sannin finished reading, they spoke again.

"Like the letter says, the other candidate for Hokage would be your wife, but she will be stuck on a hospital bed for quite some time, if what the ANBU told us is right. And we can't wait that much," Koharu said.

"Besides, we also believe that taking Tsunade away from the hospital to place her on the Hokage's office would be a disservice to the village. Not only our healthcare has improved considerably since she took charge of the hospital, but the number of medic-nin, as well as their overall skill has increased considerably since her return," Homura explained.

"You made it sound as if I only sit at home and write my novels. I do work for the village too, you know! I'm the main intelligence gathered of the village!" Jiraiya protested.

"True. But I'm sure that you can send somebody else to meet your spies, or train other people in the art of collecting information. But we can't just ask a medic of Tsunade's caliber to stay at an office doing paperwork."

Jiraiya groaned loudly. Part of him was already regretting coming back to the village. Taking care of Naruto was doable, but being Hokage? Not in a thousand years. But then again, the thought of handing the Hokage mantle to Danzo was... nightmarish, to say the least. Sighing in defeat, Jiraiya was forced to admit that he had only one choice.

"Alright. I'll become the new Hokage."

"Excellent. We'll announce your appointment this afternoon."

...

Later that day, sometime during afternoon

Jiraiya had never been so nervous in his whole life. Well, maybe the day before his wedding. But then again he was only marrying to one

woman. This was like being married to the entire village. While the two Elders were talking to the people gathered around the tower, Shizune was adjusting his robes and making sure that he was presentable. Naruto, Kaida and Hagane were present as well.

"So, how do I look?" Jiraiya asked.

"Absolutely imposing, Jiraiya-sama," Shizune beamed.

Jiraiya, however, frowned in return. "Listen Shizune, I'm still trying to work out what kind of relationship you and Tsunade-hime have, but drop the honorifics when talking to me, okay? Jiraiya is enough," the Sannin replied. He really wanted to tell her that for a long time.

"Given that you're about to become Hokage, I don't see that happening anytime soon," Shizune retorted, never losing her smile. Jiraiya's scowl deepened.

"And without further ado, meet the Fifth Hokage!" Homura's voice said.

"That's your cue, Jiraiya-sama. Go and impress them!" Shizune patted Jiraiya on the back.

"Yeah, you can do it dad!" Hagane cheered.

"We will be here cheering you!" Kaida added.

"Soon you'll be the second best Hokage this village ever had!" Naruto said.

Jiraiya looked at him, puzzled. "Second best? Who's the best then...? Oh, never mind, I see what you did there."

Naruto chuckled in return.

Wasting no time, Jiraiya walked towards the edge of the tower, and took a look at the huge crowd below him. They were silent, expecting him to say something. He'll better not keep them waiting.

"People of Konoha!" Jiraiya began his speech. "Usually, the appointment of a new Hokage is a reason to celebrate. Yet I can see that nobody here feels in the mood to celebrate anything. Konoha went through one of its darkest moments second only to the Kyubi attack. Many good ninja died. Parents lost children and children lost their parents.

"However, I ask you not to be consumed by grief and stand strong! Because we already went through something similar not too long ago, and we were back on our feet in no time, and this time it won't be different! Our beloved Third Hokage, my sensei, might not be with us anymore, but his will, the Will of Fire, still is! The Third Hokage would have all of you to move on with your lives, to be happy, to keep the village strong and running!

"That's why I'm going to honor my master's last request, and become Hokage, and work as hard as I can to honor his legacy! And that's why you're going to do likewise, so everybody who wants to harm us know that this village can resist anything!"

People started to cheer loudly once Jiraiya finished his speech. All present members of Jiraiya's family smiled at him.

"He's always been such a good orator. It's a pity Tsunade-sama isn't here to see him. She would have loved it," Shizune thought.

...

Orochimaru's Main Base, Land of the Rice Fields

After much time waiting, Obito appeared from his trademark swirling vortex, and looked as if he had been trampled by an stampede of mad elephants. His cloak was completely torn, his mask was nearly broken, his body had multiple bruises, and a whole arm was missing. Another Akatsuki member was expecting his arrival.

"Welcome back, Obito-kun," Orochimaru sardonically greeted, chuckling. "It seems that Tsunade-hime made a number on you,

didn't she? Kukuku... first Minato-kun, and now her. You need to pick your battles better, Obito-kun."

"Shut up!" Obito growled as he took his broken mask and tossed it away. "And prepare the operation table!"

"Yes, it looks like you need some surgery as if there's no tomorrow."

"You know, Orochimaru, if I didn't need you, I would have killed you long time ago," Obito snarled, angry at the Snake Sannin's taunts.

"If you think so," Orochimaru shrugged, at no point dropping his unnerving smile. "While I don't need to ask how the main mission went, did you at least get something of use out of this mess?"

Without saying anything, Obito pulled out three sealing scrolls from inside his torn cloak and tossed them to Orochimaru. The yellow-eyed man unsealed its contents. The first one was a pile of Byakugan eyes. The second was just a single pair of Byakugan eyes. And the last one was a single Sharingan eye.

"A nice loot, but I think mine is better. Is there a reason for these Byakugan are separated from the rest?"

"Yes. They're the eyes of the Hyuga clan head. You can have some of the others if you want, but I need those eyes specifically, so don't touch them."

While Orochimaru was tempted to ask more about that, he felt that Obito wouldn't be in the mood to satisfy his curiosity. Not that it mattered, he could learn about Obito's secret plans on his own later.

"By the way, how about the modifications I made to your body? Even if they weren't of any help in the end, did you notice any improvements?"

"Yes. It took me much less effort to use Wood Release, but I still can't give my jutsus all the power I'd like."

"Baby steps, Obito-kun, baby steps. Sometimes science doesn't advance as fast as we wish. That's why my first priority was to find a way to prolong my lifespan beyond its natural limit."

"Then you should make to find a way to improve my body even further your first priority now. At least, as long as you want me to continue providing you with more genetic material from Hashirama."

"You hurt my feelings, Obito-kun. My work always produces the best results. So, what shall it be, the Byakugan, or the Sharingan?"

"The latter."

"I see. Do you miss having the two of them? Because I certainly would have chose the former. For additional versatility, you know"

"I have my reasonsn, Orochimaru. Now prepare the damn operation table."

Of course, Obito wasn't going to tell the snake Sannin about Shisui's eye special properties. Nor anybody in Akatsuki, for that matter. Trust wasn't something you could find in an organization almost exclusively composed by criminals.

A few minutes later, Obito was strapped to the operation table. Orochimaru looked at him from above with a sadistic smile. If only all his test subjects had Obito's enthusiasm and eagerness...

"Alright, let's start with the eye, then I'll fix the rest of your body. Do you want anesthetics?" Orochimaru pulled out a syringe, full of a greenish liquid.

"You should know better already," Obito spat at him.

"No anesthetics then," the Snake Sannin put the syringe away, and pulled out an scalpel. "Then let me tell you that this is going to hurt a lot. But you should know that already, shouldn't you?"

"Cease your attempts at intimidating me, snake. I don't feel pain anymore."

"Kukuku... I wonder what our leader would say about that."

Author's Note: Despite what this chapter might imply, the arc hasn't ended yet. But don't worry, there won't be anymore fights or potential deaths. The next chapter, unimaginatively titled "Aftermath", will deal on how the Uchiha Coup D'etat has changed Konoha, even if you can see it on this chapter as well. Even then, there are still A LOT of things that need to be wrapped up before we can move into the next arc.

I know that compared to the time he had to fight Orochimaru alongside the zombie versions of Hashirama and Tobirama,, maybe fighting Fugaku and some of his elites wouldn't be much trouble and thus he shouldn't have lost, but I thought that, with even greater numbers (remember, eight versus one), Sarutobi's old age, and the fact that the he lost a lot of blood due the wounds he received, I thought his defeat wouldn't be too far fetched. Plus he killed five of his attackers, so it's not that he went down easily.

Speaking of which, it's not hard to guess that I was originally planning to kill Sarutobi. But I enjoyed writing him far more than I had anticipated, so I decided to keep him alive for a little longer. I especially liked his interaction and conversations with Jiraiya, which will continue into the future, but now with a completely inverted dynamic, given Jiraiya's promotion.

Anyway, I hoped that you liked the climax of this arc. Until we wait for the denouement next week, remember to leave a review! Reviews make me very, very, very happy!

The Uchiha Coup D'etat, Part IV

Author's notes: And with this chapter, the Uchiha Coup Arc comes to an end. I'm glad that it's finally over, because this arc was way darker than the rest of the story, both the chapters preceding it and those who will follow it, and I'm not usually comfortable writing dark stuff, even if sometimes is neccessary.

See you at the bottom as usual. Enjoy the chapter.

Chapter 12:

The Uchiha Coup, Part IV: Aftermath

or

Shall we start rebuilding Konoha?

The first law Jiraiya passed wasn't exactly well received, though then again, he already expected that reaction. The Clan Discrimination Bill was a law that harshly punished those who attacked, discriminated or ostracized anybody for belonging to a certain clan. It was painfully obvious that, even if it affected all clans, the point of this law was to protect the last three remaining Uchihas from the wrath of the rest of Konoha, particularly of those who lost somebody during the failed coup d'etat.

In fact, once the news that Itachi, Shisui and Sasuke were still alive, a mob formed headed to the Uchiha Compound (where the three of them were at the moment), ready to kill them, and eradicate the threat of the "Red Eyed Demons". Fortunately, the ANBU acted quickly and dispersed the mob before they could cause any harm. Jiraiya couldn't help but think that if it wasn't for Tsunade and him, similar mobs would have formed to kill Naruto. Maybe that was the

reason as for why Sarutobi wanted to enact a law to stop people from even mentioning the Kyubi.

Jiraiya had a meeting with the two older Uchihas in order to discuss the future of the clan, which turned out more... interesting than he had anticipated. Shisui told him about his failed role in stopping the coup, and how Danzo had stolen his eye in order to obtain its brainwashing powers. But even after Jiraiya ordered Danzo's installations to be searched, he never found the eye. Naturally, Danzo denied everything.

Given that Danzo has been very vocal about how they shouldn't trust the Uchihas, people weren't exactly pleased either with Jiraiya siding with the latter over the former.

Jiraiya appointed Shisui, being the older at twenty two, the new head of the Uchiha Clan. His first action was, as expected, to rescind Fugaku's banishment of Itachi. Shisui also handled most of the Uchiha Clan's properties to Konoha -including the entire Uchiha Compound- as a compensation for the coup, while in turn asked for a new house for them to live. Jiraiya bought them a four room penthouse near the southern gate. They moved there as soon as possible, since Shisui liked to see their new home as the symbol of a new beginning for the Uchiha.

Still, everything was far from perfect for the remaining Uchihas, especially the youngest one.

"Sasuke?" Itachi asked, not daring to enter his brother's room, despite the door being open. Sasuke's room, while big, only had a bed, a closet and a small bedside table. Sasuke was sitting on his bed, looking at the window. "I was wondering... would you like to go training with me?"

In the past, Sasuke would have jumped in joy whenever Itachi mentioned training together. But now, he hardly reacted.

"I see, you're not in the mood... so I saw that we have almost no food yet. Wanna go to eat out, the three of us together?"

Once again, it was as if Sasuke didn't even hear him. Despite wanting to get Sasuke to open up to him, Itachi took the hint and decided to leave.

"Well... if you ever want to talk to me about anything... just tell me, okay?" Itachi pleaded, hoping for an answer that never came.

Itachi left Sasuke's room, and went to the living room, which was rather big, but looked empty due to its bare furniture. At the very least, it had a couple of couches, one of them being occupied by Shisui.

"So, how did it go? Any progress?" the one-eyed Uchiha asked.

"No, still the same. But I can't blame him. How do you react when your older brother kills your father and half your clan?"

"Hey, don't beat yourself over it. He'll realize that you did the right thing. Right now, he needs some time alone to cope with this and deal with his feelings. Once he gets ready, he'll open up to you."

"You sound really sure."

"Come on Itachi, your brother worships the ground you walk on. He'll get out of his trance sooner or later."

"Still, I'm afraid that Sasuke will never be the same again. Nobody can go through an experience like this and remain unaffected. Things will never be like they were in the past. And that's not even taking into account the fact that almost all of Konoha hates us."

"So we will work to make things better! Come on Itachi, I know that what you did would leave anybody scarred for life, but you need to be strong. Sasuke isn't going to get any better if his big brother is so sullen."

"And why are you so chipper? The guy who gouged out your eye got away scot free. I'd think you'd be seething in rage right now."

"And I would be... if I didn't have a date with the prettiest medic of Konoha," Shisui announced, his mouth forming a huge smile.

Itachi raised an eyebrow. "Shizune accepted going on a date with you? Did she lose a bet or something?"

Shisui crossed his arms. "You know Itachi, normally I wouldn't leave that jab unanswered, but that also means that you still have some sense of humor left, so there may be hope for you."

Itachi couldn't help but chuckle in response.

"By the way, I recently got a message from Nekobaa. She accepted my proposal of moving her shop to Konoha."

"Really? Those are good news," Itachi replied, smiling a little. "Right now, we're going to need all the possible allies."

"She said she was also doing it for Tamaki. That abandoned city wasn't place for a little girl. And she even said that she might enroll Tamaki on the Academy!"

"That's even better. Sasuke definitely could use a friend like her."

"Now that you mention it, Sasuke never made any friends in the Academy, right?" Shisui asked.

"Sadly, no. He was more preoccupied with his ninja training, and considered socializing a waste of time."

"That's awful. Maybe if he had some friends, they could help him deal with all this crap."

Itachi was pensive for a few seconds, when suddenly he realized something. "Shisui?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever thought in getting an eye transplant? Because I'm sure Konoha has now plenty of Sharingan that nobody is using."

Shisui chuckled. "Funny thing, Shizune asked me the same. And the answer is that I don't want the eye of some stranger in my face, it feels creepy. I'll wait until I recover my other eye. In the meantime, I'll manage with one eye."

"That may never happen."

"Then so be it."

...

Hiruzen Sarutobi slowly opened his eyes. He felt very weak. No, weak wasn't the word. He felt... numb. As if his brain barely noticed the rest of his body. Still, the sensation felt familiar. He probably guessed that it was the work of the many medicaments running through his body, as well as painkillers. Looking around, he realized that he was on a hospital room, lying on a bed.

And sitting besides that bed was a large, white haired man, glaring daggers at him.

"Took you long enough to wake up, you old monkey," Jiraiya spat at him. Sarutobi could see that his former student was angry at him, though he could also discern that it was the kind of anger born of worry.

Sarutobi chuckled. "It's that a way to talk to your sensei and Hokage, Jiraiya?" the Hokage weakly asked.

"It would be, if you were still Hokage," Jiraiya tossed a scroll at him. "You're in front of your new boss, sensei. And *you* tell your sons and grandkids that you love them."

Sarutobi opened the scroll, and immediately recognized it as his last will. "How can you have this? This was meant to unseal the moment I died."

"Oh, you were dead. For about three minutes, thanks Kami for our medics," Jiraiya said. Then his face morphed into a mask of fury. "What the hell were you thinking, sending your ANBU away and facing the Uchihas alone!? It's a miracle you're still alive!"

"Like I told Fugaku-san, I can defend myself, other people cannot," Hiruzen replied, meeting Jiraiya's angry stare with one of his own. "Speaking of which, what happened with him?"

"Dead. His brat killed him. As so are most of the Uchiha."

Sarutobi averted his gaze, and cursed inwardly. "That was... catastrophic, to say the least. Did at least any Uchiha survive?"

"Three, as far as we know: Fugaku's two brats, and Shisui. And hear this: Shisui claims that he was about to use some sort of Sharingan jutsu to stop the coup before it started, but he was assaulted by Danzo and stole one of his eyes. Do you know any of this?"

Sarutobi sighed, and looked at Jiraiya with sad eyes. "Unfortunately, yes. Shisui was my trump card against the Uchihas. It would be a way to stop the coup without spilling blood. Fugaku told me that the last time Shisui was seen he was talking with some ANBU. This confirms my fears..."

"I already had Danzo and his installations searched, but the eye did not appear. Danzo claims Shisui's lying. Still, I believe that after what you said Fugaku told you we have enough evidence of his treachery to put him out of commission."

"Sadly, I don't believe that the testimony of an Uchiha, especially of a dead one, will hold much weight now. We will get Danzo, but not now. Just keep a close eye on him. Sooner or later, he will make a mistake, then we will act."

"I see," Jiraiya said standing up. "I better go back to the tower. I have a big-ass pile of paperwork with my name on it, and those two old farts of your teammates aren't going to give me the time of the day if I don't get started already."

"Ah, paperwork. That's something I'm definitely not going to miss," Hiruzen replied with a cheeky smile.

"I hope you enjoy the hospital food, because you're going to stay here a long time, sensei," Jiraiya mentioned, smiling back at him. "I'll pay you a visit whenever I have some spare time."

...

The next few days were hellish for Jiraiya. Between meetings, passing laws, approving missions, relationships with other villages and many other duties he had now, he swore he would go crazy at any time. He could almost hear the voice of Sarutobi, laughing at him from the hospital.

However, this particular meeting was something he was eager to get on with. In front of him was an androgynous looking boy -Jiraiya swore it was a girl before being corrected by the boy himself- who was a similar age to Naruto. Besides him, there was a tall, muscular man, completely wrapped in chains, and held in place by two ANBU.

"So, Zabuza Momochi," Jiraiya started, crossing his fingers under his chin. "You're quite far away from the Land of Water. Since your coup d'etat on Kirigakure failed, were you trying your luck in Konoha?"

"I have no interest in Konoha, Jiraiya. This was merely a job," Zabuza replied, not losing his cool. "By the way, what a surprise to see you here. My bingo book didn't say that you were back in Konoha, and as a Hokage no less."

"My promotion is a recent one. I got the job because your client put my boss out of commission. And honestly, I would have you executed right now and your head sent on a wrapped box to Yagura

for helping the Uchiha. But luckily for you, this child here might save your sorry ass."

"Ah, yes, because of his Ice Release, right? Yes, Konoha has quite the fascination with the Bloodline Limits. Turn out Haku is an even better tool than I imagined," Zabuza said, chuckling.

After having his brain scanned by T&I the ANBU found the boy on a tent in the outskirts of Konoha. Apparently the kid was a survivor of the infamous bloodline purges from the Land of Water, and the last of his clan, no less. The opportunity to have another Bloodline Limit on Konoha was just too good to pass.

"So, the Demon of the Hidden Mist, your subordinates the Demon Brothers... is he the Demon Kid or something?" Jiraiya retorted. Then he regretted using that nickname, given that it was exactly how some villagers referred to Naruto.

"It would have been, had I have more time to train him properly," Zabuza replied.

"You're one of the last persons I'd imagine taking care of child, Zabuza."

"Haku has powers that I could have used in my goals, and I believe that you're going to do the same, right Jiraiya? Come on, let's stop beating around the bush and tell me what do you plan to do with us already."

"First of all, it's *Hokage-sama* to you, scum," Jiraiya spat, scowling at the Kiri Swordsman, while projecting some killing intent. "Now, this is what we're going to do. From the time being, you will be send to jail, and Haku here will attend our ninja Academy. Once Haku graduates, and if there's no incidents while you're there, you'll be out on probation. While on probation, you will carry out missions for the village. Once I believe your debt with the village is paid, both you and Haku will be released, free of any charge and to go wherever you please. As you can see, it's a pretty reasonable deal."

Naturally, Jiraiya didn't mention that his plan relied on the possibility of Haku growing attached to Konoha and not wanting to leave with Zabuza once the swordsman's probation ends. Zabuza already guessed this, but some things are better left unsaid.

"What if I refuse?" Zabuza tentatively asked.

"Then you will be immediately executed, and Haku will be sent to a certain... acquaintance of mine which will brainwash him into an obedient drone, and once he becomes old enough he'll be forced to have children with several women of Konoha in order to produce Ice Release users. Not a very good alternative for either of you.

"But this isn't just your choice," Jiraiya stared at Haku in the eyes. "What do you say, kid? Do you want to save your pal and become a Konoha ninja?"

Haku was trembling. He looked at Zabuza with fearful eyes as if looking for his approval. The Demon of the Hidden Mist merely nodded, and Haku echoed the gesture.

"Yes, I'd like to become a ninja of Konoha. But please, do not harm Zabuza-sama!" Haku pleaded.

"Zabuza won't receive any harm. He's going to go to prison. While it's hardly a pleasant place, I'm sure his reputation will keep him safe," Jiraiya said as he made a hand motion, and the ANBU took Zabuza away. Another couple of ninjas entered the office, a brown haired man that couldn't stop coughing, and a woman with long, purple hair.

"These are Hayate Gekko and Yugao Uzuki. They volunteered to take care of you as long as you stay here. I trust you'll be fine with them."

Haku looked at his new guardians, who smiled at him. Still, Haku's sadness did not disappear. He then turned back at the Hokage.

"Can I visit Zabuza-sama?"

"Yes, you can, as long as your legal guardians allow it," Jiraiya was already expecting that question, and had the prison visiting schedule on hand. "From what I can read here, you can visit him on Tuesdays and Fridays. Visits will be up to forty five minutes. Do you have anymore questions?"

Haku shook his head. "No, that's all, Hokage-sama."

"If that's the case, you may as well start to get acquitted with your new legal guardians."

Yugao took a step and grabbed Haku's hand. "Come on Haku-kun, now we'll show you your new home. You'll love living with us."

"I'm sure I will, Yugao-san," Haku replied, thought deep down he doubted it.

...

As Naruto walked towards the Hyuga compound, part of him screamed to turn back and return home. He knew that the Hyuga clan was among those most damaged by the coup, and they probably weren't in the mood to greet visitors. And even if they did, he wasn't sure if Hinata would want to see him.

But then again... he *needed* to see Hinata. Not because of him, but to check how she was doing and make sure that she knew he was there to support her. Seeing the compound entering his field of vision, Naruto sighed.

" *Let's get this over with.* "

As expected, the gate was guarded by Tokuma Hyuga. Naruto smiled upon seeing that one of the few Hyuga he got to know besides Hinata and her immediate family managed to survive the debacle. He went to greet the gate sentinel.

"Hey, Tokuma! It's okay if I drop by?" Naruto asked, rubbing the back of his head. The Hyuga looked at him, and smiled.

"Of course, Naruto-san. You know you will always be welcomed here. Do you come here to see Hinata-sama?"

"Yeah. She was pretty down at the funeral, and I wanted to see how she's doing. Though maybe she doesn't want to see me..."

"Oh, I find that doubtful. While it's sure that Hinata-sama is taking Hiashi-sama's death as anybody would expect, I'm sure that seeing you would brighten her mood."

"Let's hope you're right," Naruto said, giving a hint of a smile. "If that's the case, then I won't keep her waiting."

As Naruto walked through the halls, he felt the compound was way more... empty than usual. The few Hyugas that ran into him often acknowledged him with a nod, but after asking them about Hinata, none of them gave him any clear answers. One of them told him that Hinata was in the main dojo training, but when he arrived there he found it empty.

"Are you looking for somebody?" a voice said behind him.

Naruto turned around, and saw another Hyuga. He was the boy Hinata would often spar against. Neji was his name, or so he thought.

"Yeah, I'm looking for Hinata. Do you know where she is?"

"Hinata-sama just finished her training, and is now having a bath. Hinata-sama likes to spend a long time in the bathtub, so I believe it will be at least half an hour until she's presentable," Neji explained. His tone was oddly neutral.

"I see..." Naruto said, rubbing the back of his head again. "Your name was Neji, right?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Did you... did you lose somebody the night the Uchihas attacked?"
Naruto asked.

Neji raised an eyebrow, taken aback by the boy's bluntness. But then again, whenever he heard his clansmen talking about Naruto, this was one of his perks they mentioned the most. The boy made quite an impression the first time Hinata brought him to the compound.

"No. Unless we count Hiashi-sama, my uncle. But then again, we were never exactly close, so his loss didn't have the same effect on me as if I lost my father."

"I didn't lose anybody either. Guess that we were luckier than Hinata."

"Luck has nothing to do with it. It was fate."

Naruto frowned. "Fate? You think Hinata's dad was meant to die?"

"I don't think it. I know it," Neji said, sure of himself.

"That's a bunch of nonsense! If Hinata's dad was predestined to die or something else, then he could have avoided it!"

"You're not getting it. I don't mean that I knew Hiashi-sama was going to die, but that his death was already set in motion by forces beyond our control, and there was nothing we could do about it."

"I'm not getting that either."

"Then allow me to use another example. Do you know about how our clan is divided?"

"Yeah. Hinata told me a bit about it, thought I didn't understand that either," Naruto replied, making Neji sigh.

"In that case I'll try to use the simplest terms possible. You see, in order to protect the secrets of the Byakugan, the clan is divided into two groups: the Main House and the Branch House. The Branch House is supposed to protect and serve members of the Main House. To ensure their obedience, and protect the Byakugan, we members of the Branch House wear the Caged Bird Seal," Neji pointed at the green seal on his forehead.

"Hey, I've been starting to study seals!" Naruto eagerly said. "What does your seal do?"

"When I die, the seal will destroy my Byakugan so enemies of Konoha won't be able to get it from my corpse. And a Main House member can use the seal to cause me an unbearable pain, should he or she choose to do it."

"But... that's horrible! Why do you allow such thing to happen?"

"Because we can't do nothing about it. You see, my father and Hiashi-sama were twins. But since Hiashi-sama was the older one, he got to be the clan heir, while his brother, my father, was marked with the seal, and made leader of the Branch House. That would mean that any children he had, namely me, would be fated to be part of the Branch House, and bear this cursed seal.

"Now, the night the Uchiha attacked, the Branch House members, such as my father, were tasked with protecting the children and the elderly from the Uchiha, and take them from the compound to one of the shelters, while the Main House members, such as Hiashi-sama, fought against the invaders. Many Main House members died that night, but almost no one from the Branch house.

"Had my father been born first, he would have died in place of Hiashi-sama. Do you understand it now?"

"I think I do. But I don't believe in that fate crap. So are you saying that me being Hokage or not has already been decided?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't worry if I were you. Your adoptive father has recently become Hokage, and his sensei was Hokage as well. Fate seems to be smiling at you in that regard, Naruto."

"That's nonsense! If dad became Hokage was because he worked hard to become an awesome ninja, not of because of that fate crap!"

"Believe what you want. That won't change the truth. By the way, your wait is already over," Neji said, looking at something or somebody behind Naruto. Naruto turned around, and saw Hinata in her usual clothes.

"Naruto-kun?"

"Hinata-sama, Naruto has come here to see you," Neji said, making a slight bow.

"Thanks for keeping him company, Neji-niisan."

"If you don't require anything more from me, I will take my leave then," Neji said. Hinata nodded, and her cousin left the dojo.

Now that Neji was out of the way, Naruto felt a bit more comfortable. "So Hinata... how's everything going?"

"It's... good. I'm trying to be strong. Thanks for your interest in my well-being, Naruto-kun. It means a lot to me."

"Hey, that's what friends are for!" Naruto replied, his mouth forming a foxy grin. "If you want anything, you only need to ask."

"You being here already lifts my spirits," Hinata assured, trying to smile. "So, what was Neji-niisan talking you about, Naruto-kun? I swear I hear him mentioning the Caged Bird Seal."

"Yeah, he told me about it. Why does half of your clan is forced to wear it?" Naruto said. He was clearly put off by such revelation. Hinata hoped that this wouldn't made him see her or her family in a negative light.

"It's... a tradition that has been present for generations. That doesn't make it anymore right. If I ever become clan head, I will try to convince everybody to abolish it. It hadn't done nothing but create strifes and misery, especially on Branch House members like Neji-niisan."

"So that's why he looks and acts so uptight?"

"Sadly, yes. Deep down, Neji-niisan is a kind and caring person, but the seal soured his spirit a bit. Back when we were little, he was the most cheerful boy around. He never stopped smiling."

"Well, guess what? Besides being Hokage, I will also help you become the next clan head so you can make the Hyuga better!"

"R-Really? That would be great, Naruto-kun."

"By the way, now that your father is... well... no longer with us," Naruto was struggling to address the issue in a delicate way, definitely not his forte. "Who's going to be the clan head? Your mom?"

Hinata nodded. "Yes. Fortunately, Mother also shares my views regarding the Caged Bird Seal and the division of the clan. Maybe together we can change things. Speaking of which, how is Tsunade-sama? I heard she was gravely wounded during the insurrection."

"Oh, she's fine! It takes something more than a blade to the gut in order to take mom out! She has to stay a couple more weeks at the hospital, but the doctors says she's fine."

Hinata sighed in relief. "Good to hear. I'd hate if you lost your mom."

"Hey, speaking of which, would you like to go with me to pay her a visit? He gets bored as hell in the hospital, and I'm sure she'd love seeing you."

Hinata smiled. "Of course, Naruto-kun. Let me change first into something more appropriate."

...

In the outskirts of Konoha, two figures were walking through a path that leaded towards the ninja village, one smaller than the other, and adult and a child, both redheads. One of them, the child, who wouldn't be older than nine, wore glasses.

"Look, Karin," the woman said, pointing into the distance. "Our long journey is finally over."

The girl, Karin, adjusted her glasses and narrowed her eyes to see the village better.

"Why do you think this place will be different from the others, mom?" Karin asked.

"Because I know that there's an Uzumaki here. Tsunade Senju, one of the Legendary Sannin. She will protect us."

"How can she be an Uzumaki if she's named Senju?" Kari asked, a bit flabbergasted.

"Because she also has Uzumaki blood running through her veins. Come on, once we meet her, she'll help us to set up a home in Konoha."

"I hope you're right, mom. I'm tired of being on the run all the time."

...

Once the ANBU allowed him to, Iruka entered the Hokage's office. Jiraiya was sitting on his desk, reading something.

"You called me, Hokage-sama?" the teacher asked.

"Yes, Iruka. Please take a seat," Jiraiya made a hand motion to an empty chair in front of him. Once Iruka sat down, the Sannin continued. "You see Iruka, I called you here because I'm about to do a... rather big reform on the Academy Curriculum."

Iruka shifted on his seat, feeling uneasy. "I see... and how big are we talking about?"

"Pretty big. You see, Tsunade-hime and I have been reviewing the curriculum and found it rather... lacking. But before we get into that, I'd like to discuss a big discrepancy when it comes to the Academy graduates."

"I don't think I'm following you, Hokage-sama."

"So far, the Academy graduation rate is nearly one hundred percent. Yet the True Genin Exam approval rate is just a merely 33%. From that 66% remaining, only about 5-10% actually return to the Academy to continue their careers. The rest decided to quit and move to civilian schools. That would mean that little more than about 35% percent of the Academy graduates actually become ninjas. Which means that 65% of the resources we invest in the Academy go wasted. Do you see where I'm going?"

Iruka's normally tan face paled. Much to his horror, he knew what Jiraiya was going to do. "Please Hokage-sama, don't cut our budget! It's small enough as it is! There are very few teachers, and we work as hard as we can to-"

"Whoa there, calm down, Iruka!" Jiraiya interrupted the panicked teacher, holding his hands up in defense. "Nobody mentioned budget cuts here. Just let me finish."

"Y-yeah. Sorry for the outburst, Hokage-sama. It was out of place."

"Like I say, relax. I know that you and your fellow teachers are doing your best. Now, with Tsunade-hime's help, we devised a new curriculum to make sure that the Academy Graduation Test will have

the same approval rate as the True Genin Test. Take a look," Jiraiya said as he handed a folder to Iruka.

Iruka spend the following minutes carefully reading the teaching plan for each year. Turn out that Jiraiya wasn't exaggerating when he was talking about 'big' changes. He was unable to repress a couple gasps.

"Are you... are you sure you want to go through this? I mean, I even agree with some of these things like advanced chakra control, but isn't elemental ninjutsu too much for Academy students?"

"Why? Naruto is currently training to master his first wind jutsu, and I believe he'll have it down by the next month. And from what he told me, Sasuke Uchiha already knows the Great Fireball."

"It's not the same, Hokage-sama. Sasuke Uchiha has been trained by his clan, who was one of the most powerful on Konoha until recently. And Naruto has been trained by both you and Tsunade-sama. Other kids aren't that lucky."

"While I appreciate your compliments, you vastly overestimate me, Iruka," Jiraiya replied, crossing his fingers. Iruka raised an eyebrow, a bit confused. "Listen, while it's true that I can teach Naruto many things other Jonin can't teach their students, what I currently taught Naruto -and what the Uchihas taught Sasuke- is something that any Chunin can teach. I mean, you know elemental ninjutsu, right?"

"Indeed, Hokage-sama. fire and water."

"Then you're already qualified to teach such a thing."

"Still, I believe you're rising the standards way too much."

"Of course I am! We're ninja, in case you have forgotten it. We're going to send this children to situations in which they can potentially lose their lives. I did my best to ensure that Naruto had enough preparation to survive out there once he graduates, but now that I'm

Hokage, all the village's future ninjas are my responsibility, and thus they're going to be held to same standard I hold Naruto.

"The Academy current curriculum is laughable. Seriously, all what it takes to be a ninja is three E-Rank ninjutsu? With a dedicated teacher, any kid Naruto's age will be able to master them in no time. I don't know why they don't teach them until the last year. No wonder the True Genin Test has such huge failure rates."

"While I agree with your reasoning, there's the problem of the schedule. There's no way to implement these new subjects without removing others."

"Then that's what we're going to do. I believe that the Academy focuses too much on theory, and neglects practice. While I believe that subjects like Maths or Geography are important, you have not just one but two subjects dedicated to explaining how Chakra works, yet neither include any kind of chakra control exercise. Same thing about this subject about the nature of genjutsus. Anyway, my plan is to implement this reform the next school year, so you may tell the news to your coworkers."

"I... of course, Hokage-sama. I'll tell them this the next time we meet," Iruka said.

"Good. If that's the case, then you're dismissed."

Iruka bowed his head before leaving the office. He didn't say anything in front of Jiraiya, but wasn't looking forward it. He knew that his coworkers would get really mad upon seeing all the radical changes Jiraiya was about to do.

Upon leaving the office, Iruka had the feeling that he was forgetting about something... something important he should had told the Hokage the moment he could talk to him...

...

Shortly after Iruka led the Hokage's tower, he was approached by a black haired kunoichi. He immediately recognized her as Tsubaki, Mizuki's fiancée. This made him realize that he didn't see Mizuki again after the silver haired ninja decided to go into hiding. Tsubaki's worried face made Iruka realize that she shared the same worries.

Of course! That was what he was forgetting about. He didn't tell Jiraiya about Mizuki. With all the chaos that followed the insurrection, and how busy he was helping the village recover, he forgot about his silver haired coworker. Oh well, it wasn't too late.

"Ah, Iruka, can I talk with you?" Tsubaki asked.

"Yeah, sure, what do you need?" Iruka asked, even though he knew the answer.

"It's Mizuki... it seems that he has disappeared. Nobody knows anything about his whereabouts. You are the last person who saw him. Was he okay? Did the Uchihas wound him?"

"Well, during the battle, Mizuki and I... got separated..."

"What!? And why did you do such a thing?"

"We heard some criminals attacking civilians on different streets, so we split up in order to deal with them faster. But once I was done... well, I don't know where did he go..."

Tsubaki's last hopes of finding Mizuki slowly faded. Noticing her sorrow, the teacher decided to patch things up as best as he could.

"But hey, if Mizuki was dead, we would have already found his body, so I'm sure that he's somewhere, safe and sound.

"I... I guess you're right. I'll have to keep a positive mind. It's what Mizuki would have wanted."

"Indeed it is. Remember, if you need something, don't mind telling me."

"Yeah. Thanks Iruka. Now... I better go."

As he watched Tsubaki leave, Iruka wondered how much of what he said was actually true. He wanted to believe that Mizuki was still alive, but if that was the case... then where the hell was he? Anyway, he wouldn't be able to answer those questions on his own. Better he'd go back and tell the Hokage about Mizuki.

...

"HOKAGE-SAMA!" an ANBU with a rabbit mask frantically said as he burst into the Hokage's office. "Something terrible happened!"

Jiraiya sighed. Of course, something should go bad sooner or later. "First of all, calm down. And second, define 'terrible'. Unless somebody died, I'm sure we can find a solution."

"Well, we were checked the tower's inventory, and found that the Scroll of Seals is no longer here! Somebody must stole it during the coup d'etat!"

"What? Quick, alert all the ANBU! I want all the available squads to look for that scroll!"

"Yes, Hokage-sama!"

Jiraiya groaned loudly as he took his hands to his head. He wasn't even a month into the job, and something catastrophic already happened. In the wrong hands, that scroll could be a dangerous weapon. While he hoped the ANBU would find it, deep down he knew that the thief was probably far away from Konoha.

...

Far Away from Konoha

Mizuki walked through a small road surrounded by forests, with the Scroll of Seals tied to his back. During the chaos of the battle, he had sneaked into the very much unguarded Hokage Tower and took

the scroll away while that old fool of a Hokage was fighting alone against the Uchiha. After that, leaving the village was easy.

He had predicted that they would take quite some time for the Konoha ninja to realize that their precious scroll had disappeared. Those days were all the head start he needed to avoid being captured.

Looking back, Mizuki felt a tinge of remorse for his actions. But said tinge quickly disappeared, and left no lasting impression.

"Konoha is pretty much on its deathbed. A ninja of my caliber has nothing to do on such a place."

As a last act of cutting ties with the village, Mizuki removed his bandana-style forehead protector, and tossed it away before resuming his journey.

Author's note: welcome to another edition of "let's hear Ander bitch about ficitonal characters because he's a little shit"! Today's topic will be Mizuki.

Yeah, just like my rant about the repetitiveness of the Wave Arc in fanfics, my feelings regarding Mizuki are the same. I'm sick of seeing time after time the goddamn confrontation with Mizuki. I know why people do it, it's an important event in which Naruto learns about the Fox, as well as his signature jutsu. But even in fanfics in which he learns about these two things from different sources, the face off with Mizuki still happens! Those are the worst since they play my hopes up that they may use Mizuki in a little more original and creative ways.

So yeah, just like Zabuza, Mizuki is out. And I also made him steal the Scroll of Seals, not only because I never read any fanfic in which such thing happens, but because, despite being a seemingly important object, the Scroll never gets mentioned

again after chapter 1. I'm sure I can do something interesting with a scroll written by Hashirama Senju.

Don't worry, Naruto will learn the Shadow Clone. Wouldn't be Naruto without it ;)

Also, a second topic to bitch about, because why not: the True Genin Exam. Okay, I get why it's so hard and has such a high failure rate. They want to make sure that only the strongest and most skilled become ninja. It's some kind of filter. But my question is, why doesn't the Academy act as the filter instead? It's like going to a school of average difficulty, only to find that the final exam can only be passed by the most gifted students. Wouldn't you think that they wasted your time? So yeah, with this new method, besides making the new Genin stronger, the kids not cut to be ninjas won't have to waste their time at the Academy and can find their true call earlier.

Which leads to the second part: the Academy itself. Seriously, what the hell do they teach there? I mean, take a look at Sakura. Being a clanless ninja, the Academy teachings is all what she has, and her skills didn't take her very far (there's the fact that Kakashi never taught her anything besides tree walking, but that's another topic). I mean, come on! Stuff like tree walking is simple enough to be taught at the Academy. And not just the Academy. For some reason, Elemental ninjutsu is restricted to Chunin and up, but Sasuke has no problem learning not one but two elements, one of them before he even graduated.

So yeah, the next chapter, which will be a two parter, titled "Academy Days", will address and fix the issues I brought up here. And as you can guess, the Academy will have three new students. In the meantime, leave a review! Let's see if we can reach the 300 review mark! Remember, reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Also, I wish all of you a Merry Christmas :)

Academy Days, Part I

Author's note: So, Carrie Fisher is dead. Guess that 2016 couldn't just leave already without one last "fuck you". Anyway, here you have what will be the last chapter of 2016. See you at the bottom, and enjoy:

Chapter 13:

Academy Days, Part I

or

Going to a ninja school isn't as fun as it looks

Nine years after the Kyubi attack

Fortunately for Konoha and its inhabitants, the damage caused by the Uchiha Coup D'etat wasn't as severe as the one caused by the Kyubi, both in terms of human deaths and property destruction. In a few weeks, Konoha was functioning like normal, even if its forces were considerably weaker. Still, Jiraiya made an effort to make the village look strong and did not stop or even slow down the flow of missions.

One of Konoha's institutions that was also back to normal was the Academy. It was the beginning of a new school year, and Jiraiya's educational reforms were starting to take effect. Namely, the fact that quite a few students, especially those born from civilian families, found the new Academy way too hard and moved to civilian schools.

Still, there were at least three new faces to replace some of the drop outs.

"Welcome back once again to the Academy, kids. At least, those who passed last years' exam. Before we begin, we have three new

students that moved recently to Konoha. Why don't you introduce yourselves?"

The first one to take a step forward was a girl with shoulder-length red hair, red eyes, and glasses.

"Hello. My name is Karin Uzumaki. I haven't been much time in Konoha, but I like this place so far, and wish to be a ninja," Karin said.

"Hey, I'm an Uzumaki too!" Naruto exclaimed, waving his hand at her. "Where have you been all this time?"

"Naruto, please don't interrupt!" Iruka sternly chided. "You can talk with Karin later if you wish. Now, who wants to go next?"

This time, a girl with long, brown hair took a step forward.

"Hi everybody, my name is Tamaki. I used to live with my grandma on an abandoned city, but she thought it would be good for me to move here. I obviously want to be a ninja and, well... I love cats!"

Tamaki heard a dismissive snort in response. She didn't know where it came from, but many people realized it was Kiba, who looked at the girl with contempt.

Without waiting for Iruka to tell him anything, the last newcomer introduced himself.

"Hello. My name is Haku Yuki. I come from the Land of Water. People like me aren't well liked there, so I'm staying in Konoha until things get better," Yugao and Hayate had told him not to mention his relationship with Zabuza to people who didn't know about it already, at least for the time being. "You look like nice people, and I'm eager to meet all of you."

Shino raised his hand.

"Yes Shino?" Iruka asked.

"I wish to ask Haku-san something, if it's okay with that."

"Of course, I'm sure that Haku will be glad to answer any question you might have about him," still, Iruka looked at Haku for his approval. The kid silently nodded.

"Him?" repeated many voices in disbelief.

"My question does not pertain his gender," Shino clarified, before adjusting his shades. "You said that 'people like you' aren't welcome in the Land of Water. Does that mean that you have a Bloodline Limit?"

"Yes. I possess the Ice Release Bloodline," Haku replied in a neutral tone, used to mask his inner worry.

"But you don't have to worry. Here in Konoha nobody will hate you for having such abilities," Iruka reassured the girl-looking boy. "Now that you have introduced yourselves, go and take a seat."

Tamaki sat on an empty seat besides a bored Shikamaru. Haku took an empty seat in the first row. Karin was about to sit besides Naruto and Hinata, but something else caught her attention. Namely, Sasuke Uchiha's good looks. And fortunately for her, there was an empty spot besides him. Naruto's face dropped when Karin choose to sit with his rival instead of him, her family.

Sasuke acknowledged Karin with a sigh. The redhead then noticed that another girl sat at Sasuke's other side, one with long pink hair, was glaring daggers at her.

"Maybe you should try sitting somewhere else, Karin," a voice said from the upper tables. Karin turned around and saw a blonde girl looking at her. "While I can see what spurned you to sit besides Sasuke, you must know that he comes from a clan of traitors and murderers. It can't be safe being near him. I'm sure you'll be better with Naruto. He's your family after all."

Sasuke didn't seem to react to the blonde's hurtful words, but the pinkette besides him surely did.

"Can it Ino! Sasuke had nothing to do with the coup d'etat and you know it! Stop being such a idiot to him already! You weren't the only one who lost somebody that day!"

"And you should stop defending him, Sakura! Oh, yeah, Sasuke lost his clan, boo hoo hoo. Maybe they should have thought that before trying to take over Konoha!"

"Enough you two!" Iruka bellowed, silencing the feuding girls. "I'm not going to tolerate that kind of talk, okay!? Yes, the Uchiha coup d'etat was a dark day in this village's history, but harboring resentment won't be of any help!"

Haku was starting to understand why he was told to keep his ties with Zabuza a secret. Tamaki, however, wasn't deterred by Ino's words. Her family had always been a staunch ally of the Uchiha clan, and he would show his support to Sasuke. His good looks didn't hurt either.

"Alright, now that we calmed down, let's start. Open your Tools of the Ninja books on page 3..."

...

Jiraiya was working tirelessly in his office as usual. Even with the aid of a couple Shadow Clones, it seemed that the paperwork would never end. He really missed the amount of free time he used to have back then, which he spent either training Naruto, Hagane and Kaida, or spending quality time with his wife. Now those moments were far scarcer. Letting out a frustrated sigh, he decided that a break was in order (though the clones continued working).

He opened a drawer, and pulled out the as of yet unfinished draft of his next Icha Icha volume. Progress had been slow, so he better hurry up and finish this one. He'd hate to make his loyal fans

restless. However, there was something in the drawer that caught the Hokage's attention: his very first novel. He grabbed it, and remembered he had with his godson some months ago.

FLASHBACK

Somebody knocked the door of Jiraiya's office.

"Come in!" Jiraiya shouted. He was relieved to have a little break from the endless mountain of paperwork.

Much to his surprise, his godson entered the office. Jiraiya's smile grew even wider. "Naruto! Great to see you here! Did you come to see your old man at his new job?"

Naruto smiled back. "More or less. Well, that, and that I have a few questions that I think only you can answer."

Jiraiya leaned back on his chair, and crossed his fingers above his lap. "Well, that's what I'm here for. What kind of trouble do you have? Is something wrong with the Academy? With your mother? It is a girl you like? Of course it's a girl!"

"It's none of that!" Naruto cut him off before he could come up with more ridiculous scenarios. He fished something from one of his pockets, and handed it to Jiraiya.

The surprised Sannin saw that it wasn't just his very first book, but the one he gave Minato as a gift. Jiraiya's expression darkened. "Naruto... where did you find this?"

"In the underground shelter, inside a box," Naruto replied. "That book was so good! So much better than the stuff you write nowadays! Why didn't you tell me about it before? And why don't you write more books like this one?"

"I see. To answer your questions... you could say that I forgot about it," Jiraiya sighed heavily. "First, there's the fact that the book hardly

sold. You and your father where the only people who gave me any kind of positive feedback."

"People who disliked your books were morons," Naruto bluntly stated.

"And second... this book reminded me of your father too much, and the life he will never have, thanks to the Kyubi and that masked bastard that nearly killed Tsunade-hime. I thought that I was over it but... after all these years, the pain still persists."

"I see. Sorry for bringing up then..." Naruto said, averting his gaze.

Jiraiya forced himself to smile. "Hey, it's okay! It's not that you knew about it. I would have done the same in your situation. By the way, what else did you saw in that box?"

"Nothing too interesting. Except a bunch of old pictures," Naruto answered. "But now I'm too afraid to ask..."

"Don't be," Jiraiya assured. "What kind of pictures?"

"Well, the ones in which you and mom were younger... and a couple of my birth parents... but then there was this one with you and three kids that I didn't recognize. Who were they?"

"Three kids? A ginger, a redhead and a bluenette?" Jiraiya asked. Naruto nodded. "Those were a trio of orphans from Amegakure that I taught ninjutsu and survival skills for two years, back during the second war."

"What happened with them?"

"The last time I heard of them, they formed some sort of freedom fighting group, and were about to face the leader of Amegakure. I never knew anything about them after that. The poor bastards are probably buried two meters underground now."

"I see... no wonder you wanted to forget about the contents of that box..."

"Yeah, that box is kinda like a compilation of all my failures, isn't it?" Jiraiya said, almost chuckling. "That's me, the master that ends up surviving his students."

"But hey, if it's of any consolation, you know that such thing won't happen with me!" Naruto boldly declared. "Besides, you did plenty of good things too! I mean, you're Hokage! How many people can say that?"

Jiraiya couldn't help but smile at his godson's unwavering optimism. Yeah, Jiraiya's life didn't turn out so bad, did it? He married the girl of his dreams, had other two kids besides Naruto -both of them who had rare bloodline limits, despite neither him nor Tsunade possessing any- and even if it was something that he didn't want, he was the leader of Konoha.

"You know what, Naruto? I think you have a point," the Sannin conceded. He then looked at the book. "And I think that maybe this book deserves a second chance..."

END FLASHBACK

Jiraiya was snapped of his thoughts when somebody knocked the door. After telling the stranger to come in, the door opened to reveal the person he was expecting to meet, Itachi Uchiha.

"You summoned me, Hokage-sama?" Itachi asked.

Jiraiya nodded, and motioned him to take a seat. "First of all, I'm aware of how much you sacrificed for the village, and what I'm going to ask you may seem a bit too much, so don't be afraid of declining my proposal if you're not up to the task."

"With all due respect, Hokage-sama, but if that was the case, then I wouldn't become a ninja to begin with. Especially now that I'm a

Jonin," the Uchiha replied. "Just tell me what you want, and it will be done."

"Your devotion to the village is admirable. Okay, here it goes: as you probably know, I used to be Sarutobi-sensei's main informant during his second tenure. During that time, I build a spy network across the Elemental Nations. However, due to my new responsibilities, I can't leave the village as often as I could in the past, so I need somebody whom I can trust to take care of this task."

"And you thought of me for it," Itachi guessed. The Hokage nodded. "Alright, consider it done."

"Are you sure? Keep in mind that this job sometimes involves leaving the village for long periods of time. You won't be able to spend as much time with your little brother as in the past."

"Thanks for your concern, but I can assure you that it won't be a problem. Sasuke doesn't seem to be very eager to talk or even spend time with me. Maybe I should give him some space, and this job might be good for me as well."

"I see that you made up your mind. If that's the case, meet me tomorrow at five o'clock sharp so I can teach you about your new occupation. You're dismissed."

...

Later, at lunchtime, Naruto and Hinata were sitting on a bench, enjoying their food and each other's company, while they looked others kids playing, talking, or eating their lunches as well. Naruto's eyes were particularly fixed on Karin, and much to his displeasure, the redhead refused to abandon Sasuke's side.

"Man, this sucks. I find a lost clan member, and she has to spend the time with that idiot," Naruto groaned.

"Eh, I'm sure that Karin-san will be more than glad to meet you, Naruto-kun. Just wait for the right moment to introduce yourself," Hinata suggested.

"Man, what does that idiot have that all the girls all flock around him?" Naruto complained. "You know, it almost seem that a higher being sent Karin to Konoha to fill Ino's vacant spot now that she doesn't fawn over Sasuke anymore," Naruto angrily said. Hinata couldn't help but giggle at Naruto's comment.

"Well, Sasuke-san... some girls like his looks, as well as his strength," Hinata explained.

"Man, I'm so glad that at least you don't go after him like the other girls" Naruto said, smiling at Hinata. "I'd hate to lose you too to him."

Hinata blushed a bit. "Y-you don't have to worry about that, Naruto-kun. You're my f-friend, I will always be a-at your side."

"Speaking of friends, maybe we should befriend the new guys?" Naruto suggested. "I mean, not only they're new, but they aren't even from Konoha, so I doubt they have any friends here already."

"I don't see why not. The three of them look like nice people."

"Cool! Well, Karin-neechan is out of the question since he's with that idiot, so how about Tamaki?" Naruto suggested as he scanned the playground with his eyes, trying to track her.

"I like cats too. Maybe I could use that to approach her?" Hinata asked, both to herself and Naruto.

"Oh, there she is!" Naruto finally located the cat kunoichi... and much to his dismay, she walked towards Sasuke. "Oh come on! She too!? Besides, Sasuke isn't even paying attention!"

"M-maybe we should approach the boy of the Land of Water?" Hinata meekly suggested. "He's sitting all alone in that bench."

"I swear if he was actually a girl, he would be trying to get Sasuke's attention too," Naruto muttered with a groan. "Oh, I think you don't know this, but Haku's adoptive dad helped the Uchiha in the coup d'etat."

Hinata was taken aback. "He did?"

"Yeah, and he's in prison now. Dad was planning to have him executed, but changed it to jail time with the condition of Haku becoming a Konoha ninja."

"I... I see," Hinata said. For obvious reasons, the mere mention of the coup d'etat caused her great sorrow.

"On second thought, maybe we shouldn't talk to him..."

"N-no, no!" Hinata quickly said. "W-we shouldn't judge others based on actions t-they were not responsible of."

Thanks to the Caged Bird Seal the Branch House Hyugas were forced to carry, Hinata knew very well what it feels to be personally accused of something people close to you did. She remember the time when Branch House members used to look at her with pure scorn, as well as muttering under their breath things Hinata couldn't hear, but could imagine. Fortunately, things got better over time as the Branch House Hyugas got to know Hinata better.

Once they finished their lunch, they approached Haku, who had just finishing eating as well, and was putting the remains of his bento inside his backpack.

"Hi, Haku!" Naruto enthusiastically greeted. "I'm Naruto Uzumaki! And this is my friend Hinata Hyuga!"

"W-we'd like to know you better, if it's okay with you. Can we sit with you?" the Hyuga asked.

Haku smiled at the duo. "Sure, I can use some company," the Ice Ninja moved aside so Naruto and Hinata could sit. "And I think it will be good if I get to know some people here already."

"Great!" Naruto sat down. Hinata did likewise.

"You said you have a Bloodline Limit, right? I also have a Bloodline Limit too, but it's different from yours," Hinata mentioned.

"Really? Interesting. Do you mind telling me more?"

"My Bloodline Limit is called Byakugan. It allows me to see through solid objects, gives me 360 degrees vision, and I can see people's chakra pathway system."

"It sounds mostly interesting," Haku said, still smiling. "Like I said before, my Bloodline Limit is Ice Release. I can combine wind chakra with water chakra to create ice. Look."

Haku placed his hands as if he was grabbing an invisible ball. Focusing his chakra, he created a small snowball that floated in mid air. Naruto and Hinata watched the display, eyes widen in fascination.

"Whoa, that was so cool!" Naruto praised.

"You think so?"

"Of course? Why would we lie?" Hinata asked.

"Well, it's that... if I did this in my country, some people would want to kill me."

"Is that... how you lost your parents?" Hinata asked, then she mentally chided herself for not realizing that she was dealing with a sensitive topic. Fortunately for her, Haku didn't seem to mind.

"Yes. Our neighbors assaulted our home shortly after I awoke my powers. Guess that somebody saw me. I lost my entire family that

day," Haku explained, omitting the most horrifying details -namely, his father's role.

"And then you met Zabuza," Naruto stated matter-o-factly.

Haku was taken aback by the blond's statement. His normally relaxed expression tensed. "H-How do you...?"

"My dad's the Hokage. There's little going on on this village that I'm not aware of," Naruto proudly said. While being the Hokage's son gave him access to quite some privileged information, his statement was an exaggeration.

"I see. In that case, I must ask you too not to tell anybody about Zabuza-sama. I'm afraid that it may make my stay here tad more unpleasant."

"Don't worry! Your secret is safe with us! Right Hinata?" the blond asked, and the bluenette nodded in return.

"By the way, do you have a Bloodline Limit as well?" Haku asked.

"What? Oh, no, I don't have that. But I'm a Jinchuriki, you know!" Normally, that wasn't something he would be proud of, but Haku and Hinata talking about their Bloodlines made him feel a bit left out, and wanted to show something that made him special, even if it was a curse.

"A... Jinchuriki?"

"Yeah, it's a-"

"I know what a Jinchuriki is," Haku cut him before he could explain his condition.

"You do?"

"Yes. The current Mizukage is one."

Naruto was starry eyed. "Really? That's so cool! If he can be a Kage, then-!"

"It's NOT cool!" Haku suddenly yelled. Naruto was taken aback. Hinata flinched.

"W-why is not, Haku-kun?" the Hyuga fearfully asked.

"He's the reason people like me are hated! He's ruining Kirigakure, and the whole country! That's why Zabuza-sama wanted to depose him!" Haku angrily shouted. Then again, Haku wasn't aware -or was deliberately ignoring- Zabuza's own ambition of becoming Mizukage. Upon seeing Naruto and Hinata's faces, Haku quickly regained his composure. "I'm... I'm sorry for that outburst. You have nothing to do with my plight. Don't think that I hate all Jinchuriki because one ruined my life, Naruto-kun."

"Eh... it's okay!" Naruto said, with one of trademark grins. "Hey, guess what? When I become Hokage, I'll talk some sense into that Mizukage so it's safe for you to go back to your home!"

"I... thank you, Naruto-kun. I appreciate the gesture," Haku sighed. If it was only that easy...

"By the way, I'd like to know how strong you are. Want to spar against us?" Naruto asked.

"That sounds nice, Naruto-kun. That way I can also measure how strong you two are."

...

Later that day, once the Academy was over, Naruto bid Hinata and Haku goodbye and headed home. While he usually was eager to return home and train with one of his parents -or Shizune, in case both of them were particularly busy- it wasn't the case anymore. Jiraiya had started to instruct him in Fuinjutsu, something Naruto found horribly tedious.

Still, the Toad Sannin insisted, claiming that it was Naruto's "cultural inheritance" -whatever that meant- and the fact that it was an incredibly useful art that not many people bothered to master -Naruto could clearly see exactly why-. While Naruto enjoyed the idea of being able to make his own explosive tags, among other things, Fuinjutsu training overall wasn't very stimulating.

"Hey, Naruto!" a female voice snapped the Jinchuriki from his thoughts. Turning around, he smiled to see it was Karin, who was running towards him.

The blond smiled. "Hey, Karin-nee-chan!"

Karin stopped when she close to Naruto, and gasped for air. "Hey! I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for ignoring you earlier. I got... distracted."

"Yeah, it's quite common with Sasuke," Naruto said, grinning.

"So, you're an Uzumaki?"

"Yup! On my mother's side!"

"I see. My mother and I thought that we were the only Uzumakis left. We traveled a lot and never stayed on the same place for more than a month as long as I remember, and never once run into another Uzumaki."

"Funny thing, I also thought I was the only Uzumaki left. It's so great that we were both wrong!"

"Indeed. The reason we came here was because of Tsunade, who my mother says has Uzumaki blood, and would protect us."

"She is my adoptive mother, you know. She took care of me alongside dad -who is the current Hokage- when my birth parents died. I believe she did it because she was related to my birth mom in some way."

"It's a good thing then," Karin said, adjusting her glasses.

"Ummmm... would you like to come to my house later today? I'm sure my mom would love to meet another family member."

"Yeah! And maybe another day you can come to my house and meet my family. They aren't Uzumakis except mom, but I'm sure you'll like them."

"That sounds like fun."

...

A few months later

Naruto's entire class wasn't at the academy, but on Training Ground Seventeen, which had quite a lot of trees, and thus it was popular for drill skirmishes in the Land of Fire. Their newest sensei, a tall man clan in blue, whose eyes were covered by sunglasses -similar to Shino- who wore a bandanna-style headband had brought them there for an exercise.

"Hello, children. My name is Ebisu, and during the following weeks I'll teach you some exercises that will refine your chakra control," the blue-clad man announced. "Chakra control is something important for young, developing ninjas such as yourselves. If you lack control, you won't be able to perform ninjutsu.

"But enough talking, let's go with the exercise," Ebisu said, noting that most of the kids paid him now more attention. "How many of you would be able to climb this tree?" Ebisu asked, while motioning to a large tree behind him.

Everybody raised their hands, just as expected. Time to drop the bomb.

"And how many of you would be able to climb it... without using your arms?"

All who had their hands raised lowered them, and started to mutter among themselves in confusion. "That's impossible!" somebody said.

"Oh, it's very possible! Just look at me," Ebisu said, as he started to walk on the tree as if gravity had no effect on him. The kids looked at him in awe, much to the Special Jonin's delight. "In order to do this, you must gather chakra at the bottom of your feet. But be careful! Too much chakra, and you will be pushed away from the tree; too little you will fall off. Now, choose a tree to climb, and begin!"

The kids split into several groups, since the trees were wide enough for several people to climb them at the same time. Naruto stayed with Hinata and Haku, while Sakura, Karin and Tamaki chose the same tree as Sasuke.

"Alright, this is going to be piece of cake!" Naruto exclaimed, as he started to climb the tree without much difficulty. This, naturally, drew some attention.

"Hey, how did you do it at your first try?" an annoyed Kiba asked.

"Easy, I already did this exercise with mom. And her methods were way more extreme."

FLASHBACK

After many attempts, Naruto managed to nail down the climbing exercise, not without effort.

"Look, mom, I did it!" Naruto proudly said. Huh?"

Much to the Jinchuriki's confusion, Tsunade was emptying a bottle on the base of tree. And then, the Slug Sannin tossed a lit match, setting the base of the tree ablaze.

"WHAT THE HELL!?" a very freaked out Naruto yelled.

"Climbing is easy enough with practice. Staying in the same place for a prolonged time, not so much," Tsunade calmly explained,

ignoring the protests of his adoptive son. "I want you to stay like that for five minutes. The fire is to make sure you're motivated enough not to fall."

END FLASHBACK

"In the end, she had to buy me a new pair of pants," Naruto recalled, rubbing his butt, still feeling some phantom pain. "But on the bright side, my chakra control improved a lot!"

Even if his training with Zabuza was brief, it helped Haku to complete the exercise in no time. Hinata was the last one of their little group who managed to reach the top of the tree, after almost an hour of trying.

Other people who managed to complete the exercise in record time were Shino, Sakura and Ino. Much to Naruto's amusement, Sasuke was having a lot of trouble with the exercise. He managed to climb very far on his first try, but he progressed at a rather slow pace. It was a delicious irony seeing the "prodigy" being outlasted by one of his fangirls. Kiba, Shikamaru, Karin, Choji and Tamaki weren't having an easy time either.

After an hour and a half, Ebisu dismissed the class, congratulated those who completed the exercise, and gave some pointers and encouragement to those who didn't.

Still, after a week, the whole class was able to master the tree climbing exercise.

...

Hokage's Office

Shortly after his educational reform, many people met Jiraiya to protest over how much he had raised the standards at the Academy, increasing the number of students who failed to pass from one course to the next, and most times they were forced to drop out.

Most of the time, it was furious parents, most of them civilians, who demanded him to return the Academy to the way it was. Less frequently, it was an Academy teacher who complained about either being overworked or the children failing to grasp their lessons.

However, this was the first time a ninja, a Jonin no less, requested an audience with the Hokage to discuss such topic. The man in question was tall and well built, with extremely thick eyebrows and a ridiculous bowl haircut. He was wearing a green jumpsuit under a Chunin flak jacket and orange leg warmers. Despite his rather... bizarre appearance, this man was one of Konoha's strongest Jonins, and Konoha's greatest taijutsu specialist.

"Maito Gai. I don't believe we ever talked to each other after I got the position," Jiraiya eyed the green clan Jonin. While Gai was known for his exuberant and obnoxiously optimistic behavior, now he looked the complete opposite. "What do I owe the visit? I believe you have a problem with my educational reform, though I fail to see why."

"You see, I met one of the Academy students not long ago," Gai began. "He was crying his eyes out, since his dream was to become a ninja, but now he sees that dream crumbling into dust. You see, for some reason, the kid is unable to do ninjutsu nor genjutsu. I believe you see where the problem lies."

Jiraiya clasped his fingers. "I believe I do. That kid's... condition is mostly unfortunate, but maybe he isn't meant to become a ninja. There are plenty of ninjas who are forced to retire after suffering certain injuries. This case isn't that different."

"Listen, Hokage-sama, give that kid a chance. While my case wasn't the same, I also sucked at ninjutsu and genjutsu for a long time, that's why I focused on taijutsu. I believe that kid can follow my footsteps, and become a ninja with only taijutsu. That kid has a lot of potential! His flames of youth can burn brighter than mine!"

Jiraiya sighed. "I understand your plight, Gai, I really do. But my stance on the Academy is non-negotiable. I believe that ninjutsu is

an important part of being a ninja. So unless that kid can develop a level of taijutsu impressive enough in order to-

"Consider it done," Gai suddenly said.

Jiraiya was left stunned for a few seconds. He blinked a couple times, before he could reply.

"What?" he lamely replied.

"You were going to say that that kid needs a level of taijutsu impressive enough to make up for his deficiencies, right?" Gai asked. Jiraiya just nodded. "Then leave him to me! I will train him personally so his taijutsu reaches a level unheard on an Academy student!"

"Okay, you can take that kid under your wing, but please don't neglect your duties as a Jonin when training that brat."

"Never! That would be mostly unyouthful! Thanks for being so understanding, Hokage-sama! I promise that you will not regret this decision!" Gai loudly declared before he left.

...

A few weeks later

Once again, Ebisu took Naruto's class out of the Academy, this time to training ground nineteen, which had a rather large lake. He also told them to bring swimsuits, since they would need it for the next part of the exercise.

"Okay, all of you already completed the Tree Climbing Exercise, and I hope that you kept practicing on your own. Now, I believe it's time to take it to the next level," Ebisu said, and without further ado, he started to walk on water. Once again, the kids stared in awe. "Now, this exercise is a bit harder than tree climbing, due the fact that a tree is solid, and water is liquid, which means that you'll need a

constant stream of chakra from your feet to stay on the surface, as opposed to a fixed amount of chakra," Ebisu explained as he returned to the grass. "The goal of the exercise is to walk ten meters into the water, and get back to land. Come on, begin."

"Did you master this exercise already, Naruto-kun?" Haku asked.

"Nope, I'm still trying. It's way harder than it sounds," Naruto moaned.

"Well... Ebisu-sensei made it sound as if it was rather hard to begin with," Hinata mentioned.

"It's still harder than it sounds. Fortunately, mom can't set the water on fire," Naruto grinned, but his grin was soon replaced by a mask of contained terror. "Yet."

Unlike the tree climbing exercise, nobody was able to master water walking on their first few tries. Those who managed to do the best usually sank after walking just a measly two or three meters, while those who were having the hardest time didn't manage to land a single step without sinking.

Naruto and his classmates took another additional two weeks to master this exercise. But much to their surprise, the exercise didn't end there. Once they all could walk on water in an acceptable way, Ebisu revealed the next part of the training: taijutsu spars, while on the water.

"A ninja has to be prepared to fight anywhere. There will be times in which a battle will take place on a lake, on a river or even at high sea. Besides, this will improve your chakra control even further!" the blue-clad Special Jonin enthusiastically explained as he adjusted his shades. "So, who wants to go first?"

Naturally, Naruto and Sasuke were the first ones to volunteer. The two swimming trunks-clad ninja students placed in front of each other. Near them was Ebisu, who would oversee the fight.

"Begin!" the Special Jonin said, made a chopping motion with his hand.

"Prepare to get your ass kicked," Naruto shoot a taunting smile at Sasuke. The Uchiha merely grunted back.

"Come on Sasuke-kun!" Sakura cheered from the lake's shore.

"Kick his ass, Naruto!" said Ino's voice, much to Naruto's bewilderment.

Naruto immediately dashed at Sasuke, and launched a punch to his face. The Uchiha dodged the fist, and taking advantage of Naruto being wide open, punched him in the gut. The hit messed up Naruto's chakra control, and he sank into the water. He managed to be back on his feet a few minutes later.

"As you can see, remaining on top of the surface while fighting entrails some difficulty, but with enough practice it will become natural to you," Ebisu explained, then he looked at Naruto. "Ready to continue?"

"You can bet your glasses I am," Naruto replied, not taking his eyes from Sasuke.

"If that's the case, let's continue!"

Naruto once again dashed at Sasuke, ready to punch him in the face. Sasuke was already moving to dodge the fist like he did the first time. But in the last second, rather than a punch, Naruto kicked Sasuke on the hips instead. This time, it was Sasuke who lost his balance and fell into the water.

"Ha! How about that, idiot?" Naruto taunted at his fallen opponent.

"Naruto, don't do that. This is a friendly spar between classmates, there's no necessity to be rude," Ebisu said in a chiding tone. Naruto frowned at him, but nodded nevertheless.

The spars were usually short, sometimes in favor of Naruto, sometimes in Sasuke's favor. Though at one point Sasuke decided to "get serious" and activated his Sharingan. The following spars were all won by Sasuke. Seeing this, Ebisu decided to end the spar, and asked if somebody wanted to fight Sasuke instead. Only one person raised his hand.

"I believe I can defeat Sasuke-san," Haku stated as he walked towards the Uchiha, while Naruto returned to land with the others. Haku studied his rival before Ebisu gave them the signal to start. The Uchiha's Sharingan remained activated.

"Begin!"

Just like with Naruto, Haku dashed at Sasuke, ready to strike him. But just when he was about to punch him, Haku then leaped into mid air, much to the Uchiha's surprise. Haku gracefully landed behind Sasuke, and attacked his legs with a quick low kick. Sasuke lost his balance, but his chakra control didn't falter him this time and didn't sink into the water. Jumping back on his feet, Sasuke tossed a series of punches and kicks at Haku, who moved back while dodging them.

"Those eyes," Haku mentioned.

"What about them? Never saw a Sharingan before?" Sasuke replied, mildly irritated.

"I was talking about your eyes, not your Bloodline Limit," Haku explained. "Those eyes... are the same eyes I used to have. The eyes of somebody who is angry at the world. Did something happen to you?"

Of course, that question was mostly an act of politeness. Haku knew too well the fate of the Uchiha clan.

"That's none of your business!" Sasuke yelled as he hit Haku in the chest with a flying kick. Haku nearly lost his footing and sunk, but his

chakra control remained strong.

"You can tell me," Haku insisted as he and Sasuke traded more punches. "You know my background. I lost loved ones and have been betrayed by people I thought they loved me. It's because of what your clan did?"

"I said SHUT UP!" Sasuke shouted as he hit Haku in the jaw. This time, the Ice Ninja was unable to stay in the surface and sunk in the water.

"Okay, I believe that was enough. Sasuke, Haku, go back to land," Ebisu said. "Does anybody want to spar in the water?"

"Me!" Sakura said, raising her hand. "I have the best chakra control here, so this shouldn't be hard."

"I'm glad for your eagerness, Sakura. Does anybody wants to fight her?" Ebisu asked, looked at the rest of the students.

"Me," said a soft voice. Hinata was raising his hand.

"Alright, then come here. Stand in front of each other and... begin!"

Both kunoichi took a fighting stance. Hinata activated his Byakugan. Sakura was the first one to attack. Just like Naruto with Sasuke, she tried to punch Hinata in the face, but the Hyuga bent backwards, avoiding the fist. Hinata then delivered a palm strike at Sakura's belly. While her chakra control was really good, Hinata's Gentle Fist momentarily disrupted her chakra, making her to sink in the water.

"Boy, that hurt!" Sakura moaned, rubbing her belly.

"S-Sorry, Sakura-san..."

"No, it's okay. I would be stupid to be mad at you for hitting me during a spar. And how did you bend you back like that? It's like you're made of rubber!"

"T-The Gentle Fist requires a lot of b-body elasticity," Hinata explained.

"Well, now I know what not to do. Come on, let's continue."

Upon getting a taste of the Gentle Fist, Sakura decided to be more careful and plan her strikes better. She adopted a more defensive stance, spurring Hinata to go into the offensive. Both girls spend quite some time fighting, Sakura letting Hinata attack, dodging or parrying her blows, and waiting for an opening in order to counterattack. Unfortunately, Hinata managed to hit her first with the Gentle Fist again before that could happen.

The spar continued for another five minutes, in which Hinata landed another Gentle Fist strike at Sakura, making the pinkette to give up. Tamaki then volunteered to fight Hinata.

As she returned to solid land, Sakura never felt so humiliated. She was hoping to impress the class with her skills -and more specifically, Sasuke- yet all she did was making a fool of herself. It was shocking how such a sweet, shy and gentle girl like Hinata could pack such a mean punch.

Anyway, that was just a minor setback. She was still the best kunoichi of her class, and nothing was going to change that.

Or that's what she thought.

...

Meanwhile, the rest of the class watched the two girls spar. At that moment, Naruto was approached by Shikamaru.

"Man, I can't understand how are you so eager to fight the Uchiha. He always end up beating you," Shikamaru mentioned.

"He didn't beat me that bad. At least until he activated his Sharingan. But without it, we're pretty much equal!" Naruto protested, as if trying

to prove something.

"I know. But I doubt he won't want to use that troublesome Sharingan again if he sees he's losing. And truth be told, I don't see you doing anything about it."

Naruto looked at Shikamaru puzzled. He didn't understand what he mean by that. "I don't think I'm following you."

"Sasuke defeated you because, after activating his Sharingan, you keep fighting him the same way as before. If you see something doesn't work, try something different instead. It's basic strategy," the lazy Nara explained.

Naruto seemed to understand it now. "Thanks for the advice. So you think you should be able to beat Sasuke then?"

"Hell no. Even if I came up with an strategy to circumvent the Sharingan, I don't have the strength nor the skill to match him in pure taijutsu."

Of course, there was the fact that Shikamaru's father killed Sasuke's mother, and Sasuke might feel like wanting revenge by proxy. But that was something Shikamaru preferred not to bring up.

"Don't listen to him, Naruto," Kiba said, walking towards them. "He thinks strategy is the key to everything, but a big brain won't protect you from a fist to the face. Being strong and fast will."

"I would tell you why you're so wrong, but honestly, that would take too much effort for such little gain," Shikamaru lazily replied.

"Next time we spar, I will fight Sasuke instead of Naruto, and I will overwhelm him with my superior strength and speed, you'll see!" Kiba boasted.

"If that was true, it would have happened already, yet you can barely touch Sasuke," Shikamaru deadpanned.

"That's the past! My mom have been training me way harder now! And once I get my dog, Sasuke won't stand a chance!"

Shikamaru merely rolled his eyes at Kiba's boasting.

...

Konoha Hospital

After a long stay at the hospital, Hiruzen Sarutobi was finally declared to be in good enough state to be released. Still, that didn't mean his recovery was complete. Far from it. In fact, the doctors pretty much forced him to use a wheelchair for some time, since they told him his body was in a frail state and couldn't afford to make any unnecessary efforts in order to speed his recovery.

"Ah, it's a good thing to finally get out of that hellish place!" Hiruzen said to his present companion. "If I knew hospital food was so bad, I had done something about it long time ago! I need to talk with Jiraiya about it!"

His companion chuckled. "Unfortunately, I believe my husband has more pressing matters to attend right now. Not that I don't agree, the weeks I've spend there weren't pleasant to me either. I need to tell Shizune more often how much I appreciate her cooking," Tsunade mentioned, as he pushed Hiruzen's wheelchair.

"Were you upset that you couldn't apply to become Hokage?"

"What? Hell no! People may think that being Hokage is glamorous, but I know that the Kages are merely glorified bureaucrats. If Naruto knew what he was getting into, I doubt he'll want to be Hokage," Tsunade replied in disgust.

"Come on, it's not so bad," Hiruzen protested.

"You know, I'm starting to think that you wanted one of us to replace you the moment Jiraiya and I returned to the village."

"I won't deny that the thought crossed my mind. But I know for a fact that you would have rejected my offer, plus Naruto needed you way more than the village, and you'll be overwhelmed. I thought that, maybe once Naruto graduated and became a ninja, I could retire and leave the hat to one of you. Sadly things never turned out as planned."

"I'm afraid of what will happen if Naruto becomes a ninja. He will eventually leave the village to do missions, and will only have his teammates and sensei to protect him..."

"And what is your plan, keep Naruto inside that underground bunker of yours forever?"

"First, don't mock the bunker, it became quite handy to protect Naruto and the twins when that one-eyed maniac attacked. And second, even if I know I can't protect Naruto forever, I can't help but worry about him."

"Understandable. It was inevitable that, after all these years of being his legal guardian, you ended up growing fond of the kid."

" *Mother* . I didn't spend so much time changing diapers, cleaning vomits and being unable to sleep at night to be considered his 'legal guardian', thank you."

"That's a good thing, indeed," Hiruzen said, smiling. "So, you say that your attacker claims to be the man behind the Kyubi attack, right?"

"Correct. That man had both the Sharingan *and* the Wood Release. Plus his teleporting ability would explain how he managed to avoid all the security measures and barriers you set while Kushina gave birth. To think that that man could just teleport one day and whisk Naruto away..."

"He won't do that," Hiruzen stated.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Easy. Both times he tried to get the Kyubi, both times had to wait for the right moment. The first one was Kushina's birth, the second the Uchiha insurrection. He can't just teleport in the middle of Konoha in broad daylight. Besides, he should know where Naruto should be first, and I'm sure that his spies, should he have some, don't reach that far."

"Let's hope you're right. Still, I'm not letting my guard down."

"I never said you should."

While they walked -or better said, Tsunade walked while she pushed Sarutobi's wheelchair-, many townspeople and ninjas stopped to congratulate Sarutobi on his recovery, as well as wishing him a good time now that he was retired. This made the ex-Hokage realized that, with all the time he spent locked up in that office, he hardly had any time to enjoy the village he protected. Still, he wouldn't stop protecting it nevertheless.

"By the way, what are you going to do now that you're retired, sensei?" Tsunade asked.

"I don't know, honestly. Though I thought that maybe I could help Jiraiya a bit and become his advisor."

"I'm sure he can use your wisdom. And with you helping him, his workload will be-" Tsunade interrupted herself when she realized something, and frowned. "You're going to help him so he can have more time to write those perverted books, right?"

Hiruzen smiled at her innocently. "Tsunade, do you have any idea how long I have been a widower? As long as Naruto is alive. I may be old, but even men my age have certain needs."

Tsunade grimaced in disgust. "Thanks for the mental image, sensei."

Sarutobi merely chuckled in return.

Author's note: Not much to say here, just the first part of what will be a transitional chapter. As you can probably guess, soon this story will finally reach graduation, and thus the start of the manga.

I hoped you enjoyed this chapter. Happy new year, and see you back in 2017, which I hope it turns out to be a better year for all you than 2016 was (2016 was kind of a shitty year to me, especially concerning my job situation, so I can't see how 2017 can't be any worse short of dying).

In the meantime, say goodbye (or better yet, say "rot in hell") to 2016 with a review! Reviews make me really, really, really haappy!

Academy Days, Part II

Author's note: Okay, before we start, I'm going to address an issue that had been brought up in multiple reviews. Namely, what happened to other Uchiha children, or how is that I never mentioned them.

The answer is that, by the time of the Uchiha massacre in canon, both in the manga and the anime, we never see any other kid Sasuke's age or younger. If anything, there are a couple of guys who are Itachi's age, but that's about it. And thus, I decided to stick with this interpretation. It is stupid? Probably, the idea of Sasuke being the only kid in a clan that probably numbers in the hundreds is hard to swallow, but I did this for two reasons:

1-To avoid creating a number of unnecessary Uchiha children OCs that wouldn't serve any purpose other than slow the story (and given the hell a lot of people gave me over Hagane and Kaida, who will serve many purposes in future arcs, I'm not going through that again).

2-To not only avoid having innocent children killed in the story (yes, this story is rated M, but even I have my limits) but not to acknowledge that Itachi did kill innocent children in canon.

That's my answer, and it's final. I'm not going to reply to that question anymore.

Now, let's enjoy the first chapter of 2017:

Chapter 14:

Academy Days, Part II

or

Who said that being a ninja is easy?

Eleven years after the Kyubi attack

Two years had passed since Jiraiya had implemented his educative reform in the Ninja Academy, rising the standards significantly. Many students weren't able to keep with the new standards for long, so they dropped out and moved to civilian schools. As a result, Naruto's class was reduced to merely twelve students, Naruto, Hinata, Sakura, Sasuke, Ino, Shikamaru, Choji, Kiba, Shino, Tamaki, Haku and Karin.

Of these twelve, Sakura was the only one not being born to a ninja family -technically speaking, Tamaki didn't have a *human* ninja family either, but she had the benefit of being trained by ninja cats-, but this didn't deter her. After all, she was the best kunoichi of her class.

That didn't last long. In fact, these two years were horrible for the pinkette.

As the classes moved less from theory -a field in which Sakura excelled thanks to her book smarts- to a more practical approach, Sakura's grades started to fall. While she was pretty good at chakra control and the few classes that still required to study books, on everything else she was a total mess. While she was moderately good at kunai and shuriken toss, she found that it was much harder to it with moving targets, and/or when she had to move. While she mastered the three E-Rank jutsus with little difficulty, D-Ranks gave her a harder time. And obstacle courses were simply a nightmare.

But the worst part was taijutsu spars. Just like Naruto marked Sasuke as his rival, Sakura did the same with Hinata. But while Naruto was slowly closing the gap with the Uchiha, each time the pinkette and the bluenette clashed, Hinata took each time less effort to defeat Sakura.

After admitting that Hinata was too strong for her to beat, Sakura lowered her standards and aimed to defeat her former friend turned

rival, Ino. But the results were the same. Even if Ino wasn't as skilled or strong as Hinata, Ino still ended up kicking her ass. It didn't help that unlike Hinata, who actually showed some restraint, Ino took sadistic glee in beating Sakura. Given that Tamaki was aiming to become a close quarters fighter, she didn't even attempt to fight her either.

So far, the only other kunoichi that she managed to beat from time to time was Karin. And even then her victories were short lived, as Karin also managed to surpass her over time. Ino even replaced her usual "forehead girl" nickname for "the pink punching bag". And her parents suggested her that maybe she wasn't cut to become a kunoichi, and think in other possible career paths.

But she could ignore Ino's taunts and her parents' discouragement. What she couldn't ignore, however, was the way Sasuke looked at her whenever she lost. That look full of disdain, barely acknowledging her. She couldn't stand that.

Sakura always excelled without even trying, so the idea of training outside the Academy was foreign to her. Still, she decided that if she wanted to catch up with her classmates, she needed to improve, and fast. Unfortunately, her additional training and study hours were very little help.

And one day, after another painful and humiliating taijutsu spar, Sakura couldn't take it anymore. She ran away from the Academy, crying, not even caring that the bell didn't ring or the fact that she forgot her backpack. She ran, not caring where she was going, or all the people she bumped into. Her legs carried her to a park, which was devoid of children given the time of the day. Out of breath, Sakura merely dropped herself at the base of a tree, and started to cry her eyes out.

" *Maybe they're right, and I'm not mean to be this,*" Sakura thought. *"Hinata has the Byakugan and her clan's taijutsu style, Ino-pig has her clan's jutsus, Tamaki has her cats, and Karin is a sensor and can*

heal people. What do I have that makes me stand out? Or even makes me useful?"

"Are you okay?" a voice asked behind her.

Sakura turned around, wiping the tears from her eyes. In front of her was Naruto, flanked by Karin and Hinata. She instantly noticed that Hinata was holding her backpack.

"How did you find me?" the pinkette asked.

Karin raised her hand. "Sensor."

"Sakura, you ran away before the classes ended. What happened?" Naruto asked, as he crouched besides her.

"Why do you care!?" Sakura spat at him, making Naruto flinch.

"Hey, that's not a way to talk to somebody who asks if you're okay, you know!" Karin shot back.

"You look pretty upset. It's because taijutsu spars are hard to you?" Naruto asked.

"No! Yes! I mean... it's not just that!" Sakura said between sobs. "I used to be the best girl of the class without even trying, but then your stupid dad had to change everything, and now I'm at the bottom!"

Naruto's soft face turned into an angry frown. "Hey, don't blame my dad for wanting to make us stronger!"

"Yeah, it's easy for you to say that, having not one but two legendary ninjas training you! Everybody has somebody who can train them, but not me!"

"Hey, my mom knows some medical ninjutsu and a couple clan jutsus, but she sucks at everything else," Karin said in disagreement..

"Then how did you got so much better than me at taijutsu?"

"Naruto offered me to train alongside him, being from the same clan and all that," she explained.

"But Naruto is like your cousin or something, right? Then my point still stands."

"Well, you could train with us if you wanted," Naruto offered.

Sakura opened her eyes wide in shock. "R-really? But I'm not part of your family!"

"So?" Naruto failed to see the problem. "Neither is Hinata, and we train together many times."

"Well... don't clans only train their own members?" Sakura asked.

"Yeah, most of the time. But that doesn't mean we couldn't help other people too. Besides, it's not that we will reveal you clan secrets or anything."

Sakura stared at Naruto in disbelief. "Why are you helping me? I mean... it's not that we are friends or anything. We hardly speak to each other."

"Because I'm going to be Hokage, and a Hokage has to care about all the people of Konoha, not just your friends and family. And I can't stand see a smart girl like you like this."

"Besides, it's obvious that you need some help," Karin added, adjusting her glasses.

"N-Naruto-kun was going to t-teach us something that h-he said it was good for p-people with good chakra control. Maybe could you join us and learn it?" Hinata asked.

Sakura smiled, as she stood up. "Really? That would be great."

"In that case, go to Training Ground Three tomorrow after class. Don't be late!" Naruto said as he turned back and left. Karin left as well.

Hinata, on the other hand, approached Sakura and handed her her backpack. "You forgot this."

"Oh... thank you," Sakura wiped her tears and accepted her returning backpack.

"Sakura-san... may I ask you something?" Hinata asked.

"Uhm... yeah, sure, go ahead."

"I mean, maybe i-it's not my place to ask but... what did make you want to become a ninja?"

Sakura was taken aback by Hinata's question. Looking back, she couldn't remember the reason for her to join. That wasn't good. She thought that maybe it was to impress Sasuke, but that couldn't be it since she didn't meet Sasuke until later. But the reason... yes, she remember she wanted to become a ninja when she was little, but that was just a stupid, childish dream she had casted aside.

"I... I don't remember," Sakura sheepishly said.

Hinata looked thoughtful. "And do you still want to be a ninja?"

"Y-Yes, I do."

"Why? What do you want to accomplish? Being a ninja isn't an end, but a means to an end. I want to become a ninja so I can be the leader of my clan some day. Naruto-kun wants to become a ninja to become Hokage. Why do you want to become a ninja?"

Sakura once again looked inside her mind for an answer but found nothing. Well, she did found something: Sasuke Uchiha.

"A boy. I want to become a ninja so I can impress a boy, who's already stronger than I'll ever be," Sakura thought, but she clearly wasn't going to tell her that.

"It is because Sasuke-san?" Hinata guessed.

Sakura suddenly turned red and jumped back from Hinata. "Why do you think that!? And what if it's true!? It is wrong to like a boy!? Everybody knows that you'll love to be more than friends with Naruto!"

Hinata turned red as well, and yelped. Was she that obvious? But then again Naruto didn't notice how she felt either.

"T-That's besides the point!" Hinata stuttered, making an effort not to avert Sakura's accusatory glance. "Y-Yes, I like Naruto-kun, but unlike you, I don't neglect my ninja training for the sake of a misguided attempt at impressing him!"

Sakura gasped at Hinata's accusation, but rather than anger, she felt sadness, for she knew that Hinata was telling the truth. How much time did she spend trying clothes and new hairstyles in order to draw her attention that could have been invested in training? Tears started to form in her eyes.

Seeing this, the Hyuga realized that she went too far. "S-Sorry, Sakura-san! I didn't mean to be so hurtful... !"

"No, no you're right," Sakura replied, fighting back the tears. "I'm a mess of a ninja. All I did was fawn over Sasuke-kun like a fangirl while the rest of you actually improved and got stronger."

"Well... it's not too late to improve. I mean, y-you're really smart, and have the b-best chakra control of a-all of us... I think you'll make a wonderful kunoichi, Sakura-san."

This managed to make Sakura smile again. "You think so?"

Hinata nodded. "You only need to find something to apply your strengths."

"In that case, I'll work hard to show everybody that I can become a ninja, even if I don't have a clan!" Sakura stated, clenching her fist with determination. Then, she looked at Hinata in the eyes. "Thanks for cheering me up, Hinata, you're a real sweetie. No wonder Naruto likes to hang out with you," Hinata smiled in return. Sakura continued eyeing her. "And with a little wardrobe upgrade, you could be his girlfriend in no time!"

Hinata's face pretty much invented a new shade of red. "W-WHAAAT!?"

"Oh come on, drop the 'cute innocent girl' act, Hinata, you're not fooling anyone. Well, except Naruto," Sakura teased.

"W-what's wrong with my clothes?" Hinata asked as she looked at herself.

"For starters, why do you hide yourself behind this coat? It's not even cold!"

"W-Well..."

Flashback

In the Hyuga Compound Dojo, Hinata was sparring against her mother, just like she did every day for her Gentle Fist practice. Suddenly, her mother stopping attacking, and stared at her in silence. Hinata grew nervous.

"Uh, Mother? I-It is there something wrong?"

Hikari smiled. "Oh, nothing, honey. It's just that I think I should buy you a bra. Didn't expect you to develop so soon!"

Hinata turned bright red, and instinctively covered her chest with her arms.

End Flashback

"... I like this coat."

"Oh well. Whatever. Anyway, thanks for the talk again, and for bringing me my backpack. See you tomorrow!" Sakura cheerfully said as she walked away.

...

Meanwhile, at Downtown Konoha

"You have no right to do this!" Sasuke angrily protested.

"Shut up! Just get out of here before I call the ANBU!" a shopkeeper replied, just as heatedly, if not more.

After the day of the failed Uchiha Insurrection, the three remained Uchihas had become pariahs in Konoha. People would glare at them, murmur between themselves whenever an Uchiha was present -though they sometimes were loud enough for their insults to be heard- and treat them with scorn and contempt. Sasuke had learned to ignore all of the above and live with it as he could, but this was the first time they treated him with such an open hostility.

Sasuke noticed that he was starting to outgrow most of his clothes, so he decided to buy new ones. However, the moment he tried to enter a store that caught his attention, the storekeeper, a bald man in his forties with a moustache, wasted no time to kick him out.

As the two of them loudly argued, a small crowd build around them, mostly to enjoy the spectacle, but some also joined the argument and threw some insults at Sasuke. Naturally, it didn't take too long before a couple of ANBU arrived to see what was causing the commotion.

"What's going on here?" an ANBU with a ferret mask asked as he made his way through the crowd.

"Oh, thank Kami you're here! Please take this demon away from my store!" the storekeeper demanded the ANBU, while pointing at Sasuke

"You can't do that! This man just kicked me out of his store for no reason!" Sasuke protested.

"No reason!? You're an Uchiha! That's all the reason I need!" the storekeeper replied.

"I see," the other ANBU, who was wearing a bear mask calmly placed a hand on Sasuke's shoulder. "Now everybody calm down, we are going to fix this."

Everybody was expecting the ANBU to take Sasuke away, but much to everybody's shock, the ferret masked ANBU slammed the storekeeper against a wall, and placed handcuffs on his wrists.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!?" the storekeeper angrily demanded.

"You yourself admitted to refuse service to a ninja of this village based on his clan alone. That's a clear violation of the Clan Discrimination Bill. Hence, you're under arrest," the ANBU calmly explained as he dragged him away.

"WHAT!? My wife was killed by those red eyed bastards, and you take their side!?" the storekeeper angrily shouted. "You will regret this! Both you and the Hokage! You can't expect us to live side by side with those traitors!"

"Release him, he did nothing wrong!" a random villager said.

"Yes, take the Uchiha instead! Kill all of them before they betray us again!" another villager added.

"Enough!" the bear masked ANBU bellowed. "Everybody, scatter or you will be arrested as well!"

The warning was effective, and people quietly resumed with what they were doing before the incident happened. The bear masked ANBU was about to ask Sasuke if he was okay, but he noticed that the young Uchiha had already left.

...

The next day after class, Sakura headed towards Training Ground Three, where Naruto, Hinata and Karin were already waiting for her. They were standing in front of a very large rock.

"Alright, everybody is here, so we can start now!" Naruto enthusiastically announced as he looked at Sakura.

"Er, Naruto, don't get me wrong, I'm really thankful that you're teaching us this, but I hope you don't expect us, or at least me, to address you as 'sensei'," Sakura stated.

"What? Oh no. I'd be a crappy sensei anyway. At least until I get stronger," Naruto replied, rubbing the back of his head. "You see, this is mom's super strength secret technique. It is very simple. All you have to do is gather chakra on your fist, and release it. Like this!" Naruto then punched the rock behind him, leaving a small crack. "See?"

"Wow, that's so amazing!" Karin gushed.

"D-Does it hurt?" Hinata asked.

"A little. That's why you also need to keep some chakra in order to shield your hands from the backlash. My chakra control is still far from perfect, but yours is much better. Why don't you give it a try?" Naruto moved aside from the rock in order to leave the girls enough space.

The first one to go was Karin. Just as Naruto instructed, she gathered chakra on her fist, and punched the rock, leaving a bigger

crack than Naruto's. However, she also shook her fist in pain once she was done.

"AWW! You said it didn't hurt!" Karin protested as she nursed her damaged hand.

"I didn't said that. Did you remember to use some chakra to counter the backlash?" Naruto asked. Karin then shook her head. "I thought so."

The next one to try was Hinata. However, she looked rather hesitant. "Uh, Naruto-kun, it is okay for you to teach us this? I mean, you said it is Tsunade-sama's secret technique and..."

"Don't worry! Mom told me I can teach it to my friends if I want to!" Naruto assured, grinning widely. Then his grin disappear and added: "But please don't teach this to other people without asking me first, okay? And you can't teach this to Sasuke! I don't want to give him more weapons to use against me!"

"Actually, if Sasuke-kun wanted to learn this all what he had to do is copy it with the Sharingan," Sakura flatly stated, much to Naruto's horror. Noticing the blonde's distress, the pinkette added: "But I don't think he will. Sasuke usually favors ninjutsu and armed combat over bare fists."

"Well, let's hope that he doesn't think about doing it. Come on Hinata, show me what you can do!"

The Hyuga nodded, and walked towards the rock. Clenching her fist, she gathered chakra, remembered Naruto's warning about the backlash, and punched the rock with all her might. She managed to make a crack slightly bigger than Karin's, and unlike the redhead she managed to avoid hurting her hand.

"Well done, Hinata!" Naruto cheered with a big smile.

"T-Thanks... you know, I think I may find a way to combine this with the Gentle Fist..." Hinata noted, mostly to herself. She was already working to combine elemental ninjutsu to the Gentle Fist, and if she also managed to combine both... the results could be devastating.

"My turn!" Sakura confidently said as she walked towards the rock. After mentally checking all the steps of the technique, she punched the rock.

"WHOA!" three voices said in unison.

Sakura managed to make a crack in the rock twice as big as Karin and Hinata's, plus she managed to pretty much sink her whole fist into the rock. Everybody, including Sakura, couldn't believe what just happened.

"Holy shit... that was amazing!" Naruto shrieked, utterly perplexed.

Dumbfounded, Sakura slowly removed her fist from the hole she just created. She stared at her unharmed hand for a whole minute, while her brain tried to process what just happened. Once her actions started to sink in, Sakura's mouth curved into a huge smile.

"Wow, look at this!" Sakura beamed, pointing at the hole in the rock. "Oh boy, I can't wait to show this to everybody else back in the Academy! Ohhhhhhh, I can't wait to have a rematch against Ino! Let's see how does she like the new 'pink punching bag'!" Sakura said, followed by a rather disturbing laugh.

"Uh... Naruto? Do you think she's going mad with power?" Karin asked, visibly worried.

"Well... I believe it's the rush of having a new technique. It should wear off soon," the blond replied, as he continued watching Sakura making holes in the rock.

"And if she... doesn't?" Hinata asked fearfully.

"YES! YES! I'M SAKURA THE UNSTOPPABLE! SAKURA THE INVINCIBLE! TREMBLE, EVERYBODY, AND DESPAIR! YOUR DOOM HAS COME TO THIS WORLD! MWAHAHAHAHAHA!" After reducing the rock to rubble, Sakura then decided to take down a few trees.

"Dad said that the Land of the Crescent Moon is a really nice to place to live," Naruto replied, just as scared.

...

Fortunately, just like Naruto said, Sakura didn't went mad with power, and calmed down the moment she exhausted her chakra after taking down a dozen trees. After saying their goodbyes and agreeing on a date for their next training session together, the four children headed for their respective houses.

On his way home, there was something that caught Naruto's attention. Sitting alone on a small pier on the Naka River was no other than Sasuke Uchiha, his hands crossed under his chin, looking absentmindedly at the orange and yellow reflection of the descending sun in the water.

Sasuke was never the more social person to begin with, but since the Uchiha Coup D'etat three years ago, Sasuke had become even more quiet and asocial. Talking to him had the same effect as talking to a wall, and he usually lashed out at those who insisted on making him talk.

Then again, Naruto could never understand what the boy was going through. Not only he had lost almost his entire family in a single night, but on top of that the standing of his once proud clan was lower than dirt. Itachi got a pass, since there were multiple witnesses to his acts and how he was instrumental in stopping the insurrection and saving the Third Hokage. But Sasuke and Shisui were pretty much the new village pariahs. And while Shisui managed to ignore the cold stares, murmurs and the passive hostility, Sasuke was too

young and didn't have the emotional maturity to deal with that. And, as such, he decided to close himself from the world.

He had seen Sasuke like this many times, but for some reason never had the courage to go and try to talk to him. But given how he helped Sakura today, Naruto thought that maybe helping Sasuke wasn't beyond his power. Making his decision, the blond Jinchuriki walked towards the youngest Uchiha.

"Hey, Sasuke!" Naruto shouted.

Sasuke didn't even turned back to look at him. "Go away, idiot. I don't want to spar with you now."

"What? Oh come on, you didn't even let me finish! I don't want to fight you, just talk."

"I don't want to talk either," Sasuke scoffed.

"You know, you've been pretty cranky since... well, you know..." Naruto rubbed his arm and looked sideways -even if Sasuke wasn't even looking at him-.

"And you think you can help me?"

"Yes, of course I can!" Naruto excitedly replied.

"Alright. Tell me, did you ever lose most of your family in a single night, yet you have absolutely no one to blame for their deaths, and on top of that people want you to pay for their crimes?"

"Uh... no. I'm afraid not."

"Then we have nothing to talk about. Now leave me alone."

"But I know what it feels being blamed for stuff that it's not your fault!"

This made Sasuke to finally turn around. "Really? How?"

"Uh, did you forget that I have the Kyubi sealed inside me?" Naruto asked as he pointed at his stomach. "There are a lot of people who fear me, because they believe that I will let the Kyubi out one day and destroy Konoha. Others hate me for the people they lost during the attack, even if I'm merely the Kyubi's container. My parents told me that they hate me because they need something to vent their hate, and I'm the easiest target. And that's what the people who lost their loved ones during the insurrection, like Ino, are doing with you and your remaining family. And you suffer because you want to lash out at somebody, but you don't have anybody to vent your frustrations."

"What about you? Don't you get frustrated? Don't you want to lash out at the people who mistreat you and hate you?"

"Of course I do! Many times! But I have something else that helps me deal with it: my family and my friends. And I believe you have that too."

Sasuke looked down, pensive. Suddenly, he felt really guilty for the cold treatment he had been giving both Itachi and Shisui, despite the fact that they only wanted to help him. Maybe he should make something to compensate them.

"And why are you telling me this? Do you want to be my friend all of sudden?" Sasuke asked, skeptical.

"Yeah," Naruto's smile was sincere. "If you have a problem, you can count on me to help you."

Sasuke remained a few seconds silent, looking at his feet.

"I... I'll think about it," Sasuke muttered. He then stood up, placed his hands on his pockets, and walked away. "I need to go home now."

Naruto watched him go. Well, that went better than what he had originally expected.

...

Many Months Later

And once more, the school year came to an end. Naruto and his eleven classmates managed to pass the exam, which, besides the usual theory, included the three basic E-Rank jutsus (even if they were also present in the exam of the previous year), taijutsu, and kunai and shuriken toss. This meant that all of them would pass into the next course next year, which hopefully would be their last, before finally becoming a real ninja.

After being congratulated by Iruka, the twelve kids gathered their gear in their backpacks, and left. As usual, Naruto was walking with Hinata and Haku.

"Hey, today my dad is going to give me some new training, wanna tag along?" Naruto asked his two friends.

"I'd love to, but I can't. My family and I are going to celebrate Neji-niisan graduating and becoming a ninja," Hinata said, a bit down. "But now that we have a few weeks off I'm sure we can find time to hang out again, Naruto-kun."

Naruto looked at her, puzzled. "How do you know that Neji passed already? The final exam has been just now!"

"Neji-niisan is a prodigy, and thus I believe it's unlikely he failed the exam. In fact, he was even aiming to graduate as the Rookie of the Year."

Naruto let out a whistle. He already knew that Neji was strong, but not to that point. Pushing those thoughts aside, he looked at the Ice Ninja. "What about you, Haku?"

"Like Hinata-san, I also have plans. Today is Friday, which means that I can visit Zabuza-sama in jail. One more year, and he'll be out of prison," the girl-looking boy replied. " Maybe another day."

Naruto looked down. "Man, what a drag. Well, in that case-WHAT THE HELL!?"

When the trio exited the Academy, they were greeted by an impossible image: despite being two in the afternoon, the sun was setting. And on top of that, they could hear the sound of waves crashing, despite the fact that the nearest beach was more than two hundred kilometers away from Konoha.

"This is... mostly unusual," Haku said, inspecting the scene.

Hinata activated her Byakugan. "This doesn't appear to be a genjutsu, my Byakugan can't see through it."

Before Naruto could say anything, he was interrupted by a pair of loud voices that came from somewhere near them. He could swear they came from within the Academy.

" It was thanks to you that I could graduate, Gai-sensei!"

" Nonsense! It was you who did all the hard work! I only gave you some pointers!"

" Gai-sensei!"

" Lee!"

" Gai-sensei!"

" Lee!"

" Gai-sensei!"

" Lee!"

"Okay... I think I'm getting out of here before things get even weirder..." Naruto said as he trailed off. Haku and Hinata did likewise.

...

Konoha Prison

Haku was sitting on a table, flanked by his legal guardians, Yugao and Hayate, who were close behind him. At the other side of the table was Zabuza, wearing the prison uniform, with shackles and both his wrists and his ankles.

"Good afternoon, Zabuza-sama. How have you been since I last came to visit you?" the Ice Ninja asked.

"Same as always. The food is trash, the company is even worse, and I can't start a fight without being thrown into solitary confinement for a week. But other than that, I'm fine," the Demon of the Mist replied.

"This will end soon. Next year I will be a ninja, and the Hokage will have to release you under probation."

"That's if he keeps his word."

"Of course he will!" Yugao slammed her fist on the table. "How you dare to doubt the word of the Hokage!"

"Trust me girl, being a Kage isn't something that makes him deserving of my trust, or anybody's trust, for that matter. I learned that the hard way."

Hayate cleared his throat after coughing a few times. "I don't know how things are in Kirigakure, but in Konoha we tend to keep our promises and deals."

"Well, it's just that I know how much you guys like Bloodline Limits, and Haku's is especially powerful. I really find hard to believe that he will let us go that easily once I finish my probation."

"Like Hayate-kun said, things here are different. Do as you're told, and there won't be any troubles," Yugao said.

"We'll see," Zabuza then redirected his attention to Haku. "What about you? Are they treating you good?"

Haku's mouth curved into a smile. "Yes. I made a few friends in the Academy, Yugao-san and Hayate-san are really kind to me, and I can show my powers without being afraid of being persecuted. Konoha is a nice place."

"It's good that at least one of us is enjoying their stay here," Zabuza mentioned. *"Smart. Really smart, Jiraiya."*

Haku seemed to catch Zabuza's thoughts, and his expression turned serious. "But that doesn't mean that my loyalty towards you has wavered in the slightest. Once you finish your probation, I will go follow you should you choose to leave Konoha."

Zabuza smirked, baring his sharp teeth. "Good to hear that."

They continued talking for quite some time. Haku talked about the training he was getting from both the Academy and his legal guardians, to which Zabuza constantly claimed that he would make a much better job. Zabuza also told him the little novelties that went in prison from the last time the Ice Ninja came to visit. Until they finally hit the forty five minutes mark, and Zabuza was brought to his cell.

While they headed back home, Yugao couldn't hold her tongue about certain topic. "You know, Haku-kun, I never understand how such a kind boy like you can be so loyal to such bloodthirsty criminal."

"I told you that Zabuza-sama save me from-"

"Yeah, we know," the purple haired woman interrupted. "But still, the way he talks about you, as if you only existed to serve him and your feelings didn't matter... why does that never bother you?"

"It's a small price to pay, compared to my previous situation."

"What about Yugao-chan and myself? Didn't we treat you good during these years?" Hayate asked.

"Yes. You've done an admirable effort taking care of me, and I will always be grateful for that."

Hayate frowned. "Yet if you have to choose between Zabuza or us, you'll choose him."

"Undoubtedly," Haku's answer left was definitive.

"But why? That's what we can't understand," Yugao said with pleading eyes.

"Because he was the first to acknowledge me. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here. That's why I have a debt with him that I will never be able to pay."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes. He is the most important person to me."

"I see then. And do you think he loves you back?"

Haku averted his gaze. "That's irrelevant."

"You didn't answer my question." Yugao wasn't going to let the issue go so easily.

Haku stuttered something unintelligible before he gave his answer. "I... I don't know. I think he does."

"And do you want him to love you?"

Haku felt as if he was trying to force the words out of his mouth. "... yes."

"Then, why don't you ask him that the next time we come to visit him?" Hayate suggested.

"I... I'll think about it. Can we talk about else now, please?" Haku asked with pleading eyes.

"Yes. I believe we give you enough hell for that. So, do you want to have dinner at home, or do you want for us to go out?"

...

Training Ground Three

"Alright Naruto, this year will be your last at the Academy, so we will make sure that by the time you graduate, you're good enough to become a Chunin. The only thing you'll need then will be experience, and that will come with the missions," Jiraiya explained. "Now, show me what you can do before we move into something new."

Naruto and Jiraiya spend half an hour sparring, while the Toad Sage made comments about things that Naruto had improved and others that he needed to work out. Then, he asked Naruto to make him a demonstration of his ninjutsu skills, first the three E-Rank jutsus - Naruto had finally learned to do the Body Replacement without needing to do hand seals- and later his few wind jutsus.

"So, how it was?" Naruto asked, expectant.

"Pretty good. But then again it's no surprise, given that you have such an awesome teacher like myself. I am the Hokage after all," Jiraiya said, with a self-aggrandizing air. "Though your mom helped as well."

Naruto was about to retort, when a realization dawned on him.

"Hey, I just realized something," Naruto said, narrowing his eyes at Jiraiya. "Shouldn't you be at the Hokage's tower? How can you have so much spare time to train me?"

"Oh, you noticed?" Jiraiya asked with a foxy grin. "You took your sweet time. And before you start throwing accusations, the answer is

that I'm not the real Jiraiya, but a clone. The real me is back at the tower, working."

Technically, the real Jiraiya was in a secret room in the tower writing the next Icha Icha installment, while another couple of clones worked on the paperwork.

"A clone? But... you're... you're... I mean, I can touch you!"

"You mean that I'm solid? Yeah. Because I'm not a normal clone, but a Shadow Clone. Not only I'm solid, but I possess all the knowledge and jutsus from the real Jiraiya. And all the knowledge I gain will be send to Jiraiya once I'm dispelled."

"Whoa, that jutsu it's so cool! And how durable are you?"

"It depends, but Shadow Clones are usually rather fragile, and a strong hit is enough to dispel them. Still, Jiraiya's clones are rather sturdy, and nothing less than a stab will dispel them."

"I see. And do the pain of the clones feel go back to the original too?"

"No. Just the knowledge."

"Okay, then let me try something!" Naruto said as he pulled out a kunai from his pouch.

"Hey kid, what are you-"

But the Jiraiya clone didn't time to react before Naruto sank a kunai on his chest, exploding in a cloud of smoke. Ten minutes later, Jiraiya -or better said, another clone- reappeared.

"Seriously brat, don't do that again!" Jiraiya shouted in a scolding manner. "We're wasting a lot of time! Not to mention that seeing you trying to kill me was disturbing as hell!"

"Can you teach me that jutsu?" Naruto asked, starry eyed.

"This is a forbidden jutsu that is only taught to Jonin," Jiraiya replied. Naruto's stars vanished from his eyes. "But then again, it's due its heavy chakra cost. And since you have way more chakra than the average Genin, I don't see why you shouldn't."

The stars returned once again to Naruto's eyes. The Toad Sage explained the process, which was surprisingly simple for being a forbidden jutsu. Once Naruto heard the explanation, he formed a cross with his index and middle fingers from both hands, and made his first attempt.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Fifteen Naruto clones appeared from just as many small cloud explosions. Jiraiya looked at the display, speechless.

"Holy shit, brat! I knew you have a lot of chakra, but this is way too much!" Jiraiya shouted in shock, unconsciously stumbling back. "Hell, I have pretty big chakra reserves and I can't make more than six clones!"

Naruto grinned. "I can do more if you want."

"No, it's okay. Boy, if I knew this, I could have taught you this jutsu way earlier. This is going to accelerate your training big time."

Naruto tilted his head. "Come again?"

"Brat, did you forget already what I said about the original retaining the knowledge of the clones?"

"Wait, so that means... I could have five clones learning five different jutsus at the same time, and thus I'd learn five jutsus in the time it takes to learn just one?"

Jiraiya smiled. "You got it right."

Naruto looked as if his birthday had just arrived. "Oh boy, this is awesome! Now I'm going to be the most awesome ninja who ever

lived in no time! Come on, teach me something else!"

"I like your enthusiasm, kid. Your dad was just as eager to learn as you are. And thus, I believe it's about time you learn a jutsu that it's pretty much a family tradition. How do you like the idea of summoning an animal companion to help you in battle?"

...

Many months later

And once again, a new school year began.

One of the perks of Jiraiya's reform was the introduction of optional subjects, which would help the future Genin to choose their specialization as soon as possible. That means that, for a couple hours, the students wouldn't be together in the same classroom or training ground.

Medical Ninjutsu Course, Konoha Hospital

"Welcome everybody to my class. I'm sure everybody knows me, but I'll introduce myself nevertheless. My name is Tsunade Senju, and as you guessed, I will teach you medical ninutsu," the Slug Sannin announced, staring at her five students. "Now, why don't you introduce yourselves and tell me why are you interested in learning medical ninjutsu?"

"I think I will go first," Sakura said. She cleared her throat. "My name is Sakura Haruno. I know that medical ninjutsu requires a fine chakra control and intelligence, traits I'm sure I posses. As for my motivation, I believe it's a good way to help my teammates in battle and make myself useful."

"Nice introduction, kid. How many times did you rehearse it in front of the mirror?"

"Five times-I mean, none! What I said came from the bottom of my heart!"

Tsuande smirked, amused. "Sure, I believe you. What about you?" she asked, looking at Ino.

"My name is Ino Yamanaka. I also think I have what it takes to be a medic. My reasons for wanting to be a medic is that ninjas are mostly known for killing, but I believe that saving lives is important too. And unlike forehead girl, I didn't rehearse this."

Sakura shot his former friend a murderous glare.

"A noble thought, indeed. Who wants to go next?"

"How about me?" Karin suggested, raising his hand. "My name is Karin Uzumaki. I already have an innate healing ability, so I think I could greatly benefit from learning medical ninjutsu."

Tsunade merely nodded, and looked at her remaining two students.

"M-My name is Hinata Hyuga, though y-you already know who I am," Hinata said a bit sheepishly. "I think my Byakugan can be a great tool for a medic-nin, plus just like Ino-san said, we ninjas should help people in ways other than killing."

"Girl, you have no idea how much I wanted to get my hands on a Hyuga. But the rest of them seem to think that there's nothing beyond the Gentle Fist," Tsunade commented. "But then again, a tool is just as good as the person using it. Don't think that having a Byakugan makes you a medic already."

"O-Of course not!"

Tsunade then looked at his last student, who took the hint and spoke.

"My name is Shino Aburame. Like Karin, I also know medical ninjutsu. But then again, our clan's medical jutsus involve using our

insects to repair our bodies, and thus non-Aburames are quite reluctant to be healed this way. And since I have an extensive knowledge of human anatomy, I believe I have a good base to learn mainstream medical jutsus."

"Good to have somebody in my class with a Y chromosome. I don't know why most men are so unwilling to learn medicine," Tsunade mused to herself. "Alright, now that introductions are over, let's get started. The first thing you'll learn is the Mystical Palm Jutsu, the basic healing jutsu, and the one you will use the most. My knucklehead of a son, who has an average chakra control and zero aptitude for medicine learned this jutsu in two weeks, so I expect you to learn it in less than one. Now open your books on page 7, and read..."

...

Chakra Flow course, Training Ground Eighteen

"Welcome to Chakra Flow course. My name is Hayate Gekko, and I will be your teacher," the Special Jonin said before coughing a couple times. "You know, I wasn't expecting this many people to attend this class."

Hayate's students looked at each other a bit puzzled. They were Naruto, Sasuke, Haku and Tamaki. Was Hayate expecting less than four people?

"In case you're wondering, last year I only got one student. A girl named Tenten, do you know her? No? Oh, nevermind then," Hayate coughed again. "Okay, now I'll explain you the basics of chakra flow. Like the name implies, it consists in channeling your chakra through a weapon to increase it's power, as well as adding it other attributes. Now watch this."

Hayate then tossed a kunai at a bullseye in a tree stump. The kunai's point stabbed itself in the middle.

"Now, watch what happens when I charge the kunai with my chakra before tossing it," Hayate showed the kunai, which had a faint blue glow, and tossed it against another bullseye.

Except this time, the kunai drilled itself into the stump, making multiple large cracks. Naruto and Tamaki opened their mouths in awe, while Sasuke and Haku merely nodded.

"As you can see, good chakra control is essential to master this art. What I did was channel normal chakra. If you learn elemental chakra, you can coat your weapons in fire or electricity. Now take out a kunai or a shuriken -yes Haku, a senbon is also fine- and try to do it yourselves. Don't get frustrated if you don't get it at the first try."

...

Elemental Ninjutsu Course, Training Ground Eleven

As many teachers expected, this was the optional subject with the most students. All of them actually. Iruka himself was the instructor. Behind him were five opened boxes with scrolls on them. The boxes were labeled with the kanjis for "fire", "water", "earth", "wind" and "lightning".

"I'm glad to see all of you here. You know already me and I know all of you, so we can skip the introductions and get down to business," Iruka pulled a small sheet of brown paper from a pouch of his flak jacket. "Does anybody knows what is this? Yes, Naruto?"

"A Chakra litmus paper. It's used to find out your elemental affinity. You channel chakra into the paper, and you can guess your affinity based on how it reacts."

Iruka smiled. "Very well, Naruto. I believe you have been introduced to the basics of nature manipulation, right?" the teacher asked. Naruto proudly nodded. "Does anybody else knows the basics of nature manipulation?"

Sasuke, Haku and Hinata raised their hands.

"Okay. As you can see, there are some boxes behind me. Said boxes have some D-rank and C-rank jutsus. Your task for today is to pick one and try to master it. The rest of you, take a litmus paper from me and see which is your affinity. If the paper burns, is fire. If it gets wet, is water. If it turns to dust is earth. If it splits in two then is air. And if it wrinkles is lightning."

Shikamaru, Choji and Tamaki got fire. Karin, Kiba and Shino got earth. Ino got water.

"Uh... Iruka sensei, I think I have a problem here..." Sakura said as he walked towards him.

The teacher smiled. "That's why I'm here. What's wrong, then?"

"Is just that my paper... it did something weird... can you give me another one? Maybe the one you gave me was defective."

Iruka tilted his head, puzzled, but decided to comply the pinkette's request and gave her another paper. After she channeled her chakra once again, the paper got wet, but then it crumbled into a paste.

"See? This is what happened before!"

"Oh my..." Iruka looked at the remaing of the paper in surprise.

"What is it? There's something wrong with my chakra?"

Iruka smiled in a reassuring way. "There's nothing to worry about, Sakura. In fact, this is pretty good."

"Huh?"

"The paper got wet, indicating water, affinity, then crumbled, indicating earth affinity. That means that you have two affinities. Which is extremely rare outside Bloodline Limits."

Sakura's worried face morphed into a smile of triumph.

"Two affinities? Oh yes!" the pinkette pumped her fists.

"Alright, now that everybody knows their affinity, I will teach you the basic control exercises that you'll need to master before you can learn any elemental jutsus..."

...

Time passed. Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. And before anybody realized, it was the end of the school year, which would mean the Final Exam. Like the other exams, this one had written portion, which involved subjects such as math, physics, history and geography. The ninjutsu portion consisted on showing the teacher a jutsu other than the three E-Rank ones. Most people used their clan jutsus. Karin surprised Naruto with an Uzumaki secret jutsu called Adamantine Chains. Sakura used the Chakra Scalpel -which Naruto taught her- and Naruto himself used the Summoning Jutsu to summon a little red toad wearing a black jacket named Gamakichi. Other two portions consisted on taijutsu spar against a teacher, an obstacle course, and tossing kunai or shuriken against moving targets. And lastly, there was also a portion for each optional subject taken.

All the students passed without much trouble. The position of Rookie of the Year, which was close between Sasuke and Haku, went to the former. Hinata was the top kunoichi, with Sakura being a close second. Iruka congratulated each of his students at the same time he gave them their desired forehead protectors, signifying the fact that they were now real ninjas. He also told them to come back tomorrow to know their teammates and their Jonin-senseis.

At the Academy's entrances, the twelve new ninjas were being congratulated by their clans and families. Naruto was a bit dejected that Jiraiya and Tsunade couldn't come, since they were busy at the moment, but at the very least, Shizune and the twins were for him.

"Congratulations, Naruto-kun! We all knew you'll make it," Shizune happily said as she patted Naruto on the back.

"I can't wait to show this to mom and dad!" Naruto cheered, proudly pointing at the forehead protector on his head. "It look cool on me, doesn't it?"

"Hey, can I see it?" Hagane asked, as he reached for Naruto's forehead.

"I want to see it too!" Kaida said as well.

"Yes, but I asked first!"

"But Naruto-niisan likes me better than you!"

"That's a lie! Naruto-niisan, you like me better, right?"

"Enough you two! You won't see anything if you don't behave!" Shizune angrily chided. The twins shut up, and lowered their heads in shame. "Now come on, today we will dinner somewhere special to celebrate your graduation."

"Yay! Icharaku's!" Naruto and the twins said in unison.

"I said 'somewhere special', not the place you go every day, Naruto-kun."

Meanwhile, Hinata was also showing her forehead protector to her mother and little sister.

"The entire clan will be proud of you, Hinata," Hikari sweetly said, as she caressed her daughter's cheek. "And top kunoichi no less!"

"Hinata-nee-chan, can I see your forehead protector?" Hanabi asked as she made puppy dog eyes.

Hinata smiled at his sister, and handed the precious headgear to her. "Of course, Hanabi-chan. You'll see how in no time you'll get yours

too."

Another kunoichi near the Hyugas was also showing her prize to her parents.

"See this? I'm a real ninja now! And I almost became top kunoichi! Not bad for somebody who doesn't have a clan, uh?" Sakura waved her forehead protector in front of her parents.

"We always knew you can accomplish anything you set your mind to, dear," Kizashi, Sakura's father said.

"We're really proud of you, honey," Mebuki, Sakura's mother, said as she hugged her.

While Sakura hugged her mother, she couldn't help but glance at certain black haired boy who, just like everybody else, was showing his forehead protector to the remains of his clan.

"Rookie of the Year, uh? Just like your big bro!" Shisui said as he ruffled Sasuke's hair.

"I want to restore the honor of the clan. And by doing that I need to do my best in order to show the village what the Uchiha clan is made of," It was refreshing see Sasuke happy for once.

"Now you will have plenty of opportunities to prove yourself and the clan. Come on, we have to celebrate your graduation at the top of your class," Itachi suggested as he and the other two Uchihas walked away.

Near Sasuke, Yugao and Hayate were also congratulating their quasi-adoptive son, Haku, who was showing them his headband.

"Really impressive kid. It's a pity that you didn't become Rookie of the Year, but oh well," Yugao said as he patted his back.

"Thank you," Haku replied, smiling at them. "Now if it's not much of a bother, could we go to the Hokage's office? This is the proof that I

graduated, and thus the Hokage will have to release Zabuza-sama."

"That won't be necessary, brat," a voice behind them said. A voice Haku knew too well. The Ice Ninja turned around and saw Zabuza, no longer wearing the prison uniform, smirking at him from behind his mask. "Surprised to see me?"

"ZABUZA-SAMA!" Haku cried as he threw his arms around Zabuza, taking the swordsman completely by surprise. "You're free at last!"

"What the hell?" Zabuza asked in shock as he held his hands upwards, as if Haku was made of fire.

"Hey, big guy, why don't you try hugging the kid back?" Hayate suggested, while repressing a cough. "Maybe you even like it."

Going against his better judgment, Zabuza awkwardly wrapped his arms around Haku, and patted his back a couple times.

"What the hell is this place doing to me..."

...

Undisclosed location

In an underground location, a vast man-made cavern decorated with statues of snakes, three men were present, two of them having a conversation, while the third one listened intently. Two of them had silver hair, with one of them also wearing glasses. The last one was taller than the other two, had pale skin and long black hair. The latter man spoke first.

"So, tell me, Mizuki-san, what are your reasons to join my humble organization?"

Mizuki was bent down on one knee, looking at the floor. In front of him was a man whose immense power was only rivaled by his even greater ambition. This man could give Mizuki all what he ever

wanted, or he could end his life right here. The former Konoha teacher had to choose his words carefully.

"Because I believe that we're the same, Orochimaru-sama. Like you, I'm a man not bound by petty morality. Like you, I'm a man that will stop at nothing to achieve my goals. Like you, I'm a man who wants to become stronger at any costs. And like you, I also left Konoha when I realized that that place had nothing more to offer."

Orochimaru couldn't repress a smirk. "You certainly has some guts, Mizuki-san, comparing yourself, a mere teacher, to somebody like me."

Mizuki gulped. He needed to fix this *fast* . "At no point I said that we were equals, Orochimaru-sama, but that we have similar mindsets. That's why I believe that my place is at your side."

Orochimaru chuckled. He certainly enjoyed watching that lowly man squirm in a pathetic attempt at making a good impression. Orochimaru had already made his mind, since you can never have enough foot soldiers or guinea pigs, but he decided to pressure him a little more, just for his own amusement.

"And tell me, what could you offer to me and my organization to be accepted on it? Our numbers might pale in comparison with the great villages, but even we have standards."

Mizuki smirked, and reached for his bag. "That's why I brought a present that I'm sure you will enjoy."

Upon seeing the bag's content, Orochimaru's yellow eyes expanded considerably. He took a step forward to check the item better.

"The Forbidden Scroll of the First Hokage," Orochimaru said in awe, passing a hand through the much desired item. Then he glared at Mizuki. "So it was you who had it all this time?"

"Yes. I stole it during the Uchiha insurrection. They were so busy dealing with the Uchihas, that nobody thought about keeping the scroll safe. Stealing it was a child's play," Mizuki threw his shoulders back in pride.

"So that's why the scroll wasn't there when I went to steal it," Orochimaru calmly said, and suddenly, all trace of color disappeared from Mizuki's face. "And you took no less than four years to bring it to me. Guess that the jutsus here were too complicated for your simple mind, huh?"

Mizuki knew he was screwed, and not in the fun way. His skin started to sweat bullets. Stammering, he tried to find an answer that would save his skin.

"Uh... sorry, I didn't thought that... uhh... eh..."

Orochimaru's mouth formed an unnerving smile. "But you did bring the scroll to me in the end. And like the old saying goes, all's well that ends well, right?"

"So... you aren't going to punish me?"

"No, Mizuki-san. In fact, from this day onwards, you're now a ninja of Otogakure. Since you were a teacher, I believe you'll have no trouble training a squad of young recruits, right?"

"Of course not, Orochimaru-sama. I'm eager to start working for you."

"Good. Kabuto, walk Mizuki-san towards his bedroom, please."

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama," the bespectacled ninja said, as he and Mizuki walked away.

Alone, Orochimaru couldn't help but stare in awe at the object in his hands, the very reason he wanted to be Hokage to begin with. This would accelerate his plans greatly... but he also had to be cautious

with the Akatsuki. It would do him no good if they realized that this scroll was in his possession now.

...

Tsunade sighed in relief when she finally arrived home after a particularly long shift at the hospital. She hated missing Naruto's graduating ceremony, but she simply couldn't leave in the middle of a delicate surgery, which turned out more complicated than the initial diagnosis suggested. Anyway, at least she could give Naruto her congratulatory gift. She only hoped that Naruto wouldn't be too upset with her.

The living room was empty, and so was the kitchen. She was about to go upstairs when a sound in the backyard caught her attention. And indeed, she saw Shizune in a light taijutsu spar with the twins, which immediately ended after her children and apprentice noticed her presence.

"MOM!" both white haired kids said in unison as they rushed to her.

"Hey mom, Naruto-niisan is a ninja now! They even gave him a headband!" Hagane excitedly commented as he tugged his mother's jacket.

"I know. I don't have any doubts that Naruto passed the exam without much trouble," Tsunade replied.

"Hey, now that you mention it, how is that you don't have a headband, mom?" Kaida asked.

"It's somewhere in my room. I don't use it because I find it uncomfortable," Tsunade told her daughter as she ruffled her hair. Then she turned at Shizune. "Where is Naruto?"

"In his bedroom," was the black haired kunoichi's answer.

"And... how is he?" Tsunade asked, feeling a bit uneasy.

"He was a bit upset that neither you nor Jiraiya-sama showed up, but I believe he understands why. I don't think he'll be mad at you," Shizune replied, trying to sound reassuring.

Tsunade sighed, though she wasn't completely relieved, at least not until he talked with her eldest son. "Alright. I'll go to see him and give him his gift."

"Gift? Do you mean...?"

Tsunade merely nodded.

...

"Enter!" Naruto said after somebody knocked the door. He had an idea of who could be.

And just like he expected, Tsunade entered his bedroom.

"Hi," Tsunade timidly said. "First of all, I'm sorry for missing your big day, Naruto."

Naruto simply smiled at her. "It's okay. I know that your work at the hospital is important and sometimes you have to stay until late. And dad's the Hokage, so that goes without saying."

Tsunade smiled back at him. "I'm glad that you're not mad at me," the Sannin then sat in the bed alongside him. "So, you're a ninja now, how do you feel?"

"Truth be told, the same as yesterday."

"Soon you'll start taking missions. Are you nervous?"

A foxy grin appeared on Naruto's face. "Of course not! This is what I was born to do!"

Tsunade couldn't help but giggle a little at the display. "I'm glad that you're so confident. That's good. But do not get too overconfident."

That can get you killed in our line of work."

"Of course! You don't have to worry about me, mom!"

There was a moment of silence. Tsunade keep staring at Naruto, whose smile never left his face for a single moment.

"Anyway, besides that, I also came here to give you a gift. You know, for finishing the Academy and becoming a ninja."

Naruto grew excited upon hearing the word "gift", as his mind raced through the possibilities. "Really? What is it!?"

Without uttering a word, Tsunade removed the necklace from her neck, and placed it around Naruto's. All the enthusiasm from the blond jinchuriki disappeared, replaced by an overwhelming sense of awe.

"Mom..." Naruto said in an uncharacteristically low volume. "The necklace of the First Hokage... why?"

"Don't you like it?"

"No, no! I didn't mean that!" Naruto quickly stuttered as he shook his hands in negation. "It's just that... shouldn't you give this to Hagane or Kaida? This crystal has the chakra of the first Hokage, just like them... besides, they're your real kids..."

Tsunade's expression hardened. She then grabbed Naruto by his shoulders, forcing him to look her into her eyes. "Naruto, listen to me. Maybe you didn't come from my body, but you're my son as much as the twins, and I will not let anybody say otherwise. Besides, with that necklace, now all my children have the chakra of my grandfather with them."

For once, Naruto was at a loss for words. "I... thank you mom..."

Tsunade's stern expression was replaced by a warm smile. "You're welcome, kiddo. Now make me and the village proud."

"You can bet I will!" the jinchuriki replied, with one of his trademark wide grins.

...

The next day at the Academy

Iruka looked at his now former students with pride. They were sitting on their usual seats, for what will be the last time. The teacher was afraid that Jiraiya's educational reform will turn into a slaughterhouse, and while many students ended up dropping out due to the increased standards, these twelve kids persevered until the very end and came out triumphant.

" Turn out Jiraiya-sama's idea wasn't so hare-brained after all. This kids will be way more prepared for the future than if we stuck to the old model."

Clearing his throat, Iruka spoke. "I told you yesterday already, but let me congratulate you again. It has been great having you as my students, but now, somebody else will take my place, somebody who will be able to teach you according to your growing needs.

"You will be organized into four man cells, composed by three Genin, and a Jonin, that will be your commanding officer, as well as your teacher.

"In the past, we used to make the teams based on grades, so the average grade of each team would be more or less the same as everybody else in order to have balanced teams. But Hokage-sama thought that this idea was stupid, so he suggested to create specialized teams based on the skills of its components. Some people like it, others preferred the older system, but it doesn't matter. It's what the Hokage wants, and his word is the law.

"And without further ado, these are the team formations..."

Author's Note: DUN DUN DUUUUUUUUUN!

Yeah, I know I'm a S.O.B. for finishing the chapter without revealing the teams yet, but I wanted to build up some expectation, I didn't want the team formations to overshadow the other events of this chapter, and to give you some time to speculate. Will the teams remain the same? Will there be new teams? A mix of both? You only need to wait one more week for that.

(BTW, Team Gai is going to be the same as canon, with Neji, Lee and Tenten)

Okay, now let's talk about one of the most prominent characters on this chapter: Sakura.

A fellow writer I recently befriended described Sakura as an "epic fail of a main character", and I couldn't agree more. Kishimoto said in an interview that the idea behind Sakura was to create a "normal" character, somebody without any kind of dark past, clan history, inherited powers or stuff like that, that the audience could relate to. The problem is that such characters are usually rather boring to read about if you don't give them something interesting to do (besides being a love interest). Sakura could have been a "triumph of the common people" kind of character, somebody who rises to prominence despite lacking the advantages children of clans have. Similar to Rock Lee, you know.

Most fics that aim to "fix" Sakura merely make her stronger and more active in fights, but that's just half the problem. As I highlighted during her and Hinata's talk, Sakura doesn't seem to have any kind of dream or goal to become a ninja like pretty much every other people her generation (even if most of them become ninjas out of family tradition, but that's something). So in my opinion, giving her a motivation besides impressing a boy was a must. Really, something as simple as proving yourself will do the trick.

So after fourteen chapters, we finally reached the beginning of the manga, and broke the 100K words barrier. It was about time :)

So, while you wait and speculate the team formations, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Beginning of their Ninja Journey

Authro's Note: Okay, something I need to clarify. Just because I gave Sakura both water and earth affinity doesn't mean that she will develop Wood Style, or that she's secretly a Senju, or stuff like that. Kaida will be the only character in this story to naturally possess Wood Style. Other characters will acquire this ability by splicing Hashirama's DNA, just like in canon.

Now, enjoy the new chapter.

Chapter 15:

The Beginning of Their Ninja Journey

or

What do you mean we're not real ninja yet?

Everybody listened intently to the teacher as he revealed who will be their teammates for the foreseeable future.

"And without further ado, these are the team formations:

"Assault Squad, Naruto Uzumaki, Hinata Hyuga, and Haku Yuki."

"AW YEAH!" Naruto shouted as he grabbed both Hinata and Haku in a hug on each arm. Haku merely chuckled, while Hinata turned red like a tomato.

"I'm in the same team as Naruto-kun... I can't believe my luck... !"
Hinata thought, unmolested by Naruto's arm wrapped around her.

"Naruto, enough!" Iruka angrily shouted. Then he continued reading.
"Medical Squad, Sakura Haruno, Karin Uzumaki and Sasuke Uchiha!"

"Yes! I'm with Sasuke-kun!" both Sakura and Karin gushed at the same time. Noticing what just happened, they glared and hissed at each other.

" There was a time I would have killed to be in the same team as Sasuke, now I feel lucky I'm not with him... come on Sakura, can't you see he's dangerous, and not in a kinky way?" Ino thought while she glanced at both Sakura and Sasuke.

Sasuke raised his hand. "Iruka-sensei, there has to be a mistake. Not only I'm not a medic, but there's no way I can be in the same team as those two! I mean, I can tolerate one, but TWO!?"

"I can assure you that there are no mistakes, Sasuke. If you have any question, talk it with your Jonin-sensei when she arrives," Iruka then turned his eyes back to the list. "Animal Squad, Kiba Inuzuka, Shino Aburame, and Tamaki!"

"I'm with the fleabag? I demand another team!" Tamaki asked as she looked at Kiba in disgust.

"You should be honored to be in the same team as me, apprentice of a crazy cat lady!" Kiba spat back.

Shino didn't say anything, just let out a long sigh.

Iruka groaned, and pinched the bridge of his nose. *"On second thought, I'm glad you guys are now somebody else's problem."*

"And lastly, Tactical Squad, Shikamaru Nara, Choji Akimichi and Ino Yamanaka."

Shikamaru high-fived Choji without either of them had to turn at each other.

"Those are the teams. If you have a problem with them, go complain to the Hokage. Now, wait here. Your Jonin-sensei had been warned,

and will come to pick you up any moment," Iruka announced before leaving the classroom.

Five minutes later, just as the teacher had said, a Jonin entered the room. A black haired woman that Naruto, and to a lesser extend Sasuke, knew very well.

"Hey, Shizune-nee-chan!" Naruto enthusiastically called, waving at her. "Are you a jonin sensei?"

Shizune smiled at him. "Yes. I thought it would be a nice experience."

"That's awesome! Are you my team's sensei?"

"I'm afraid not, Naruto-kun. It's forbidden for a Jonin to be the sensei of a team with a close relative on it," noticing that Naruto's disappointment, she added: "But don't worry, I know your sensei, and I'm sure you'll like her. Now, members of the Medical Squad, can you come with me?"

Sasuke, Sakura and Karin got up from their seats and followed the black haired kunoichi out of the class.

"*Of course, Konoha's second best medic would be the leader of the medical squad,*" Sakura thought in realization.

Ten minutes later, two Jonin arrived at the same time. One of them was a tall man with short, spiky black hair and a beard of the same color, and tan skin. He had a cigarette on his mouth. The other was a woman with long raven hair and deep crimson eyes that could be easily mistaken for a Sharingan.

"Tactical Squad, with me," the man said.

"Assault Squad, come with me," the woman added.

Both teams got up from their seats and followed their senseis out of the classroom, leaving the members of the Animal Squad alone.

An hour later

"I believe they forgot about us," Kiba complained. Akamaru barked in agreement.

"Maybe our sensei is late...?" Tamaki said.

"No, late would be fifteen or twenty minutes. I mean, the other senseis only took ten minutes to arrive while we have been waiting here for almost an hour."

"I suggest patience," Shino spoke. "This man is a Jonin, and thus somebody serious worth of his rank. I'm positive that he'll have an acceptable reason for not being on time."

Two hours later

Tamaki was asleep on her desk. Kiba was groaning in annoyance.

"Where the hell is this guy!?"

"Regardless of what I said before, I'm starting to believe that either our sensei forgot about us, or the Hokage forgot to tell him about us. In either case, an unacceptable behavior from either our sensei or the Hokage," Shino commented, a little irritation seeping through his usual stoic monotone tone.

That moment, the door opened, revealing a tall man with silver colored, gravity defying hair, whose lower part of his face was covered by a mask.

"Yo," the man laconically said.

"YOU'RE LATE!" Kiba yelled at the man, abruptly waking Tamaki up.

"Oh, sorry about that. I kinda forgot how to arrive here. You know, it's been a while since I was an academy student," the man said, giving the three Genin an eye-smile. "I believe that you're the Animal Squad?"

"By virtue of being the only remaining team present, yes, we are," Shino replied.

"Alright, then come with me. And once again, sorry for being late. It will never happen again."

The three Genin had the impression that that was a huge lie.

...

Training Ground Ten

Shikamaru, Choji and Ino were sitting on the grass, looking at the tall bearded man in front of him, who had informed that this training ground would be now where they will be training from now onwards as a team.

"Alright, before I explain you the role of this team as a whole, why don't you introduce yourselves to each other, you know, to be better acquitted," the man said as he gave his cigarette a puff. "I'll start. My name is Asuma Sarutobi. I like to train, hang out with my friends, and play shogi," Shikamaru perked up upon hearing this. "I dislike bullies, and those who doesn't get take their roles as a ninja seriously. My dream is to make a name of myself, marry a nice woman, and start a family."

It was Ino who perked up upon hearing the last bit of information. Her mouth curved into a huge smile "Do you have somebody in mind already?"

"I don't think I have to tell you that," Asuma replied.

Ino's grin grew even wider. "That mean yes, then. Was that that pretty woman that came with you? I noticed the looks she was shooting at you."

" *Man, if I knew that this girl was so much into gossiping I would have my trap shut,*" Asuma thought. "Why don't you share something

about you? That way we should be even."

"Why, of course," Ino chirped, before clearing her throat. "My name is Ino Yamanaka, future heir of the Yamanaka Clan once I'm eighteen. I like shopping and gossiping," her face considerably soured before continuing. "I dislike traitors and murderers. And my dream is to become a great kunoichi so I can lead my clan properly so we can keep Konoha safer."

Asuma remembered that Ino lost her dad during the Uchiha insurrection. While she didn't make any specific references, it was easy to guess who she was thinking when she talked about "traitors and murderers."

"If you work hard, I'm sure you'll achieve your dream," Asuma then turned to Choji, who was munching some chips, and nodded at him. The Akimichi took the hint.

"My name is Choji Akimichi. Eating is what I like the most. While I have some favorite foods, I'm also open to taste new things. I dislike people who judge others based on their appearance. And my dream is to become a great ninja, just like my father."

"Well, maybe you could moderate a little on the food if you want to achieve that goal," Asuma said, making Choji to frown at him, but didn't stop eating his chips. The Jonin then stared at Shikamaru, who replied with a long sigh.

"My name is Shikamaru Nara. I like playing Shogi and watching the clouds. I dislike... well, pretty much anything that requires some sort of physical effort on my part, if it's not a life or death situation. And my dreams for the future... guess it would be to have a quiet life devoid of complications, and maybe have a family as well."

"Interesting. Maybe you and I should play Shogi sometime," Asuma said, earning a shrug from Shikamaru as if saying "sure, why not?" "And maybe I could do something about that laziness of yours."

Shikamaru gave another shrug, this one meaning "you're welcome to try".

"Alright, so the four of us form the Tactical Squad. The role of this squad will be taking care of missions other specialized teams wouldn't be qualified for, such as infiltration, reconnaissance, captures, dealing with enemies that won't go down with just brute force, and so on.

"It is no coincidence that you three were chosen for this squad. Members of the Nara, Akimichi and Yamanaka clans being on the same team is a tradition that goes back fifteen generations, but I'm sure you're already aware about that.

"Now, I must tell you something. Despite what Iruka might have told you, you're not Genin already," this earned a loud "WHAT!?" from Ino and Choji, and a soft "eh" from Shikamaru. "Before you're officially Genin, I must give you my approval. And before I can do that, I have to test you first."

"What kind of test is going to be, Asuma-sensei?" Choji asked, after apparently finishing his bag of chips.

"A simple spar. You three against me. The teamwork of your three clans is downright legendary, and I want to check if you're going to live up to said legend," Asuma explained before finishing his cigarette, dropping it at his feet, and stepping on it to put it out completely.

The three Genin got on their feet, and prepared for the fight.

...

Training Ground Nine

Just like Asuma's team, Shizune's team were sitting in front of their sensei, though in their case they were sitting on a makeshift bench made out of a fallen tree, Sasuke in the middle with Sakura and

Karin at each side. And just like Asuma, Shizune proposed to introduce themselves to each other.

"My name is Shizune Kato. I like medicine, helping others, cute animals, and to visit cultural heritage sites. I dislike drunks and gamblers. My dream is to become a great kunoichi and live up to Tsunade-sama's legacy. Well, now you know a little more about me," the adult medic-nin said with a warm smile. "Who wants to go next?"

Sakura cleared her throat. "My name is Sakura Haruno. I like... well, cute boys," she said, glancing at Sasuke, who didn't react. "I also like medicine. I dislike people who judge others without getting to know them, and my dream is to prove that I can become a great kunoichi despite not being born into a ninja clan."

Without waiting for Shizune to say anything, Karin started her introduction, slightly upset that Sakura got to introduce herself first. "My name is Karin Uzumaki. I like perfumes, medicine, and having a permanent home. I dislike rude people. My dream is to restore my clan to its former glory, and be strong enough so I don't have to worry about people wanting to hurt me or my family."

Shizune nodded and smiled, then looked at Sasuke, who groaned in return.

"Let's get over this already. My name is Sasuke Uchiha. I like training and getting stronger, and when I'm not doing that I like to take long walks. I dislike people who hurt those I care about. And my dream is to become the strongest ninja this village has ever seen, as well as to restore the honor of my clan."

"Well, now that we all know a little more about each other, how about I explain you the role of this team?" Shizune asked. Sasuke raised his hand. "Yes, Sasuke?"

"This is a medical squad, and I can see that you, Sakura and Karin are medics. But I'm not a medic. Shouldn't somebody like Ino or Hinata be here instead of me? I think I belong to the Assault Squad

or even the Tactical Squad. Clearly there has been a mistake when the teams were formed."

"Jiraiya-sama told me you'd said that. And no, there were no mistakes with the team placements. If you allow me to explain how this team will work, you'll understand why you're here instead of a more... offensive-oriented team."

"You have my attention then."

"Alright. The Medical Squad is mostly a Search and Rescue team. Our duty includes searching disappeared people, healing the wounded and rescue people from dangerous areas, among many others. When working alongside other squads, our role will be to support them.

"Now Sasuke, as for your presence here. You see, for obvious reasons, medics tend to be the first ones being targeted by the enemy forces. Since most of the time medics will be healing and assisting others, they will be unable to defend themselves and thus vulnerable to enemy attacks."

Sakura and Karin imagined a chibi version of themselves healing a random Konoha ninja, only to be ambushed by an enemy who stabs them in the back multiple times, making their spirit leave their lifeless bodies.

"If that happens, not only we lose a medic, but the person he or she may be healing. Your role is make sure that such thing doesn't happen."

"So I'm an escort?" the Uchiha asked.

"Exactly. I'm glad you got it."

Sakura and Karin replayed the same scenario as before in their minds, except this time a chibi Sasuke appeared and defeated the enemy ninja before he could harm either of them, and posed

heroically. Sakura and Karin stared at Sasuke with heart in their eyes as the wounded ninja they were treating died due the lack of medical assistance, causing his spirit to leave the body.

"However, there is something you should know: you're not real Genin yet," Shizune revealed, much to her students shock. "You still need to go through one last test to determine if you're worthy of being part of this team. If you fail, you will be sent back to the Academy."

Sasuke's initial shock was short lived. "I've taken quite a few tests already. I'm not afraid to take one more."

"Sasuke-kun is right, whatever you have planned, we can go through it!" Sakura added.

"Eh, what she said," Karin said.

"Alright. See the small forest behind me?" Shizune asked, motioning back. "There's a medical training dummy hidden somewhere among the trees. Your task is finding said dummy, treat its injuries, then bring it here. I will attack you from time to time. But don't worry, I will hold back. Now go!"

The two girls and the one boy rushed into the forest.

...

Training Ground Seven

Just like the two teams before, Kakashi asked their Genins to introduce themselves.

"Why don't you introduce yourself first?" Tamaki suggested.

"Alright, I guess it would be fair," Kakashi said. "My name is Kakashi Hatake. I like many things. As for things I dislike... I don't feel like talking about them. And my dreams... well, I have dreams just like everybody else. There, now you go."

"Wow, not only he's absurdly late, but he doesn't tell anything about himself other than his name," Kiba snarled exasperatedly. Akamaru growled as well.

"Excuse me, Kakashi-sensei, but you can't expect us to tell you personal information about us if you're not willing to share anything about you with us in return. Why? Because while trust is important on a team, trust is also a two-way road. You can't ask for trust if you don't trust others yourself," Shino explained.

Kakashi stared at him for a few seconds as he processed the bug user's elaborated rant.. "How old are you again?"

"Twelve. But I fail to see how's that relevant to the matter at hand."

Tamaki shifted in her seat, and looked at Shino. "I believe Kakashi-sensei thinks you don't speak like a kid our age should."

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with my manner of speech. And if you thing there is something wrong, then, like kids our age usually say, deal with it."

Kakashi let out a sigh. "Okay, let's start over again. My name is Kakashi Hatake. I like books, dogs and training," this elicited a smirk from Kiba and a frown from Tamaki. "I dislike people who abandon their comrades. And my dream... well, I'm not entirely sure, guess it would be to make up for all the mistakes I made in the past and all the people I failed. There, are you happy now?"

"What mistakes?" Tamaki asked, leaning forward.

"What people you failed?" Kiba asked, interested as well.

"Sorry, that's all you're going to get from me right now, so don't push your luck. Well Kiba, why don't you introduce yourself?"

"Alright. My name is Kiba Inuzuka, and this is my best friend, Akamaru!" Akamaru happily barked upon being acknowledged. "I

like dogs, take long walks, running, and meat! I dislike cats," Kiba shot a glare at Tamaki. The girl merely stuck her tongue at him. "And my dream is to reach higher than any Inuzuka ever did, like being Hokage!"

"Interesting," was all that Kakashi said. He then motioned at the only girl in the group. "Shall you introduce yourself?"

"Sure. My name is Tamaki. I like playing with my cats, buying new clothes, and climb high places. I dislike dogs, especially those who bark constantly the moment you get near them. And my dream is for one day to start a clan on my own, and make a name for myself."

"Nice introduction," Kakashi said, with his trademark eye-smile. "Now, since that's out of the way, let's-"

"Actually, I believe I didn't introduce myself yet," Shino interceded.

"What? Oh my, I'm sorry! I guess I'm not feeling that hot today," Kakashi replied in an irritatingly jovial tone.

"You know, forgetting about one of your students is not a mark of a good sensei," Shino glared at Kakashi from behind his shades.

"Nevermind. My name is Shino Aburame. I like entomology, medicine, and nature. I dislike people who hate or kill insects for no reason. My dream is to discover a new or very rare species of insects, as well as advancing the field of entomology."

"Okay, now that everybody has been introduced, let's get down to business. Given the name of the team, it should be obvious what you all have in common. Kiba has his dog, Shino his insects and Tamaki cats... where are your cats, Tamaki?"

Tamaki half-expected that question. "I don't have them with me all the time, they're with Grandma. If I need them, I can use the Summoning Jutsu."

"Interesting. So young, and with a Summoning Contract?"

"Eh, it's not that big deal," Tamaki said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Another kid of our class, Naruto, can summon toads. What about you? For being the leader of the Animal Squad you don't have any animal with you either."

"Summoning Jutsu," was all what Kakashi answered, thought it was enough to satisfy his students. "Anyway, we're getting off track. From time immemorial, many ninjas had used animals as companions to aid them in battle. Regardless of how powerful a ninja becomes, there are abilities that he or she will never have, but animals do have. This led many clans, such as the Inuzukas, to specialize in breeding animals and develop a fighting style involving them.

"And thus, the main role of the Animal Squad will be to take care of missions in which human ninjas would be insufficient, such as tracking, searching for hidden objects, and so on. Our secondary role will be to offer support to other teams. Do you have any questions? No? Okay. In that case, then you should know that you're not Genin already."

"How can that be, if we graduated from the Academy?" Shino asked, as he adjusted his glasses.

"Because the graduating the Academy is a prerequisite to take the real Genin test. And if you fail it, you'll go back to the Academy."

"Oh come on! You can't do that!" Kiba protested, shaking his fists.

"Trust me, I can. Now, let's proceed with the test," Kakashi then pulled from a pocket two small bells. "Do you know what is this?"

...

Training Ground Eight

Just like the three other teams, Naruto, Hinata and Haku were sitting around their sensei, who was studying them intently.

"Well, look at that. This year we're going to have not one but two Genin teams that are majorly female. It's good to see more women taking the path of the ninja," Kurenai then stared at Naruto, and smiled at him. "Given that you were raised by the strongest kunoichi who ever lived, I'm sure you won't have any problem being the only boy in the team." However, much to her confusion, Naruto started to chortle. The red-eyed woman frowned, and placed her hands on her hips. "Did I say something funny, Naruto?"

"As a matter of fact, you did," Naruto said between giggles.

"Kurenai-sensei... despite my appearance you should know that I'm actually a boy," Haku interceded.

Kurenai stared at the Ice Ninja for a few seconds, and as his words sunk in, her eyes grew while her irises shrunk. A faint blush flashed on her face. Her hands then flew to her face.

"Oh my... ! I'm so sorry! I mean, given your name and the way you look... !" Kurenai spluttered

Haku, however, smiled. "It's okay, Kurenai-sensei. A lot of people mistake me for a girl. Guess that the way I dress doesn't help."

" If that happens often, then no wonder he doesn't look upset at all. Still, I can't believe I did that..." the Jonin thought.

"Eh, it's more common than you think. When I went to Suna a few years ago I also saw a guy who looked like a woman," Naruto shared in an almost apologetic tone.

"Okay, okay... let's forget about this and... how about we get to know each other better? I'll start. My name is Kurenai Yuhi. I like going out with my friends for a drink during the evenings. I don't like people who thinks that I'm weak or useless just because I'm a woman. And my dream is to become a kunoichi of renown, like Tsunade-sama. Or at least attain a level of skill close to hers. Now that you know me, who wants to go next?"

"Oh, me!me!" Naruto said, frantically waving his hand at her. "My name is Naruto Uzumaki! I love ramen, learning new jutsus, gardening, my friends and my family! I dislike the three minutes you have to wait for the ramen to cook, as well as people who are mean to others. And my dream is to become the best Hokage who ever lived!"

Kurenai chuckled. "Huh. And here I thought that my ambitions were grandiose. Who wants to go now?"

"I believe I will," Haku said. "My name is Haku Yuki. I like Konoha, Yugao-san, Hayate-san, Zabuza-sama, and the friends I made at the Academy. I don't like people who hate others for reasons outside their control. I don't mind people mistaking me for a girl, but as of recent it's starting to become kind of annoying. My dream is to help Zabuza-sama end the current Mizukage's tyranny and restore peace to the Land of Water."

Kurenai took note of the girl-looking boy's words. His vocal loyalty towards the rogue swordsman was worrying. But then again, he said he liked Konoha. She decided not worry about that for the time being, and looked at the only member of her team that didn't introduce herself yet.

"H-Hi, my name is Hinata Hyuga. I like..." she trailed off, glancing quickly at Naruto while blushing a bit, something both Kurenai and Haku noticed, but Naruto missed. "... I like pressing flowers, gardening, and hanging out with my friends. I dislike rude and mean people, as well as the division of my clan. My dream... is to become a great kunoichi so I can succeed my mother as a clan leader someday, and help her to undo the rift in our clan."

Kurenai smiled at the little Hyuga's introduction.

"Okay, now that introductions are over, I'll explain you the function of this team. As the name implies, we're an offensive unit, with Haku focused on ninjutsu, Hinata on taijutsu, Naruto on a mix of both, and

myself on genjutsu. Our job will be mostly focused on combat. Pretty simple as you can see."

"Alright! When are we going to start doing missions?" Naruto asked.

"Oh, about that. Well, you see, you're not Genin already. You still have to pass one more test of my choice. If you fail, you will be send back to the Academy." Kurenai answered.

Naruto took a few moments to process his sensei's words, but when he did, his reaction was both instant and predictable. "WHAT!?"

Haku's face soured. *"Then if I don't pass this test... Zabuza-sama will go back to jail?"*

"Hey, don't give me those looks. I saw your Academy profiles. This should be piece of cake for you."

"S-So, what is g-going to be the t-test, Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked.

"I'm glad you asked," Kurenai then produced a storage scroll, and unsealed an old, rusty body armor. The body armor used to be blue, but the color was now almost completely faded. It had multiple dents and scratches. But what drew their attention were the two huge red and white bullseyes painted in the front and the back of the armor. Kurenai started to put the armor on. "For this test, you'll need to hit either of the bullseyes with a weapon or a ninjutsu attack. You have three hours. To give you guys a chance, I won't use ninjutsu nor genjutsu. Any questions?"

Hinata raised his hand. "The three of us have to hit you?"

Kurenai shook her head. "No, if either of you hit the bullseyes, all three will pass the exam. More questions?" the Jonin asked. Her Genin remained silent. "Alright, in that case, let us commence!"

Kurenai made a hand seal, and she suddenly vanished as if she was made of dust.

"... the hell?" a very confused Naruto asked.

"I-I believe t-that was a g-genjutsu..." Hinata said, thought it was more a guess.

"Wait, so she wasn't even here to begin with?"

"It seems so," Haku concluded as he got up and grabbed a handful of senbon. "Come on, we need to pass this test."

"Yeah, but where did she go?" Naruto asked.

"My guess would be among a group of trees," Haku then turned to Hinata. "Hinata-san, we will need your Byakugan to locate her."

The Hyuga nodded, made a hand seal, and activated her doujutsu.

...

Just like Haku had guessed, Kurenai was hiding on the canopy of a big and lush tree. She felt a bit disappointed that neither of them noticed that she had casted a genjutsu on them while they were talking, but then again the kids weren't used to deal with this kind of illusions. Unfortunately, as good as Jiraiya's Academy reform was, genjutsu was once again barely covered, and the little practice was more about dispelling than casting them.

Anyway, she was sure she could teach at least one of her students the art of illusions. While Naruto's chakra control still needed some polishing before he could use genjutsus, Hinata and Haku were perfect. Though she also discarded Hinata when she remembered that the Hyuga heiress was also training in elemental ninjutsu and medicine besides the Gentle Fist, leaving Haku, who seemed to focus mostly in ninjutsu, as the most suitable candidate.

A whirring sound Kurenai identified as shuriken snapped her of her thoughts. She immediately jumped out of the branch she was resting on before the steel stars embedded themselves into the wood, and landed on a small clearing. Her three Genin appeared shortly afterwards, and surrounded her.

Kurenai smirked. "I must admit, you found me earlier than I thought."

"With Hinata's Byakugan it was piece of cake," Naruto said, as he made a hand seal. "And with this, passing this exam will be even easier. Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Twenty Naruto clones appeared from smoke, forming a circle around the genjutsu mistress. "GET HER!"

Kunai in hand, all Narutos charged forward. Kurenai also pulled out two kunai of her own, and started to slash the orange-clad clones while she dodged their almost telegraphed swings. Some clones that did not charge pulled out some shurikens and threw them at her. Kurenai grabbed one of the clones and used him as a human shield while attacking the others. In a couple minutes, the clones were no more.

Haku decided it was his turn to attack, and threw a trio of senbons at his sensei. Kurenai turned around and deflected all of them with a kunai. From the corner of her eye she saw Hinata ready to strike her with a palm strike. She grabbed Hinata's wrist just before she could touch the Jonin, and threw her crashing against Naruto.

Haku started to make hand seals, but before he could complete the sequence, Kurenai was already in front of him. The raven-haired woman sunk her knee on the Ice Ninja's gut, knocking the wind out of his stomach. And just like she did with Hinata, she grabbed his wrist and tossed the kimono-wearing boy against a tree.

"Tsk, tsk, such a disorganized attack..." Kurenai shook her head in disappointment. "You will need to do better than that if you don't want to return to the Academy!" she said before leaping away.

...

After getting back on their feet, the three Genins decided to regroup, and plan a better strategy, given how attacking her at random produced such a disastrous results.

"Alright, anybody got an idea?" Haku asked.

Naruto nodded. "I believe that Hinata should attack her head on, while we wait for an opening and try to attack her from the distance."

Hinata looked at Naruto surprised. "M-Me, attack Kurenai-sensei? But w-why?"

"Because you're the best at taijutsu here! It isn't obvious?" Naruto explained. "While you keep her distracted, Haku can attack her with his needles and ice jutsus while I use my clones and wind jutsus."

"We will provide you cover so you can get close to her," Haku added.

Hinata looked at her male teammates. They both were placing their trust on her. Despite Hinata wanting to protest, a part of her told her to keep going, and that she could lead the team to success.

"A-Alright," the little Hyuga said, nodding.

Scanning the area with her Byakugan, Hinata found Kurenai standing on a clearing surrounded by several trees. The perfect spot for an ambush. Almost too perfect. While it smelled like a trap, Hinata didn't see any. Or maybe she was taunting them by choosing such a disadvantageous terrain. Nevertheless, they decided to take the risk and attack.

Haku was the one to initiate the attack. He took from his pouch a storage scroll with water sealed on it, and unsealed its contents. A large puddle was former at his feet. Kurenai didn't detect his presence yet. Or she did but pretended not to. Nevertheless, it was time to attack. Haku formed the required hand seals.

"Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!"

Using the water of the puddle, Haku formed several ice spears that floated above him, and flew at Kurenai. The raven haired Kunoichi performed several backflips while avoiding the deathly ice attack. Naruto saw it as the perfect chance to attack.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Kurenai found herself once again surrounded by orange-clad clones. All of them pulled out shurikens and tossed them at her. Kurenai rolled into the ground, expertly avoiding the ninja stars, which ended up hitting the clones instead, dispelling most of them.

"Such recklessness. If those were your teammates instead of mere clones..." Kurenai shook her head in disappointment as she quickly destroyed the few remaining clones.

"Hinata, now!" the last clone shouted before being dispelled.

The Hyuga heiress leaped from her hiding spot at the top of a tree and landed in front of Kurenai. The two women started to trade blows. Thanks to Naruto and Haku attacking from afar, the Genjutsu Mistress was forced into the defensive.

Seeing an opening, Kurenai kicked Hinata in the gut, and dashed at Naruto, who was about to throw more shurikens at her. Kurenai grabbed him by his wrist, and tossed him against a tree. She was about to move towards Haku, when the corner of her eye caught Hinata doing hand seals. Suddenly, Hinata's hands were crackling with electricity. The Hyuga dashed at her as fast as she could.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

" *She combined the Gentle Fist with elemental manipulation? Amazing. These kids are sure something,*" Kurenai thought as she dodged Hinata's electricity-enhanced palm strikes. Unfortunately for her, her musings made her fail to see that Naruto was on his feet again and was making hand seals.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto trusted both his hands forward, forming a cone-shaped gale. Despite pouring a lot of chakra into it, he didn't manage to make it as powerful as he wanted. Still, the cone of wind managed to almost push Kurenai from her spot, and distract her long enough for Hinata to hit her in the shoulder with a palm strike in the shoulder, not only closing her tenketsu, but also numbing her shoulder with electricity.

"AAARGH!" Kurenai shouted as she fell on her knees and instinctively grabbed her shoulder with other hand.

"NOW!"

Haku leaped from behind, and fired a barrage of senbons at the Genjutsu Mistress. Kurenai tried to run as fast as she could, and while she managed to avoid most of them, a couple of soft thuds indicated that at least two of the needles found its mark.

"Haha, yes! We did it!" Naruto cheered, pumping his fist in the air. Haku and Hinata walked towards him.

Kurenai removed her armor, and confirmed that two of Haku's senbons had embedded on the bullseye on the armor's back. She sealed the armor again in the scroll, and walked towards the three Genin, who were still cheering for their victory. Upon seeing her holding her shoulder, Hinata immediately started to use the Mystical Palm Jutsu on it.

"Congratulations, you three, you passed the test," Kurenai praised, smiling, "Now you're real ninjas. See? I told you that it wouldn't be that hard."

"And it was thanks to Hinata!" Naruto claimed as he patted Hinata on the back. "Told you you could do it!"

"W-Well, it was a t-team effort... plus it w-was Haku-kun who dealt the killing blow..." Hinata stuttered as she averted her gaze.

"Hinata is right. You passed the test because you worked together, as a team should," Kurenai interceded.

"So, that was the meaning of the test, to teach us the value teamwork?" Naruto asked. "We already knew that!"

"Yes, but that's not all. So far, you only fought in friendly, controlled spars, and tossed kunais and shurikens and immobile tree stumps. This was meant to give you a taste of what you will find out there: fast moving enemies that will come at you with the intention to kill."

"So, what do we do now?" Haku asked.

"Take the rest of the day off. Starting tomorrow, we will take missions at mornings, take a lunch break, then spend a couple hours in the afternoon training. We won't do neither missions nor training during weekends, but please keep training on your own those days as well," Kurenai explained. "Meet me tomorrow at nine in the morning in the Academy for our first mission."

...

Hokage Tower, a few hours later

Jiraiya was sitting at his desk, as usual. In front of Jiraiya were the Jonin-senseis of the four new Genin teams, ready to give their reports, as well as Iruka.

"Tactical Squad has my approval. While we still have some stuff to polish, especially regarding some of their personal priorities, I have faith that they will even surpass all their predecessors," Asuma proudly informed.

Shizune was the next one to talk. "Medical Squad also has my approval. All of them know their roles and they slipped into them perfectly. Maybe the teamwork could use some improvement, but in the future they'll be an invaluable asset."

"Animal Squad passed the test, though barely," Kakashi mentioned. "They do have a lot of potential, but they still need a lot of work."

"Assault Squad has my approval as well. They both have talent and barely need any incentive to work as a team. I just can't wait to see them in action," Kurenai said.

Jiraiya smiled, clearly pleased, and turned at Iruka. "What about that? For the first time in Konoha's history, the True Genin Test has a one hundred percent approval rate, as opposed to past thirty three percent."

"The results speak for themselves. Your educational reform was truly brilliant, Hokage-sama," Iruka replied.

"And it's thanks to you and your fellow teachers, for the great job you did preparing those kids for the future. Oh boy, I can't wait for the Chunin Exams to begin!"

"That will be in three months. Do you think they will be ready by then?" Iruka inquired. "While their abilities are impressive, there's no way they can get enough experience in such little time."

"Have a little faith in them, Iruka. The results may surprise you. Now, if there's nothing left to discuss, you're dismissed."

After the four Jonin and the single Chunin left the office, a pair of ANBU wearing masks of an owl and a tiger brought yet another Jonin, one Jiraiya last had seen four years ago.

"Well, well, well..." Jiraiya was looking at a file on his hand. "So, Zabuza. According to this report, except for getting a couple of fights during your fist year, your behavior has been mostly excellent."

Zabuza chuckled. "Glad to know that. Repressing my killing instinct wasn't an easy task, you know."

"Now that Haku successfully passed all the tests and became a Konoha Ninja, you're to do the same if you want to start to pay your debt with Konoha," Jiraiya snapped his fingers, and one of the ANBU handed Zabuzza a Konoha forehead protector and a flak jacket. "While not mandatory, it will be mostly appreciated if you wore at least part of our official uniform."

Reluctantly, Zabuzza tied the headband around his forehead and put on the flak jacket.

"Oh, and I believe this is yours," Jiraiya then tossed Zabuzza a sealing scroll.

Unsealing the scroll, Zabuzza's eyes widen in surprise when he saw his trusty Executioner Blade back in his hands. "You kept it all these years? I thought that you would have given it to somebody else, or sell it to other villages."

"Eh, Konoha doesn't have much of a swordfighting tradition. It will be better in your hands. Now, are you ready to start working your ass off for the village?"

"Sure. But first answer me something," Jiraiya listened to Zabuzza intently. "Aren't you worried that once I get out of this village, I never return?"

Jiraiya smirked in satisfaction. He was dying for Zabuzza to make that question. "Ah yes. It would be extremely imprudent on my part to letting you out of the village without some kind of leash, right? That's why, before taking you out of prison, my ANBU put you to sleep, and I carved a special seal in your chest. I can activate said seal to give you a heart attack."

Zabuzza raised a nonexistent eyebrow, and smirked under his mask. "Right. And you expect me to believe that?"

"If that's the case, then you won't mind if I do this," Jiraiya made a hand seal, and all of sudden, Zabuzza fell on his knees, his hand

instinctively clutching his chest. He felt as if an invisible hand was crushing his heart to pulp. Even if the effect was short lived, the consequences weren't. "As you can see, I can kill you whenever I want, with a mere hand gesture, from a fifteen kilometer radius. This seal is designed so it only reacts to my chakra, meaning that I'm the only one who can activate or remove it. Well, guess that you could remove it if you find a seal master of my caliber or greater... but good luck with that.

"The seal is also linked to a special map which pinpoints your approximate location. As you can see, you can't escape from my grasp. I will only remove that seal once you complete your probation. Now, are you ready for your first mission?"

Panting heavily, Zabuza slowly got back on his feet, with the help of the ANBU. "I guess... so..."

"Good. Here it goes," Jiraiya tossed Zabuza another scroll.

The Kiri Swordsman unfurled the scroll and read it. His face morphed into a mask of incredulity. "A C-Rank mission? Is this some kind of joke?"

Jiraiya frowned at Zabuza. "If it was a joke, you'll be rolling on the floor, laughing, because besides being a talented writer, magnificent charmer and a kick-ass ninja, I also happen to be gifted comedian. This is a test. You've been four years in prison, and I must check that your abilities didn't get dull."

"I was in jail because YOU send me there!"

"Details, details. Now, Owl, bring in the client."

"Yes, Hokage-sama!" the ANBU said before leaving.

A minute later, he returned with the aforementioned client. A gray haired, glasses-wearing middle aged man. He wore a sleeveless v-neck shirt with an obi, pants and a pair of sandals. He also carried a

towel around his neck and wore a pointed hat on his head. There was a bottle of sake on his hand.

"Zabuza, this is Tazuna-san, master builder of renown. Your mission will be to escort him to his homeland, the Land of Waves, and protect him until he finishes the construction of the bridge he and his men are working on."

"I doubt this guy could even build a toy bridge," Zabuza skeptically mentioned as he eyed the visibly inebriated man.

Jiraiya ignored Zabuza's remark. "Tazuna-san, this is Zabuza, one of our more... recent recruits. You'll be safe as long you're close to him."

The drunk bridge builder scanned Zabuza with his reddened eyes, his mouth agape. He couldn't decide if he was more afraid of his alleged escort or the powerful man that was after his head.

"Well... guess that the Hokage wasn't lying when he promised me some muscle... boy, you're scary," Tazuna slurred as he eyed Zabuza, his words being coated in terror.

"Thanks," Zabuza replied, unaware that Tazuna's words weren't a compliment.

"Now, you should better get going. Good luck on your first mission, Zabuza," Jiraiya said, waving Zabuza goodbye

Zabuza snarled before leaving, and dragged a very scared Tazuna with him.

Author's Note: So here are the new teams! What do you think about them? Did you like my reasons for making such teams?

As you can probably guess, I put a lot of thought while making the teams. First, I had to choose if I put Naruto and Hinata in the

same team, or if I kept Team 7 (and by the way, the rest of the teams) untouched. Doing the former allowed me to focus more on Hinata, at the expense of Sasuke and Sakura, while the latter would give the chance to fix the mess that Team 7 was in canon, but I couldn't focus on Hinata as much. In the end, I choose the former. There was also the issue of the third member. Besides Haku, my other option was Sasuke, but in the end I chose Haku because I wanted the three new Genin on a different team each, and I believed that the Medical Squad needed a powerhouse like Sasuke, as opposed to a glass canon like Haku. Besides, like the reviewer Ziltoid said, with both Naruto and Sasuke being more powerful than they were in canon, a team with both of them would be too overpowered.

And while a lot of fanfics put a lot of thought on Naruto's team when they decide to change it, they had the habit of leaving the rest of the teams as completely random and without any kind of team dynamic, and I wanted to avoid that. For example, the fact that I brought Tamaki over other characters (like Sai, for example), wasn't a coincidence. I noticed that Hinata was the only Genin of Team 8 that doesn't use animals, so I thought I could made Tamaki into a cat ninja and place her with Kiba and Shino. So far, I only read a single story in which the author actually put some thought in all the new teams, not just Naruto's.

Also, kudos to Ziltoid as well for guessing that Shizune would be the fourth Jonin-sensei (I told you guys I had plans with her back then when I teased her possible death ;)). Speaking of Jonin-senseis, Kurenai's choice was the result of an elimination process rather than a deliberate choice on my part. Team Gai and Team Asuma were left the same, so Gai and Asuma weren't an option. I thought that Kakashi would be the best suited to lead the Animal Squad, being the only one who regularly uses animals (Gai also has a summoning contract, but he hardly uses it), and Shizune was obviously better placed on the Medical Squad, and that only left Kurenai. Though then again, I

do like her a lot, and it's a pity how underdeveloped her character was in canon compared to other senseis. A reviewer suggested Yamato, but let's say that there's already somebody who needs Yamato as a teacher more than Naruto.

Also, to all the reviewers who were concerned about what was going to happen to the people of Wave since I said that the Wave Arc wouldn't happen... I told you I had a plan for them, didn't I? So in one of my ironic twists, Zabuza will end up playing the role of Tazuna's protector instead of his killer.

Now I have to give you some bad news: thanks to a combination of my muse going on vacation and the new chapters becoming each time longer (the first few chapters were 4k-6k words long, while the newer chapters are in the 8k-11k words range), I'm publishing chapters faster than I'm writing them, which means that in a couple months I will run out of already written chapters and won't be able to update as regularly as I do now. That's why from now onwards, new chapters will be posted once every two weeks instead of once a week, so I can have more time to write between updates and I can still upload new chapters on a regular schedule. Sorry.

Also, to increase the quality of this story, I'd like to have a beta reader. So if somebody (preferably a native english speaker) wants to help me, tell me. That way, you'll get to read the new chapters earlier than everybody else.

So we will see again in two weeks. In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

First C-Rank Mission, Part I

Author's note: Woohooo! the 400 reviews barrier has been shattered! Shout out to Jldark for being the reviewer #400! Let's see how long until we reach the 500 mark.

Hi there, my loyal readers! I know it has been a relatively long wait, but here you have a new chapter of this story you love so much. Let's see how Naruto and co. do now that they're finally ninjas.

This is the first chapter which has actually been betaread, by gio08. Thanks for your job, and I hope it improved the story.

Enjoy!

Chapter 16:

First C-Rank Mission, Part I: Clash in the Rice Fields

or

What could possibly go wrong?

Placed on one of the shelves among a couple books, a vase, photographs and other ornaments, there were two pictures that decorated the living room of the Senju Residence. Both of them were pictures of a group of four people, consisting on an adult and three children.

The first one was a picture of Naruto, Hinata, Haku and Kurenai. Hinata was in the middle, with Naruto at her right and Haku at her left, and Kurenai behind all of them. Everybody was smiling: Naruto had a foxy grin while he gave the camera a thumbs up. The others' smiles were more subdued, but they still radiated happiness nevertheless.

The second one was a picture of Sakura, Karin, Sasuke, and Shizune. Sasuke was in the middle, with Sakura at his left and Karin at his right, both forcefully hooking their arms around his, as well as pulling the boy to their respective side. Behind them was Shizune, with either hand on both Sakura and Karin's shoulder. The three girls were warmly smiling at the camera, while Sasuke had a sour expression, as if saying "kill me".

It was tradition for the newly formed teams to take a picture of the first day they're formed and be given as a memento for both students and sensei. Tsunade spent quite some time looking at those two pictures after waking up. The one with Naruto reminded her of her old picture of Team Sarutobi, which was in black and white due the technology of the time. The one with Shizune made her regret not taking on a Genin team. Jiraiya often mentioned that training a Genin team was an amazing experience.

Sure, she had trained Shizune, but the young woman's upbringing was everything but normal.

"Mom? Breakfast is ready!" Kaida shouted from the kitchen.

"Coming!"

As expected, everybody except Jiraiya, who had already left about an hour ago, was sitting at the table, eagerly eating breakfast before getting ready for the day. Tsunade sat her usual seat, where a couple of slices of toast with strawberry jelly were placed on a plate, and an apple close to it. Shizune was eating a bowl brown rice, while the kids were eating cereal.

"So, today is your first day as a real ninja, and as a Jonin-sensei," Tsunade commented after taking a bite from her toast, while looking at both Naruto and Shizune. "How do you feel?"

"I can't wait to get my first mission! Dad told me that he had something already prepared that befits my skills!" Naruto cheered.

Tsunade and Shizune exchanged a look. There was a glint of pity on the young medic-nin's eyes, while Tsunade's gleamed with almost sadistic joy. They didn't trade words, but they understood each other perfectly.

"I think I should tell him..."

"No way! Let him find it by himself, just like everybody else."

"Well," Naruto emptied his bowl, brought it to the sink and quickly cleaned it. "I'm going to meet with my team for my first mission!"

"Be sure to tell us how it went!" Tsunade said as he waved him goodbye.

"Boy, this sucks!" Kaida protested as she crossed her arms. "Naruto-niisan goes to do missions, while we still have to go to the Academy!"

"Trust me, Kaida-chan, if I were you, I wouldn't be jealous of Naruto in the slightest," Shizune replied as she finished her meal. She also brought her bowl to the sink. "I better get going too, I would hate to keep my team waiting. It's going to be bad enough when they find out what kind of missions they are going to do."

After waving Shizune goodbye, Hagane looked at her mother, puzzled.

"Mom, what's wrong with the missions Naruto-niisan and Shizune-neechan's team are going to do?" the white haired kid asked.

Tsunade almost chortled. "Kid, a better question would be what's *not* wrong with those missions."

...

After meeting with his team on Training Ground Eight, Team Kurenai walked towards the Academy, where the Mission Assignment Desk was. The three Genin were rather excited to finally start taking

missions -though Naruto was the one who showed it the most- and cheerfully discussed about them what their first assignment would be. Kurenai didn't say anything, but she simply looked intently at them with a small amused smile.

Upon reaching their destination, they were greeted by Jiraiya, sitting on a desk flanked by the former Hokage, Hiruzen Sarutobi, and their former Academy teacher, Iruka Umino. Sitting on nearby desks were people none of the Genin were able to identify.

"The Assault Squad is here and ready to kick ass!" Naruto loudly announced while he and his team entered the room. "Come on dad, give us something worth of our awesomeness!"

Jiraiya chuckled. "You know, Naruto, the part I like the most about you is your enthusiasm. That will take you far," Jiraiya replied, smiling at him. For some reason, there was something about said smile that made the Jinchuriki feel uneasy. He then tossed a scroll at Kurenai. "All the details of the mission are there. I trust you will be able to complete it within the day. Come back to collect your payment once you're done."

Haku raised an eyebrow. "Within the day? It must be an extremely easy and simple mission if it can be completed in such a short amount of time."

Naruto's grin didn't falter. "Or maybe it's that dad knows that our team is so great that we will do much faster than other teams?"

"So, Kurenai-sensei," Hinata chimed in. "What is our mission about?"

...

An hour later...

Naruto, Hinata and Haku were painting the fence of a house. Neither of them looked particularly happy.

"You know, I wasn't expecting that somebody would hire a whole ninja team for such menial task," Haku commented as he soaked his brush in white paint.

"Y-Yeah, me too. I wasn't expecting to do the big missions on the first day, but this is... too little," Hinata agreed.

Unlike her students, Kurenai wasn't painting, but merely watching them. "Come on, don't complain. I had to do this kind of missions when I was a Genin."

"So it's like a rite of passage? But my point still stands. Why does somebody would hire a ninja for doing this instead of a civilian worker?" Haku asked.

"If you want to know so badly, ask the client. People hire ninja for just about any task. Said tasks are ranked based on their danger and difficulty. You're Genin fresh out of the Academy, so naturally you're going to get the easiest, most simple and least dangerous missions, at least until you become more experienced," Kurenai explained.

"But why does the Hokage accepts these kind of missions? I believe it's a waste of our talents and our formation," Haku replied.

"Yes. Besides, we can't improve as ninja by doing these kind of tasks," Hinata added.

"These missions also have the purposes of building teamwork, building bonds with people of the village, as well as making the civilians know that we're here to serve and protect them," Kurenai then glanced at Naruto, who despite his loud protest over the nature of the mission, remained uncharacteristically silent once they got to work. Kurenai decided to push her luck. "You know Naruto, I was expecting you to complain nonstop about doing this, yet you haven't open your mouth once. While I must say that your change of attitude pleases me, the fact that it happened so sudden worries me a little."

"Eh, it's okay. This may be a waste of our skills, but it's so simple it actually gives me time to think," Naruto replied.

Kurenai sighed in relief and smiled. "That's a good thing. And what are you thinking right now, may I ask?"

"My revenge on dad for giving us this shitty mission. It's going to be the stuff of legends. Do you think that burning down the Hokage Tower would be too much?" Everybody stopped what they were doing and stared at Naruto, eyes wide in shock and mouth agape. "Okay, I get it, too much. I'll tone it down."

...

Hokage's Office, A few days later

Once again, Jiraiya and Zabuza were face to face against each other. The Hokage noticed that Zabuza was carrying a large bag that he didn't have the moment he left. Jiraiya broke the silence with a single word.

"Report."

"So far, the mission went without incident, though the information provided by the client was faulty," Zabuza stated.

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow, and leaned forwards. "Please elaborate."

"You see, that Tazuna was in the sights of a very powerful man. Some shipping tycoon named Gato, or something," Zabuza began. "Who wanted him dead because the bridge threatened his business in some way, and the bastard keep sending thugs to kill us. At first I was happy that I had something to kill, but even that grew old, fast. Those guys weren't even ninja!"

"But you say there weren't incidents."

"No, of course not. There was nothing I couldn't handle. In fact, when the construction of the bridge was almost done, that ugly midget

shows up with an army of more thugs in a pathetic attempt to threaten me. They're now sleeping with the fishes."

"Good to see that you completed your first mission without any trouble, then."

"Of course I did! Maybe the mission would have had more excitement if Gato hired an actual ninja instead of those thugs. I mean, the guy was loaded, and could afford it. Let me tell you something: had Gato hired me, that bridge builder would have been dead before he even set a foot on his little country."

"I'm sure of it. By the way, what is that bag you're carrying?" Jiraiya asked, since he grew tired of waiting for Zabuza to mention it himself.

"This? Oh, a little compensation I decided to take for the troubles. After I killed Gato, I went to his house and emptied his vault," Zabuza tossed the bag at Jiraiya, who opened it, and saw lots of rolls of money. "I hope this helps to accelerate my probation."

"When I said that you had a debt with Konoha, I didn't mean in the monetary sense, but yeah, this will help," Jiraiya pushed the bag aside. "Though I'm having a hard time believing that this is all Gato had."

"Because it's not. That's nothing but a fraction of all the money the short bastard had," Zabuza confirmed.

"Then where is the rest of the money?" the Sannin asked.

"I lost it on my way back," Zabuza replied matter-o-factly.

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow. "You lost it," he deadpanned. Zabuza simply nodded. "You certainly have some guts lying so boldly to my face."

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "I'm not lying. And if you think I am, then you should prove it before flinging unfounded accusations."

"You know Konoha has an entire clan specialized in mind-reading jutsu, right?" Jiraiya asked. "Though I think I will let it slide this time, since I have more pressing matters than caring for money that I never had to begin with," Jiraiya concluded. After all, Zabuza had brought some of Gato's money to the village, while he could have hogged all of it for himself and keep it under wraps. "You're dismissed. I'll call you in a few days for your next assignment."

"I'll be looking forward my next mission, Hokage-sama," Zabuza replied, making a slight bow. "Though I hope I get something more fitting of my talents rather than a mere escort mission."

...

The next days didn't change much. The missions Team Kurenai would get usually involved carrying errands for some elderly people, chase down vermin and other pests, babysit children and gardening, among many others.

As expected, Naruto's team wasn't the only team to take this kind of missions, the other three teams had to endure them as well. It was noted that Kakashi's Animal Team managed to complete a mission literally a minute after they got it: the mission was to retrieve Tora, the Fire Lord's wife's cat, who would always try to escape at the first opportunity from her owner's suffocating embraces. Using the Summoning Jutsu, Tamaki summoned Tora in front of her. Whenever the cat escaped, Tamaki would be requested to summon her again.

After finishing their daily training routine, Shizune dismissed her students and headed for her next appointment, a date with Shisui Uchiha at Yakiniku Q. After ordering some food and drinks, Shisui felt like starting up a conversation.

"So, how is your team doing, Shizune-sensei?" The Uchiha asked in a playfully mocking tone.

"As expected, when you start with the D-Rank missions. They complain that this isn't what they had been training for," the medic-nin answered.

Shisui leaned forwards. "Does Sasuke give you some trouble?"

"He usually complains about these missions being a waste of his talents, but at least he carries them out."

"I was expecting that Sasuke would react that way, but it's good that he knows his place. We all had to go through that hell once, and now it's his turn to suffer," the one-eyed Uchiha said as he ate a piece of bread.

The medic-nin shifted uncomfortably on her seat. "Actually... I never did a D-Rank mission in my life."

Shisui almost choked on his food. "You WHAT!? How!? It's because you were Tsunade's apprentice? Yeah, it has to be that! Boy, that's some big-ass favoritism right there!"

"Hey, calm down!" Shizune held her hands up in defense. "The reason for that it's that I left Konoha with Tsunade-sama shortly after I graduated the Academy. But trust me, I had to do stuff just as bad, sometimes even worse, than the D-Ranks Genin do nowadays."

"I doubt they were worse than chasing that goddamned cat around..."

Shizune leaned forwards, and narrowed her eyes at Shisui. "One day, you will go drinking with Tsunade-sama. But you won't drink, oh, no. You merely will listen her ramble for two hours, then try to convince her to leave when she had too much, then drag her to her room and get her in her bed. And then you will eat your words."

Shisui smirked. "Maybe. But for the time being, this steak is the only thing I'm going to eat," the one-eyed Uchiha said as he started to cut

the steak. "By the way, Sasuke met your little siblings today. He told me something about an incident. Care to elaborate?"

"Ah, yes, our latest D-Rank mission, babysitting the Hokage's kids. You see..."

FLASHBACK

Shizune had decided to leave her Genin alone on the house with Hagane and Kaida while she ran some errands of her own. When she returned home, she was greeted by Sasuke lazily sitting on the couch, while Hagane was also sitting a couch, completely immobile.

"Hi, I'm back!" Shizune greeted upon entering the house. "I trust there wasn't any incidents while I was outside?"

"No. Everything has been fine here," the Uchiha replied.

Shizune then looked at Hagane, who was extremely still. "Hagane-kun? What are you doing?"

"I'm playing a game that Sasuke taught me!" the kid happily said, careful not to move.

"And what is that game?"

"A challenge to see how long can I stay completely silent and immobile. I've been like this for two hours! Though I'm not silent anymore. But that doesn't count because you ask me something."

Shizune exasperatedly stared at the Uchiha. "Sasuke..."

"What? He likes that game," Sasuke replied.

"By the way, where are the girls?"

"In the backyard. Kaida wanted somebody to spar with her, and Sakura and Karin volunteered."

"And why didn't you spar with Kaida-chan too? I thought you liked spars."

"I do, but against people I can learn something from, just like you, Shusui or my brother, not against some eight year old girl."

Shizune walked towards the backyard, and she heard the voices of Sakura, Karin and Kaida.

"That was very good, Kaida-chan!" a voice that sounded like Karin said.

"If you liked that, wait till you see this! Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

"Aw, how cute, she's emulating the First Ho-WHAT THE HELL!?" Sakura screeched as a tremor shook the house.

Shizune froze for a second, and rushed to the backyard, followed by Sasuke and Hagane. When they arrived, they saw that Karin and Sakura were suspended in the air with thick wooden vines wrapped around them. The two medic-nin apprentices looked between terrified and angry. Kaida smiled happily at them.

"Kaida-chan! What did we told you about using Wood Release in front of people who aren't family?" Shizune sternly asked, frowning at the little girl.

"But I wanted to show Sakura and Karin my power!"

"Still, you broke a rule. And you put my Genin in danger. You know you still can't control your Wood Release yet!"

"Oh come on, I did control it this time!"

"This time?" Sakura and Karin said in unison, shocked.

Shizune's scowl deepened. As guilt started to creep its way through her insides, Kaida's smile disappeared, and lowered her head in

shame. "I'm sorry, Shizune-nee-chan, I won't do it again. But please don't tell mom!"

"I demand this mission to be re-classified into an A-Rank!" an angry Sakura shouted.

"Seconded!" Karin added.

END FLASHBACK

"Now that Sasuke knows that there's a Wood Release user in the town, he's begging me to let him fight her," Shizune said while giggling a little. "But there's no way that's going to happen. At least not until she grows up."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Sasuke can be pretty stubborn," Shisui commented, leaning back.

"Oh, and by the way, don't tell anybody about Kaida's powers, okay? If word of her abilities get out-"

"The Hyuga Affair would be a joke compared what other villages would do in order to kidnap her," Shisui finished her sentence. "You don't have to worry about that, my lips are sealed."

"Good that I can count on you."

"That's a given. By the way, what about her brother, Hagane? Does he have that power too?"

"No. But Hagane has an uncanny affinity for natural energy, and he somehow can temporarily increase the power and chakra of those close to him."

Shisui let out a whistle. "That may not be Wood Release, but it's impressive nonetheless. The genes of Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama are sure something if they can produce those little monsters."

Shizune punched him in the arm. "Don't call my little siblings monsters!"

Shisui merely laughed. "Oh come on, Shizune-chan, I mean monsters in a good way. By the way, between them, and Naruto having the Kyubi... you're the only one in that house that's actually normal. No offense."

Shizune shoot him an apathetic look. "Shisui, after you spend a week living in that house, you'll realize that *somebody* has to be normal."

...

To celebrate the completion of their tenth D-Rank mission, Kurenai decided to treat her team to dinner at Shushuya, one of her favorite restaurants. Naruto suggested going to Icharaku's but the red-eyed Jonin shot down the idea, since Naruto dragged them to that place quite often, and she wanted to go somewhere different.

Despite her best intentions, it doesn't seem that her Genin were much in the mood for celebrating anything. Probably because they thought that doing ten D-Rank missions wasn't something that deserved a celebration.

"So, Kurenai-sensei... how long until we get to do real missions?" Naruto asked, tapping his fingers on the table.

"These are real missions, Naruto," Kurenai pointedly replied. "All missions are important, since they generate income for the village. Don't assume that these missions are below you."

"But they are!" Naruto protested, throwing his hands in the air. "These missions could be done by my little siblings, who are freaking eight and they still go to the Academy! These missions are no different from the chores I do at home!"

"I must agree with Naruto-kun, Kurenai-sensei," Haku interceded, showing far more restraint in his frustration than his blond friend. "Zabuza-sama said that while we're doing these menial tasks, Genin in Kirigakure are committing assassinations."

"Genin in Kirigakure are also hired to hunt down people with Bloodline Limits like you," Kurenai harshly replied. Haku scowled. She knew that that was a cheap shot, but she believed it was a necessary one.

"Yeah, why can't we assassinate somebody?" Naruto pleaded.

"No."

"Come on!"

"No."

"Only a little!"

"No!"

"How can you assassinate somebody 'just a little'?" Hinata asked to no one in particular.

"Come on! We're the Assault Squad, not the Fence-Painter Squad or the Dog-Walker Squad!"

Kurenai sighed, as she massaged her temples. She had been trying her best to try to soothe the growing frustration within her team, but she knew that this could only get worse with time if she didn't do something.

"Okay, let's do this. For tomorrow, I will ask for a C-Rank mission, okay?" the raven haired kunoichi asked. A huge smile appeared on Naruto's face.

"Really!?"

"Yes. At first I wasn't sure, but maybe you're ready to take a slightly more difficult missions. But this doesn't mean that you won't get to do more D-Rank missions once we finish this one," Kurenai sternly added.

"It's okay. Doing D-Rank missions won't be so bad with some C-Ranks in between," Haku mentioned.

"I will have to judge your performance first before I request more C-Ranks. But then again, I'm sure that you won't disappoint."

...

The next morning Team Kurenai was once again at the mission assignment desk. Jiraiya had already prepared several missions for them to choose.

"Ah, glad to see you came here back for more," Jiraiya said with an unnerving grin. Naruto would swear he was enjoying his suffering. "I have a few more D-Ranks with your name on it!"

Naruto shot his adoptive father a murderous glare, but Kurenai stepped in before the blonde could do or say something stupid.

"Actually, I believe my team is ready to do a C-Rank mission, Hokage-sama."

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow. "You think so? It's not even been a month since they graduated."

"I believe their skills are enough to handle any C-Rank mission, Hokage-sama."

"It's not their skills I'm worried about. Maybe they should polish their teamwork a bit more before venturing out of the village?"

"Their teamwork is mostly excellent, Hokage-sama. My three students get along rather well, and have no trouble acting as a single unit when the situation requires it."

"I see." Jiraiya started to dig through a pile of scrolls. "If your evaluation of their abilities is as you say, then this shouldn't be much of a problem." Jiraiya then tossed a scroll at Kurenai. While she read it, he continued talking. "We've recently received a request to protect a village in the Land of the Rice Fields that has been repeatedly attacked by bandits. Besides protecting the village, your job will also be catch those bandits and turn them in to the local authorities."

"Alright! Finally something worth my skills!" Naruto pumped a fist in the air.

"Now, don't get overconfident. Bandits might not be much of a threat to ninja, but they can still present some danger if we're careless," Kurenai chided Naruto. "Okay, go and pack what you think will be necessary for the mission. We will meet at the village's northern gates in an hour."

"Yes, Kurenai-sensei!" the three Genin said in unison before the whole team left.

Jiraiya leaned back on his chair, and let out a defeated sigh. Something that was obviously not missed by his main councilor and assistant.

"Something wrong, Jiraiya?" Sarutobi was one of the few people who wouldn't address Jiraiya as a Hokage. Not out of lack of respect, but familiarity and the fact that he would always see the Toad Sage as his student.

"I knew that this day would come, but... I wasn't expecting it to be so soon," the Sannin replied.

Sarutobi chuckled. "Ah, yes. I remembered the first time Asuma had his first mission outside the village. I know that you're worried, and it would be unnatural if you weren't."

"It's not just that. I wouldn't be that worried if Naruto was a normal child. But Naruto has a huge bullseye painted on his back. If

Tsunade-hime's words are to be believed, somebody encouraged a clan to rebel against us just to create an opportunity to kidnap Naruto. And now... he will be outside the village's protection, with only his sensei and teammates to watch his back."

"You can't protect that kid forever, Jiraiya. If I remember correctly, it was you who told me that we should have faith in the next generation. Now I tell you that you should have faith in that Naruto will come back home safe and sound."

"I can't think in anything to refute that. And I hate it more than anything," Jiraiya said, gritting his teeth a little. "Man, Tsunade-hime is going to kill me when she finds out."

"Don't underestimate Tsunade like that. I'm sure that she knew that this was going to happen sooner or later the moment Naruto became a ninja."

"Still, that woman can be quite emotional at times," Jiraiya let out another exhausted sigh. "Boy, you have no idea how thankful I am for the fact that we will host the next Chunin Exam."

...

Konoha Hospital

Tsunade was in her office doing some paperwork, when somebody knocked the door. She was a bit surprised, given that she had no appointments until at least an hour.

"Come in!"

Much to her surprise, Naruto entered the office.

"Naruto! What are you doing here?" the Slug Princess asked. "Not that I don't like seeing you, but... you're not sick, aren't you?"

Which would have been a reason to worry more than usual, since Naruto never got sick.

"What? Oh no, not that!" Naruto replied, chuckling. "Dad finally gave my team a worthy mission. We will be going to the Land of the Rice Fields to protect some villagers from bandits. Kurenai-sensei said that we will be around a week or so outside. So I came here to tell you goodbye. Though a 'see you later' would fit better since I'm not going to be out for so long, hehe."

Tsunade paled upon hearing Naruto's words. How did Jiraiya give Naruto a C-Rank mission so soon? She thought that he would wait at least a month before doing that. He probably gave up upon Naruto's insistence. The boy had been begging him day and night to stop giving him D-Rank missions.

But then again, Jiraiya wouldn't have complied if Naruto's Jonin-sensei wouldn't think he was ready for the task. She had to remind herself not to be so overprotective.

"Really? That sounds great," Tsunade said, making an effort to smile. "But be careful when you're out there, okay? Remember that there are people who are still after you."

"Don't worry mom, I'll be fine! Besides, I can't die yet, not before I'm the Hokage!"

Tsunade smiled, this time genuinely. She got up from her chair, and hugged her adoptive son. "I know you will. I'm sure you'll make me and your dad proud."

Breaking the hug, Naruto just smiled at her, and left.

...

Fortunately, the Land of the Rice Fields was close to the Land of Fire and Konohagakure, and since they didn't have to escort any civilians, they could go at a much faster pace. Kurenai had predicted that they would arrive at the town in question around four or five in the afternoon.

However, shortly before they crossed the border between the Land of Fire and their destination, the Genjutsu Mistress decided to make a stop for lunch and bring her students to visit a place of utmost historical and cultural importance.

"Welcome to the Valley of the End," she said, as she motioned at two huge statues, looking at each other while making a hand seal, separated by a waterfall.

The valley was rather unremarkable by itself. If you removed the statues, there was nothing but a barren gray land crossed by a small river. Though trees and other forms of plant life could be seen on its surroundings. For some reason, there was something about the valley that made impossible for plants to grow on it.

"I'm sure that you remember this place from the history lessons at the Academy, but I thought it would be nice if you saw it with your own eyes, given that it's on our way to our destination."

Many people referred to the valley as "the place where Hashirama and Madara had their final duel", but that would be false. A more accurate description would be "a byproduct of Hashirama and Madara's final duel". The fact that two people could shape the land in such way was a concept a lot of people, especially non-ninjas, had a hard time grasping.

"Weird. It's like... like I have already been here before," Naruto commented, as his eyes were fixed on the two statues.

"How is that, Naruto?"

Naruto was about to open his mouth, but something stopped him. A feeling. Coming from his gut. A mix of anger, frustration and grief. But for some reason, he felt like those feeling weren't exactly his, but somebody else's.

Somebody he shared his body with.

"I believe it was... him who was here."

Kurenai opened her eyes wide in shock, knowing full well what, or whom, Naruto was talking about. The possibility of aborting the mission crossed the Jonin's mind.

"And how do you know that, Naruto? Does he... talk to you?" the Jonin asked, biting her lip, as a tinge of worry crossed her body.

"No. It's like I could feel how he feels. As if our feeling sych... synz..."

"Synchronize," Hinata mentioned.

"Synchronize, yeah, that, thank you."

"Does this happen often?" Kurenai asked again.

"Actually, no. This is the first time I feel something like this. I believe that this place causes him distress, for some reason," Naruto explained.

Kurenai pondered his words. Not wanting to make anymore unnecessary risks, she urged everybody to finish their meals, and continue their trip. The last thing she wanted was to make something to influence the Kyubi.

"By the way Naruto, if you feel something unusual and think it may be due to your tenant, tell me, okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry, sensei."

...

Not an hour after leaving the Valley of the End, Kurenai's Assault Team arrived at their destination, Sawa Town. It was a farmer community surrounded by rice fields, just like the majority of towns of the country -hence its name-. Most of the villagers wore short sleeved linen shirts and short pants -ideal to work on rice fields- and

coolie hats -used as protection against the sun and rain while working-. They guessed that the town probably had less than five hundred inhabitants.

The more they studied the villagers, the more they realized about something odd: most of them were either children, or people older than forty. There were no teenagers or people in their twenties/thirties.

Naturally, the presence of ninjas didn't went unnoticed among the farmers. Some were happy to see that the ninja they had requested had finally arrived, but others murmured about the young age of three fourths of the group, and wondered how they were going to protect them. While most villagers didn't dare to approach the foreigners, there was somebody who did: a short man in his early thirties, with short black hair and a soul patch, who wore the same clothes as the rest of his peers.

"Welcome to Sawa Town, foreign ninjas," the man greeted as he removed his hat and made a bow. "Are you the Konoha Ninjas that we requested to protect our home?"

"Indeed we are. My name is Kurenai Yuhi. These are my students, Naruto Uzumaki, Hinata Hyuga and Haku Yuki," the Jonin motioned to her Genin as she introduced them.

"Good to see that you're finally here. My name is Ryo Yuhara, mayor of Sawa Town. Please come to my house, and we will discuss the matter at hand there."

...

Kurenai and her three Genin were sat around a table on the kitchen in Ryo's house. A pregnant woman they presumed was Ryo's wife, served them some tea.

"Thank you, Emi," the man said to his wife, who nodded in return.

"I'll be in the garden if you need me," the woman replied before leaving.

"Ryo-san, you said that your village has been attacked multiple times, and that's the reason for us to be here. Before another attack happens, we're going to need as much information as possible," the Jonin said before taking a sip from her tea.

"Sure, ask what you want, and I'll try to be of as much help as possible," the mayor replied.

"For starters, their numbers. How many of them there are?"

"It varies from time to time, usually between fifteen and thirty. All armed with all kinds of weapons, such as swords, axes, spears..." Ryo decided to elaborate before Kurenai asked him again.

"Do any of them show aptitude for ninjutsu?" Kurenai asked once again.

"I believe not. I mean, they don't look like ninjas. Ninja usually wear some sort of badge that identifies their village of origin, just like your headbands," Ryo pointed at Kurenai's forehead protector.

"Not necessarily. There are still quite a few independent clans out there not affiliated to any village. These clans are the last remnants of the Warring States Period. Most people nowadays hire ninjas hailing from villages, leaving these clans with nothing but the poorest customers. I wouldn't be surprised if out desperation, one of these clans turned into pillagers just to survive."

"Still, they didn't look nor act like ninjas to me, nor use that fancy magic ninjas are famous for."

"Ninjutsu," Kurenai sharply corrected. "Magic is what street performers do."

"Oh, right, sorry."

"My I ask something?" It was Haku who spoke this time. Both Ryo and Kurenai nodded. "I saw that most people in this town are either children or middle aged. Where are the people of Kurenai-sensei's age?"

Ryo's mood became somber, his eyes reflected a deep sadness. "You see, most of the time those bandits come here looking for food or money. But sometimes, when they feel we don't have enough to satisfy their greed, they usually take some of our peers with them. Usually those older than eighteen but younger than thirty five."

"Do you know what they do with them?" Kurenai asked.

"I don't know, nor want to think about it," Ryo shuddered in disgust. "At first we thought they did it to increase their numbers, but we never see again the people they take with them."

"Haven't you tried to defend yourselves?" Naruto asked.

Ryo smiled sadly at the blond. "Kid, this is a farming town. None of us know to fight, nor have the disposition to. Our attackers are well armed and organized, and while we outnumber them, nobody wants to die fighting them."

"What about the Lord of these lands?" Hinata chimed in. "Shouldn't he make sure that such attacks doesn't happen?"

"Maybe he should, but for some reason he doesn't. These lands had always been peaceful. We always had our share of criminals like everybody else, but our Lord's soldiers and guards usually dealt with them. But during the past years, the bandit attacks have multiplied drastically, not only in our town, but in other towns as well. Many people traveled to the capital to ask our Lord for help, but they never returned. We think that they didn't even make it to the capital before falling prey to some ambush."

"This is unacceptable," Kurenai was trying her best to hold her anger. "Is a ruler's duty to keep his people safe. Once we deal with

this problem, we will travel to the capital and ask what's going on."

Ryo's face lit up. "You'll do that? Because that would be wonderful! Though that wasn't included in the mission..."

"That's what differentiates ninjas from mere mercenaries. We may charge for our services, but we do work to make the world a little better."

"I'm glad my brother in law suggested the idea of hiring some ninjas from the Land of Fire, given that there is no ninja village in our country," the mayor said, smiling. "By the way, and I don't mean to disrespect any of you, but while you seem like a strong fighter, your students can't be older than thirteen. Are you sure they will be able to fight?"

"A reasonable doubt, but yes. Don't let their age fool you, these three may be children, but they have been trained and are ninjas in their own right. Once the bandits attack, you will see their abilities in action."

"Speaking of which, do you know when the bandits attack?" Haku asked. "Or do they attack at random?"

"No, I realized that they attack sometime around the first week of each month," Ryo answered.

There was a moment of silence while Ryo's words sunk in, and realized which day it was.

"Which means that they will attack sometime this week," Kurenai stated.

"Yes. That's why it's a good thing that you arrived here before the attack could happen," Ryo said.

"Fortunately, given the kind of threat we're dealing with, we won't need any time to make preparations such as traps. Now we better

get some rest. Do you know any inn, or a place where we can stay while we're here?"

"Yes, Baiko's Inn. It's our best inn... by virtue of being our only one," the mayor chuckled.

...

Baiko, the owner of the inn, was graceful enough to not charge anything to them for staying there, given that they were there to save the town -though he did charge them for the food, claiming that his generosity couldn't get in the way of feeding his family-. The fact that they were his first customers in quite some time helped.

The inn was rather small. It was a two story building, the lower floor being something of a mix between a tavern and a dining room, and the upper floor being the bedrooms. Naruto shared a bedroom with Haku, while Hinata shared a bedroom with Kurenai.

The next morning, Team Kurenai was finishing their breakfast in the lower room, when the mayor, extremely agitated, burst in.

"Kurenai-san! They're here!" Ryo shouted while barging in. The four ninjas immediately tensed up.

"Alright. Keep calm, and try to get people out of the way, we'll be there in a couple minutes," Kurenai calmly instructed. She then turned at her students. "These guys may not be ninjas, but still be careful, this will be your first real fight. Check you have your equipment with you before going. I believe you can handle this, but I will intervene if things get ugly, understood?"

"Yes, Kurenai-sensei!" the three of them said in unison.

...

"Yes, I think this one is perfect, we will take her!"

"No! Not my daughter you monsters!"

"Shut up, you old hag! Or else tonight you'll be sleeping two meters underground!"

The four ninjas rushed towards the group of bandits. Their description matched Ryo's. Some of them were forcefully dragging people from their homes, ignoring the pleas of the distressed families. Others were looting stores, taking either goods or money.

The fact that they weren't even bothering to hide their faces and the way they acted, they clearly believed that they owned that town. However, soon they would find out how wrong they were.

"Hey, you assholes!" Naruto yelled once he was near enough to be heard. "Stop what you're doing, or else!"

"Hey, look at that," one of the bandits, a large, broad shouldered bald man, looked at Naruto. "A small kid with a very big mouth."

"Maybe we should teach you what happens to cheeky kids who don't respect their elders," a slim, brown haired man said, as he rubbed the blade of his sword.

"And who the hell do you think you are?" another bandit, this time of the few women, asked.

"My name is Naruto Uzumaki, future Hokage of Konoha, and these are my teammates Hinata and Haku! And if you don't leave these people alone, we're going to kick your asses!"

There was a moment of silence as the band of thugs processed Naruto's words. The silence was broken by a giggle, which turned into laughter, which was followed by an uproar laughter from the entire group of pillagers. Naruto gritted his teeth in anger.

"Naruto," Kurenai called him. Naruto turned at her. She smirked. "Are you going to let them laugh at you?"

Naruto smirked back. "You can bet I'm not!" he turned to the bandits again and made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A dozen Narutos appeared from clouds of smoke, and the bandits suddenly stopped laughing.

"CHARGE!"

The orange-clad army charged forward and engaged the whole band of bandits. Their shock was so big that some of them didn't even react to the attack.

"Defend yourselves, you idiots!"

"That brat is a ninja!"

"Hinata-san, I think we shouldn't let Naruto have all the fun for himself, right?" Haku asked, smiling at the Hyuga.

"R-Right! Let's go help him!" Hinata answered as she activated her Byakugan.

After the bandits recovered from the shock, they started fighting back and managed to destroy about half of Naruto's clones. However, they were so focused on fighting Naruto that they didn't notice Hinata landing near them. The Hyuga made several hand seals, and her hands were crackling with electricity.

"Lightning Release: Eight Trigrams Thirty-Two Thunder strikes! Two strikes!" Hinata's lightning-infused palm strikes immediately disabled a thug. "Four Strikes! Eight Strikes!" Other three thugs fell before her. "Sixteen Strikes! Thirty-Two Strikes!" Five more bandits were out of commission.

Haku decided it was his turn to act as well. His hands flew through hand seals. "Ice Release: Breath of Winter!" The Ice Ninja breathed deeply and released a huge cone of ice that covered in frost all who were touched by it.

Two of the bandits leaped into the air and tossed multiple kunai at the Konoha Genin. However, Naruto had already saw them, and his hands were forming several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto trusted both his hands forward, forming a cone-shaped gale. This time he managed to make it bigger than the one he used against Kurenai. The wind vortex not only stopped the kunai mid air, but also hit the thugs who had thrown them.

"ENOUGH!"

The three Genin turned around to see where the yell came from. At the top of one of the houses, there was one of the bandits -probably the only one still uninjured- with an arm around a little girl, and a kunai on her neck.

"Surrender now, or this girl dies!" the bandit yelled, as he pressed the kunai against the girl's neck.

Naruto laughed at him. "I don't see any girl there, just a bag of flour."

"What?" and much to the bandits shock, where the girl should be, there was a bag of flour. He scanned the people in the ground, and saw the girl on Hinata's arms. Before he could even react, Haku appeared from behind, and knocked him out cold.

The few bandits who were still on their feet wisely decided that those three kids were too much for them, and run for their lives, while Naruto, Hinata and Haku watched the scene proudly. Once they were out of sight, the villagers of Sawa Town loudly cheered.

"Boy, that felt good! Now I'm even angrier at dad for not giving me a mission like this earlier!" Naruto said, with a wide grin.

"Maybe it wasn't an assassination, but this beats pulling out weeds or picking up litter any time," Haku added.

"Plus we helped somebody in need. Now these villagers won't be afraid of being attacked and robbed anymore," Hinata said as well.

...

An hour later

After helping clean the mess the bandits have made before being kicked out of the town, Kurenai, gathered her team.

"Now I'm going to go to the capital and request an audience with the Lord of these lands. You've showed that mere bandits are no threat to you, so you three should be able to protect this town while I'm absent. I guess I should be back in less than three days," Kurenai explained.

"Don't worry sensei, this town will be safe as long as we're here! Right guys?" Naruto asked. Haku and Hinata nodded.

...

A couple hours later, at the bandits secret hideout

The few bandits that managed to return were kneeling in front of some unseen figure.

"You usually don't have much trouble gathering supplies and test subjects. What happened this time? Did the villagers get fed up and decided to fight you?" the man asked, chuckling.

"Worse than that. They hired ninjas to protect the town. They were just children, but... we weren't able to land a hit on either of them," one of the bandits fearfully explained.

"I see. If that's the case, I'll have to send somebody else more qualified than you. And since you failed to gather fresh test subjects for Orochimaru-sama's experiments... I guess that you'll have to take their place."

The bandits paled. They tried to run away, but before they could get on their feet, their world turned into darkness...

Author's Note: So, after the Uchiha Coup D'etat, we dive into the second multi-chapter arc. Fortunately, it won't be as dark as it predecessor.

So, Naruto, Hinata and Haku have unwittingly poked with a stick Orochimaru's wasp's nest. What will they face, now that they made their presence known? Especially now since Kurenai is conveniently out of the picture. But that doesn't mean that the Genjutsu Mistress won't have her share of "fun", oh no.

Anyway, I hoped you liked the beginning of this new arc, and don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

First C-Rank Mission, Part II

Author's note: As we delve a little deeper into the arc, it's about time for Naruto, Hinata and Haku to face their first REAL enemies (those bandits were just a warm up). Also, some little foreshadowing of future events. Hope you enjoy:

Chapter 17:

First C-Rank Mission, Part II: The Sound of Terror

or

The return of an old friend

When Team Kurenai arrived at Sawa Town, there was an atmosphere of grief, sorrow and fear impregnating the air. People barely talked to each other, minded their own business and focused on the matter at hand. Most of them were on the edge, as if they were expecting Death itself to claim them or their loved ones at any moment. And given the situation they were in, such behavior was anything but unusual.

But now... it felt like a whole new place. People would often happily and loudly greet each other. Children freely played in the streets. The townspeople behaved in a much carefree way, as if a huge burden had been relieved from their backs. Hell, even the sun appeared to shine even brighter than it did before.

The three Genins were now in a small grass field close to a river. Hinata and Haku were sparring against a bunch of Naruto clones, while the real Naruto was reading a book on fuinjutsu. While he was progressing at a very slow pace, he was now capable of making his own explosive seals and storage seals of small capacity. Now he was trying for something a bit more advanced.

Elemental Seals

Description:

As their name suggest, these kind of seals are closely tied to elemental ninjutsu, and thus a great mastery of said art is a prerequisite before attempting to create these seals. These seals can be as simple as storing a quantity of an element on a tag or a scroll -especially useful for Water Release or Earth Release users- to crate a seal that will unleash a jutsu once activated.

Components:

- 1. In the center of the seal, a kanji of the element in question. Fire (火), Water (水), Wind (風), Earth (土) and Lightning (雷).*
- 2. A standard containment matrix around it (see page 25 for reference).*
- 3. A standard chakra filter (see page 31 for reference).*

The central kanji must be infused with chakra of the selected element. The containment matrix, chakra filter and other additions can be infused with non-elemental chakra.

For instructions on how create more advanced elemental seals, please go to page 113.

Other Applications:

Elemental Seals can be also carved into weapons to make it easier to channel elemental chakra into them. Containment matrix won't be necessary, since unlike paper, the sturdier material weapons are made of will be enough to contain the seal. Though adding a chakra filter is recommended in order to stop enemies from using your weapon against you. It's also-

The experience from Naruto's clones upon being destroyed flowing through his mind snapped him from his book. He lifted his eyes from the book, and looked at both his teammates, who were looking at him expectantly.

"Already? Wow, you guys are good! They didn't last even five minutes!" Naruto then got up, and made a hand seal. Six clones popped besides him. "Maybe this will be a challenge worth your time!"

"Actually, I believe that the real Naruto joining the fight would be a better challenge, don't you think?" Haku suggested.

"Are you sure you can handle the real me? Alright, don't say I didn't warn you!" Naruto retorted as he walked towards Haku and Hinata, while a clone took his place studying fuinjutsu.

"Besides, Kurenai-sensei has started to teach me some low-level genjutsus, and I want somebody to practice them," the Ice Ninja explained.

"Why can't you practice with Hinata?" Naruto asked.

"T-The Byakugan c-can see through most genjutsus s-save for the strongest ones, Naruto-kun," Hinata explained. "And since I always fight with my Byakugan active..."

"Yeah, I get it," Naruto got into a fighting stance. "Alright, let's go!"

The spar began, Haku and Hinata versus Naruto. While everything was allowed, all three fighters were holding back. Naruto didn't use more than six clones, Hinata only used normal Gentle Fist as opposed to her Lightning-infused version, while Haku limited himself mostly to throwing senbons and casting genjutsus.

The first genjutsu made Naruto lose perception of reality, making it was if the world started rocking, as if Naruto was on a ship during a sea storm, causing Naruto to lose balance and almost fall to the

ground before he managed to dispel it. The second one caused vines to grow and wrap around Naruto. Despite knowing it was a genjutsu, he was unable to move until he dispelled it.

The fight continued for a few more minutes, in which the group was unconsciously moving towards the river. And the spar finally came to an end when Naruto, in an attempt to fend Hinata, kicked her in the gut with more force than necessary, pushing her into the river.

"EEP!" She squeaked upon falling into the cold water.

"HINATA!" Naruto yelled, and quickly jumped into the river to save her.

Fortunately, the river was very shallow -it only reached Naruto's knee- so there was no danger, but Hinata fell on her back, and got all her clothes soaked.

"Hinata! I'm so sorry!" Naruto mentioned as he grabbed Hinata's hand, and helped her out of the river. *"Hinata's hands are so soft... wait, why I'm thinking this?"*

"I-It's okay, Naruto-kun... this kind of things h-happen sometimes..." the Hyuga heiress then looked at her dripping clothes. "But my clothes are all wet..."

"I think I can be of help. Please give me your coat, Hinata-san," Haku asked.

Hinata nodded, removed her coat and gave it to Haku. Haku placed a hand close to the coat, closed his eyes, and focused his chakra. The water started to slowly leave the coat in the form of tiny droplets, and gathered on Haku's hand while merging into a big watery sphere. After dropping the water ball on the ground, Haku repeated the process.

"This may take a few minutes. You better stay in the sun while I work," Haku advised.

While Haku worked to dry Hinata's coat, they sat down against an old fallen tree.

"Again, sorry for getting you all soaked, Hinata," Naruto asserted.

"A-And I told you t-that it's n-nothing, Naruto-kun. It's not l-like you hurt me or anything..."

"Thankfully. Still, I better hold back a bit more next time we spare. I don't want anybody getting hurt unnecessarily..." Naruto didn't realize that Hinata's wet shirt was clinging to her body, revealing her figure. Upon realizing what he was doing, Naruto blushed a bit, and quickly turned his head back.

"Naruto-kun?"

"Er... just must be cold with all those wet clothes! Do you want me to bring you a blanket?" Naruto quickly offered.

"Eh... okay, thank you."

"What the hell is happening to me?" Naruto thought as he walked towards his backpack.

...

After hours of running and leaping through endless grass fields, Kurenai saw a town in the distance, and decided that it would make a decent spot to rest a bit before continuing her journey. Her stomach was starting to complain through loud grumbles, and her legs were starting to get a little sore. Yes, it was time for a little break.

However, as the town came close to her sight, the Genjutsu Mistress couldn't help but feel that there was something wrong. For once, the ambient noise didn't change as she was getting closer, which would mean that there was nobody there. This assumption was supported by the lack of farmers working on the rice fields surrounding the

town. And as she came closer, she saw that her fears were indeed a reality.

The town was a complete ruin. Half the houses had been burned to the ground, while the other half sustained heavy damage. There were broken glasses and pieces of wood scattered everywhere, alongside farming tools. The pools of dried blood didn't go unnoticed either. Still, there was something missing.

Because, despite the overwhelming evidence of the town being victim of an attack or incursion -Kurenai guessed it happened between three and six days ago- there were no visible bodies. If the attackers were a group of bandits like those her students fended off the day before, the Konoha Jonin simply couldn't imagine that they would care about the bodies.

Suddenly, a noise snapped Kurenai from her thoughts. A kunai appeared on her hand, as she immediately turned around and adopted a fighting stance.

"Who's there!?" the Jonin asked, not expecting anybody stupid enough to answer that question.

And indeed, nobody answered. But whoever was stalking Kurenai made a sound while they tried to move. That's all what the Jonin needed to pinpoint their location. Silent as the night breeze, the red-eyed woman burst into one of the less damaged houses, almost tearing the door from its hinges.

"Please don't hurt me!"

Kurenai immediately dropped her fighting stance when she saw a middle aged woman, wearing ragged clothes, sitting on a corner cowering before her. While she lowered her kunai, she didn't drop her guard just in case it was a trap.

"Calm down, I'm not going to hurt you," Kurenai walked towards the woman, who continued trembling. "My name is Kurenai Yuhi, I'm a

ninja from Konohagakure. Who are you?"

The middle aged woman finally dared to make eye contact with Kurenai, and her body stopped shaking.

"My... my name is K-Kimi..." the woman stuttered. "Aren't you going to hurt me?"

"I believe I answered that question already," Kurenai helped the woman on her feet. "Can you tell me what happened?" Upon seeing how shaken the woman was, she added: "Take your time to catch your breath if you need it."

Kurenai picked a chair, and motioned Kimi to sit down. The Jonin even shared some of her meal with her, thinking that at least a partially full stomach would be of help. After a few minutes, Kimi was relaxed enough to talk.

"It started happening a few months ago... bandit gangs multiplied like rats... at first, they usually ambushed our caravans or those who traveled to other villages or to the capital... but then they started coming to our town, demanding goods and money... and sometimes they even kidnapped some of us... the mayor decided it was enough and gathered everybody to stand up against them... it was a mistake... when I came out, everybody was gone and our beautiful town is in ruins..."

Kurenai listened intently to the woman's words. The situation was extremely similar to what was happening in Sawa Town. For some reason, Kurenai thought that this was something more than a mere loose gangs. The more reason to reach the capital and contact the Lord of the land.

"How did you survive?" the red eyed woman asked.

"M-My husband hid me in the basement with our two grandkids... we've spent there the past two days... I came out to see it was

safe... then I saw you and thought that you came here to finish us off..." the woman sobbed.

"Calm down. Like I said before, I'm not going to hurt you. Now, this is what you're going to do: there's another town a few kilometers to the southwest named Sawa Town. I know that it's dangerous, but I want you to pack whatever you can, pick your grandchildren and go to that town. That town is under the protection of my students, so you should be safe there," Kurenai reassured the older woman.

"B-But... it's too dangerous to travel these lands alone!" the woman protested.

"Listen, this town has been ravaged, so no bandit would have any interest in this area. Besides, there are too many open fields to set an ambush. If you set off in an hour, you should arrive at Sawa Town before nighttime."

"O-Okay... guess that it's too dangerous to remain here..." the woman cried. "Wait! Can you come with us? You're a ninja, right?"

"Unfortunately, I can't. I'm going to go to the capital and ask the Feudal Lord why he lets so many bandit gangs to run unchecked through his lands," Kurenai replied, sounding apologetic.

"I see... guess that I'll have to be brave, at least for my grandkids..." the woman wiped the tears from her eyes, and looked at Kurenai with a heartfelt smile. "Still, thanks for your help, Kurenai-san..."

"You're welcome. Now, if you excuse me, I need to resume my trip."

...

A few hours later

Kurenai felt a tinge of relief when the walls of the capital of the Land of Rice Fields appeared in her sight. She hoped that it wouldn't take too long for her to have an audience with the Lord.

But, just as it happened with the town she stopped a few hours ago, she felt that there was something very wrong going on. It was the same, silently eerie atmosphere that was present before arriving to the destroyed town.

But it made no sense. Sure, those little towns were easy prey for bandits, with their lack of an organized and well-trained defense force. But the capital was a walled city protected by literally hundreds of soldiers. There's no way it could have befallen to the same fate as the town she had been before. Hell, even if all the bandit gangs of the country joined forces under a single banner, they wouldn't be able to lay siege to the city.

But the evidence took no time in presenting itself. As she came closer, she could see the gates of the walls teared from its hinges. Every one of Kurenai's instincts told her to turn back and flee, that only death awaited for her in that city. But there were too many questions that needed an answer. That, and she was a Jonin, for crying out loud. She didn't get the rank for quitting when things got ugly.

Entering the city, she saw her fears confirmed once again: most of the buildings were either reduced to rubble, or extremely damaged. An intense smell of copper and burned wood invaded her nostrils. Debris, rocks, and broken glass was scattered across the ground. Pools of dried blood everywhere. But, unlike the little town, there were copious amounts of corpses littering the destroyed streets.

She couldn't help but having a brief flashback of Konoha right after the Kyubi was sealed. Only this was even worse, since plenty of people survived the Demon Fox's rampage. There was nobody here but dead bodies.

Still, remembering that she found a survivor on the destroyed town, Kurenai decided that maybe it would be a good idea to scout the city a little, and maybe with some luck she could find somebody who explained her what the hell was going on with this country.

"Why would somebody attack this country? The Land of the Rice Fields is a nation of farms. It's not a rich country, and possesses little strategical value. This makes no sense," Kurenai thought as she inspected the ruined city. "But what's most worrying is that somebody managed to launch an attack of this scale and keep it secret from the rest of the world. Hokage-sama needs to hear of this..."

Suddenly, a noise. While the Konoha Jonin hoped it was a survivor, her instincts kicked in, and a kunai appeared on her right hand.

"Well, well, well, look what we have here," Kurenai was a bit startled by the voice, definitely male. "Some Konoha scum getting her pretty nose in our turf."

"Let's teach her what happens when you wander too far away from home.." another voice added.

"You know, I'm kinda glad that she showed up. This scavenging job was pretty boring," a third one said.

Looking around, Kurenai managed to track the voices to the top of a half destroyed building. There were four men, wearing a gray and black camouflage uniform. Their faces were covered by black balaclavas, which had a small metal plate on their forehead with a symbol the Genjutsu Mistress was unable to see.

It was obvious that these uniformed men were ninjas belonging to a village, but she was unable to identify which based on the clothes alone.

The black and gray clad ninjas jumped from the building, and landed on the ground, surrounding Kurenai. Now she could see that the symbol on their balaclavas was a musical note, a quaver to be more precise. Kurenai had no idea there was a ninja village with such a symbol.

"A quaver... Anko told me that Orochimaru was in the process of creating a ninja village somewhere, whose name was Otogakure... do these ninja belong to this village?"

"Who are you?" Kurenai asked. "I didn't know that there was a ninja village in the Land of the Rice Fields."

"First of all," one of the ninja replied. "We are the ones that make the questions here. But regarding what you said... well, things change. Yeah, there wasn't a ninja village, but now there is."

"It was your village who caused this destruction?" Kurenai asked again.

"What did we tell you about asking questions, you Konoha whore! You're in our territory, so now you're coming with us! Our boss will have a field day with you!" another of the mysterious ninja shouted as she grabbed her upper arm.

Kurenai's reflexes immediately kicked in, and she quickly stabbed her kunai on the hand grabbing her arm. The man yelled in pain as he grabbed his injured limb and jumped back. His three companions lunged at Kurenai, who jumped back to put some distance between herself and her attackers.

"What do you plan to do with these lands?" Kurenai asked as he parried several kunai swipes from two of her attackers.

"Dead people have no business in asking pointless questions!" another ninja said as he threw a salvo of shurikens.

The ninja stars reached their mark, but in a poof of smoke, the Konoha Jonin was replaced by a log.

Kurenai appeared behind the ninja who tossed the shurikens, and kicked him hard in the back. "Your symbol... you're Oto ninjas, right? Do you serve Orochimaru?"

Two of the ninjas visibly flinched, making Kurenai realize that she was right. Still, that wasn't enough confirmation of her doubts. And she still had more questions.

"Come on, she's just one, and we're four! We should be able to beat her!" one of the ninjas yelled in frustration.

"Let's attack her from different angles at the same time!" another suggested.

"You know, shouting your tactics at your enemy is not the mark of a good ninja," Kurenai said, shaking her head. "Whoever trained you did a very poor job. If you got any training, that's it."

"SHUT UP!"

Kurenai thought about creating a couple Shadow Clones, but deemed it unnecessary. Despite being attacked from four different sides at the same time, she had no trouble fending off their amateurish swipes.

"This is getting annoying, you know. And I believe that my questions are rather simple," the Jonin jumped back a few meters while she made several hand seals. "But if you're not going to talk, then I have no reason to prolong this charade. Demonic Illusion: Underwater Burial!"

They didn't know how, but all of sudden the ruined city was transported to the bottom of the ocean. The attacking ninjas clutched their necks as they were unable to breathe and a torrent of water invaded their lungs. In a couple minutes, all four ninjas lost consciousness due to the lack of oxygen.

Meanwhile, Kurenai watched how her genjutsu made the balaclava-wearing ninjas writhe in agony until they stopped moving altogether. The Konoha Jonin decided to inspect them and see if they had something that identified them, or at least identified the mysterious village they hailed from. However, her search turned out fruitless. All

these men had were kunai, shuriken, some paper bombs, ration bars, and one of them was carrying a small first aid kit.

"Damn my luck," Kurenai cursed. "Well, maybe I should carry one of these guys back to the village. Maybe Anko may be able to make him talk before this snowballs into a bigger problem. But then again... no visible ninjutsu, mediocre taijutsu and skill in armed combat, and absolutely zero aptitude to dispel or even recognize a genjutsu. If these guys are an example of the ninjas this new village can produce, then there's nothing we should worry about," Kurenai mused to herself.

"Oh, don't judge all of us based on the performance of our lowest members," a new voice startled the Jonin, who turned around and saw another Oto ninja. This one was wearing the same clothes as the other four, except he was also wearing a dark gray light body armor, similar to Konoha's flak jackets. Kurenai deduced that he was either a Chunin or a Jonin. "You made quite a number on my men. But then again, they should know better than messing with a Jonin, right Kurenai Yuhi?"

Kurenai frowned, and stared at the Oto ninja's eyes. "How do you know who I am?"

"Anybody who bothered to read our bingo book could identify Konoha's top genjutsu specialist. Those bright red eyes are a dead giver," the Oto officer pointed at Kurenai's face.

"And you think you're tough enough to take on me alone?" the Genjutsu Mistress slipped into a fighting stance, ready for another short combat.

The Oto ninja smirked under his mask. "Who said I was going to fight you alone?"

The earth started to shake, in an almost imperceptible way first, more noticeable with each second. With a loud crash, one of the half destroyed buildings collapsed completely, and from the cloud of

smoke, a massive greenish gray snake appeared, its jaws wide open, ready to gobble the red-eyed Jonin.

Kurenai managed to shake off her shock and jump away just a second before the gigantic slithering reptile could get her, its fangs sinking into the concrete floor. Still, the gigantic snake gave her no room to breathe, and lunged at her again. This time, Kurenai jumped above its head, landing just on its neck. The Jonin turned around and tossed a volley of kunai and shuriken at the back of the giant reptile's head. The snake hissed in pain, but the attack didn't appear to cause much damage.

A painful flying kick to the side reminded Kurenai that the giant snake wasn't her only opponent. The Oto official started to make hand seals. Several crescent-shaped blades made of chakra appeared above him.

"Flying Decapitating Blades!"

The chakra blades shot themselves at Kurenai, who dodged them while doing a few backflips. Two of them managed to narrowly hit her, producing a couple of superficial scratches. Taking advantage of Kurenai's predicament, the snake lunged forward once again, its jaws ready to devour the Jonin. She knew that if she was going to deal with two strong enemies, she should be in two places at the same time. She formed a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A single clone appeared from a cloud of smoke, and both original and clone jumped in opposite directions to avoid the snake's onslaught. The snake decided to chase the clone, so Kurenai went after the Oto ninja. She started to make more hand seals.

"Earth Release: Field of Stone Blades!" Kurenai slammed her hands into the ground.

Multiple huge spikes started to emerge from the ground. The Oto ninja jumped backwards multiple times to avoid them. When the spikes also started to appear behind him, he decided to jump to the roof of a nearby ruined building. Meanwhile, Kurenai's hand flied through hand seals once again.

"Earth Release: Flying Piercing Stone Blades!"

The stone spikes that Kurenai created before left the ground and floated menacingly, pointing at the Oto ninja's direction, who was getting ready to dodge or deflect them. Kurenai made a hand seal... and the flying spikes turned ninety degrees, and flied in the giant snake's direction. The snake, who was still chasing the clone, didn't realize what was going on until several spikes sank into its flesh. The snake hissed in pain, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"A summoned snake... now there's no doubt that this is Orochimaru's doing... now this land is under his control. That means that my Genin and the people from Sawa Town are in great danger! I have to go back as soon as possible!"

"Now I have all the answers I wanted. This village you belong to was formed by Orochimaru, just like our intelligence reports said, though we weren't aware of its location, or its existence for that matter," Kurenai deduced, while staring at the Oto ninja.

"You're a smart girl, aren't you?" the Oto ninja chuckled. "But I obviously can't let you escape with such a sensitive information about us."

More camo-wearing, masked ninja appeared from the roofs of the semi-destroyed buildings. Kurenai couldn't deal with so many. Fortunately, she didn't need to.

"Were you going to let me go in the first place?" the Genjutsu Mistress asked.

"No," the Oto officer shrugged. "But now I have extra motivation to do so."

"Well, in that case..." Kurenai started to sink into the ground. "... good luck telling Orochimaru or whoever happens to be your immediate boss how you lost a spy."

"NO!" The Oto ninja panicked as he ran through hand seals. "Underground Shredding Blades!"

The Oto ninja slammed his hands on the ground, creating several semi-buried chakra blades, which moved towards Kurenai cutting through the ground as if they were shark fins cutting through the water surface. However, Kurenai disappeared before the chakra blades could slash her.

"Search the area, she can't be too far!" the Oto officer shouted. "Find her! Find her and kill her!"

...

Leaving the ruined capital behind, Kurenai dashed back to Sawa Town. She didn't care about being pursued -she was on an land controlled by the enemy, hostile ninjas could appear anywhere- but she was too busy thinking about what would be of her Genin if she didn't get back in time...

"Naruto, Hinata, Haku... please, stay safe!"

...

A day later, at Sawa Town

"Boy, I hope Kurenai-sensei comes back soon, because this is getting pretty boring..." Naruto groaned, both his hands behind his neck.

Naruto, Hinata and Haku had already finished their morning training, so they decided to take a walk. The first two days they had spend

quite a few time exploring the town and getting to know their people, but Sawa was so small that such time was enough to see it completely. Not that a farming town was terribly interesting to begin with.

"I know that things have been pretty... quiet since we beat those bandits. But still, this beats D-Rank missions any time of the day," Haku commented.

"Besides, I-I'm sure Kurenai-sensei will be back soon... she said she wouldn't take more than three days to arrange whatever was necessary to stop this bandit attacks..." Hinata added.

"And all this spare time isn't that bad either," Haku then looked at Naruto. "You could use it to continue your fuinjutsu training, you know."

"I know. But I burned through my supplies faster than I thought, and I'm not somebody who can learn just through theory alone. Though I'm making some progress with my Wind Seal," Naruto said while walking.

"W-What is that, Naruto-kun?" the Hyuga asked.

"It's a seal I make. It's kinda like the explosive tag, only that instead of exploding, the seal releases a gust. Well, it's not that strong, but I'm not that good at sealing yet."

"Interesting. Would you be able to create seals based on other elements?" Haku asked.

"Well, yeah, but first I would need to master said element, you know? Explosive tags are pretty easy, since it's just to create an explosion with chakra, but for elemental seals, you actually need to infuse the seal with elemental chakra. So for the time being I'm just stuck with Wind Seals," Naruto explained.

"M-Maybe Haku-kun and I could help?" Hinata offered. "We do have different elemental chakras, so maybe we could help you make Lightning and Ice seals."

Naruto pondered Hinata's words, as his mouth curved into a smile. "Hey, that's... pretty smart! Yeah, I guess I could do most of the work, then show you how you can infuse the chakra into the seal. We have to try that when we get back at Konoha!"

Suddenly, the group saw a very distressed farmer running into them.

"Ninja-sama!" the farmer, a man in his forties, shouted as he stumbled towards them. "Thanks goodness that I found you!"

Haku helped the man on his feet. "Calm down. Tell us what happened."

"A trio of punks attacked us while we were working on the fields! I managed to escape, but I don't know what happened to the others! Please help us!"

"A trio of punks? Were they bandits?" Naruto asked.

"No, they didn't look like bandits... I think they were ninjas. They were wearing headband with a symbol just like yours, and had some freaky powers..."

Hinata frowned. "Other ninja? If that's the case, then this shouldn't be just a C-Rank mission... were you attacked by ninjas before?"

"No, just bandits, like those you beat up the other day, I swear!"

"Come on guys, why are we still here? These people needs our help now!" Naruto was shaking his fist.

"But we don't know how strong these ninja are! If we aren't careful, we may walk to our deaths!" Haku countered.

"I'm not going to let these people to die!" Naruto then turned at the farmer. "Take us to the place in which you were attacked!"

Haku sighed. Even if he really didn't want to engage enemy ninja without any kind of intel on them, he knew that there was no way to convince his blond teammate to stay. Better go all together, than let Naruto go alone.

"Alright, Naruto-kun, I will go with you then. Hinata?"

The Hyuga merely nodded, and they headed to the rice fields.

...

A few minutes later, they arrived at the rice field. It was apparently empty, save for a trio of farmers, to each other, sitting in the middle of the field.

"Of thank Kami, they look to be alive!" the farmer who asked for the Genin's help rushed to untie them, but he was stopped by Naruto. "What are you doing?"

"Don't rush in. This smells like a trap. Hinata?"

Hinata nodded, and activated her Byakugan, and inspected the fields. "There are several explosive tags hidden among the rice plants, forming a circle around the hostages. They're set so if one explodes, it will trigger a chain of explosions that more than likely will kill the hostages."

Naruto rubbed his chin. "That sounds as if they were expecting us..."

"Over there!" Hinata pointed to the right of the tied farmers. "There is a trio of ninjas hidden among the rice plants!"

"Those are some impressive eyes, girl. If I knew that we were going to face an Hyuga, we would have prepared a more elaborated trap," a male voice said as the trio of ninjas revealed themselves.

There were two boys and a girl. One of the boys had bandages covering most of his face, leaving only his left eye uncovered. He was wearing large poncho with long sleeves, a camouflage gray scarf, a straw raincoat protruding from the back of his scarf, and a metallic gauntlet on his right arm. His back was hunched, which made him look smaller than he actually was.

The other boy had spiky, black hair and dark eyes. He was wearing a beige shirt with two black stripes and three prints of the kanji for death down the front, and a camouflage gray scarf.

The only girl of the trio had very long black hair, almost reaching down to the ground, tied by a violet ribbon right near the end, and black eyes. She was wearing a pale green vest somewhat similar to a flak jacket, and camouflage gray vest and pants.

"Who the hell are you!?" Naruto asked, while pointing a finger at them.

"Actually, we should be the ones asking the questions, you loudmouth, given that you're in our territory," the boy with the spiky black hair replied.

"Your territory? But the Land of the Rice Fields doesn't have a ninja village!" Hinata said.

"Let me enlighten you, then," the bandaged boy spoke. "First, yes, there is a ninja village here. And second, this is no longer the Land of the Rice Fields, but the Land of Sound, since it belongs to Otogakure now."

"Wait, but... why are you attacking these farmers then? If you're a ninja of these lands, you should protect them instead!" Hinata cried.

"Enough with your stupid questions already," the raven-haired girl interrupted Hinata. "Dosu, Zaku, I think we should kill this trio of meddlers right now."

"Agree, Kin," the bandaged boy, Dosu, replied. "Come on, let's go!"

As the trio of mysterious ninja dashed towards them, the Konoha Genin slipped into their usual fighting stances.

"We need to drive the fight away from the hostages, or else may risk activating the explosive tags," Hinata noted. Her two male companions nodded.

"I'll create a Shadow Clone to remove the paper bombs and release the hostages," Naruto whispered at them.

Once they were close enough, Zaku stopped, and aimed his holed palms towards the Konoha Ninja. "Decapitating Air Waves!"

Zaku shot from his palms an air blast at the Konoha Genin. Naruto flied through hand seals.

"So, another Wind User, huh? Let's have a competition then! Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!" Naruto waved his arms in a cross, producing a powerful gust of wind, which clashed against Zaku's air blasts.

"My turn!" Haku said as he also formed hand seals. "By the way, thanks for choosing a battleground that gives me so much terrain advantage! Ice Release: Thousand Needles of Death!"

Using the water of the rice fields, Haku created multiple spikes of ice, which flied towards the trio of sound ninjas. Unfortunately for him, Dosu was already preparing a counterattack.

"Vibrating Sound Blast!" Dosu made a punching motion towards the incoming ice needles.

Dosu's sonic attack shattered Haku's ice spikes before they could land on their intended targets. After that, he held his right arm in front of his face, and dashed at Haku. However, Hinata intercepted Dosu

before he could get to the Ice Ninja, and attempted to hit him with her Gentle Fist strikes.

If the rice fields granted Haku a boon thanks to his Water and Ice jutsus, it was a liability to Hinata, since she couldn't use her Lightning jutsus without a huge risk of hurting her teammates or the hostages -or worse, set off the explosive tags-, and was forced to rely on the normal Gentle Fist that she was far from proficient.

Dosu dodged, or either parried with his gauntlet Hinata's palm strikes, until he saw an opening, and tried to punch the Hyuga in the face. Hinata, displaying her flexibility, bend backwards to dodge the hit. However, after doing so, she was hit by a wave of vertigo and nausea, making her fall on her knees and vomit.

"Hinata!" Naruto yelled, while still trading wind blasts with Haku.

"W-What..." the Hyuga weakly said. "But... I..."

"You dodged my attack? Yeah, sure. But you didn't, nor couldn't, dodge the sound waves generated by my Melody Gauntlet," Dosu smirked under his bandages.

"Haku, defend Hinata!" Naruto shouted, in an almost commanding tone.

Haku nodded, and made multiple hand seals. "Water Release: Water Wall!"

The water around Hinata started to rise until the Hyuga was completely hidden, quickly forming a swirling water barrier around her.

"That barrier will last about a minute or so. Let's hope she can use that time to heal herself."

Unfortunately for Haku, while he was thinking about Hinata, he didn't see Kin's flying kick until it was too late, and the Ice Ninja was sent

back flying a few meters, landing on his back, making a splash.

"Sorry, sister, no time to stop to smell the roses," the raven haired kunoichi mocked as she pulled out a few senbons from her pouch.

"Actually, I'm a boy," Haku repeated for the thousandth time, getting up and also grabbing some senbons as well.

Kin raised an eyebrow. "Really? Oh well, it doesn't matter, given that you will be a corpse soon enough."

With Hinata weakened and hidden under a shield of water, and Kin engaging Haku, Dosu decided to lend Zaku a hand. Naruto, however, did notice the bandaged ninja dashing at him. Like he did with Hinata, he swunged his metallic arm at Naruto. However, the blonde already saw the effect it had on her female teammate, and knew that dodging it wouldn't be enough.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Multiple clones appeared in front of the blond jinchuriki as he jumped backwards. Most of them were dispelled by Dosu's sonic waves.

"Dammit, two versus one... with such destructive wide-area attacks, my Shadow Clones won't be of much use... guess that I'll have to call somebody sturdier than a Shadow Clone,"

Naruto bit his thumb, and formed five hand seals before slamming his hands on the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke appeared a toad roughly the size of large adult. It had dark green skin with numerous warts, a dull yellow belly, and yellow eyes. The toad was wearing a red samurai armor that was one size too small.

"Gamakazu is the strongest toad I can summon yet... hope he will be enough to deal with these assholes!"

The armored toad looked around, inspecting the surroundings, before taking a look at the expectant Dosu and Zaku, and lastly to Naruto.

"Naruto...?"

"Gamakazu, I need your help dealing with these two punks! Can I count on you?" Naruto asked, almost pleading.

The toad smiled. "Sure! That good for nothing Jiraiya hardly summons me anymore, so I'm more than eager to fight again!" the toad clenched his fists, and adopted a fighting stance.

Zaku laughed uproariously. "Oh ho ho, this so good! You think that summoning a fat frog is going to be of any help against us?"

Gamakazu snarled. "First of all, I'm not a frog but a TOAD, remember that! And second, let's see if you laugh so much when I tear your arms and force you to swallow them! Naruto, let's go!"

Naruto jumped on the back of Gamakazu, and leaped into the air above the two Sound Genin.

"Water Release: Water Bullet!" The Toad's jowl puffed out, and released several watery blasts.

Zaku smirked confidently, not impressed by the toad's boast or attack. He raised his hands upwards. "Decapitating Airwaves!" once again, Zaku's palms released a concentrated blast of air and sound that stopped the Gamakazu's water bullets. However, just like Naruto had planned, doing so left him completely wide open. Forming a hand seal, he created multiple Shadow Clones that descended upon him.

Dosu, however, was ready to fend off the attack. He aimed his Melody gauntlet at the clones. "Vibrating Sound Blast!"

Dosu's sonic waves poofed most of Naruto's clones. But unfortunately for him, neither his nor Zaku's attacks managed to hit either Gamakazu or Naruto, and the blond was about to capitalize on this. He threw a shuriken while making several hand seals as fast as he could.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

The single shuriken flying down suddenly turned into three dozens. Without time to counterattack, the two male Sound Genin were forced to jump backwards in order to avoid the rain of metallic death. While Dosu managed to use his Melody Gauntlet to parry the shuriken he couldn't dodge, Zaku wasn't so lucky, and ended up with a few shurikens hammered into his arms and shoulders.

"Zaku! Are you okay?" the bandaged boy asked.

"RAAAAARGH! YOU ASSHOLE!" Zaku screamed as he removed a shuriken from his arm. "You will pay for that!"

Meanwhile, Haku was still fighting Kin. Senbons flew in every direction, some hitting their target, others hitting each other, and others missing. Haku managed to get a lucky shot, and three senbons lodged into Kin's right shoulder. She'd have to remove them if she wanted to use that arm. That would give Haku a window of opportunity to form some hand seals and use his powerful ninjutsu. However, when he was about to form the first seal, his hands phased into each other.

"What...?" Haku slurred, as he tried to form more hand seals, unsuccessfully. Then, looking around, he realized that there was something very wrong. Everything looked extremely blurry and shaky. He tried to move, and he nearly fell on his face. "What's... happening...?"

"You just fell victim of my genjutsu, sucker. Have fun trying to fight like that," Kin smirked at him.

Haku tried to make a hand seal to dispel the genjutsu, but once again his hands phased through each other. Though what in reality was happening was that he wasn't even bringing his hands together, the genjutsu was messing up with his eyesight and depth perception, among other things.

"Any last words, pretty boy?"

"Eight Trigrams, Thirty-Two Palms!"

Upon hearing that, Kin paled and turned around, only to see an enraged Hinata ready to hit her. She wanted to block the attack, but it was too late.

"Two trikes! Four Strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! Thirty-Two Strikes!"

The devastating attack left Kin nearly drained of all her chakra, and fell on her knees, pained and exhausted. Ignoring the fallen Sound kunoichi, Hinata rushed towards Haku. She disrupted his chakra to dispel the genjutsu he was under, then she applied her Mystical Palm Jutsu to heal his injuries and restore some of her energy.

"Are you okay?" the Ice Ninja asked.

Hinata smiled at him. "Shouldn't I be the one asking that?"

"I guess so. But yeah, I'm feeling better now. Thanks."

"I should thank you too for providing me with the cover I needed to recover myself. Shall we help Naruto-kun? He's fighting against two enemies. Oh, and Naruto-kun's clone has released the hostages already. There's no more need to hold back."

Haku's mouth formed an uncharacteristical smirk. "If that's the case..." Haku started to form hand seals while looking at Naruto duking out with Dosu and Zaku. "Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

The water around Haku and Dosu started to freeze into large, sharp spikes. The two Sound Genin managed to jump in opposite directions before being impaled by the freezing spears. Dosu released more sound waves that easily shattered the ice, but upon doing so, he realized that Haku and Hinata had rejoined Naruto, and that Kin was lying on her back, unconscious, all while he had been separated from Zaku.

"Give up already, you're outnumbered, and your hostages have escaped long time ago!" Naruto angrily shouted, pointing a finger at Dosu.

The bandaged ninja frowned. On one side, he couldn't help but agree with the blond. On the other, this was his group's first confrontation with other ninjas. He couldn't allow their first fight to end in defeat. Otogakure had no place for weaklings. However, there was somebody who was about to make that decision for him.

"I've already seen enough," a new voice said, as somebody landed near the Oto ninjas with a loud splash.

It was a tall man with silver, shoulder-length hair, who was wearing a gray and black camouflage shirt and pants, and a bandanna-style forehead protector with a quaver on it. A Fuma Shuriken was strapped to his back. This man was somebody who Haku didn't recognize, but Naruto and Hinata did, despite not seeing him for more than four years.

"Mizuki-sensei...?" Hinata was taken aback by his appearance.

"What? No, it's our sensei, you bitch!" Zaku shouted at her.

"Zaku, I think that this Konoha kids used to go to the Academy in which Mizuki-sensei was a teacher before he joined our village," Dosu explained. He then smirked under his bandages. "What are the chances of such encounter to happen? It's a small world indeed."

"You traitorous scum! Not only you defected from Konoha, but stole the Scroll of Seals! Just wait until I tell dad!" Naruto's blood was boiling with anger.

Mizuki smirked as well. "For such thing to happen, first you'll have to get out of here alive, which I'll make sure you don't, demon brat," Mizuki then turned at Dosu and Zaku. "You three have done enough already. Get Kin and return to the base."

Zaku tried to protest. "But-"

"Don't question my orders!" Mizuki yelled, making Zaku flinch. "I don't need your help to deal with these trio of brats. In fact, I've been dying for something like this to happen. I never had the chance to test in a real combat the power Orochimaru-sama granted me."

Dosu picked Kin's unconscious body, and alongside Zaku, fled the scene, leaving their sensei alone against the Konoha Genin, who slipped into fighting stances.

"An unsealed Hyuga, an Ice Release User, and the Jinchuriki of the Kyubi," Mizuki smiled evilly as a pattern of chains of crescent-shaped marks started to spread around his skin. "If I manage to bring you to Orochimaru-sama, my reward will be even greater."

Author's note: DUN DUN DUUUUUUUUNNN! Mizuki is back! And he has a cursed seal! Plus other abilities neither Naruto nor you, the readers, know about! Naruto easily defeated Mizuki in the manga, but this one won't go down so easily. Oh yeah, and I decided to give Mizuki a normal cursed seal because not only is a power-up I love, but I really disliked Mizuki as Tony the Tiger from the anime filler.

One of the things I liked the most about writing this chapter was the debut of the Sound Genin. They're among my favorite villains. Too bad Kishimoto killed them so quickly, all of them had potential, especially Dosu. One of my minor goals, if you

could call it that, is to try to give them a bigger role, or at least a bit more presence in the story.

Anyway, while you wait for the clash against Mizuki in two weeks, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

First C-Rank Mission, Part III

Author's note: The chapters of this arc are getting far less reviews than previous chapters. Let's hope that my writing isn't getting worse. Anyway, I hope you enjoy the next chapter:

Chapter 18:

First C-Rank Mission, Part III: The Snake pit

or

Genin and A-Rank Missions don't mix well.

Mizuki stood in front of the three teens -and a toad- with a wide smile on his lips.

"An unsealed Hyuga, an Ice Release user, and the Jinchuriki of the Kyubi." Mizuki smiled evilly as a pattern of crescent-shaped marks started to spread around his skin. "If I manage to bring you to Orochimaru-sama, my reward will be even greater."

Hinata gasped upon seeing such thing happening. "H-His chakra...!"

"What about it?"

"It's like... he has a s-second type of chakra coursing t-through his body..." Hinata mumbled. "An overwhelmingly dark chakra..."

"What you're seeing, little Hyuga, is nothing but a fraction of Orochimaru-sama's power. Power that will wipe you out like leaves in the wind!"

"Shut up! It's us who are going to kick your sorry traitorous ass! And when we do, we will make you return the scroll you stole four years

ago!" Naruto shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at the former Konoha teacher.

The silver haired ninja chuckled. "Ah Naruto, loudmouth as ever. Guess that nobody gave you a much needed beating to curb that aggressive personality of yours. Fortunately for you, I'll be more than happy to oblige." Mizuki said as he cracked his fingers.

"I'd like to see you try!" Naruto then jumped at Gamakazu's back again. "Gamakazu, let's go!"

"Alright!" The toad then leapt into mid air once again. Meanwhile, Naruto's hands ran through hand seals. "Water Release: Water Bullets!"

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Mizuki jumped back in time to avoid the cyclone and the water missiles aimed at him, which made a huge splash upon impacting the shallow water. The former Konoha ninja made a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Two Mizuki's appeared besides the original. "Now I can give all of you the proper attention you deserve!" The Mizuki clones tossed their Fuma Shuriken while the original made some hand seals. "Shuriken Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

The two Fuma Shuriken turned into two dozen, much to the Konoha ninjas' horror. Haku flew through hand seals as well.

"Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

A wall of ice rose from the water, protecting the Genin from the giant metallic stars. Even if none of the Fuma Shuriken touched them, the wall was shattered by the giant steel stars. But Mizuki and his clones had no intention of giving them any time to breathe, and were preparing more jutsu.

"Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullets!"

A dragon head made of dirt, mud and stone rose from the ground, opened its jaws, and fired multiple mud projectiles at the Konoha Genin.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Blast!"

The Mizuki clones released a stream of fire from their mouths, igniting the mud projectiles. Haku, was going through hand seals once again.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

A watery barrier was erected in front of the Konoha Genin and the toad, blocking most of the projectiles but failing to stop some of them. Fortunately, Gamakazu would take care of that.

"Water Release: Water Bullets!" Gamakazu's jowl puffed out, releasing a barrage of water missiles that clashed against Mizuki's fire attack, nullifying it completely.

"Come on, we have to get to him before he pelts us with more jutsu! Come on Hinata!" Naruto rushed forward, with the Hyuga behind.

"Haku-kun, provide us with some cover!" Hinata asked.

Haku nodded, and his hands went through more hand seals. "Ice Release: Thousand Ice Needles of Death!"

Though not as much as one thousand, Haku managed to create quite a few ice senbon, which flew at Mizuki. The Sound ninja and his clones tried to deflect the ice senbon with their kunai, but some of the ice projectiles found their mark. The wounded clones were dispelled, and the real Mizuki was left with a few ice needles piercing multiple parts of his body. Meanwhile, Naruto and Hinata were already at a close combat distance.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A dozen Naruto's appeared from clouds of smoke, and leapt at the silver haired missing nin. Even wounded, Mizuki was more than able to fend off the clone's onslaught, showing an impressive display of skills and strength. However, he was so focused on fighting the blond army that he completely forgot about the Hyuga Heiress.

"Eight Trigrams: Thirty-Two Palms!" Hinata quickly dashed towards Mizuki, ready to strike. "Two strikes! Four strikes! Eight strikes!"

Unfortunately, before she could deliver sixteen strikes, Mizuki grabbed her by her wrist the moment she was about to strike him, and with an impressive force, he tossed her against a couple of Naruto clones, which were poofed immediately upon being hit.

"Hinata! Are you okay!?" The original Naruto quickly went to check if Hinata wasn't hurt, and to help her on her feet.

"Y-Yes, Naruto-kun. H-He's way stronger than he looks. That second chakra also increases his speed and strength. Fortunately, I closed some of his tenketsu." The Hyuga explained.

Naruto smiled brightly. "Well done, Hinata! Let's see if you can land all thirty-two strikes next time!"

"Like hell I'm going to let a 'next time' happen, you dumb brats!" Mizuki angrily yelled. The black marks on his skin started to glow with a fiery light, almost as if the markings were made of fire, and spread around the rest of his body. When the glow vanished, Mizuki had turned into a completely new being. "I didn't think I'd have to resort to the advanced level of the cursed seal, but if you insist on making me mad..."

In his Advanced Cursed Seal form, Mizuki had grown slightly larger and more muscular, to the point that the sleeves of his shirt were completely torn by his now thicker arms. His skin was now maroon, and his hair was much longer. His eyes were now yellow, with black sclera, giving him a demonic or otherworldly appearance. A pair of natural blades grew from the back of his hands.

But the biggest change by far was an additional pair of arms sprouting from his back, though rather than having hands, these arms ended in huge sickle-like blades, almost like the arms of a praying mantis.

"What the hell!?" Naruto yelled upon seeing Mizuki's new form.

Haku was so stunned he wasn't able to say anything.

And while the transformation left both Naruto and Haku shocked, it left Hinata, who watched it through her Byakugan, completely horrified. The Hyuga had seen how the second type of chakra invaded the body completely, assimilating Mizuki's natural chakra. The transformation also modified Mizuki's chakra pathway system, creating new tenketsu and chakra paths.

"Now brats... get ready to feel Orochimaru's power!"

Mizuki dashed at Hinata, and thrust his hand blade at the Hyuga's gut. Fortunately, Hinata was able to jump backwards while kicking Mizuki's face. Naruto created more clones and send them at the inhuman ninja, but Mizuki's mantis-like additional arms shredded them into pieces.

"Naruto-kun, Hinata-san, get out of there, now!" Haku shouted.

While Naruto was tempted to ask why, his instincts told him to simply do what the Ice Ninja said, and both he and Hinata jumped in opposite directions. The inhuman ninja saw that Gamakazu's jowl was puffed out again.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

"Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Gamakazu released a powerful stream of water from his mouth while Haku released a cone of ice from his mouth that froze Gamakazu's

jutsu, creating a barrage of frozen water. Though rather than being surprised, Mizuki merely smirked, and made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Cursed Flame Destruction!"

Mizuki exhaled a massive stream of blue fire from his mouth, pushing the water/ice combined attack back at Haku and Gamakazu, while evaporating the water of the rice field, and setting the rice plans on fire. Gamakazu disappeared in a poof when the heat was too much to take, while Haku used the Body Replacement Jutsu, leaving a log behind, which was soon burned to ashes.

"What do you think about my power, brats? This isn't something you can achieve by staying in Konoha. That place does nothing but hold back those who are great. That's the reason Orochimaru-sama left in the first place, and more importantly, the reason why you will die here!"

Naruto, Hinata and Haku quickly regrouped, while Mizuki advanced menacingly towards them. Hinata and Haku were visibly exhausted, while Naruto had some minor wounds. Much to their displeasure, Mizuki seemed to be fine and dandy.

"Do you guys have a plan? You guys should know that I only have chakra left for two, maybe three more jutsu." Haku mentioned.

"I believe I can keep the Byakugan active for a few more minutes, but my eyes are starting to sore." the Hyuga replied.

"Man, that cursed seal surely pumps Mizuki up." Naruto narrowed his eyes at the smiling inhuman ninja. "Hinata, do you think you can close all his tenketsu? That should stop that cursed seal as well."

"My mastery of the Eight Trigrams isn't further than thirty-two strikes so far. I don't think that will be enough for what you want. Sorry.." Hinata lowered her head.

"No, but maybe it can weaken Mizuki enough for Naruto and I to finish him off." Haku added.

"Yeah, we need to try that. Come on, Haku and I will keep Mizuki busy, you go and close his tenketsu!" Naruto said while patting Hinata on the back.

"I... I will do m-my best..."

The three Genin facing Mizuki, still advancing towards them with a smug smirk plastered on his face. They slipped into their usual fighting stances.

"Still want to fight? Stubborn until the very end. You guys should know when to give up." Mizuki laughed mockingly.

"No man or woman who can make me give up has been born yet! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Ten clones appeared around Naruto. "GET HIM!"

Mizuki adopted a fighting stance as the small army of clones charged at him. However, just when he was about to stab the first one with one of his blade arms, the clones jumped aside in opposite directions, leaving a small passageway, which Haku used to pepper the traitorous ex-Konoha ninja with senbon.

"You'll need more than those toothpicks to actually harm me, brat." Mizuki didn't even bother to remove the senbon from his body.

"How about this then?" All the clones pulled out a curved Fuma Shuriken and tossed them at Mizuki at the same time.

Mizuki however, used his increased agility to dodge most of them, and used his additional bladed arms to parry those he couldn't dodge. Unfortunately for him, this had the effect of being left completely wide open.

"Hinata, now!"

The Hyuga Heiress quickly dashed towards the maroon-skinned ninja, ready to strike.

"Eight Trigrams: Thirty-Two Palms!"

"That again? Like hell I'm going to let you do it again!" Mizuki turned to grab Hinata's arm before she could deliver the first blow.

"Like hell we're going to let you stop her!" Haku flew through hand seals. "Ice Release: Thousand Ice Needles of Death!"

Mizuki had to use all his four arms to protect himself from the rain of ice spikes, leaving him vulnerable to Hinata's attacks.

"Two strikes! Four strikes! Eight strikes! Sixteen strikes! Thirty-Two strikes!" the last strike was so potent that she pushed Mizuki a few meters backwards.

Naruto then used two clones to push him and gain enough momentum, and delivered a devastating flying kick to Mizuki's face, which hurled him backwards even further, making him fall on his back with a loud thud.

After a moment of silence, Hinata's Byakugan deactivated automatically and fell on her knees. Naruto immediately rushed to her.

"Hinata! Are you okay?" The blond asked, concerned.

"Y-Yes... I'm just a bit tired... I never had to fight and use the Byakugan for so long..." Hinata replied, panting a bit.

"You were amazing, Hinata! I knew you could do it!" Naruto congratulated as he patted her on the back.

Hinata blushed a little. "Y-You think so...?"

"Of course," Haku interceded. "If it wasn't for you-"

Haku was unable to finish his sentence as Mizuki's hand blade stabbed in his gut. Mizuki then pulled his natural spike from Haku's body, and hatefully kicked the Ice Ninja backwards. Naruto and Hinata couldn't help but stare at the scene, speechless. Mizuki looked at them and laughed.

"What? Did you thought that such a pathetic attack was enough to finish me off?" The former Academy instructor teased cruelly before moving to hit Naruto.

Acting on reflexes, Hinata moved to intercept the attack, but she was unable to block it in time and Mizuki's punch hurled her backwards, while her body spun violently. Naruto didn't had time to react before Mizuki sunk his knee into his stomach, before delivering a painful kick to the face, knocking Naruto on his back.

"Then again, the combo from that Hyuga bitch would have left me completely wrecked and with hardly any chakra. Thanks goodness I'm more than human now, hehe. Well... time to finish the job..." Mizuki cracked his fingers before moving towards Hinata.

Naruto struggled to get up, but between the emotional shock of his friends being beaten to death, and the physical strain of the prolonged battle, he was unable to move.

"So, this is how it ends...? Both my and I friends, killed on our very first mission outside the village, at the hands of a traitor...?"

The jinchuriki never felt so angry before. Not only angry for being beaten by such despicable man, but the fact that he was unable to protect his friends. How was he supposed to become Hokage, the man who has to protect the whole village, when he couldn't even protect his teammates? His parents always warned him against the harsh realities of the ninja world, but he never truly understood them until now.

As he heard the soft splashes of water made by Mizuki's steps, he knew that their death was closer by the second. If he only was

stronger... if he only had the means to save his friends like a future Hokage should...

'Naruto...' The blond heard guttural voice inside his head.

'Huh?'

'I can sense your anger... Your hatred... that man... Mizuki... You want to make him pay for what he did, right?'

'What... who are you?'

'That matters little now. What matters now is Mizuki. You want to kill him, right? For all what he did. Not just you and your friends, but your village as a whole.'

'Yes! Yes of course I want to!'

'In that case...' Naruto started to feel a heat building up from inside his body. **'Take my power, and kill him! Kill him, and everybody who dares to stand in your way! Give into your anger! Let the world know the power of your hatred! Let's dye the waters of these lands red!'**

A red aura surrounded Naruto, and started to glow brighter each second. The water around the blond started to boil. The jinchuriki felt the pain of his wounds and the ache of his muscles slowly receding, as it was being replaced by pure energy. His body got on its feet on its own, as if he was being pulled up by invisible hands.

"The only thing that's going to end today... *IS YOUR LIFE !*" The feral ninja snarled at Mizuki.

Naruto's eyes were now blood red, with slitted, vertical pupils. His facial whisker marks were now bolder, and his teeth appeared to be bigger and sharper. The fiery red aura increased with each second.

Despite the display of power, Mizuki wasn't intimidated. "So, you finally show your true face, demon. But don't think this changes

anything. I'm well aware of the limits of your power. You're only delaying the inevitable."

Naruto didn't reply, he merely shot forwards, ready to punch Mizuki's ugly grin. The Oto ninja was fast enough to catch Natuo's fist, but he wasn't fast enough to block Naruto's kick to his gut, which forced him to bend forward, something that the blond ninja capitalized by punching Mizuki in the jaw, hurling him backwards a few meters.

" **You're dead! You hear me!? DEAD !**" Naruto bellowed as he dashed forwards once more.

Mizuki quickly got up, at the same moment, Naruto was once again at hand-to-hand range, ready to deliver another punch. This time, Mizuki tried to impale the Konoha Genin with his mantis-like arms, but Naruto caught both sickle-shaped blades with his bare hands. His hands started to bleed, but Naruto didn't seem to be bothered in the slightest. Then, with an impressive show of strength, he tore the sickle-shaped blades off.

"RAAAAAARGH! YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Mizuki yelled in pain.

Naruto lunged once again, ready to impale Mizuki with his own blades. But in his state of unbridled anger, he was left wide open, vulnerable to Mizuki's hate-filled kick, which stopped Naruto's momentum and sent him hurling backwards. Naruto tried to get up once again, but Mizuki wasn't going to leave him any room to breathe, and kicked him once again. He then started to relentlessly kick Naruto until the red aura vanished.

"I have to admit... I underestimated the power of the Nine Tails... but that demon will soon be history once I kill you..." Mizuki raised his hand blade, ready to impale Naruto.

However, before he had the chance to claim the blonds' life, Mizuki saw a white and red blur flying at him, kicking him in the face and tossing him backwards.

"Don't you dare to touch my student, you monster!"

Mizuki got up, and after cleaning the blood from his broken mouth, he saw his attacker, an attractive raven-haired kunoichi in her late twenties. He took a few seconds to realize who this woman was.

"Kurenai? Oh, of course. Naturally, Konoha wouldn't let children run away unsupervised. I presume you're their Jonin-sensei, right?"

Kurenai frowned. "That's correct, creature! And you're not going to lay another finger on them as long as I'm here! And how do you know who I am?"

"Oh come now, you hurt me Kurenai. I knew that we weren't exactly close, but you should at least remember me given that we used to be classmates."

"Classmates? What are you tal-... wait a minute... Mizuki?" Kurenai narrowed his eyes at him, a bit puzzled.

"Bingo! I knew you were among the smart ones. As a reward, I will spare you from seeing your precious students die by killing you first." Mizuki chuckled.

"I'd like to see you try, you traitor!"

"Oh, I will do more than just try!" Mizuki's hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Cursed Flame Jutsu!"

Once more, Mizuki exhaled a massive stream of blue fire. Kurenai didn't waste time and made several hand seals as well.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Kurenai gushed an equally large stream of water from her mouth. Both elemental attacks collided, resulting in a cloud of steam. However, Mizuki's fire jutsu was starting to lose power, and thus losing ground to Kurenai's water jutsu. In the end, Mizuki was overwhelmed by the water attack.

The traitorous ninja tried to get up, but a wave of pain surged through his body when he tried to move.

'My body! What's going on? Where did all my power go?' Mizuki desperately thought, until he found the answer. 'The cursed seal. Kabuto told me not to overdo it. I have been using it for too long.'

As he deactivated the cursed seal, his body started to regress to his original human appearance, the pain started to recede as well. However, he was starting to feel incredibly exhausted. He had no chance to defeat a well-rested Jonin in such circumstances.

"You left poor Tsubaki heartbroken, you know that, scum?" Kurenai angrily asked as he walked towards him, holding a kunai. "But it's okay. Once I take you back to Konoha, she will be able to break up with you properly. Right before you're executed for treason."

Despite his poor odds, Mizuki allowed himself to smirk, as his hand reached his tool pouch.

"While I might die one day, it won't be today. Nor will it will be by your hands, Kurenai. This land belongs to Orochimaru-sama, and those who dare to step foot on it will die, one way or another. Farewell." Mizuki then threw a smoke ball, and took advantage of the resulting cloud to escape.

Kurenai entertained the thought of chasing him, since he couldn't be too far, but in the end decided that helping her students was more important.

Two hours later

Naruto opened his eyes. He blinked several times before his eyes could adapt to the light. Before briefly and hazily inspecting his surroundings, his mind drifted towards his last memory, the fight against Mizuki, and how the former Konoha ninja was about to kill both him and his teammates.

"Hinata! Haku!" He instinctively yelled.

Naruto felt somebody grabbing his hand.

"Calm down, Naruto. They're okay, as so are you." Kurenai softly reassured.

Naruto realized that he was on a bed, in the same room he had been spending the last couple nights. In the other bed was Haku, who apparently was asleep. Kurenai and Hinata were at both sides of Naruto's bed. The latter looked relieved to see Naruto awake.

"Wha... What happened?" Naruto managed to ask.

"Kurenai-sensei appeared and defeated Mizuki for us. Then she brought us back here." Hinata hurried to explain.

"Then Hinata treated both Haku and you. Haku had some serious wounds, but fortunately he's out of danger now." Kurenai continued. "It's a good thing that Hinata is a medic-nin in training. Guess that Tsunade-sama knew what she was talking about when suggested that all squads should have a medic-nin."

"Yeah, mom's awesome, isn't she?" A foxy grin plastered on Naruto's face. Said smile, however, was short lived, as his mood surely grew somber. "Kurenai-sensei, what about your trip to the capital? Is the Rice Fields Lord going to help us?"

Naruto and Hinata noticed that Kurenai's mood darkened as well when asked such question. She let out a heavy sigh. "I'm afraid that there won't be any help. This new village, Otogakure, has conquered the country. The capital is in ruins, completely deserted save for a few scavengers. Other towns have been ravaged as well. Hell, Sawa may be the only town left, and when word of our presence here gets out, it will suffer the same fate."

Hinata looked distraught. "Then... what are we going to do? We can't protect this town if more ninjas like Mizuki come again."

"There's no other option... the only viable course of action will be to escort the townspeople left here to the Land of Fire," Kurenai answered. "We will have to protect them from any attacks while they cross the border."

Naruto looked unsure, his resolve wavering for once. "Mizuki did quite a number on us, and he was just one. What if they send more ninja with those freaky mutant powers?"

"I wish we could ask for help, but I'm afraid that we don't have any means to contact Konoha other than sending a messenger bird, and that would take too long."

"Actually... there's a way to instantly send a message to Konoha." Naruto stated.

Kurenai's eyes shot open. "Come again?"

"Write the message first, I'll go get the messenger." Naruto said as he started to get up from the bed, only for a concerned Hinata to try and stop him.

"Naruto-kun, no! Mizuki gave you quite the beating, you need to rest first!" The Hyuga protested.

Naruto merely grinned at her. "Hey, it's okay! I recover from my injuries pretty quickly. Dad says it's because of the Nine Tails. Guess that something good should come out from having the fox thrust into my stomach, hehe."

"O-Okay then... but try not to exert yourself." Hinata warned him.

A few minutes later, Kurenai finished writing a scroll detailing their situation and requesting reinforcements. Naruto then bit his thumb and made five hand seals before slamming his hand on the floor.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke a small toad appeared. It was mostly red, with blue markings around his eyes and his head. A pair of goggles were hanging from his neck.

"Hey, Naruto!" The toad cheerfully greeted. "What can I do for ya?"

"Kosuke, I need you to deliver a message to dad. It's super important. As in, a matter of life and death important." Naruto remarked. He then turned to his sensei. "Kurenai-sensei, give him the message."

After staring for a couple seconds, Kurenai dumbly nodded and handed the furled scroll to the small red toad.

"Consider it done, Naruto!" Kosuke said before vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

After a couple minutes, Kurenai spoke. "Naruto, I don't want to badmouth your or Hokage-sama's summons, but... do you trust that that toad will deliver the message in time?"

"Actually, I'm pretty sure that dad is already reading that scroll as we speak." Naruto confidently replied.

Kurenai raised an eyebrow. "That fast? Do the toads have a way to teleport to Konoha?"

"As a matter of fact, they do." Naruto's statement took Kurenai aback. "You see, there's this weird pool thing in Mount Myoboku that connects with Konoha, which the toads can use to travel to the village when they need to. After Kosuke canceled the summon and returned to Myoboku, he uses the pool to travel to Konoha. Said pool can be used to appear at the side of a toad summoner that happens to be on Konoha, or to appear inside the Hokage's office if there isn't any."

"That's... something really useful." Hinata commented. "It's a good thing that Hokage-sama allowed you to sign that summoning

contract before graduating."

"Dad said he wanted to have a way to keep contact with me when I was outside. I thought that he and mom were being overprotective... but now I have to admit that it came rather handy." Of course, Naruto would never admit that in front of Jiraiya and Tsunade.

...

Konoha, Mission Assignment Desk

Jiraiya was handing the last missions of the day to the Genin teams. In an hour, he'll return to the tower to continue his daily doses of pain and misery, most commonly known as paperwork.

The door opened, and Jiraiya saw Asuma's team walking inside the room. Asuma looked rather content. Shikamaru was wearing his usual apathetic demeanor. Choji was busy devouring a bag of chips, and Ino looked a bit irritated.

"Well, well, Asuma's Tactical Squad! I'm so glad to see you here. Coming for a mission, I guess?" Jiraiya asked, already knowing the answer.

"You guess right, Hokage-sama," Asuma replied.

"Your Genin don't look too eager, though." Jiraiya pointed out.

"I know. But they just need to know that being a ninja sometimes means getting your hands dirty and do stuff you don't want to. Sooner or later, they'll understand that." Asuma said, taking a look at the trio of kids. "Now, what do you have for us?"

"Let me see..." Jiraiya started to look through the scrolls on the desk. "There's a house that requires a paint job... some medicine that need to be delivered to a town near Konoha, and a couple that wants somebody to pull the weeds from their garden."

Ino frowned. "Come on, those missions suck! Don't you have something better, like taking care of your kids? I promised Kaida-chan that I would try some new hairstyles on her."

"Yeah, and Hagane is a pretty good Shogi player, for being so young." Shikamaru noted. "Granted, he has never defeated me yet, but each game is becoming a bit harder to win."

"Sorry, but Hagane and Kaida already have another team babysitting them." Jiraiya informed.

Ino cursed something under her breath. She was about to ask which team it was when suddenly Kosuke, the messenger toad, appeared in front of Jiraiya with a scroll between his arms.

"Jiraiya, urgent message from Naruto!" The toad shouted, while pretty much thrusting the scroll into Jiraiya's chest. "He says it's a matter of life and death!"

Asuma noticeably tensed upon hearing the small toad's words. Ino remembered that Kurenai was Naruto's sensei, who was more than just friends with Asuma, regardless of how much Asuma tried to deny it.

Jiraiya unfurled the scroll, and started to read. His expression grew darker, which wasn't that surprising, considering the way the toad announced his entrance.

"Hokage-sama, what does the message say? Are Kurenai and her team okay?" Asuma asked, flinching a little.

"Bad news. Remember Otogakure, Orochimaru's hidden village we've been trying to find during the past years? Well... let's say that Kurenai found it."

"WHAT?" Asuma's shouted, startling his Genin.

"They're going to evacuate the town before they're attacked by rogue ninja working for Orochimaru, but they can't do it alone, and are requesting reinforcements."

"Then you have those reinforcements right here!" Asuma declared. His three Genin looked at him incredulously.

Jiraiya sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Asuma, I know that you and Kurenai are... close, but as you can understand, I can't send a team of Genin fresh from the Academy to a potential A-Rank mission."

"Why not? I admit that these three are still a bit green, but they have potential. Plus I will be with them all the time. Besides, didn't you raise the Academy standards so our Genin would be better prepared for these kinds of situations? And if you think we're not enough, you can always send more people with us. "

Jiraiya spent a few minutes pondering what to do. After the whole Uchiha debacle, their numbers have been reduced, most chunin and jonin were constantly on missions, and there were very few high ranked ninja in reserve. Before he could gather a better force, Asuma's team would have to do.

"Alright, you can go, but you won't go alone. Go to the north gate, you will meet your escort there in an hour."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," Asuma said, bowing before the Hokage. "You three, go to your houses and pack what you will need for a week-long trip."

As they exited the building, Choji, who just finished his bag of chips, spoke up. "An A-Rank mission... isn't that a bit too much for us?" Choji asked.

"Given that it involves fighting against ninja of Asuma-sensei's caliber... yeah, pretty much." Shikamaru replied. "Troublesome."

"'Insane' is the word I'd actually use." Ino added.

"Come on, don't be so glum. Yeah, it's going to be a little dangerous, but everything will be fine as long as you stay close to me and do exactly as I say." Asuma said in a reassuring tone.

Meanwhile at the Mission Assignment Desk, Jiraiya had summoned a couple ANBU.

"What are your orders, Hokage-sama?" A bird-masked ANBU asked.

"Go to Torture & Interrogation and fetch our resident Orochimaru expert. Tell her I have a mission for her. Oh, and whenever Itachi Uchiha returns from his current mission, tell him that I need to talk to him about something of utmost importance."

...

The next day, Kurenai and the town mayor, Ryo Yuhara, were overseeing the evacuation of the villagers. The mood was somber and glum. As expected, many people opposed to leave the town in which their families lived for generations, but in the end they eventually saw reason. That didn't mean that they had to like it though.

"Well, this is going better than I expected." Kurenai commented, as she saw people getting all what they could from their soon to be former houses. "If they keep this pace, we will be able to leave by tomorrow morning."

Ryo sighed heavily. "To think that when I hired you, I thought that this was merely a bunch of bandit gangs roaming out of control... I can't believe that we're forced to leave our beloved home like this..."

"Your people is what matters, Ryo-san. But if it makes you feel better, think of this as a temporary solution. Once we deal with Orochimaru, you will be able to return to your previous lives," Kurenai tried to reassure.

That didn't help with Ryo's depressed mood, but he made an effort to smile. "I... well, I hope you're right... to think that my son won't be born here..."

"You can let this get you. Your people need you more than ever."

Ryo sighed once again. "I... I guess you're right. I need to be strong, for both my family and the people of this town."

"Good. We will make sure that all of you cross the border safe and sound." Kurenai then spotted a bunch of Naruto clones helping some villagers load some of their belongings on cart wagons. She then walked towards one of them. "I guess you're a clone, right?"

"Yeah." the clone replied.

"Do you know where the original is?" Kurenai asked. The clone merely shook his head. "In that case. Naruto, when you hear this, I want you to meet me on the rice field you battled Mizuki. There's something important I need to talk with you about." And with that, she delivered a quick hand chop to the clone's neck, dispelling it.

...

Five minutes later, Naruto and Kurenai were standing in what remained of the rice field that served as battlefield of the very first fight between Konoha and Oto.

"What did you want to talk about, Kurenai-sensei?" Naruto asked, a bit nervous, as he rubbed his right arm.

Sensing her student's distress, Kurenai smiled. "You can relax, it's nothing bad." Her smile then disappeared. "Though it's an important issue, and if we don't discuss it now, it can snowball into a bigger problem."

Naruto swallowed. "And that would be...?"

"Shortly before I arrived, you were fighting against Mizuki. I couldn't see it properly since I was still too far away, but there was an... aura. A fiery red-orange glow surrounded your body. It disappeared when Mizuki got the upper hand of the fight, but even being so far away, I could sense an incredibly powerful and evil chakra coming from you. I think I don't need to elaborate any further to know what I'm talking about, right?"

Naruto averted his gaze. "... The Nine Tails."

Kurenai nodded. "Now Naruto, I want to make it clear that I'm not mad at you or anything, but this is something that needs to be addressed. First, answer me this: before this mission, was there any other time in which you tapped into the Kyubi's chakra?"

The blond shook his head. "No, never. My dad wanted to teach me how to use it, but then the whole Uchiha insurrection happened, he became Hokage, and didn't have as much time to train me as before, so we kinda skimmed that part."

"I see. Now I want you to remember what happened, and how you felt when you were fighting Mizuki and manifested the Kyubi's chakra."

"Eh... it's kind of blurry... I was rather boggled at the time..." Naruto replied, rubbing the back of his head.

Still, Kurenai wasn't planning on letting him go so easily. "Please make an effort."

"Okay... let me see... I was... rather angry. Angry at Mizuki because he was about to kill us, and angry at myself because I wasn't able to save my friends..." Naruto began. Kurenai listened intently.

"And what happened then?"

"I think I heard a voice..."

"What did the voice say?"

"I don't remember..." Kurenai frowned at Naruto, which made the blond raise his hands defensively. "It's true, I swear! If I remember I'll tell you!"

"We can go back to that later. What happened next?" Kurenai pressed.

"I... all I remember is that I wanted Mizuki dead. I already told you it's kind of blurry, but that's all what I remember. I wanted Mizuki dead. I felt like my body was moving on its own but... it didn't bother me. I wasn't in control of my body, but my body was doing what I wanted... this must sound super weird, right?"

"Absolutely not." Kurenai sharply replied. "For the time being, I heard enough. If you ever feel like that again, even if it's just for a fraction of a second, tell me, okay?" Naruto obediently nodded. "Once all this madness is over, we'll talk about this with Jiraiya-sama."

"I see..." Naruto looked at his feet. Then he lifted his head again, meeting Kurenai's crimson gaze. "What do you want me to do now?"

"For the time being, continue what you were doing. Help the villagers pack up their stuff, and stay alert if an enemy appears. Hopefully, we will be gone by the time they attack, and the reinforcements we asked for will be here to support us."

"Right!"

...

When they returned to the town, there was a surprise waiting for them, but mostly for Kurenai. Turns out that five ninja had arrived, two of which she knew very well. The apparent leader of the group was having a talk with the mayor.

"Asuma? Anko?" Kurenai asked out loud.

"Heeeeeeeey! Look who finally decided to show up!" Anko cheerfully shouted as she walked towards the Genjutsu Mistress. "First mission out of town, and you need to ask for reinforcements. You have some rotten luck, girl."

Kurenai frowned a bit. "This isn't my first mission out of Konoha, Anko."

"Well, it is as a Jonin-sensei. But I wasn't blaming you, you know."

Asuma finished his talk with the mayor, and went to greet Kurenai as well.

"Hey. Good to see that we arrived just in time, Kurenai." Asuma said, smiling at her.

Kurenai smiled back and wiped a strand of her hair from her face. "Indeed. I wasn't expecting you to show up." The red-eyed Jonin noticed Asuma's Genin team behind him and Anko. "Did you bring your students?"

Asuma simply shrugged. "The more the merrier, right?"

"This is a potential A-Rank mission. I'm surprised Hokage-sama allowed you to bring them here, given the risks."

"Hey, relax. They came here to help with the evacuation. If a fight breaks out, they won't take part on it. We will do all the heavy lifting," Asuma explained, hoping to reassure Kurenai.

Anko decided to intercede. "So, you finally found out this Otogakure we've been looking for years." It was less a question and more a statement. "We never thought looking in this country, since we didn't think there would be anything that would catch Orochimaru's interest. Guess we were wrong."

"We know it's somewhere on these lands, but I don't know its exact location. We'll need to send a team of spies to check it out once this

is over." Kurenai replied.

While the adults talked, Ino decided to start up a conversation with her two teammates.

"Have you seen the way Asuma-sensei and Kurenai-sensei looked at each other? They're SO going out, but for some reason they don't want to admit it." Ino said while glancing at the two Jonin, who were still talking.

Shikamaru raised an eyebrow. "Do you think it's appropriate to talk about that in a situation like this? According to what Hokage-sama said, we could pretty much end up fighting a Jonin."

Ino frowned at her Nara teammate. "You're such a killjoy, you know that?"

"I agree with Shikamaru. I heard that Naruto, Hinata and Haku nearly died fighting Oto ninja." Choji commented. "Thank goodness they're okay."

"Ugh, you guys are no fun." Ino scoffed, as she turned her head away. "Speaking of which... where are Naruto, Hinata and Haku?"

"Haku is still resting at the Inn, while Naruto and Hinata are helping the townspeople to pack their stuff." Kurenai told her. "Why don't you go and help them? I'm sure that they will appreciate a few extra hands."

Shikamaru groaned. "Boy, no matter where we go, we never get rid of D-Rank missions. This is all kinds of troublesome."

"Shut up and get moving, you lazy ass!" Ino chided, while she went to find her former Academy classmates, with Shikamaru and Choji following behind.

...

Undisclosed Location, Land of the Rice Fields

After being granted permission by its only occupant, Kabuto entered Orochimaru's private study. As the medic-nin expected, the Sannin was studying the Scroll of Seals. During those times, he warned all his minions to not disturb him unless it was important. The silver haired ninja hoped that his report was important enough.

"What news do you bring me, Kabuto?" The Snake Sannin asked in an oddly neutral tone, one that couldn't mask his irritation completely.

"Orochimaru-sama, the spies have returned." Kabuto announced.

"And...?"

Kabuto cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. "According to their report, people of Sawa Town are preparing an evacuation. They plan to cross the border and settle in the Land of Fire. Konoha had sent another squad of ninja to help with their exodus."

"What kind of reinforcements did Konoha send?" Orochimaru asked.

"A team of five people, two Jonin and three Genin. According to their description, the Jonin matches the description of the Konoha ninjas known as Asuma Sarutobi and Anko Mitarashi."

Orochimaru perked up upon hearing that last name. He turned at Kabuto and smiled wickedly. "So Anko-chan is here? That makes things even better..."

"Do you still plan to engage them yourself?"

"Indeed. It will be a great chance to put these new eyes to the test" Orochimaru replied.

In his unabashed anticipation, Orochimaru's eyes flared with a red glow, revealing a pair of fully developed Sharingan.

Author's Note: And the snake comes out of his lair! Will our heroes survive an encounter against him?

In before people points out the idiocy of sending out Genin to such a dangerous mission: like I stated in the chapter, Shikamaru, Ino and Choji are there to help with the evacuation, and are not supposed to fight. If a fight breaks out, it's the Jonins who will fight, while the Genin will escort the refugees. Plus remember that Konoha hasn't recovered quite yet from the losses of the Coup D'etat. But this is Naruto, and we know how things will turn out...

As for Mizuki's blue fire, I remember that, the first Sasuke activated the advanced cursed seal, his chidori turned black, as opposed to the usual blue. The black chidori disappeared after that, which was a pity since I thought it looked pretty cool. So I decided to do something similar with Mizuki as well.

And yes, I know Anko is just a Special Jonin. Kabuto referred to her as a Jonin for the sake of simplicity.

Anyway, while you wait for the confrontation with Orochimaru, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

First C-Rank Mission, Part IV

Author's Note: Ugh, I haven't written anything in weeks. Damn writer's block. Fortunately, I still have several chapters already written, but that may change soon if my inspiration doesn't return. Anyway, at least, this story now has become my most popular story in terms of views, favorites, follows, and reviews! Thanks a lot to everybody who helped this!

Now, enjoy the ending of the Land of the Rice Fields Arc:

Chapter 19:

First C-Rank Mission, Part IV: The Escape

or

Goodbye to the Land of Rice Fields

After greeting their former classmates, Team Asuma was assigned to help the villagers with their luggage. With the six extra arms, and Naruto's Shadow Clones, they finished a couple hours before sunset. Since the evacuation wouldn't start until the next morning, the only question left was what to do in the meantime.

"Maybe we should get some training in, you know, to get ready before the inevitable Oto attack comes," Naruto suggested.

"From what your sensei told us, you barely came out alive from your latest fight, then you've been helping these people pack their stuff, and yet you still have energy for training?" Shikamaru asked incredulously. "Man, I get exhausted by just being near you."

"Maybe that's why he's so energetic, because he siphons the stamina and chakra of those around him?" Choji suggested half-jokingly.

"If that was the case, then Shikamaru would be unaffected since he has none to begin with," Ino replied. "But then again, I agree with Shika. Besides, tomorrow's mission is going to be insane. We should get all the rest we can."

"I agree with Ino... besides, I still haven't recovered completely from the battle with Mizuki..." Hinata mentioned, making a conscious effort to suppress the "-sensei" honorific.

"Speaking of which, I can't believe that guy ended up joining another village, and one created by Orochimaru, no less. To think that he used to be our instructor..." Shikamaru mused as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Maybe we will see him again, if he decides to finish the job." Choji mentioned.

"Heh, if that traitor's stupid enough to show his ugly face a second time, it will be ME who's going to finish the job." Naruto punched his palm vigorously. By the way he spoke, everybody guessed that Naruto actually wanted for Mizuki to show up again.

"We still haven't decided what are we going to do until we go to bed..." Shikamaru reminded everyone.

"How about some culinary tourism? This is the first time I've been out of Konoha, and I'd like to see what they eat in other countries." Choji suggested.

"There were only like two restaurants in the town, and both of them are now closed due the evacuation thing," Naruto explained, and noticed how Choji's mood soured.

"But that doesn't mean that we aren't going to have dinner." Hinata interceded, hoping to at least reassure Choji a bit, aware of the Akimichi's love of food. "In fact... why don't we have dinner now?"

"Yeah, that can work too." Naruto agreed. "Let's go back to the inn. That way, we can check on Haku as well."

While they walked the relatively short distance towards the inn, the group of five separated into two subgroups, boys and girls. Though a more accurate statement would have been Ino grabbing Hinata and dragging her away from the three boys, who were casually chatting with each other. Hinata wasn't sure what Ino wanted, but her unnerving smile made her a bit nervous.

"Okay Hinata, we didn't have a chance to talk after we graduated, so now you're going to spill everything." Ino demanded in an oddly commanding tone.

"Spill? W-What are you t-talking about?" the Hyuga Heiress asked.

Ino grimaced. "About the state of your relationship with Naruto, duh," the blonde replied as if stating the most obvious thing. "Come on, everybody knows that you have the hots for him, and you got lucky enough to be in the same team as him. I mean, I can see that you're not formally a couple yet, but I'm sure that you progressed in some way beyond the 'just friends' stage, right?"

Hinata turned extremely red, averted her gaze, started to fidget with her fingers while she tried to elaborate a response, but all that came from her mouth was inelegant blubbering. That was enough for the gossip-hungry blond.

"Nothing yet!?" Ino grimaced. "Come on girl, if you don't take the initiative, some other girl will take him away from you! While Naruto may not be my type, he's kind of cute, plus he's the son of two Sannin, which will increase the popularity factor, and thus, the number of girls after him."

"Well, i-it's that... N-Naruto-kun is my f-friend and I-I don't know if h-he likes me that way..." the shy Hyuga replied.

Ino wrapped an arm around Hinata's shoulders and her face came uncomfortably close to Hinata's. "Nonsense! You're a cute girl, and Naruto would be a dumbass if he doesn't realize what he has in front of his eyes. Unfortunately, we have more pressing matters at hand now, but once all of this is over and we're back home, we'll work to make sure that blond knucklehead notices you!"

"Hey!" Naruto shouted, indignantly. "Who's this blond knucklehead you are talking about!?"

Ino didn't realize that she had raised her voice that much, and that Naruto wasn't that far away from them. While he didn't catch the whole conversation, his ears perked up at those two words.

"N-Nobody!" Hinata quickly replied. "W-We're talking about a cousin of Ino t-that's been annoying her lately!"

Shikamaru, and even Choji, realized that Hinata was telling a huge lie. However, the blond merely smiled.

"Oh, if you say so. I believe you. I know that you would never badmouth me behind my back, Hinata," Naruto happily concluded, before returning to his conversation with Shikamaru and Choji.

Hinata sighed wearily. While it would have been heartwarming in any other circumstance, Naruto's blind confidence in her made her feel even worse. "I can't believe I lied to Naruto-kun like that..."

"Well, it was me who called him a knucklehead, not you." Ino reassured, her voice now being lower. She then grinned. "But did you see that? He trusts you a lot. That's a good sign."

"Ino... is there something I can do or say to make you drop this topic?" Hinata asked exasperatedly.

Ino's smile grew even wider. "Nope, nothing!"

...

Senju Residence, Konoha

Upon arriving home, Jiraiya saw that Tsunade was already there. After greeting her, he decided to get to the point, and told her about Naruto's message. As he predicted, Tsunade pretty much exploded. Though given that the house was still standing, her reaction wasn't as... catastrophic as the Toad Sage had initially feared.

"So Naruto goes on his first mission out of the village, and he accidentally stumbles on Orochimaru's secret lair!" Tsunade shouted as she threw her hands in the air. "I knew that something would go wrong, dammit! I should have never given him that accursed necklace!"

"Listen, there's no way we could have known what was going to happen." Jiraiya tried to reassure her. "Besides, I already sent reinforcements. Naruto will be fine."

"You sent another rookie squad, and Orochimaru's former pupil. Kami knows how many ninja that snake has under his command." Tsunade countered.

"Hey, the Uchiha Insurrection did a number on our forces. That was the best I could come up with at the moment."

"Not the best. You could have sent me." Tsunade replied, as her frown deepened.

Jiraiya frowned in return. "Tsunade, no. We can't forsake our responsibilities whenever Naruto faces some danger. The life of a ninja is a dangerous one. We know it and he knows it. We are needed here."

"I... I know. But I can't help but feel worried... he's still a kid..." Tsunade rubbed her arms, as she averted her gaze.

"I'm worried too. But I have something that will alleviate some of those worries." Jiraiya said, and much to her confusion, he spread a

map of the Elemental Nations in front of her. Then, the white haired Sannin made a hand seal, and multiple tiny symbols and kanji appeared on the map, most of them concentrated on Konoha.

"Jiraiya, what is this?"

"I have marked many people with a tracker seal that allows me to pinpoint their location on this map at any moment." Jiraiya pointed to a tiny symbol on the Land of the Rice Fields. "This is Naruto. The seals are linked to their life forces, meaning that if they died, they would not appear in the map, and I would feel the seal disappear."

"So, Naruto is still okay." Tsunade said, somewhat relieved. Then she frowned again when a realization dawned upon her. "Wait a minute, how many people did you mark with that seal? I hope I'm not among them!"

Jiraiya just chuckled. "I know better than that, Hime. The marked people are Naruto, Hagane, Kaida, and a bunch of people that haven't earned my full trust yet."

Tsunade's mood somewhat lightened. "So Naruto's safe for the moment. But that could change anytime soon."

"From what I know, Naruto and the others should return to Konoha. I also know that tomorrow one of my strongest Jonin will return from his mission, and I will send him as additional backup."

"You speak of Itachi?" Tsunade asked.

Jiraiya shook his head. "He was my first option, but sadly he won't come back in time. Fortunately, I got news that another group finished their mission, and send them a message to go to the Land of the Rice Field to assist Naruto's group. They're ANBU, so they should be enough."

"If you say so..."

Jiraiya then came close to Tsunade and kissed her on the cheek. "Come on hime, have some faith in Naruto. I'm sure that tomorrow night he will be back here in one piece, and we will laugh at how worried we were."

Tsunade sighed, but solemnly nodded. "Okay, I'll try not to get too worried."

...

Sawa Town, Next Morning

The two Jonin and one Special Jonin were awake half an hour before the sun would rise, Asuma was up even longer than that since he had taken the last watch of the night. They woke up the six Genin and told them to wake up the villagers in return, so they could start the evacuation as fast as possible. The Genin did as instructed, but still it took almost an hour before everybody was ready to go. After taking one last look at their hometown, the residents of Sawa Town began their march.

Shikamaru, Ino and Choji were placed at the head of the caravan, which would serve as a reconnaissance force. Naruto, Hinata and Haku were placed in the middle, and between Naruto's clones and Hinata's Byakugan, they would make sure that the caravan wouldn't fall prey to potential ambushes. And lastly, Kurenai, Anko and Asuma were in the back, where it was more likely for an attack to come from.

The atmosphere was tense. Very tense. And it wasn't just the civilians. The ninja, both children and adults alike, knew that they were in hostile territory, and they wouldn't be safe until they reached the Land of Fire. Anko decided to start a conversation, not just to keep her mind busy, but to get as many details of Orochimaru as possible.

"So tell us Kurenai, what exactly did you see in the capital?" Anko inquired.

"The city had been completely ravaged. There was some signs of a fight, but it appeared as if it was the work of a colossal beast rather than an army of ninja." Kurenai recalled.

"That sounds awfully a lot like the job of a snake summon." Anko concluded. "More than likely Manda, the Snake Boss. Orochimaru never earned his respect, and had to offer sacrifices in order to appease him. I guess that he probably summoned Manda to destroy the capital and thus get on his good graces, killing two birds with one stone."

"That bastard..." Asuma growled. "Those poor people never had a chance to begin with, right?"

"Sadly, that appeared to be the case. These may as well be the last free citizens of the Land of the Rice Fields. Too bad we couldn't save more." Kurenai mentioned while she looked at the caravan in front of her.

Anko smiled a bit. "Hey, focus on the people you saved than on those you couldn't save. You did a great job."

Kurenai smiled in return.

"So, how long until we reach the border with the Land of Fire?" Asuma asked.

"I guess that a couple more hours should do, give or take a minute." Anko replied. "But I wouldn't put it past Orochimaru and his minions to ignore the borders and chase us into the Land of Fire."

"That would be a suicide. Orochimaru may be a madman, but even he knows that doing such a thing would be like declaring open war upon us." Kurenai interceded.

"Well, you guys kinda entered his domain first."

"Because we got a mission request from one of its towns!" Kurenai loudly protested. "If that bastard wants to use that to claim to other villages that Konoha invaded his-"

"Kurenai-sensei!"

A loud yell made the three Jonin to turn their head to the source of the voice, and saw Naruto, or rather, one of his clones, rushing at them.

"Naruto! What's going on?"

The blond stopped in from of the three adults, panting. "Hinata saw something with her Byakugan! A massive snake coming from behind!"

The three adults looked at each other, exchanging worried looks.

"How far?" Asuma asked.

"The range of her Byakugan is one kilometer, so I guess it would be that. But now it will be even closer. It will take a couple minutes for the snake to arrive."

Kurenai walked to the clone and grabbed him by his shoulders.

"Naruto, Asuma, Anko and I will take on the snake. Your team and Asuma's Genin will protect the caravan while we fight. There might be a chance that this is just a trap to get us out of the way, so if you pick up more enemies or are under attack, send us a signal."

"Shikamaru knows a couple of fire jutsu, so that should work."
Asuma added.

"Is that clear?"

"Protect caravan, call for help if we're under attack." the clone repeated.

Kurenai nodded. "Stay safe, and watch each other's backs." Kurenai said before she stabbed two fingers on the clone's neck, dispelling it.

The earth started to shake. The three adult ninja slipped into their usual fighting stances.

"Here it comes!"

The ground shattered as a massive, gray snake emerged from below. The three Konoha ninja leapt backwards, all of them making hand seals while in air.

"Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!" Asuma expelled an expanding stream of flames at the snake.

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!" Anko released flames shaped like a dragon that flew at the snake.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!" Kurenai motioned her arms forward, creating a huge gust of wind that increased the potency of Asuma and Anko's attacks.

The snake loudly hissed in pain upon being hit by the attacks, its skin catching fire. The reptile, however, quickly shed its skin and put some distance between them. At that moment, two figures landed on the giant snake's head.

"Kukuku... impressive display... I think you three will be more than enough to test my new abilities..." one of the figures said.

Anko's blood froze upon hearing the new voice. From atop the giant reptile was the unmistakable pale visage of Orochimaru, wearing the black and red Akatsuki cloak, smiling teasingly at her. Besides him was a glasses-wearing, silver haired man that Anko paid no attention to.

"Orochimaru?" Asuma asked, mildly shocked.

"I knew that he had conquered these lands, but I never thought that he would come out to fight us personally..." Kurenai replied, trying not to shake. She knew this was a foe in a league way above hers.

Anko noticed her friends' reaction and decided to intervene. "Don't be afraid of him! That's what he wants! Deep down, he isn't that strong!"

Orochimaru merely chuckled. "Not that strong? You hurt my feelings, Anko-chan." Orochimaru's lips formed a cruel smile. "But if you're so sure, you're welcome to fight me. The last time we saw each other I was on a schedule, but now I have plenty of time to spare. And I want to check how much have you grown since the last time we fought."

"Orochimaru-sama, what about the Genin and the civilians?" his lackey asked.

"Take care of them, Kabuto. Killing mere Genin and civilians won't be a good way to test my new strength."

"Right," Kabuto then jumped from the snake and dashed towards the bulk of the caravan.

Kurenai attempted to stop the silver haired Oto ninja, but in the blink of an eye, Orochimaru was in front of her, his expression unchanged. Now the three Konoha ninja were surrounded by the Sannin and his pet snake.

"I'm afraid I can't let you interfere with Kabuto's mission. But if you care so much about your students' well being, it should serve as a motivation to defeat me, right?" the Snake Sannin chuckled. "But even all the motivation in the world is useless without an equal amount of strength and the skill accompanying it."

"Listen, we don't need to defeat him. Just create an opening for one of us to leave and help our Genin." Asuma suggested.

"As much as I enjoy a good conversation, I believe this chattering has gone long enough." Orochimaru adopted a fighting stance, while the giant snake behind prepared to pounce them.

"I agree. But first, let's even playing field." Anko bit her finger and ran through hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, a giant snake appeared, though it wasn't as big as Orochimaru's, it looked visibly surprised upon seeing one of its own, a reaction which was mirrored by the second snake.

However, the shock was short lived, as both snakes looked at each other, and nodded as if reaching some sort of unsaid understanding, before finally disappearing in a puff of smoke, much to Kurenai and Asuma's confusion.

"Smart. Really smart, Anko-chan." Orochimaru praised his former student, his smile remaining unchanged.

"Anko? What did you do?" Kurenai asked, a bit puzzled.

"Easy. Two summons of the same tribe can't fight each other. If two summoners are at odds, as is the case of Orochimaru and myself, then our summons will refuse to fight for us until the dispute is over. So neither Orochimaru nor I will be able to summon snakes as long as the other is present. And given that Orochimaru can summon stronger snakes, I deprived him of an advantage." the Special Jonin explained.

"Your constant underestimating of my abilities had some naive charm at first, but now it's starting to become irritating. It's about time I show you three the huge gap between our power." Orochimaru quickly motioned his arms forwards. "Many Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

A myriad of angry hissing snakes emerged from the Sannin's sleeves and flew towards the Konoha ninja, who jumped back in an attempt to avoid their poisonous fangs.

'Dammit, that bastard still has access to some snake-based jutsu... but if he can, then so can I!' Anko thought as she fend off the snakes.

Asuma's hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Ash Pile Burning!" Asuma then exhaled a huge cloud of gunpowder that covered Orochimaru completely. Asuma made a hand seal, making the gunpowder to explode, engulfing everything within the cloud in fire. However, much to his shock, Orochimaru jumped from the explosion almost unscathed.

"Sword of Kusanagi!" Orochimaru opened his mouth, and a snake came out of it, which in turn vomited the sword in question, which flew at Orochimaru's hands. "Killing you will be a nice way to get revenge on my former sensei!"

Asuma quickly pulled out his chakra blades and parried an incoming swing from Orochimaru's sword. The two of them continued trading blows, Orochimaru acting more aggressive, forcing Asuma on the defensive. Fortunately for the latter, he had two kunoichi that could provide him some backup.

With a kunai in each hand, Kurenai dashed at Orochimaru, who quickly raised his sword to protect himself from the red-eyed woman's swings, and deliver one of his own. However, much to Kurenai's surprise, the Sword of Kusanagi cut through her knives like they were butter, and the kunoichi barely avoided being slashed by the legendary sword.

Thinking that such action left Orochimaru wide open, Anko pulled out a single shuriken and infused it with fire chakra before tossing it at Orochimaru. But before the flaming star reached the Sannin, Anko cast another jutsu in the span of a second.

"Shadow Clone Fire Shuriken Jutsu!"

Orochimaru, however, saw the attack, and in the blink of an eye, stabbed his sword on the ground, and formed more hand seals at an

imperceptible speed.

"Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

A tornado formed out of nowhere, encasing Orochimaru and protecting him from all harm. The shuriken were unable to fly any further, their fire snuffed out by the powerful winds before being pushed outwards. The wind was so intense that it hurled the three Konoha jonin backwards as well. Fortunately for them, the wind barrier didn't last long.

"Kukuku... I was afraid that I would kill you without having the chance to test my new power..." Orochimaru said in an almost orgasmic tone. "I'm glad to see that that's not the case."

Anko was the first one to get back on her feet.

"How did you see my attack? I knew you were fast, but that... that was impossible, even by your standards..." Anko complained, frustrated.

"Because these eyes can see through everything, my dear student..."

At first Anko didn't realize what he was talking about, but it took no time for her to see it. Orochimaru's eyes were no longer yellow, but red. They also had three tomoe around the still slitted pupils.

Anko paled in shock. Orochimaru somehow had acquired the Sharingan. Their already low chances of survival had become even smaller.

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"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Kabuto jumped over the cone of wind generated by Naruto, and landed gracefully in front of his six rivals, while sporting a smug smile.

"If that's the best you have, then you may spare me the trouble and give up already." Kabuto taunted, not bothering to slip into a fighting stance.

After Hinata detected Kabuto coming after them, the six Genin decided to face him all together, and sent the refugees going, escorted by several Naruto clones. Hinata's Byakugan didn't see any more enemies coming after them, so she thought they would be fine. Hopefully, the clones would be enough until they reached the Land of Fire's border.

How were she and her friends going to escape this four-eyed menace? That was another problem she wasn't sure how to solve.

"Give up? Nobody has been born yet that can make me to give up on anything!" Naruto replied as he formed another hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Ten Naruto's appeared around him and charged at Kabuto, whose smile grew even bigger.

"You seem to be an entertaining bunch. I'm sure Orochimaru-sama won't mind if I drag this fight a bit for my own amusement." Kabuto said as he engaged the clones.

While Kabuto was busy with the clones, Haku pulled out a small scroll from his kimono and unfurled it on the ground. It was a sealing scroll with the kanji of "Water" in the middle. After making a hand seal, Haku stepped on the kanji, and water started to pour from the scroll, creating a large puddle.

Shikamaru, meanwhile, was trying to piece a plan together as fast as he could. The Naruto clones weren't going to buy him much time.

"Alright, this enemy is easily as strong as our Jonin-senseis, so we need to tread extremely carefully. Naruto, Hinata and Choji are the best hand to hand fighters, so they should be at the front, while the rest of us support them from behind." Shikamaru started to explain.

"We have the numbers advantage, so we should exploit that to its fullest. That means that we will attack him from every possible angle. With some luck, we might land some hits on him."

After Shikamaru finished explaining his admittedly not so good strategy, Kabuto finished off the last Naruto clone.

"Okay, let's see... I should make sure that the Jinchuriki, the Hyuga and the Ice Release user are incapacitated without receiving much damage." his sight then moved towards the other three Genin.

"Hmmmm... you three look like the newest incarnation of the infamous Ino-Shika-Cho trio. Given that your bodies are nothing outside the ordinary, I guess Orochimaru-sama won't mind if I'm not as considerate on you." Kabuto mused as he menacingly advanced towards the six Genin.

"Naruto-kun, I think that it would be wise to bring some reinforcements." Hinata interceded.

While Team Asuma didn't know what she was talking about, Naruto merely nodded. The blond bit his finger and made five hand seals before slamming his hand on the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto hoped that Gamakazu would be enough to tip the scales in their favor. However, much to his horror, from the cloud of smoke didn't appear his usual summon, but a much smaller toad.

"Hi, I'm Gamatatsu! It's so great that somebody summoned me at last. Do you have some snacks?"

Gamtatsu was a chubby, happy-looking yellow toad, with orange markings around his eyes and lips. Like Gamakichi, he was also wearing a blue jacket.

"AAAAAAAAAAARRGHH!" Naruto brought his hands to his head in horror. This was the last thing he needed. "WHO THE HELL ARE

YOU!? WHERE IS GAMAKAZU?"

'Naruto-kun didn't summon the intended toad?' Hinata inwardly asked. Upon glancing at Naruto, she realized there was something slightly off about Naruto. 'His chakra network seems... irregular. Maybe it was something Mizuki did to him?'

"So you didn't want to summon me? Oh, what a pity..." Gamatatsu said, a bit downtrodden as he lowered his head.

"I'm sure Naruto-kun didn't want to hurt your feelings, but right now we're fighting a powerful enemy, and we need a combat-capable toad who can assist us." Hinata softly explained.

"Well... I never fought before... but I have some training... I can help if you want."

"Better you than nothing." Naruto conceded. Gamatatsu regained his carefree smile, and hopped on Naruto's shoulder.

Resigning to having Gamatatsu as his partner for the time being, Naruto faced Kabuto once again, who was ready to attack.

"Let's see how well Konoha train its Genin." Kabuto set his sights on Shikamaru, and dashed at him. "Let's start with you, Nara!"

"Of course he had to go after me first. So troublesome," Shikamaru formed a hand seal. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Shikamaru's shadow extended towards Kabuto forming a somewhat thick line. Kabuto merely sidestepped aside and continued his rush. The shadow split into multiple tendrils that tried to grab Orochimaru's second in command's shadow, but he dodged all of them expertly. In no time, he was in hand to hand range with the lazy genius.

"Disappointing. Now die!" blades of chakra formed from Kabuto's hands, and he thrust one of them at the shocked Nara.

Though rather than kill Shikamaru, Kabuto's attack hit an ice barrier that wasn't there a second before. Choji appeared behind Shikamaru, grabbed him, and jumped backwards, putting some distance between them and the silver haired man.

"Wait... that looks like Mom and Shizune-nee-chan's Chakra Scalpels! Does that mean this guy is a medic-nin?" Naruto pondered. "Guys! Do not let him touch you with that! They can cause internal damage!"

"This is my chance!" Hinata thought as she ran towards Kabuto while she made some hand seals. "Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Hinata's hands crackled with electricity, and upon reaching Kabuto, tried to hit him with a lightning-infused palm strike. Kabuto parried her attacks, and tried to cut her with his Chakra Scalpels, but Hinata was able to block them as well. Meanwhile, Haku was preparing an attack.

"Ice Release: Multiple Piercing Icicle Shot!"

Suddenly, sharp icicles started to rain upon the Oto Jonin. He dodged some of them while shattering others. And the Konoha Genin weren't going to give him any time to breathe.

"Human Bullet Tank!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Once again, Kabuto was barely able to dodge the massive rolling meat boulder that had become Choji, as well as Naruto's wind jutsu. He was so focused in doing so that he momentarily lost sight of what Shikamaru was doing. And that moment was all what the lazy genius needed, as Kabuto suddenly found it nearly impossible to move. Looking down, he realized that Shikamaru had trapped him with the Shadow Imitation Jutsu.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu, success." Shikamaru announced, complacently grinning.

However, his grin was short lived as Kabuto started to overpower his jutsu.

"Congratulations for catching me, Nara, but that pitiful jutsu of yours is nowhere near enough to contain me." Kabuto said, not losing his cool one bit.

"Then maybe this will calm you down!" Ino made a hand seal pointing at Kabuto. "Mind Scream Jutsu!"

Just like the name of the attack implied, Kabuto felt as if somebody screamed into his eardrums, though it appeared as if the scream came from inside his head rather than outside. He tried to instinctively bring his hands to his head, but Shikamaru's jutsu didn't allow him to.

"Naruto, Hinata, Haku, attack him with everything you have!" Shikamaru shouted.

The three Assault Squad Genin nodded, and prepared for the attack.

"Wind Release: Toad gun!" Gamatatsu exhaled a huge stream of water, which was combined with a gust of wind created by Naruto.

"Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!" Haku formed an ice spear that flew at Kabuto.

"Eight Trigrams: Vacuum Palm!" Hinata thrust her palm forward, releasing a vacuum shell.

"And now, my turn," Shikamaru said as he ran through hand seals. "Fire Release: Shadow Fire Thread!"

Shikamaru exhaled a small fire stream that ran along his shadow in a straight line. The four attacks collided, creating a huge explosion.

"Woohoo! Nice one, guys!" Ino cheered, jumping and pumping a fist in joy.

Ino's mood wasn't shared by Hinata, who saw what really happened through her Byakugan.

"He somehow used a Body Replacement in the last second!" Hinata warned as she continued to scan the area for the silver haired man. "Haku-kun, he's right below you, underground!"

Haku jumped a fraction of a second before Kabuto's hands could catch his ankles.

"I'm going to admit that you brats are a bit stronger than I had expected." Kabuto said as he started to unearth himself. "But the game ends now."

"I agree," said a female voice.

Suddenly, a tree grew right behind Kabuto, its branches wrapping around the silver haired man, immobilizing him completely.

"What the hell, Wood Release?" Kabuto asked in shock, but further inspection revealed otherwise. "No, it's a genjutsu..."

"Very clever," Kurenai's voice said, as the red-eyed Jonin appeared before him from thin air. "But knowing that won't be of any help."

"What are you doing here? There's no way you and your two cohorts could have defeated Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto asked as he tried to break free from the branches that kept him in place.

"No, sadly, we didn't. I managed to get past Orochimaru's eyes to come help the Genin. But then again, I saw that they weren't doing so bad after all."

"Thanks, Kurenai-sensei!" Naruto replied, blushing a bit.

"What are we going to do with him, Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked.

"He seems to be some sort of lieutenant of Orochimaru's, which means that he has plenty of intel about him. We'll bring him to Konoha with us for interrogation." Kurenai made a hand seal. "Don't worry, this won't hurt. When you wake up, you will be in a cell in Konoha."

"Like hell I will!" and much to Kurenai's shock, Kabuto kicked her in the guts, no longer restrained by her genjutsu. Using that window of opportunity, he made a hand seal, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Kurenai-sensei, he's one hundred meters to the northwest, and running away in that direction! If you're quick you will catch him!" Hinata was quick to inform.

"No, that's what he wants." Kurenai replied as she stood on her feet. "I need to go back to help Asuma and Anko with Orochimaru."

"S-Should we go with you?" Ino asked, a bit afraid.

"No. Orochimaru is way too powerful for you, especially now. Return with the refugees, they should be pretty close to the border with the Land of Fire."

"But... what about you, Asuma-sensei, and that other woman?" Choji asked. "If this Orochimaru is that strong as you say..."

Kurenai smiled at the Akimichi kid. "Your concern is touching, Choji, but don't be afraid for us. We can take care of ourselves. Now go!"

Kurenai and the six Genin rushed in opposite directions.

...

As the third member of the Sanin, Orochimaru was considered one of the most powerful ninja that Konoha ever produced. Jiraiya was a genius of hard work who never gave up, and Tsunade was part of a lineage of powerful ninja, but Orochimaru was a prodigy. He was

intelligent, strong, cunning, and most of the time, merciless. Very few ninja would dare to fight him.

The Sharingan was one of the most feared Bloodline Limits to ever exist, even to the majority unaware of its terrifying evolution, the Mangekyo Sharingan. With a mere glance, a Sharingan wielder could instantly copy a jutsu that would take a normal ninja weeks or even months to master, besides being able to predict the opponent's movements with fearsome accuracy.

So naturally, most people would think that fighting a Sharingan-wielding Orochimaru was a fool's errand. A suicidal fool's errand.

Asuma Sarutobi never felt like a biggest fool in his life than now.

His clothes had multiple cuts that reached his skin, some which leaked blood. His pair of chakra blades had been destroyed by a particularly vicious swing of the Sword of Kusanagi. Fortunately, he always carried a spare pair. He had pumped even more chakra into the blades to endure the hits better, but doing so made his chakra reserves to pummel.

He couldn't stay on the defensive all the time. If he wanted to survive -he had come to terms with the fact that there was no way they could win against him pretty quickly- he needed to attack as well. Hopefully Anko would be able to provide him an opening. He saw that the Special Jonin was making hand seals. However, this slight distraction allowed Orochimaru to sink his legendary sword on Asuma's shoulder.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullet!"

Anko exhaled once again a dragon-shaped stream of fire at Orochimaru, which nimbly dodged, while acting as if the attack was just a nuisance. Grabbing his injured shoulder, Asuma took advantage of this and jumped backwards, and ignoring the burning pain, started doing hand seals.

"Wind Release: Dust Cloud Jutsu!"

Anko would swear that he heard two voices shouting the name of the attack. Which proved to be true as both Orochimaru and Asuma exhaled a gust of wind with grey dust on it against each other, clashing in the middle. Unfortunately, Orochimaru's attack had more power, and pushed Asuma's backwards. Fortunately for Asuma, he wasn't alone.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullet!"

Anko combined her fiery attack with Asuma's, creating a huge stream of fire with burning dust that quickly overpowered Orochimaru's attack. Unfortunately, the Sannin used a the Body Replacement, leaving a log in its place, which was promptly obliterated.

"He... he copied my jutsu!" Asuma exclaimed in disbelief. Now he knew how Kakashi's enemies must feel.

"The Sharingan is sure something, isn't it?" Orochimaru gushed as he appeared in front of the two Konoha ninja. "You don't realize how blind all of us are until you see the world through these magnificent eyes. Not that you will see much in the near future."

"Asuma! Anko!" Kurenai's voice called, as the red-eyed Jonin landed behind them. "The refugees and the Genin already crossed the border! We need to go!"

"Right! Asuma, do you need any help?" Anko asked to her male partner.

"My shoulder hurts like hell, but I still can go on. Let's go!" Asuma said, as he and the female Jonin prepared for their escape.

"How cute, the prey think they can outrun their predator," Orochimaru was genuinely amused. His smile, however, turned into a scary snarl. "Do you think you can escape from these eyes?"

"The Sharigan is far from invincible, you traitorous bastard!" Anko reached for her pouch, and pulled two smoke bombs, which she used to create a thick and wide smokescreen.

While nothing escaped the Sharigan, Orochimaru still needed to see his opponents, if they escaped his vision, the Sharigan was pretty much useless. And as much as it pained the Sannin to admit it, a mere smoke bomb was more than enough to neutralize it and create an opening to escape.

"You're merely delaying the inevitable." Orochimaru said, still amused, as he began the chase.

The Snake Sannin took no time to reach one of his so-called prey, Asuma Sarutobi. Asuma had suffered some serious injuries in his duel against the Otogakure leader, and thus was the slowest. He probably told Kurenai and Anko to go on without him born out of some ridiculous sense of chivalry. His pale hands flew through hand seals as he prepared a jutsu.

However, said jutsu never came to be, as he was interrupted by a barrage of kunai coming from his left flank. In no time, Orochimaru's Sharigan locked onto another pair of red eyes.

So they actually were preparing a trap, and Asuma was the bait. That meant that Anko wouldn't be too far either. Big deal, the result would be the same. From what he could see, Asuma seemed to care especially for that woman. He decided to target her instead, and maybe lure Anko as well. And, as expected, Anko reacted with another barrage of kunai aimed at the Sannin the moment he appeared to prepare a jutsu.

Orochimaru cursed on the inside. This was dragging on way too long. If he could summon snakes, then this hunt would have ended a long time ago. But as long as Anko was there, that wasn't an option. That meant that Anko had to go, even if her two partners wouldn't let him touch her.

Once again, Orochimaru shifted her target, expecting a preventive attack from Kurenai and Asuma. But said attack never came, and when Orochimaru cast his wind jutsu, Anko used the few seconds the Sannin had to slow down to increase the distance between them.

"Keep going! I can already see the border!" Asuma encouraged his female partners.

"Do you think that a border between countries means anything to me?" Orochimaru replied back as he increased his pace. "Such trivialities won't stop me! You won't live to see the dawn of another day!"

"No, but maybe we can stop you." a new voice said. "Wood Release: Wood Locking Wall!"

Orochimaru's chase was stopped by several wooden pillars emerging from the ground, forming a thick and tall wall that stopped the Sannin in his tracks. Several Konoha ANBU landed on the top of the wall and on tree branches, surrounding the Sannin.

"So, for the first time in years, you finally decided to show your face, Orochimaru," the leader of the ANBU squad, a man with brown hair who was wearing a cat-like mask, stated, while crossing his arms. "That will be your last mistake."

"Kukuku..." Orochimaru couldn't help but chuckle. Despite the mask, he knew perfectly who was that man. "Ah, my old guinea pig. It's good to see you again. I see that you're making a great use of my gift."

"Your 'gift' resulted in the death of more than fifty children, monster. And that's just scratching the surface of your disgusting career. You have a lot to answer for," the ANBU captain retorted. The rest of the ANBU started to unsheathe their swords. The captain made more hand seals "Wood Release: Wood binding Jutsu!"

More wooden branches emerged from the ground and wrapped around the Sannin as, ironically, snakes around their prey. At the same time, about half the ANBU jumped from their positions and landed near the Sanin with their weapons drawn. Still, Orochimaru looked undeterred.

"I guess that there's no way I can win against these odds, right?" Orochimaru asked.

The captain smirked behind his mask. "You got it right."

"If that's the case, the best course of action will be a tactical retreat and try again under better odds. Farewell," and suddenly, Orochimaru melted into a puddle of mud, much to all the ANBU's frustration.

The ANBU were about to chase him but the captain stopped them. "Let him go. If we chase him now, he'll pick us off one by one. Let's go back and escort the refugees to a safe place."

All the ANBU nodded, and followed their captain's orders.

...

Hours later, the nine Konoha ninja arrived at Konoha. The sight of the gates was truly a gift for their sore eyes. Kurenai couldn't help but let out an almost exaggerated sigh of relief.

"I never thought I'd be so happy to see the village," the red-eyed Jonin exhaustedly commented. "First mission out of the village, and we run into freaking *Orochimaru*."

"I'm sure other ninja also had similar misfortunes during their first mission. Such is our life." Anko shrugged.

"And you three..." Kurenai turned to cast murderous glares at her team. "If I ever hear you complain again about doing D-Ranks, I'm

going to use you as practice dummies for my A-Rank genjutsu, understood!?"

While Hinata and Haku nodded and whimpered, Naruto wasn't deterred. "Hey, we only wanted a little more excitement, none of us asked to fight against an S-Rank ninja!"

"Speaking of which." Shikamaru spoke up, while looking at his sensei. "Asuma-sensei, did you know that we would face ninja of such caliber? Because this was the first time we also left the village as well."

Asuma sighed, trying to suppress his guilt. "Yes. But my intention was to keep you from the fights. Your job would have been to help the other Genin escort the refugees, while Kurenai, Anko and myself did the heavy lifting. Of course, none of us were expecting that Orochimaru himself would show up."

"But all of us came out of that alive, and that's what it counts. Live today to continue kicking ass another day!" Anko cheerfully added.

"Given who we actually had to fight, I wasn't expecting you to be so cheerful, Anko." Kurenai commented.

Anko just shrugged. "I already told you that I'm good at seeing the positive side of things. If I wasn't able to... well, I don't think I could ever get out of the bed every morning. That, and the thought that that bastard will pay some day, preferably at my hands."

After crossing the gates, the Genin were dismissed, while the adults headed to the Hokage Tower in order to report Jiraiya the outcome of the mission.

...

Senju Residence

"Hey, I'm home!" Naruto announced as he walked in. "Mom? Shizune-nee-chan? Kaida? Hagane?"

"Naruto!" the orange-clad boy heard Tsunade's voice as she entered the living room. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you back!"

"Hehe, it was nothing, mom. I know that the mission kinda went south, but in the end everything came out fine." Naruto replied with a foxy grin.

Tsunade sat in the couch and patted a spot near her, hinting Naruto to sit as well. "Come on, this was your first mission out of the village, tell me everything!"

"Okay! You see, after a day or so traveling, we arrived at this town that..."

Naruto's tale started harmless enough, but it quickly took a dark turn with the mention of Mizuki, the Academy teacher who fled from Konoha the night of the Uchiha insurrection with the Scroll of Seals in tow. If that traitor was working for Orochimaru, then that meant that the fallen Sannin had the scroll in his possession as well. But that was nothing in comparison to what happened next.

"Wait, wait, wait... you said that *Orochimaru* personally went to fight you?" the horror in Tsunade's voice could be heard.

"Yeah, but Kurenai-sensei, Asuma-sensei and Anko kept him at bay. By the way, he somehow had a sharingan despite not being an Uchiha. But then again, Kakashi-sensei also has one."

"Orochimaru has *WHAT* !?" Tsunade was close to hyperventilating. The fact that Naruto had survived this mission was a miracle.

"Calm down, mom! I already told you that everything went fine in the end. The ANBU arrived in time to drive Orochimaru away and escort the refugees to a safe place."

"Yeah, sorry, it's that... well, I was worried about you. This was the first time you left the village, and had to face one of the worst missing-nin of the entire elemental nations..." Tsunade forced herself to smile. "But let's be thankful that both you and your teammates returned in one piece. I'm sure this won't happen the next time. Still, what you told me about the Land of Rice Fields and Orochimaru was... worrying, to say the least. Your father needs to take some action against this, or else this could blow up in our faces."

...

Hokage's Office

Meanwhile, Kurenai, Asuma and Anko just gave an oral report of the mission to Jiraiya, which was more or less nearly identical in essence to what Naruto told Tsunade, only with far more details.

"So, not only Orochimaru managed to acquire the Sharingan, but has his own country now," the white haired Sannin sighed heavily. "Things can never go right for us just once."

"What are we going to do, Hokage-sama?" Anko asked. "In my opinion, we should deal with this problem before it gets worse. I doubt Orochimaru will be able to withstand and attack from our forces, especially if we ask Suna for some help."

"While I share your idea, it's not that easy," Jiraiya replied. "Orochimaru might ask for other villages' help, arguing that we're abusing our superior military to stop an emerging village from developing, and it could devolve into a massive war. No, first we must show the world that Orochimaru is a global threat before we take any action against him."

Anko cursed under her breath, but nodded in resignation. "What do you suggest to do, then?"

"For the time being, we will send a team of spies to gather information about this new village. Once we have enough

information on our foe, we will discuss our next course of action," Jiraiya stated. "Now, given the kind of mission you just came from, I believe you earned a few days off to rest. Come back for another mission once you feel your teams are at one hundred percent."

"Yes, Hokage-sama." the three Jonin replied in unison, and left the office.

Jiraiya got up from his chair, and looked through the window, pensive.

"So, the rumors were true. You created your own village. Alright Orochimaru, if you want a war between our villages, I'll be happy to oblige. Nothing will be more satisfying than beating you at your own game."

Author's Note: And thus, another arc comes to an end. Fortunately, this will be far less controversial than the Uchiha Coup D'etat.

The whole thing with the "two summons of the next tribe can't fight each other" is entirely my doing, mostly because there was no instance of two enemies that had the same summons fighting against each other. Well, there was (Orochimaru vs Anko, and later vs Sasuke) but they didn't summon snakes. In my opinion, I think it's logical for summons to refuse to fight their kind.

Well, you guys know what comes next, one of the most popular arcs, as well as one of my personal favorites: the Chunin Exams!

... truth be told, that's not entirely true. The next chapter perse will be a transition chapter, in order to set up the next arc. The chapter after that will be the beginning of the Chunin Exams. But hey, the next chapter will introduce a character that I like a lot, and that in my opinon, should have had way more focus in

the manga before she died. Let's see if you can guess who she is ;)

**While you wait for the next chapter, don't forget to review!
Reviews make me really, really, really happy!**

The Troubles with Jinchurikis

Author's Note: Okay, I thought that I didn't have to explain this, but given the number of reviews that asked this, I guess I have no choice.

Orochimaru possessed one of the Uchihas he kidnapped the night of the insurrection, he didn't transplant their eyes into his skull like Kakashi or other people did. That's why he can activate and deactivate the Sharingan at will, and using the Sharingan for a long time doesn't leave him drained. I mean, isn't that what we wanted to do with Sasuke in canon? I mean, we do see trying to possess not only Sasuke, but Itachi as well.

Now that's out of the way, I won't address this issue again.

Also, this story has more than one thousand follows, and more than five hundred reviews! I was hoping to get to that number with this chapter, so I'm very pleased with it. Let's see how long it takes to break the one thousand reviews mark :)

Now, enjoy the chapter, and see you at the author's notes at the bottom:

Chapter 20:

The Troubles with Jinchuriki

or

Who would have guessed that the Demon Fox is a jerk?

"Dad, can I ask you something?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya turned at him absentmindedly. "Hm?"

The blond jinchuriki and the white haired Hokage were resting under the shadow of a tree, after an hour or so of intense training. This time, Jiraiya had decided to come in person instead of sending a clone, and left Sarutobi to fill for him for the day, since there was something that he needed to do, something that a clone couldn't.

"What is your last name?" the blond asked.

"Why, Senju, of course. I thought you knew that" Jiraiya replied as if answering to something obvious.

Naruto frowned in return. "That's not what I mean, that's mom's last name!" he protested. "I mean your last name before you married. Which, by the way, how is it that you got mom's last name? In other couples, it's always the woman who gets the husband's last name. Is it because she's a Senju or something?"

Jiraiya chuckled. "Yeah, you could say that, but it's actually way more simple: the reason I got her last name when we married is because I never had a last name to begin with."

Naruto looked at him, eyes wide open in shock. "What!? And why not? You never knew about your family?"

"Exactly. By the way, why this sudden interest in me, Naruto?"

"I realized that I know a lot about mom's family, mostly thanks to history books, but I know very little about yours" he explained, then he frowned again. "Besides, you almost never tell me anything about you!"

Jiraiya shrugged. "You never asked. Besides, a man has to keep a little mystery, right?" he chuckled. "But then again, I didn't think my life before your birth was all that interesting."

"How can you say that? You are one of the Sannin, and trained my biological father! Besides, I will judge if it's interesting or not" Naruto sharply stated. "Now why don't you have a last name?"

Jiraiya cleared his throat to tell, in his opinion, the uninteresting tale of how he became a Konoha ninja. "Fifty years ago, the Elemental Nations were engaged in the First Ninja War. Sarutobi, my sensei, as Tobirama's student, was part of the seven-man unit with the Second leading it. There was this town whose name was lost to history, that Konoha ninja used to shelter and treat their wounded, before they were sent back to Konoha.

"So far, the Konoha ninja made a good job hiding their presence, but somehow, our enemies realized what Konoha was doing, and razed the village to the ground. When Sarutobi-sensei's unit went to the village as usual, they found nothing but scorched ruins, dead people, and a single survivor: a baby, not even a year old, with snow-white hair. Sensei took that baby, and brought him to Konoha, and he grew up in an orphanage. When that baby turned five, he learned about what happened to the place he was born in, the parents he would never know, and how he was saved by ninja. And thus, he decided to become a ninja himself."

"And that ninja was you, right?" Naruto excitedly asked.

Jiraiya laughed in return. "I believe that was obvious from the very beginning, don't you think so? So yeah, now you know why I don't have a last name, at least until I married Tsunade-hime. Though, like you said, even if I did have a last name, I don't think I would have the guts to make Tsunade discard her last name and adopt mine, given her family's importance, not only in Konoha, but in the ninja world as a whole."

"What about me? Maybe I should have been a Senju too" Naruto mentioned.

"Hey, the Uzumaki used to be a very strong clan before Uzushio's fall. Besides, we thought that you should have something that linked you to Minato and Kushina" Jiraiya replied. "Besides, I'm sure that in the future, you will make the name Uzumaki famous again."

"And what about-"

"Enough talking!" Jiraiya interrupted Naruto, as he stood up from his resting spot. "We already chatted and rested enough. Now it's time to work on a very important matter."

Naruto stood up as well. "The Kyubi."

Jiraiya nodded.

FLASHBACK

A few minutes after Asuma, Kurenai and Anko left, somebody knocked the door of his office. After telling them to come in, the person in question was Kurenai.

"Excuse me, Hokage-sama, but there's something that I need to discuss with you in private. While I do trust Asuma and Anko, I think this is something I should talk with you and you alone. At least for the time being" the red-eyed Jonin said.

Jiraiya nodded, motioned her to take a seat, and made a hand seal. "The privacy seals are activated. Everything you say will never leave this room."

Kurenai took a few moments to mentally prepare before explaining her problem. "You see, there was an... unexpected incident during our mission."

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow. "You mean another one?"

"Yes, poor choice of words. Anyway, I'll get to the point. Shortly before we arrived at Sawa Town, we stopped at the Valley of the End, since I thought it would be good for the kids to see a place with so much historical importance. And while we were there, Naruto noticed that the Kyubi was growing restless."

Jiraiya was taken aback a little. "Come again?"

"It was as if the Kyubi disliked the place. I decided not to take any risks and leave as soon as possible and tell you about this once we were back in Konoha."

"You did good, Kurenai. Don't worry, I'll check Naruto's seal to make sure that the Kyubi isn't up to something and-"

"Actually, I didn't finish."

"Of course. There is always more, isn't it?" Jiraiya threw his hands in the air. "Okay, tell me."

"During the fight with Mizuki, Naruto tapped into the Nine Tails' power. It wasn't enough to beat Mizuki, but it clearly changed him, and not for the better. Besides being more powerful, Naruto acted way more violent and reckless. Even feral, I should say."

Jiraiya sighed, and leaned back on his chair. "Yes, there was a chance that this could happen. The Fourth used the Four Symbols Seal since he wanted Naruto to use the power of the Kyubi at some point in his life, otherwise he would have used another seal that would have completely isolated the beast from Naruto. This, however, had the downside that the Kyubi has the ability to influence Naruto to some extent. According to what I could gather from other jinchuriki, strong emotions are a good way to manifest the power of a Tailed Beast. If Naruto was angry with Mizuki for harming his friends..."

"Yes, it looked to be the case when I arrived at the fight" Kurenai confirmed.

"I did plan to train Naruto on how to use the power of the Kyubi" Jiraiya mentioned. "But I always kept leaving it for another time due to my fear of what could happen. Then the Uchiha revolt happened, and then I became Hokage... but I guess that I just can't keep putting this off any longer."

"By the way, I believe that I should have asked this the moment I became Naruto's sensei, but do you have any advice on what should

I do if something like this happens again?"

"Unless you're proficient with Seal Jutsu, or Mind Jutsu, I believe there's nothing you can do. But I will create a sealing tag that can suppress the Kyubi's chakra, should Naruto ever lose control again."

"Good to hear that, Hokage-sama."

"Is there anything more you want to discuss with me?" Kurenai shook her head. "If that's the case, then you're dismissed."

END FLASHBACK

"Alright Naruto, let's get down to business. I've been putting this on hold for far too long, but we can't afford doing that anymore. Today, we will attempt to control the Nine Tails' chakra" the Sannin announced.

Naruto taken aback. "Really?.. Are you sure?"

"Given what your sensei told me, yes, we have no other options" Sensing his godson's worry, he added: "Don't worry, I already have taken countermeasures in case anything goes wrong."

"Okay... what do we do?" Naruto asked.

"First of all, let's sit down in front of each other" the Toad Sage instructed while both he and Naruto sat down.

"Now what?"

"Now, close your eyes. Breathe and exhale slowly. Relax every muscle in your body. Gather all the chakra you can, but don't force it, let it flow instead. Empty your head of thoughts. Once it's done, think on only one thing: the Nine Tails. Try to picture it inside your mind, and let your chakra drag you towards it."

Jiraiya's voice started to sound more and more distant. Naruto felt like he was falling asleep... but while somehow still being awake. It

was an almost surreal situation. And to add to the weirdness, Naruto noticed that he was standing up, even if he didn't remember getting up. Confused, he decided to open his eyes.

Much to his shock, the Jinchuriki wasn't in Training Ground Three anymore with Jiraiya, but in what appeared to be a massive sewer. The floor was completely damp, yet Naruto didn't feel any wetness on his feet. There was nothing remarkable about that place, other than an equally massive gate that looked like the door of a prison.

Cautiously, Naruto approached the jail gate. The distance between the bars was big enough for Naruto to slip between them, but he didn't want to get inside the cell. As he got closer, he could hear something rumbling in the back of the cell, where there wasn't enough light for the blond to see.

"Hello...?" the blond timidly called. "Is somebody there?"

Naruto's answer came in the form of a loud grumble, as well as a pair of red eyes glowing in the darkness, looking into his very soul.

" Oh? Look who finally came to pay me a visit..." Naruto found the guttural voice vaguely familiar.

Naruto gulped, and cleared his throat before speaking. "Are you... the Nine Tails?"

The occupant of the cell moved closer to the gate, and now Naruto could see a massive orange fox with multiple tails -Naruto didn't count them but he guessed there would be nine- and red eyes that glowed faintly.

" Your observational skills are worth praising, brat, I'm sure that you are considered a prodigy among your peers."

Naruto could swear that the fox was mocking him. Still, he decided to ignore that jab, and get to the business at hand.

"Eh, I'll take that as a 'yes'. What is this place?" Naruto asked.

" Your tiny human mind would be unable to grasp the nature of this place that is my prison, but a very simplified description would be a pocket dimension created with your chakra that exists within you, " the Kyubi answered.

"A pocket dimension... within me?" Naruto dumbly echoed. True to the Kyubi's words, his young mind didn't really understand those words. It didn't matter, he could ask Jiraiya about it later.

" While I'm flattered that you decided to come to see me after being together for so many years... " the fox's voice was oozing with sarcasm. **"... why are you here? "**

Naruto gulped once again. He wanted to ask the Kyubi to let him lend its power, but he didn't know how to approach the topic. The sight of the strongest Tailed Beast was just too much for him, even if he was protected by the giant gates.

"I... I wanted to thank you for helping me back in the Land of the Rice Fields..." Naruto began. Maybe a little flattery would help.

The Kyubi snorted. **" Keep your gratitude for someone who appreciates it, brat. My intentions were far from altruistic. "**

Naruto tilted his head, a bit puzzled. "And why did you lend me your power back then, if you didn't want to help me?"

" It was of my interest for you to remain safe. "

While there was a certain truth to that statement, it wasn't the whole truth.

" I helped you because my chakra will slowly erode the seal that keeps me imprisoned, and your strong emotions allow me to pump more chakra into your body " the Kyubi thought, but he

obviously wasn't going to tell that to his jailer. **" I presume that you didn't come here just to thank me, am I right? "**

Naruto cursed inwardly. Were his intentions so predictable?

"N-No. Since you helped me that time, and you're interested in my safety... could you lend me your power in the future? It could save my life again."

The Kyubi did an admirable job containing its rage and maintaining his composure. Those words had hit all the wrong buttons. Even if fulfilling that request would accelerate the Tailed Beast's escape, his hatred and pride (which it had plenty to spare) got the best of it. Still, it would give Naruto a piece of its mind.

" So, this is it, right? In the end, it always amounts to the same. My power " the Kyubi grumbled. **" That's all what your bastard race wants! Power! Well, you know what? Forget about it! I won't be your slave anymore!"**

"What do you mean by 'anymore'?" Naruto asked.

" That's none of your business, brat. Now get lost. "

"Me get lost? You said that this place is made of my chakra, hence I own it, meaning that I decide who stays and who leaves!"

The Kyubi snorted, and chuckled. **" So you prefer if it's me who leaves? That, I can do. Open these gates, and you'll never see me again. "**

"Har har, you must think yourself so clever, right?" Naruto placed his hands on his hips. "Even if I'd love to get rid of you forever, I'm not going to let you out and kill more innocent people."

" None of your loathsome race is innocent. And I'm doing the world a favor by getting rid of you and your race. You're nothing but a plague upon this world. "

Naruto sighed in defeat. "We're not getting anywhere."

" And you realized of that just now? Like I said before, you truly possess a privileged mind, " the Kyubi snarked.

"Will you stop with the sarcasm? It's annoying" Naruto protested.

" So are you. And riling you up is the only entertainment I had in decades, so humor me here. "

"You know, I tried to be nice, but if you're going to be an ass and not cooperate with me then... then I'll take your chakra by force!"

" You what!? BWAHAHAHAHA! That's a good one! " the Kyubi laughed uproariously. " You're welcome to try anytime, brat. "

"Dad told me other Jinchuriki can do that, so I don't know why I couldn't do it myself. And then we will see who's the one laughing."

" But for the time being, that one will be me " the Kyubi retorted. " Now leave. "

Naruto was about to retort, but he felt the floor below his feet disappear, leaving nothing but an empty void.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Naruto screamed at the top of his lungs while he fell to his apparent death.

"Naruto, calm down! I'm here!"

The blond opened his eyes, and realized that he was back in Konoha. Jiraiya was in front of him, grabbing him by his shoulders, with a panicked expression plastered over the Sannin's face.

"Uh?" Naruto asked, confused, as he slowly inspected his surroundings.

"Naruto, are you okay?" a concerned Jiraiya asked.

Panting a bit, Naruto managed to articulate a sentence. "W-What happened?"

"I was going to ask you the same. I mean, you were sitting there doing what I was asking you to, then all of sudden you starting yelling as if you were face to face with the fox itself!"

"Because I was face to face with the fox!" Naruto replied back.

Jiraiya was taken aback. "What? Did you see it for a second?"

"No, I had a whole conversation with it" Naruto said, trying to sound unironic. "Wait a minute, how much time passed since I was gone?"

"None at all" was Jiraiya's answer. "How did you managed to talk with the Nine Tails in less than a second?"

"That's the weird thing, from my point of view, I was gone for quite some time!"

"That's strange, but not impossible. We still know very little about the chakra-created artificial dimensions. Maybe time passes in a different way there" Jiraiya guessed.

"Like... why everything sealed inside a scroll remains the same until it's unsealed?"

"For example. So, tell me, did you find something during your talk with the Kyubi?" Jiraiya asked as he leaned forward. It's not that every day you could interact with a centuries-old demon.

"Yeah. That the Nine Tails is an asshole!"

...

Konoha Hospital

While Naruto had his less than friendly chat with his furry tenant, Hinata and Ino left the hospital after one of their lessons in medical

ninjutsu with Tsunade. Thanks to the additional training they received from Shizune, Sakura and Karin progressed at a much faster pace than the rest of their classmates, and thus were moved to another class at another hour in which Tsunade taught them more advanced subjects and jutsu.

And since Shino had left with the rest of his team on their first C-Rank mission to Takigakure not long ago, that left only Hinata and Ino. Then again, none of them were complaining. That meant that Tsunade could focus entirely on the two of them, allowing them to progress at a faster rate, and in no point they'd be at the same level as Sakura and Karin.

Or that's what Ino thought, until Hinata reminded her that Sakura and Karin also had Tsunade for themselves, plus Shizune as well.

"Man, this sucks! Then the gap between forehead girl and I will only get bigger and bigger! Just like her forehead!" Ino protested.

"W-Well, that's because Sakura-san is focusing all her time and efforts into becoming a medic-nin. We also have to master our clan's jutsu as well" Hinata observed.

"You have a point there" Ino conceded. "But that doesn't make it suck any less."

"Just because Sakura-san surpasses us in a single field doesn't mean that she's a better kunoichi than us," not that Hinata minded much if Sakura became a better kunoichi than her. She wasn't a competitive person. "I mean, we're still better than her at both taijutsu and ninjutsu, right?"

"Once again, you make another good point" Ino replied.

Hinata cleared her throat, and mentally prepared herself for her next question. She wasn't a busybody, but there was something about Ino and Sakura that got her curious, and this was a good chance to bring up the topic.

"Ino-san... can I ask you s-something? It's a bit personal..."

Much to Hinata's confusion, Ino's mouth formed a huge grin. "So you finally decided to tell Naruto about your feelings! And of course, you want some advice from me! Okay, listen carefully. The first thing you need to do-"

"It's not that!" Hinata interrupted, blushing furiously. Even she was surprised on how much she raised her voice. "I-I meant... personal about you."

Ino's grin disappeared, and was replaced by an expression of mild confusion. "Oh... yeah, sure, what do you want to know about me?"

"I-It's about you and Sakura-san..." Hinata noticed Ino's mood darkening. Still, she decided to keep going. "I r-remember back in the Academy that the two of you used to be inseparable, but then you drifted apart... what happened?" despite the question, Hinata already imagined the answer, but she thought that there was more to it than her mere conjectures.

The Yamanaka heiress sighed, and smiled sadly at Hinata. "Boy, people should be wary of you silent types. You make it look like you're not even there, but you see and listen to everything, don't you?"

Hinata smiled back at her. "Those are the markings of a ninja, aren't they?"

"A fair point. The third one in a row. You're on fire today, girl," Ino mentioned, chuckling, before her expression turned serious again. "Yeah, forehead girl and I used to be besties, as it's usually said. She used to be bullied because of that billboard of hers she calls a forehead, and let's say that I couldn't stand it, and defended her. That's how we met each other, and became friends."

"And... what happened then?"

"Both of us had a liking to one boy, you know who I'm talking about. Naturally, we couldn't be friends and love rivals at the same time, so it was inevitable that our friendship ended."

"B-But you don't like S-Sasuke-san anymore, right?"

"Exactly" Ino already guessed where Hinata was going. "But Sakura still does, and that's why we can't be friends again. This isn't a matter of a love fight anymore. She can't be my friend while pursuing somebody of the same clan who murdered my father."

"Ino-san, don't you think you're being unfair to him? Sasuke-san might be an Uchiha, but he didn't take part in the coup."

Ino looked at Hinata with her eyes wide open in disbelief. "Hinata, how can you say that!? I would never imagined that you, of all people, who also lost your father to the Uchiha, as well as many other clansmen, would defend Sasuke!"

"It's that... I don't think it's fair to judge him for what others did... his situation is too similar of that of Naruto-kun..."

"What do you mean?"

"Naruto-kun holds the Kyubi inside him... but a lot of people used to blame him for the destruction and death caused by the Kyubi... others think he'll turn evil due the Kyubi's influence, or that the Kyubi will escape at any time... but none of what the Kyubi did is Naruto-kun's fault."

Ino averted her gaze. "I know what you're trying to say... but whenever I see Sasuke, when I see his clan crest, when I see a Sharingan... I can't help but remember that horrible night, and the news about dad's death..."

"It was the same for me too, Ino-san" Hinata placed a hand on the blonde's shoulder. "And I'm not saying that you should befriend Sasuke-san, just that... you shouldn't judge him unfairly."

"I'll try, but don't expect me to be chummy with him or anything..."

"And now that that's out of the way, do you think that there's a chance that Sakura and you might bury the hatchet?"

Ino sighed. "It's not that easy, Hinata. There's still a lot of bad blood between us that will take some time to overcome, if we overcome it... by the way, why are you so interested in my past friendship with forehead girl?"

This time, it was Hinata who averted her gaze, as she started to twiddle her fingers. "W-Well, it's that... before meeting Naruto-kun, I didn't have any friends... not even in my clan. A-And if for whatever reason Naruto-kun and I stopped being friends, I don't know what I would do. That's why I think that what happened between you two is really sad. You and Sakura-san had a great friendship, and it would be a pity to see it go like that..."

"I see... boy, it's really sad when you put it like that... still, I don't think I would be able to walk to Sakura and ask her to forget about the past five or so years of non-stop mutual hostility" Ino replied.

"Maybe Sakura-san feels the same as you do..."

"That's a possibility, but for the time being, I'm not ready to take that step."

Hinata looked at Ino, and smiled. "It's okay. I don't want to force you to do something that you don't want to do."

"Still, this little talk made me think..." Ino looked at the sky, as if thinking of the future. "Well, I gotta go. Asuma-sensei will be mad if I'm not on time for our daily training."

"It's okay, I also have some training to do as well."

"And next time, we will talk about something personal of YOUR life!" Despite sounding so menacing, Ino winked at Hinata. The Hyuga

heiress knew all too well what the blond girl was referring to.

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Takigakure

Kakashi's Animal Squad had taken their first C-Rank mission, to escort the young leader of Takigakure, Shibuki, back to his home village. So far, the journey happened without any incident -not even bandits attacked them- and the group of five arrived to the minor ninja village with their client untouched.

After a job well done, Kakashi was ready to go back to Konoha, but his three Genin begged him to let them stay in the village at least a day, so they could get to know it better, and maybe have the chance to meet ninja from another village -besides Shibuki, that is-. It was a way to make up for the "boringness" of the mission. Not in the mood for arguing, Kakashi decided to indulge them this time around, seeing no harm in letting them spend one more day outside Konoha.

The village of Takigakure was build around a river, surrounding a small delta on it.. A massive tree grew in the middle of said delta, whose branches and leaves were so lush that they almost completely blocked the sky. Not even the giant trees of Konoha's Training Ground Forty Four -the infamous "Forest of Death"- were so big.

The surrounding trees acted like a natural barrier around the village. The only way to access it was through an underwater cave system whose entrance was behind a waterfall -hence the village's name- . This made Takigakure the only one of the Hidden Ninja Villages who was actually hidden.

Then again, it took no time for the Genin to regret their plea, since they found that there was almost nothing to do there. And then they regretted voicing their complaints, as Shibuki, with Kakashi's approval, assigned them a D-Rank mission: pick up trash from the water.

"Can somebody explain to me how we ended up doing a D-Rank mission? We asked Kakashi-sensei to do this mission so we could stop doing those menial tasks" Tamaki complained as she picked an empty can from the river's shore.

"I believe that this is a hidden punishment for our behavior, first for asking him to stay here longer, and then for complaining once we got our request," Shino guessed.

"Ugh, another one. I wish Kakashi-sensei wasn't such a walking enigma. With all his hidden tests and underlying messages and whatnot," Kiba sourly commented. "I wish that man went straight to the point just once."

Kiba would never forget their True Genin Test, taking a couple bells from Kakashi. The whole point of the test was to use teamwork, but since there were only two bells, that meant that one of the Genin would go back to the academy, which in his opinion discouraged teamwork. In the end, they passed when Kakashi gave them a second chance, which of course was another hidden test -to see if Tamaki and Shino would share their food with Kiba, who ended up tied to a post when he tried to steal some of Kakashi's food, even when Kakashi forbade them to do so.

"Well, there's a reason he wears a mask, doesn't he? I think that guy likes to keep some mystery" Tamaki added.

"Besides, we are ninja. As Kakashi-sensei said, we need to see underneath the underneath. We can't expect him to give us all the answers. And-" Shino suddenly grew silent.

"Shino? Is there anything wrong?" Tamaki asked.

"Don't you hear that?"

Nobody said anything so they could hear whatever Shino was hearing. Soon, Kiba and Tamaki heard a buzz. It sounded like a flying insect, except much louder, which meant that it was a huge

insect. While Shino knew of quite a few giant insects already, all of them made a different noise when they flew. This was something Shino had never seen.

"The buzz is getting louder, which means it's coming in our direction" nobody could be able to tell, given his usual stoicism, but Shino was really excited.

A shadow quickly passed above them. They both looked upwards, and were surprised by what they saw. It wasn't an insect, but a girl. A girl with insect-like wings protruding from her back. The flying girl paid them no mind, and flew towards the giant tree in the middle of the lake.

Again, nobody would be able to tell the difference, but Shino was speechless.

"What was that?" Kiba asked.

"Shino?" Tamaki asked, upon seeing his silent teammate staring into the direction the winged girl flew. Soon, it was obvious what was going through his head, and she knew what to do. "Shino, if you want, you can go and find that girl. Kiba and I will do your part."

"Hey!" Kiba wasn't kind to people speaking in his name, especially when it came to do additional work.

Shino was snapped from his stupor. "No" was his response. "I would be a bad teammate and ninja if I left without doing my part of the job. While it is true that I wish to know more about that girl, I don't want to do it at your expense."

"What, Shino interested in a girl? That's new" Kiba smirked at the Aburame. "If that's the case, I'm with Tamaki. Besides, we've been working for a couple hours and picked up most of the garbage. We can finish this without you."

"I see. Thank you then. I won't forget this" Shino said before leaving.

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Konoha, Training Ground Ten

Team Asuma was resting under the shade of a tree after an intense training session with Asuma, which soon would resume. Choji was eating chips as usual, while Shikamaru looked at the clouds, and Ino filed her nails. Then, she suddenly perked up.

"Ino?" Choji asked.

"My gossip senses are tingling," Ino stated. "It feels almost like... like a boy we know developed a crush on a girl he just meet!"

"You can sense people's relationships? Shikamaru asked in disbelief. "Troublesome."

"'Scary' is the word I'd use," Choji added, sharing his lazy teammate's disbelief.

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Back in Takigakure

It took very little time for the Aburame's kikai bugs to track the mysterious flying girl, who was now happily sitting on one of the tree's extremely large branches, doing nothing in particular.

Shino studied the girl before approaching her. She was his age, more or less. She had mint green hair, tanned skin, and orange eyes. She was wearing a short sleeveless white midriff shirt with fishnet armor underneath, long white armlets, and fishnet shorts with a short white apron skirt over it. She was wearing a Takigakure headband tied to her right arm, in a similar fashion to Shikamaru, which meant that she was one of the village's ninja. She was also carrying a red, cylindrical backpack.

After some internal debate, Shino decided to make his presence known to the girl. "Hello," the Aburame laconically said as he walked

towards her.

The green haired girl was a bit startled, then she looked at the approaching Konoha ninja and smiled. "Oh, hi! You aren't from here, are you? I don't remember seeing you before."

"Your assumption is correct. My name is Shino Aburame, and I'm from Konoha. My team came here while escorting the leader of this village."

In less than a second, the girl was now standing up in front of him with her hand stretched. "My name is Fu, and I'm from Taki, but you probably guessed that already, hehehe!"

Shino shook her hand, and noticed that for having such a petite frame, the girl was rather strong.

"Nice to meet you, Fu."

"By the way, not to be rude or anything, but this is my secret spot. How did you find it?" the green haired girl asked.

"I saw you flying towards this place, and followed suit" Shino explained.

"So, you saw a pretty girl, and decided to follow her like that? My, my, what a stalker you are!" Fu joked, as she punched him in the shoulder.

"I don't do that with every girl I see" Shino replied, a bit defensively.

"Oh, so there was something special about me that caught your attention?" Fu asked, smiling at him. "Care to tell me what it is?"

"It's your wings. And excuse me if I'm being too blunt, but could you show them to me?"

"Oh, don't worry, it's okay, look!" Fu turned around, and two long, insect-like green and orange wings sprouted from her hips,

surprising Shino a bit. "So, what do you think?" Fu playfully asked while fluttering her wings a bit. "You can touch them if you want!"

"Eh... I prefer not" Shino awkwardly answered as he tried his hardest not to blush. "How did you get those wings?"

Fu's wings disappeared. The girl suddenly lost all her cheerful attitude, grew a bit somber, and started rubbing her arm. "Eh, I'd love to tell you but... Shibuki told me not to tell anybody out of the village about my wings, sorry."

"I see" Shino adjusted his shades. "Can you tell me at least if it's something anybody can learn? Maybe I can learn to do that on my own."

Fu chuckled. "I don't think so, Shino. Let's say it's an unique ability of mine."

"So it's a Bloodline Limit. I understand then your leader's reservation about sharing those secrets with me. My apologies for asking."

Fu started to smile again all of sudden. "It's okay! You know, you're the first one who showed any interest in my wings, which is kind of nice" Fu's cheerfulness was back in full force as well. "I have an idea! I can give you a ride if you want! You don't appreciate how pretty Takigakure is unless you see it from a bird's eye view!"

"No, it's okay, I prefer if- HEY!"

Before Shino could react, he found himself high in the air, with Fu's surprisingly strong arms grabbing him by his armpits.

"I know a lot of people are a bit afraid the first time they fly, but trust me, you're going to enjoy this!" Fu assured.

Shino was too terrified to protest or even scream.

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Training Ground Eight

"Wind Release: Cyclone Shockwave!"

A tornado formed around Naruto, in a similar way to the Wind Release: Wind Wall, except that it also violently expanded outwards.

"Good job, Naruto" Kurenai praised. "Keep working, and you'll increase the radius of effect with each try." The Jonin then turned at Hinata, who nodded and made several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Hinata released a myriad of lightning bolt branches from her fingertips, hitting the ground, setting the grass on fire while scorching some land.

"Nice one, Hinata. See? Now you have another ranged attack in case you're unable to reach an enemy in close combat" Kurenai stated. Hinata merely nodded.

Kurenai looked at the last of her Genin, Haku. The Ice Release user nodded, and made several hand seals.

"Demonic Illusion: Ice Prison!"

Kurenai allowed the genjutsu to affect her, and she found herself suddenly trapped inside a block of ice that simply left her head exposed. The genjutsu only lasted a few seconds before Haku himself dispelled it.

"So, how was it?"

"The execution was almost flawless, but I can't help but wonder why you modified the original jutsu" Kurenai had taught Haku the Tree Binding Death, one of her most used genjutsu.

"Besides ice fitting me better, I believe it was a good way to confuse my enemies. Since I use ice jutsu, my enemies wouldn't be able to

differentiate which ones are real and which ones are illusions."

Kurenai nodded and smiled. "Interesting reasoning, Haku. I applaud your inventiveness."

Haku smiled back at her.

"I'm very glad to see how fast the three of you are progressing. I had my reservations at first, but now I believe that you're ready."

"R-Ready for what, Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked.

"A dangerous mission? Please let it be a dangerous mission!" Naruto excitedly shouted.

Kurenai just shook her head, and chuckled. Despite that close call with Orochimaru, Naruto still wanted more missions like that. Then again, Naruto didn't have to fight Orochimaru, that "honor" fell upon her and her friends' shoulders.

"Actually, better than that, Naruto. The Chunin Exams are in less than two weeks, and if you pass them, you will be promoted to Chunin" the raven-haired sensei explained.

"Whoa, that's even better!"

"That's what I said. Though in the end, the ultimate decision is yours" Kurenai looked at them. "But you don't look like you want to miss this, am I right?"

"Does that mean that our other classmates will be taking the exam as well?" Hinata asked.

Kurenai shrugged. "That depends on their senseis, as well as themselves. If a Jonin-sensei doesn't feel like their Genin are ready, then he or she can ban them from taking the exam. And just like I told you, the Genin themselves must feel that they're ready, or at least willing, to take the exam. As for myself, I'll recommend you when Hokage-sama calls for the meeting."

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Nighttime, Senju Residence

It was a rare sight to see all six members of Naruto's adoptive family to have dinner at the same time, given that Jiraiya and Tsunade were often missing due their duties as Hokage and Chief Medic of the Konoha Hospital, respectively. But today wasn't one of those days. Which was perfect for Naruto, who wanted to announce his participation in the exams.

"Hey, dad, Kurenai-sensei said that the Chunin Exams are going to be soon, right?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya nodded. "Yeah. This time they will be held here, meaning that it's my responsibility to ensure that they go on without a hitch."

Tsunade cleared her throat. "Did Kurenai mention if she was going to recommend you?"

"You can bet she did! Man, I can't wait for the exams to arrive, and I get to show people how strong I got since the Academy!" Naruto boasted.

"You graduated the Academy three months ago. Don't be in over your head. Those exams are nothing compared to the ones you take in the Academy. People actually die there" Tsunade sternly replied.

"Well, I have an -S-Rank mission under my belt, so I think I can handle it" upon seeing Tsunade's scowl, Naruto added: "But yeah, I'll be careful, mom. I won't give you a reason to worry."

Tsunade's scowl disappeared, and was replaced by a content smile. Then she realized of something, and turned to her apprentice. "Shizune, what about your team? Are you going to recommend them?"

The black haired woman nodded. "The three of them are rather strong, and their teamwork has improved a lot since the time I became their sensei. Sakura and Karin don't bicker as much as they used to."

"Would you say that Sasuke is stronger than me?" Naruto asked.

Shizune looked at him and smiled. "Well... it's hard to tell. Both of you are really strong so I couldn't say unless I saw you fight against each other."

"That has an easy solution then! Tomorrow I'll challenge Sasuke to a fight!"

Jiraiya just shook his head. "Naruto... you should stop obsessing about beating Sasuke. A rivalry can be a good motivator to improve one's self, but it shouldn't be the only one."

Tsunade dryly laughed. "Look who's talking! You were obsessed with beating both Orochimaru and I as long as we were teammates!"

Jiraiya shot Tsunade an unamused look. "That was completely different, it was a matter of principle! Besides, in the end, I surpassed both of you!"

Tsunade dropped her fork, and looked at Jiraiya incredulously. "Excuse me? When did that happen? I've always been, and still am, way stronger than you!"

Shizune was sweating bullets, as her eyes drifted back and forth between Tsunade and Jiraiya. She didn't like where this was going. If the two of them decided to fight, the house wouldn't survive.

"Do you want to put your money where your mouth is?" Jiraiya challenged.

Tsunade merely chuckled, and continued eating. "I'd love to, but I don't want to humiliate you in front of the kids, so let's leave this for

another moment, okay? We were having a nice dinner."

Jiraiya decided not to press the issue further, but this in turn raised another question. He looked at his godson. "Naruto, why are you so determined to beat Sasuke? Is it because he was the strongest of your classmates?"

"Yeah, but it's not just that" Naruto began. "It's the way he acted. All cool and hip, with that 'you're all beneath me' attitude."

"Well, Sasuke is a... complicated kid. I don't think he means any harm. It's just his way to cope" Shizune interceded. "It's obvious that losing most of his clan during the Uchiha Insurrection affected him deeply, and the way some people treat him for being an Uchiha doesn't help matters. But we're working on that. He simply needs a positive influence in his life."

"Well, Hinata lost her dad that night too, and she doesn't act like Sasuke." Naruto protested, crossing his arms.

"Naruto-kun, everyone has a different way to cope with loss and tragedy, and it's unfair to expect everybody to react the same way to such events" Shizune countered.

"At least it wouldn't be so bad if all the girls didn't act like he's the most interesting guy in the world."

Tsunade leaned forward, and smiled mischievously. "Oh, so that's what this is about? Is there a girl you like who has a crush on Sasuke?"

Naruto almost choked on his food. "W-What!? Of course not!" Naruto then turned a bit red and averted his gaze. "But you know, it would be nice to be as popular with the girls as Sasuke is. I mean, almost every girl worships the ground he walks on, and he hardly cares!"

"Naruto-nii san, what about Hinata-chan? She's really cute" Kaida piped in.

"Yeah, and she doesn't drool over Sasuke" Hagane added.

"W-WHAT!?" Naruto barked in shock, blushing furiously. "But... Hinata's my friend!"

"Ohhhhhhhh, look at him, getting all red!" Tsunade teasingly said.

The twins started to sing. "Naruto and Hinata, sitting on a tree. K-I-S-"

As much as Jiraiya wanted to join in the fun, he decided to cut Naruto some slack. "Let's change the topic, okay? We're making the kid feel uncomfortable. I know that girls are a delicate issue, especially given the age you're in."

"What's wrong with my age?"

"Nothing. But you and I will have an important talk soon. Don't worry, it's nothing bad" Jiraiya smiled impishly. Naruto just raised an eyebrow.

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Taki, Next Morning

Kakashi's Animal Squad was ready to return to Konoha. The Copy Ninja had to admit that, in hindsight, it was a good thing that they decided to stay. Turns out that a Taki renegade Jonin named Suien, helped by several Ame missing-nin, were about to steal the village's famous Hero Water, an elixir that dramatically increases the power of those who drank it, albeit with a potentially fatal cost.

Kiba, Shino, and Tamaki managed to stop Suien's minions from kidnapping several civilians to use as hostages in exchange of the Hero Water, while Kakashi and Shibuki dealt with Suien himself. The Taki missing-nin fell under the power of Kakashi's Lightning Blade.

"Thank you, all of you. You helped my village far more than what I had asked of from you" Shibuki said as he shook Kakashi's hand.

"Eh, no need to thank us. We were in the right place at the right time" Kakashi replied, rubbing the back of his neck. "Besides, there's no way a single, unimposing man, as Suien with a bunch of followers would be able to threaten a whole ninja village."

While Kakashi and Shibuki talked, Fu was saying goodbye to the Konoha Genin.

"It's a pity you guys have to leave so soon. I'd love to get to know you better" Fu said, pouting a bit. "Shibuki doesn't let me out of the village since it's 'dangerous', and there are almost no kids my age here. This village is small, you know."

"It's okay, you can always write" Tamaki suggested.

"Or we can just come to pay you a visit. Taki isn't that far away from Konoha" Kiba added.

"Like my friends and teammates said, we will do our best to keep contact" Shino finished.

Fu then pulled the three of them into a bone-crushing hug. "Aw, you guys are awesome!" the green haired girl cooed. Then, she whispered into Shino's ear. "Though... we might see each other sooner than you think, hehe."

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Konoha, Hokage's Office

Jiraiya was at his office -this time it was really him, not a clone,- doing the usual paperwork, when somebody entered the room. Turned out it was Sarutobi. He looked mildly worried, as he was holding a small scroll in his hand. He stopped what he was doing and nodded his former sensei to speak.

"Jiraiya, we got a message," Sarutobi began. "From Kumo."

The Sannin's curiosity spiked. He hasn't heard from that village ever since the Hyuga Affair nine years ago. He wondered what they wanted this time.

"What is it, sensei?"

"It's about the Chunin Exams. Kumo is going to send several teams to undertake the exam here."

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Author's note: a few things to discuss here. Let's begin.

Albeit this is obvious, Jiraiya's backstory is completely made up by me. The manga never showed us where does Jiraiya come from, if he has (or had) any family (at least we knew that Orochimaru was an orphan who lost his parents while being a kid) or what moved him to become a ninja (according to the databook, he graduated at six, so that didn't give me too much of a window of time). I hope you enjoyed this little bit of background.

And Naruto meets the Fox for the first time. Sorry for those of you who were expecting that Naruto would befriend the Fox and thus have access to his powers, but that won't happen as for now. I don't want to make Naruto too overpowered, and frankly, befriending the Kyubi so fast would be beyond unrealistic.

If you watched the OVA "Protect the Waterfall Village", you probably noticed a few elements of it in this chapter. Well, that's because this was meant to be a full adaptation of that OVA. My idea was to send Kakashi and Kurenai's teams to escort Shibuki and later fight Suiren. That way I could have the Assault Squad interacting a bit with the Animal Squad, kinda how the way they did with the Tactical Squad in the previous arc. And, unlike that OVA, it would feature Fu. There was, however, a little problem that stopped me from doing such a thing.

I absolutely loathed that OVA.

Like, four guys are able to take over a ninja village? Seriously? Is Shibuki the only ninja there? And that's not even getting on Naruto being at his most obnoxious and incompetent, except for the last five minutes, where he's suddenly able to control de Kyubi's chakra for no reason (this took place before the Chunin Exams). And Sakura did nothing but get captured by the bad guys (the usual for her), leaving Sasuke as the only one to do anything. That's why I decided to only adapt a few parts, and they were mostly to flesh out the Animal Squad a bit more. Too bad for the Animal Squad/Assault Squad interactions, thought.

Anyway, there will more inter-team interactions in the next arc, which is a big favorite of mine. In two weeks, the Chunin Exam Arc will begin! In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me very, very, very happy!

The Chunin Exams Begin!

Author's Note: The number of reviews of the last couple chapters increased a lot. Guess that for some reason, my Land of the Rice Fields arc wasn't as popular as I expected. Anyway, it's about time to start one of the most popular arcs of the manga, not without reason! Enjoy!

Chapter 21:

The Chunin Exams Begin!

or

Are we really excited to do an exam!?

It was just two days before the beginning of the Chunin Exams, and most of the Konoha Genin that wanted to participate had increased their training regime during these past two weeks in order to be in top form for the exams. While far from the norm, people sometimes died in these kind of exams.

None of the Genin who participated took missions anymore so they could spend their time preparing the exams. And given that what most Genin teams did were D-Rank missions, it was something pretty much everybody, included their Jonin-sensei, were grateful for getting rid of (at least temporarily).

After an intense training session that morning, Team Kurenai was at Icharaku's, having lunch. And after lunch, they'll go back to training once again. While they waited for their orders, Naruto spoke up.

"So, Kurenai-sensei, be honest.. do you think we're ready for the exam?" the blond Jinchuriki asked.

"Like I said before, if I didn't think you are, I wouldn't have recommended you for the exams. You three seem to progress at a very good pace. What's with the sudden self-doubt, Naruto? Are you having second thoughts?" Kurenai teased, knowing full well the answer.

Naruto took immediate offense. "Of course not! It's that, well, I'm a bit nervous. Mom and Dad explained the exams to me and it's kind of a big deal."

"Speaking of which, how was your Chunin Exams in your day, Kurenai-sensei?" Haku asked. "Did you pass on your first try?"

"Second," Kurenai answered. "And I don't mean to sound defeatist or anything, but don't be disheartened if you don't become Chunin the first time you take the exams. Very few people do."

"How old were you?" Hinata asked.

"When I participated the first time, or when I got promoted?" Kurenai asked back, before deciding to answer those two questions at once. "Twelve and thirteen, respectively."

"So, our age more or less" Naruto said, a bit more encouraged now. "And what about Jonin? Is there a Jonin Exam?"

"You're going too fast, aren't you, Naruto?" Kurenai asked. "First get promoted to Chunin, and then we'll talk about becoming a Jonin."

"Aw, come on, why don't you tell us?"

After pondering it for a few seconds, Kurenai decided that there was no harm in letting them know.

"Usually, Jonin are required to master at least two kind of elemental ninjutsu, have above average taijutsu, and some skill in genjutsu. But like I told you, there are exceptions to that," Kurenai explained.

Hinata knew that most Hyuga Jonin fell under those exceptions, since she never saw her mother nor her late father using elemental ninjutsu. But then again, their taijutsu and overall power was simply spectacular.

"That seems like a lot of things" Hinata observed.

"Well of course. It's not a matter of just being strong. Jonin are the best a village can offer, so the standards are pretty high," Kurenai said. "There's also the Special Jonin rank, which is given to Chunin who excel at one or two fields, but they haven't mastered enough skills to be considered a full Jonin. More than likely, you will have to go through that rank before becoming a Jonin, just like I had to."

"And your specialty was genjutsu, am I right?" Haku ventured to guess.

Kurenai smiled at him. "It wasn't very hard to guess, right?"

"Your orders are ready!" Ayame, Teuchi's daughter announced, as she placed all the bowls in front of her customers, much to the delight of a certain blond.

After eating, and having some more small talk, Kurenai decided that it was about time to continue training. She was planning to give them the next day off so they could relax and rest, so they had to make the best of the hours of light left. However, when Naruto exited Icharaku, he accidentally bumped into somebody.

"Oops, sorry!" the blond said.

"Watch were you're going you moron... hey, wait a minute... Naruto?" the person Naruto bumped into asked.

Naruto eyed the stranger: a boy maybe a year or two older than him, wearing a black, baggy, full body suit with a red and yellow circle on the front. He also wore a black hood which covered his head

completely, and had cat-like ears and his Suna forehead protector on his forehead. He was also wearing purple face paint.

"Excuse me?" Naruto asked, as he scratched the back of his head.
"Have we met before?"

"Oh come on! I know that it has been a few years, but I didn't expect you to forget about me so soon!" the stranger insisted.

"Of course he doesn't remember you with the sinister hood and all that make-up," a female voice said behind him, a voice that Naruto vaguely recognized.

A girl appeared behind the cloaked boy. Said girl was tall, with spiky blond hair styled in four pigtails. She was wearing a single light purple-coloured, off-the-shoulders garment that extended to halfway down her thighs, with a scarlet sash tied around her waist. In addition to incorporating fishnet worn over her shoulders and legs, specifically on her right calf and her left thigh, she also wore her black Suna forehead protector around her neck.

"Temari?" Naruto asked.

"Right on the spot," the Suna kunoichi replied with a tender smile.

"Whoa! Look at you! You're so tall!" Naruto said in amazement.

Temari just shrugged. "Eh, I just eat my greens."

"Wait a minute, if you're here..." Naruto then turned towards the hooded stranger. "And you definitely are not Gaara... then you're.. Kankuro?"

Kankuro groaned and rolled his eyes. "I can't believe that you only recognized me by process of elimination."

"What did you expect with all that make-up?"

The puppeteer looked even more annoyed. "This isn't make-up, it's war paint! Make-up is what girls use to look prettier, war paint is used by men to strike fear in the heart of their enemies!"

"Well, you don't look that fearsome to me," an unimpressed Naruto replied.

"Because you know that what it is needed to make your enemies afraid of you is not face paint, but strength and skill," a third, monotonous voice said, as a redheaded kid with blue eyes appeared in Naruto's field vision.

Naruto's beamed upon seeing his fellow Jinchuriki. "Gaara!" Naruto pulled the redhead into a bone-crushing bear hug. "Of course, if your siblings are here, you would be here too. By the way-"

Naruto was interrupted by somebody clearing her throat behind him. He turned around to see Hinata, Haku and Kurenai, awkwardly standing behind him.

"Naruto, aren't you going to introduce us to your friends?" Kurenai asked as polite as possible. She had guessed that those Suna kids were old acquaintances of Naruto and decided to give him some time to talk, but now it appeared as if Naruto forgot about his team.

"Oh, right! Sorry, my bad" the blond sheepishly said. "These are my teammates Haku and Hinata, and Kurenai-sensei, our instructor. Guys, these are Gaara, Kankuro and Temari. I befriended them on a trip to Suna with my dad a few years ago."

They all exchanged greetings.

"So let me guess, you three are here for the Chunin Exams, right?" Kurenai asked.

"That's correct, miss," Temari replied.

"So that means that we may fight each other..." Naruto said in realization.

"They won't be the only ones. Remember that all our former classmates participate in the exams as well," Haku reminded the blond.

"Yes, the world of the ninja is cruel and full of lies and deception. Sometimes, you might end up fighting somebody you considered a friend because he or she is at the wrong side of a conflict," Kurenai added. "But then again, there are lots of Genin from many villages participating. The odds of fighting somebody you know are pretty low."

"While I bear no ill towards any of you, I actually seek to fight you in the exams," Gaara spoke up. "Thanks to your father, I learned to control my powers better, and I became much stronger as a result. I'm sure that you got stronger too, Naruto. And I want to measure which one of us is the strongest."

Naruto merely smiled. "Sure. Though if we don't end up fighting in the exams, we can always spar before you leave."

"Either case, I'll be looking forward it."

"It was nice to meet you again, Naruto, as well as your teammates and sensei, but we need to go to the hotel and unpack our stuff," Temari mentioned.

"Alright, we have to go back to our training too. I hope you like Konoha!" Naruto said as he waved the Sand Siblings goodbye.

Once they were out of sight, Kurenai walked towards Naruto and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Naruto, do you have any idea who those kids are?"

Naruto looked at her and smiled. "Yeah, the Kazekage's kids!"

"I never met them, but I knew who they were by their names. To think that you were talking to them like they were old friends..." but then again, Kurenai guessed that Naruto did befriend them to some degree. "Not every Genin has such friends in high places, Naruto."

"Now it goes both ways, since my dad is the Hokage" the blond pointed out.

"True."

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Konoha's North Gate

Four ninja wearing Kumo forehead protectors approached the entrance to the village. The group was composed by an adult man with dark skin and blond hair, who wore shades and a white scarf. He was leading three children, two girls and a boy, none of them older than thirteen. One of the girls had dark skin, red hair and golden eyes, while the other had light skin and long, blond hair, styled in two long braids. The male kid also had dark skin, blond hair, and dark eyes, and he was chewing on a lollipop.

The white female glanced at her redheaded teammate. "Karui? You look a bit tense. Anything wrong?"

"What's not wrong would be a better question, T," the redhead, Karui, answered. "We're Kumo ninja going to Konoha. I'm sure that you remember what happened between our villages nine years ago."

"Yeah, what if we're apprehended and sent to jail when we set foot there, and we need to dig a tunnel to escape, but since we don't have any tools we need to use our hands, but our hands fall off due to how much-"

"Can it, Omoi!" T harshly cut him. "None of that is going to happen. Raikage-sama already sent a message in advance, and we got permission to enter Konoha."

"Still, I can't believe that Raikage-sama allowed you to come here with no other company than three Genin sensei," Karui said to the only adult in the group. She wasn't the only one who wondered what kind of witchcraft her sensei used on the Raikage to allow such a thing.

"Killer B was in need of relaxation, that's why he asked his bro for a vacation! And I thought it would be a good experience for you to fight in these exams and meet somebody new, oh yeah!" Killer B replied while waving his hands rhythmically. Other people would have been deeply perplexed by Killer B's antics, but his students were all used to him and his quirks.

Turns out, it was Killer B's idea to take his team to the exams. At first, the Raikage forbade it, since Kumo and Konoha weren't allied villages, but the three Genin guessed that Killer B bothered his brother so much until he finally relented. Some of the Raikage's councilors supported B's idea, since it would be a good way to mend their strained relationship with Konoha.

"Look, we're almost there," Omoi pointed to the gates of Konoha, already in sight.

When they were about to enter, they were stopped by two Chunin at the entrance.

"Halt!" one of the Chunin, who was wearing a bandage over his nose, shouted. "Who are you and what business do you have in Konoha?"

Killer B took a step forward. "My name is Killer B, I'm from Kumo as you can see! To the Chunin Exams we came, to show off and gain some fame! Everybody else may as well scram, since my Genin are gonna rock the exams!"

Both Chunin sweat dropped as they glanced at each other awkwardly.

"What our sensei is trying to say is that we came here to participate in the Chunin Exams. I'm sure you were notified that we were coming." Karui interceded before things got even weirder.

"Yeah, sure, let me check it," the other Chunin replied, who was wearing a bandanna and had an eye covered by long bangs. After looking through a list, he saw that they were, indeed, expecting a team from Kumo to arrive. He wondered if the Hokage made the right call by allowing them to participate. "Okay, it seems that you were saying the truth. All what we need is your passports to verify that you're who you say you are."

The three Genin immediately pulled out their passports and handed them to the guards, who quickly verified them. However, when it came to Killer B, they found there was a problem.

"Uh, sir... this isn't a passport. It's just a picture of you," the Konoha Chunin said, while looking at the picture, which was Killer B doing some rapper pose.

"It's a SIGNED picture, fool ya fool! My fans would kill to have something so cool!" Killer B protested. His three Genin sweat dropped.

"While I appreciate the intention, I'm afraid that if you don't have a passport you won't be allowed to enter."

Killer B grumbled something inaudible as he started to fish through his pockets until he finally found his passport. The picture on the passport was the same as the one he handed to the guard. Still, it was valid.

"Everything is in order. You can go into the village. But your permission to stay lasts as long as the Exams themselves. Once they're over, you'll have to leave," the Chunin of the bandaged nose informed them. "If you want to prolong your stay, you should talk with the Hokage."

After thanking the guards, Team Killer B entered Konoha. Naturally, a bunch of ninja with Kumo forehead protectors wasn't something people of Konoha, both ninja and civilians, saw every day, and thus they soon found themselves as the center of quite a lot of curious looks, and more than one hateful glare from ninja old enough to remember the previous wars.

"Boy, I'm feeling uncomfortable," T whined as she got closer to Karui.

"Come on, we can't let these people intimidate us!" Karui protested.

"It's not as easy. Remember that we're pretty much in enemy territory, all alone," Omoi observed.

Killer B realized that he needed to do something about that. "You guys are ninja, for Kami's sake! You can't let a few stares to make you shake! If that's what takes for you to bail, then you'll look like somebody weak and frail!"

Omoi and T lowered their heads in shame. Killer B was right. Not only were they ninja, they pretty much represented their village to the rest of the world right now. They couldn't leave Kumogakure in a bad place.

"Besides, we aren't the only foreigners here. I've seen a couple teams with Amegakure forehead protectors," Karui observed. "And I'm sure that we'll see even more people from outside Konoha."

Between that and their sensei's reprimand, Omoi and T regained some composure. Karui hoped that they wouldn't break down again, or else they wouldn't make it far into the exams, which would mean being the target of the Raikage's wrath.

...

Downtown Konoha, inside a Café

"Look at him, how dare he show his face and that emblem in public like that..."

"I can't believe the Hokage goes so far to protect them..."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they backstabbed him..."

"Aren't those girls worried for their lives?"

"Hell, their sensei is dating one of them! Can you believe that?"

"Sasuke" Shizune's voice snapped the Uchiha from his trance. "Don't let them get to you. Ignore them."

"I know, sensei, but... it's not that easy," the only boy of her squad replied.

"I know what you are talking about" Shizune continued. "I'm dating Shisui, you know. Whenever we go, we always have to deal with people glaring at us, treating us poorly and murmuring things behind our backs when they think we can't hear them."

"Yeah. You also have me to support you, Sasuke-kun," Sakura interceded, as she not-so-subtly grabbed Sasuke's hand.

"And me too!" Karin quickly added, while shooting a murderous glare at Sakura and grabbing Sasuke's other hand.

The Uchiha boy merely sighed.

"Well, girls and boy, the Chunin Exams will be in less than two days, how do you feel?" Shizune asked.

"Ready to kick ass, Shizune-sensei! We'll show everybody the might of the Medical Squad!" Sakura cheerfully replied.

"By the way, given that Shisui will be one of the proctors, can you tell us what are we going to face, Shizune-sensei?" Karin asked.

"Sorry, Karin, but as you can imagine, Shisui isn't allowed to talk with anyone about the details of the exam, and much less me, given that you're going to take part on it," Shizune replied with an apologetic smile.

"So he's your boyfriend but you can't get anything out of him. Lame." Karin said as she crossed her arms.

Shizune sighed. "Well, if this exam is going to be like previous editions, I can tell you that it will consist on three parts: the first one will be a test to your overall capabilities, the second part will be a survival exercise, and the last one will be a one on one fighting tournament. But then again, this exam could be different to the previous ones."

"Still, that'll be better than anything," Sakura said.

"I did try to ask my brother about his exam, but he told me that I needed to take it completely blind, just like he did," Sasuke mentioned, crossing his arms as well.

"Hey, this is like real life itself. As ninja, sometimes you will find yourselves amidst situations that you know nothing about. This exam will test your resourcefulness, among other things," Shizune explained.

"At the very least, we know that the other teams won't have any advantage over us," Karin reasoned.

"Actually, that's only true for teams who will take the exam for the first time," Sakura interceded. "Other teams had taken the exam multiple times already, which means that not only do they have an edge over us, but they're older, and thus they have more experience than us."

"I don't think so. If they need so many tries to become Chunin, then they can't be that strong," Sasuke retorted.

Shizune frowned at Sasuke's overconfident attitude. "Sasuke, underestimating your enemies is not something wise to do. Approach every fight as if you were going to face the strongest enemy possible. Otherwise, something far worse than merely failing awaits you."

"We'll see about that."

...

Outside the Hokage Tower, First Day of the Chunin Exams

All the Genin teams that took part in the Exams were told to wait outside the Hokage Tower at ten in the morning sharp. Those who were already there noticed that there was a large podium in front of the tower.

Many teams decided to be there at least half an hour in advance, just to be safe. Team Kurenai thought that they would be among the first teams to arrive, but they found out that another team had beat them to it.

"Hey, Shikamaru, Choji, Ino!" Naruto shouted as he waved at them.

"Oh, hey, what's up guys?" Shikamaru asked.

"Nice to see you guys" Choji greeted as he ate from his ever-present bag of chips.

"Why did you say my name last!?" Ino angrily asked.

Ignoring Ino's outburst, Naruto asked: "So, you ready for the exams?"

Shikamaru just shrugged. "No. But these two can't take the exam on their own, so I guess I'll have to pull my part."

"You better! There's no way we can do worse than forehead girl's team!" Ino stated.

"With how much Asuma-sensei worked us out, I'm sure we will," Choji commented.

"Ha! Keep dreaming, Ino!" a new female voice said.

Everybody turned around to see Sakura, Karin and Sasuke walking towards them.

"Sakura" Ino mentioned with false joy. "I'm glad that you decided not to run away. I want to beat you with my skills myself."

"Like I just said, Ino, you'd wish I quit. Not when I have Sasuke-kun at my side!" Sakura proudly declared. Upon noticing Karin's murderous glare, she added. "Oh yeah, and Karin too."

"Oh, of course, with that murd-" Ino interrupted herself when she noticed the pleading look Hinata was shooting at her. For some reason, she just couldn't continue with whatever hurtful comment she was going to say about the Uchiha. She simply cleared her throat, and much to everybody's surprise, she said: "Yes, Sasuke looks strong, as so do you and Karin. I will be looking forward to fighting you in the exams."

Sakura, and to a lesser extent, Karin, were taken aback by Ino's sudden bout of politeness. Sasuke was a bit surprised too, though he was better at hiding his reaction than his female teammates. The more observant people there like Shikamaru and Haku noticed the way Hinata was looking at Ino, and deduced that the Hyuga heiress had something to do with it.

"I do look forward fighting you too, Sasuke!" Naruto proudly declared. "I hope that you have been training hard, otherwise my victory over you wouldn't be as meaningful!"

"We fought plenty of times back in the Academy, and you were never close to defeating me," Sasuke cockily replied, then he smirked at him. "But then again, you were the only one back then who could be considered a challenge, so I will look forward to fighting you as well."

"And I will look forward to fighting and beating you both!" a new voice said.

Naruto and Sasuke turned to the voice's direction and saw a boy with black hair styled in a bowl haircut, with very thick eyebrows, who was wearing a green jumpsuit, and orange leg warmers.

"Uh... who are you?" Naruto asked to this would-be rival.

"YOSH! My name is Rock Lee! While I can't use ninjutsu nor genjutsu, I will prove the world that I can be a powerful ninja using nothing but taijutsu! And what better way to achieve my goal than by beating Naruto, the son of the Sannin, and Sasuke, the Uchiha genius! So, who wants to go first?" Rock Lee enthusiastically slipped into a fighting stance.

Before any fight could happen, somebody smacked Lee in the back of his head.

"Lee! Do you want to get us disqualified before even starting the exam? We can't fight right now!" a girl with brown hair styled in two buns said in a chastising tone.

"Sorry, Tenten! But seeing these two ninja, considered the strongest of our generation, makes my blood boil with excitement! My youth can't be contained!"

Everybody sweat dropped at the overly theatrical display of the green clad Genin.

"Is he always like that?" Shikamaru asked.

"Actually, today he seems unusually relaxed," the girl, Tenten, replied with an apologetic smile.

"Tsk. Troublesome. As if we didn't have enough with one hyperactive nutcase," Shikamaru deadpanned. Then he looked at Naruto. "No offense."

"Huh? No offense for what?" Naruto dumbly asked.

"Anyway, it is a pleasure to meet all of you!" Lee continued. "As long as our third teammate arrives, the Youth Squad will be complete!"

Tenten frowned. "Lee, regardless of what you and Gai-sensei insist, that's not the name of our team."

"Come on Tenten, I'm sure you'll admit that Youth Squad is a much better name and defines our team better than the official 'Close Combat Squad'. Besides, that name leaves you out!" Lee countered.

"Excuse me," Hinata asked both Lee and Tenten. "Is your third teammate by chance Neji Hyuga?"

"Yes!" Tenten replied. "How do you know?"

"I'm Neji-niisan's cousin. He sometimes talks about you two. By the way, my name is Hinata Hyuga, pleased to meet you," Hinata greeted, while bowing slightly.

"Likewise. And no need to be so formal, Hinata," Tenten chuckled.

"Hinata-sama can't help being formal. It's part of her nature," a voice that both girls instantly recognized said.

"Neji!" Tenten said to her last teammate.

"Sorry for staying behind. I didn't want to be part of Lee's antics. Though then again, it was inevitable for him to explode when he saw Naruto and Sasuke," Neji replied.

"Well, at least Lee is no longer challenging Naruto-kun and Sasuke-san," Hinata saw that Naruto and Sasuke were discussing something between themselves.

"Nope, but he found somebody else to 'challenge'!" Tenten chuckled and pointed at Lee, who was in front of Sakura.

"My name is Rock Lee! Please go out on a date with me, oh beautiful Sakura! I will protect you with my life!" the green clad ninja loudly declared.

Sakura's brain was still trying to process the situation going on, while Karin was laughing so hard she could barely breathe.

"Er... sorry, Lee, but I don't know you that much to go on a date with you..." the pinkette awkwardly replied.

"It doesn't matter! I will keep working hard until I'm worthy of your affections, Sakura-san!"

"Come on Sakura, say yes. This guy is an amazing catch!" Karin placed a hand on Sakura's shoulder, still laughing.

"You only say that so can have Sasuke-kun for yourself. Forget about it!" Sakura retorted.

"Well, Sasuke-kun is clearly out of your league, so why don't give this nice boy a chance?"

"Why don't YOU give him a chance if he's such a catch!?"

"Because it's you whom he has a crush on! And I'd hate to get in the way of true love!" Karin mocked.

While Sakura and Karin continued arguing, the last of the teams formed by Naruto's former classmates joined the group.

"Oh geez, we're the last ones to arrive," Kiba mentioned a bit dejected, looking at the group.

"Yup, it seems that Kakashi-sensei's habits are starting to rub off on us" Tamaki agreed. She then noticed Sasuke and smiled. "Oh, hey, Sasuke-kun! Ready to rock the exams?"

"Hn," was the Uchiha's response.

"Keep your attitude as long as you can, Uchiha, nothing will save you from a well-deserved ass kicking when our paths cross!" Kiba declared, with Akamaru happily barking in agreement.

"Kiba. Just like in the Academy, you're all bark and no bite. But if only for the chance to shut your annoying mouth already, I'll be more than happy to oblige."

The third member of the Animal Squad decided to intervene.

"Thinking on what could be is pointless. We're better off if we focus on the matter at hand. I know that we won't be fighting each other on this portion of the exam. Save your energy for when we are required to fight."

"Hmpf," Kiba grunted, clearly in disagreement.

"He's right, you know," Tamaki said.

"Of course you'd side with him, if that would mean siding against me" Kiba scoffed.

Tamaki frowned at the Inuzuka. "Listen here you mutt, my life doesn't revolve around you. I take most of my decisions without having you in my mind."

"That's a very poor attitude when working as a team" Kiba fired back.

"That's why I said 'most', not 'all'." Tamaki clarified.

"SHINO!" a chirpy but very loud female voice shouted from above.

Suddenly, a green and white blur fell from the sky like a meteor, landing in the middle of the Animal Squad. Everybody realized that said object wasn't a meteor, but a girl. A Takigakure kunoichi that the Animal Squad, and especially Shino, knew all too well.

"Hey you guys! I'm so glad I found you! Now we can talk a bit before the exams begin!" the girl excitedly said.

"Hello to you as well, Fu," Shino replied, unaffected by the girl's landing.

"So these are all your friends? I didn't know that you had so many, Shino! By the way, aren't you going to introduce me?" the girl said as she wrapped an arm around Shino's neck, making the usually stoic Aburame blush a little.

"Yes, Shino, we're all dying to know who is this girl that's so interested in you!" Ino interjected, her gossip senses going into overdrive.

"My name is Fu! I'm from Takigakure, and I'm here to become a better kunoichi and make lots of friends, not in that order necessarily!" Fu then smirked, and got uncomfortably close to Shino. "By the way, my offer of letting you touch *them* still stands."

"Ohhhhhhh, Shino, you devil! Who would have thought that behind that quiet façade, there was such a charmer!" Ino chimed in.

"It's... it's not what you are thinking," Shino stuttered.

"In case you're wondering, we met Fu on a mission to Takigakure a week ago," Tamaki explained, also hoping to deflect the focus from poor Shino. "By the way, Fu, you need a team of three people to participate. Where are your teammates?"

"Eh, I'm sure they're close," Fu replied, not worrying much about her missing teammates. "Anyway, I see that you guys have lots of friends. Why don't you introduce-"

Fu became silent the moment her eyes landed on Naruto. There was something about him that made him... special. It was almost like seeing a long lost family member.

"You," she stated, her voice devoid of all her previous cheerfulness.

"Me?" Naruto dumbly replied.

"You... there's... something about you that..." Fu slowly said as she walked towards the blond.

"Fu!"

The mint haired girl was snapped from her trance, and turned around to see two men with Takigakure forehead protectors running at them.

"There you are!" one of the Takigakure ninja shouted. He was a man with short, brown curly hair, who wore a violet jacket, with the inside being green, black top, with his midriff being exposed, and dark pants.

"What the hell are you thinking, going on your own in a foreign village?" the other one added. He was a slightly taller man with short, spiky hair who wore a dark violet vest, with two scrolls attached to it, a light violet turtleneck, and dark green-colored pants.

"Oh come on guys, I only wanted to see Shino and his friends again!" Fu pouted.

"Fu, you promised Shibuki-sama that you'd be cautious! He'd be really worried if something happened to you!" the man with the curly brown hair chastised.

"I know... sorry..." Fu lowered her head. She then turned her head at the Konoha Genin. "I better get going. It was nice to meet you guys. Hopefully we can see each other again later."

"We'd like that as well" Tamaki replied as she saw Fu leaving with her team.

Everybody noticed something about Fu's teammates. The first thing was that the one with the curly brown hair really liked to show off his abs. The second, and only a bit less obvious, was that they were about twice as old as Fu.

Akamaru whined something to Kiba.

"Guys, Akamaru told me that those guys' chakra levels are way above the average for Genin. We should be careful around them," Kiba warned. Those who heard him nodded.

"Attention everybody! The First Exam is about to begin!" somebody shouted.

All the Genin present turned their sights to the podium, where a black haired ninja with one eye appeared out of nowhere.

"Hello everybody and welcome to the Chunin Exams! My name is Shisui Uchiha, and I will be the proctor of the first exam!"

Ino rolled her eyes. *"An Uchiha. Just my luck."*

"First of all, if there's a team inscribed but is not present here, said team is automatically disqualified. With that out of the way, I'll start explaining the rules."

Shisui snapped his fingers, and many ninja who were previously on the roof of the Hokage Tower jumped down and landed between the group of Genin and the podium. They were wearing the standard Konoha ninja uniform, except the flak jacket was bright yellow instead of grass green.

"These ninjas have a scroll hidden within their person. Your task will be capture at least one of them and retrieve the scroll. The scroll bearers won't fight you, they will only run away from you and hide.

"Now that you know your objective, some additional rules: if you cause collateral damage while chasing the scroll bearers, you fail. If you endanger civilians, you fail. If you use excessive force, or even kill the scroll bearers, not only will you fail, but you will be arrested for murder. You have three hours to get a scroll, meaning that any team at one in the afternoon sharp short a scroll will be eliminated. You will be handed a wireless radio so that you can keep in contact with your teammates. You will have to turn those radios back once the exam is over. If you break it or lose it, you will have to pay for a

new one. And lastly, once the exam ends, all teams who passed should come back here with their respective scrolls.

"That would be all. Do you guys have any questions?" Nearly everybody raised their hands. Shisui groaned, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, the scroll bearers won't hide their scroll inside their rectums," nearly all hands went down, and only a few remained. Shisui nodded to a random Konoha ninja.

"I noticed that there are not enough scroll bearers for all of us," the Konoha ninja pointed out.

"Correct. The number of scroll bearers is exactly half the number of teams, meaning that only the better half of the present teams will advance to the next phase. At best" Shisui replied. He then nodded to a Suna ninja, who happened to be Kankuro.

"Can we steal a scroll from another team?" the puppeteer asked.

"No. Not only fighting against other teams is forbidden, but the moment a team retrieves a scroll, said team will automatically pass. And don't think you guys can fool me, I have eyes everywhere!"

"Yeah, except in the right side of your face!" a random Konoha ninja said, making other Genin to laugh at his joke.

Shisui made a hand seal, and he body flickered in front of the Genin, startling him. "What is your name, kid?"

"M-Maseo..." the kid, Maseo, babbled.

"Team Maseo, failed," Shisui announced with a sly grin as he body-flickered back to the podium, and saw Maseo's two teammates shooting murderous glares at him. "If you want to make things easier for your rivals and alleviate some competition like Maseo just did, do not hesitate to insult, annoy, or irritate the proctor, namely me. Anymore questions?" Nobody raised their hand. "If that's the case, then good luck to everybody, and let us begin!"

Shisui made a hand motion, and all the scroll bearers scattered in every direction. After a couple seconds of fumbling, the Genin teams immediately went to chase them. Lastly, Shisui made a hand seal, and created four Shadow Clones.

"Alright, let's get the party started" Shisui and his clones Body Flickered in a different direction each.

...

Asuma's Tactical Squad had already locked onto a scroll bearer, and where currently chasing him. Ino suddenly perked up.

"My gossip senses are tingling like crazy! Another boy we know developed a crush on a girl he just met!" Ino squealed.

"You and your troublesome gossiping. Shouldn't you focus on the matter at hand?" Shikamaru asked, a bit annoyed. "Besides, that person is obviously Rock Lee. He was all over Sakura."

"Not Rock Lee, somebody else besides him!"

Meanwhile, Kurenai's Assault Squad was also chasing a scroll bearer that Hinata had located with her Byakugan. Haku then spoke up.

"Um, guys, what do you think of that girl, Tenten?"

Naruto just shrugged. "I don't know. She seems nice."

Hinata nodded in agreement. "I couldn't talk to her much, but she made a good impression. Why do you ask, Haku-kun?"

"Uh... nothing in particular" the Ice Ninja replied while averting his gaze.

...

All Genin teams started their hunt for the scrolls. Many of them thought that the challenge was an easy one, even if only half the teams would pass. Still, soon they found that trying to hold themselves from causing collateral damage was way harder than they initially expected.

A random Konoha Genin tossed several shuriken at a scroll bearer, who managed to dodge them while he fled. The shuriken would have shattered a window display if it wasn't for an ANBU suddenly appearing seemingly out of nowhere and deflecting the steel stars. Shisui (or one of his clones) Body Flickered into the scene a second later.

"You caused collateral damage! Team Tadaki of Konoha, failed!"

Shisui wasn't lying when he said he had eyes everywhere. There were multiple ninja -many of them Hyuga- hidden, who would watch the Chunin hopefuls, intervene before they could cause some collateral damage or engaged in blatant rule-breaking, and lastly would warn Shisui via radio if a team was to be failed or passed.

And thus, many teams started to drop from the competition as they unwittingly broke the rules Shisui had established earlier.

"You put civilians in danger! Team Ozeki from Suna, failed!"

"You used excessive force against a scroll bearer! Team Kuro from Konoha, failed!"

"You caused collateral damage! Team Kaede from Ame, failed!"

"You engaged in combat with another team! Team Hiroshi from Konoha, failed!"

And as so many teams failed during the first hour of the exam, the remaining teams found it much easier chasing and capturing their targets.

Jumping from roof to roof, Kankuro was chasing one of the scroll bearers. Little did he know that the puppeteer's sister was on her way to cut the chase. She suddenly appeared besides him, war fan already unfolded.

"Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Temari swung her fan, casting a powerful gust of wind that tossed the scroll bearer into the air. But before the yellow-clad ninja could fall, sand wrapped around his body, encasing him in a cocoon with only the head exposed. The sand also grabbed the scroll from its hiding place, and pulled it outside the sand cocoon, where Gaara grabbed it.

Shisui appeared besides Gaara. "Team Baki from Suna, passed!" and disappeared just as quick.

...

Kiba was rushing on all fours, with Akamaru running besides him, both of them chasing another scroll bearer through a street, doing their best to avoid the walking civilians. Tamaki jumped in front of him, cutting his escape, and forcing him to turn back at Kiba. The Inuzuka grabbed a kunai and tossed it at the scroll bearer, who easily caught it mid air before resuming his escape. However, the kunai then burst into dozens of beetles, who spread all over his body.

"AHHHHH! What the hell is this? Get those bugs from me!" the scroll bearer yelled as he tried to get rid of the bugs.

Shino suddenly appeared behind him. "I can tell my kikai beetles to leave you alone, in exchange for the scroll."

"Okay, okay, here you go!" the scroll bearer pulled the scroll from a hidden pocket inside his flak jacket and tossed it at Shino, who immediately commanded the beetles to stop attacking the man.

Shisui appeared besides them. "Kakashi's Animal Squad, passed!"

Kiba and Tamaki high fived each other, while Shino allowed himself to smile.

...

Sasuke was also chasing another scroll bearer while jumping across multiple roofs. When they reached a certain zone, Sasuke tapped his radio.

"Karin, the target will pass you in a few seconds, get ready!" the Uchiha warned.

"Yeah, I'm sensing him right now, don't worry, Sasuke-kun," the redhead replied.

The gap separating the next building was much wider, but the scroll bearer knew he could jump that distance. What didn't expect was that, when he was in mid air, several chains coming from below wrapped themselves around his legs and pulled him down.

The scroll bearer thought he was going to painfully slam against the ground. But that would have Karin and her team eliminated for using excessive force, so instead the yellow-wearing ninja was caught by Sakura's chakra enhanced arms before he could touch the ground. Karin wasted no time and placed a kunai on the ninja's neck.

"The scroll. Now."

The scroll bearer sighed, and handed the scroll to the redhead before the pinkette dropped him on the ground. Sasuke immediately joined them, and upon seeing him, Karin raised the scroll at him like it was a trophy. Shisui Uchiha appeared before them.

"Shizune's Medical Squad, passed!" the one-eyed Uchiha announced before disappearing again.

"Yay! We passed!" Sakura pumped her fist into the air.

"Good job you two" Sasuke said, making both girls blush and avert their gaze.

...

Another scroll bearer was running away from two Taki ninja while running through a tree-dense area. He thought he had lost them when he suddenly found himself high into the air, a pair of feminine but very strong arms grabbing him by his armpits.

"What the hell!?" the scroll bearer yelled.

"Hey, what's up? Enjoying the view? I certainly am," Fu casually mentioned. "Though I can tell that you aren't enjoying the flight, so let's do this: you'll give me the scroll, and I place you on the ground, okay?"

Since the scroll bearer wasn't allowed to fight back, he sighed and handed Fu the scroll. However, the Jinchuriki didn't realize that she had dropped the former scroll bearer in order to grab the scroll.

"Oops!" she yelped before quickly flying down in order to catch the man before he crashed against the ground. She managed to grab him by his ankles when his face was one meter from the ground.

Shisui appeared before her. "Team Fu from Taki, passed!"

"Yes!" Fu pumped both fists in the air... and accidentally dropped the scroll bearer, who fell face-first into the ground. "Oops... sorry!"

...

There was something Shisui purposefully left out of the explanation: the scroll bearers that lost their scrolls to the Genin teams wouldn't leave. They would stick around, making many teams futilely chase and capture them, only to realize that they didn't have a scroll anymore.

Fortunately for Gai's Close Combat Squad (sorry, Lee), they had a Byakugan user among them who could identify which one of the scroll bearers still had a scroll within them. Rock Lee was now chasing one of them.

"Tenten, I'm getting close to your position!" Lee warned through the radio.

"Roger that," Tenten replied. As soon as she saw the scroll bearer followed by her green-clad teammate, she knew it was time to act. "Unsealing Art: Improvised Spear prison!"

Tenten leaped above the scroll bearer, unfolded a scroll, which immediately rained many spears above the unsuspecting target, which stabbed into the ground around him. He was about to mock Tenten for missing, but he soon realized that the spears around him formed a tight cage, and was unable to move.

"Alright, the scroll," Tenten extended a hand.

"I don't have a scroll anymore! A team from Ame took it from me!" the scroll bearer said.

"He's lying," Neji landed near them, his Byakugan activated. "The scroll is in a hidden pouch in his left trouser leg."

Following Neji's instructions, Tenten retrieved the scroll, and showed it to her teammates. Shisui appeared besides them.

"Gai's Close Combat Squad, passed!" the one-eyed Uchiha announced, much to the Genin's joy.

"Come on, let's see how many more people has passed," Tenten suggested as she and her teammates left the area.

"Hey, don't leave me here!" the scroll bearer protested.

...

Jumping from one roof to another, an army of Narutos were chasing a scroll bearer that Hinata assured he still had a scroll within his body. While Naruto could try to capture him himself, he was actually leading the unsuspecting yellow-clad ninja to a trap. Hinata was following Naruto's progress with her Byakugan.

"Huku-kun, Naruto-kun and the scroll bearer are heading towards your position. Is the trap ready?" Hinata asked through her radio.

"I see them. And to answer your question, yes. The target will fall in my trap in three, two, one..."

The moment the scroll bearer jumped into another roof, he immediately slipped and fell on his butt.

"Ice...?" the scroll bearer asked, confused.

Haku made several hand seals. "Ice Release: Ice Prison Jutsu!"

The scroll bearer's hands and feet were encased in blocks of ice, immobilizing and pinning him to the ground. Haku searched the man, and found the scroll where Hinata had said it would be, in a hidden pocket inside the flak jacket.

Shisui appeared before Haku. "Kurenai's Assault Team, pass-WHOA!" the one eyed ninja slipped on the ice and fell on his butt.

"Uh... sorry. Does that mean we still pass?" Haku meekly asked.

...

As teams started to either fail or pass, the scroll bearers, both who still had their scroll and those who hadn't, found that there were much less teams going after them. Many of them relaxed and fell prey to ambushes set by the remaining teams.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Upon locating a scroll bearer, Shikamaru used his family's signature jutsu in order to trap him. The scroll bearer immediately ran away. He was hoping to leave the shadow behind, but Shikamaru was able to find more shadowed spots in order to prolong his jutsu.

The scroll bearer ran into Ino and Choji, the latter who had enlarged his arms, and raised them in order to slam him. But when he was about to jump back, he found himself unable to do so.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu, success," the scroll bearer heard Shikamaru announced.

"What? How did you catch me without me noticing?" the scroll bearer asked.

"Take a look at my shadow" Choji mentioned.

The scroll bearer realized that Choji's enlarged arms were projecting a huge shadow, which the Nara used to his advantage.

"Now Ino, if you're so kindly..."

Ino nodded, and placed her hand on the scroll bearer's head. After probing his mind, she found the scroll in a hidden pocket in the back of his flak jacket. Shisui appeared from thin air.

"Asuma's Tactical Squad, passed!" he announced before disappearing again.

The three members of said squad loudly cheered -even Shikamaru- while jumping and pumping their fists in joy.

...

The first part of the exams came to an end a whole hour before the time limit, when the last team who hadn't claimed a scroll was eliminated due to breaking one of the rules and using too much force when dealing with a scroll bearer. Now, all the passed teams were once again in front of the podium, with Shisui on it.

Shisui was pleased with his work. Of all the fifty two teams that were initially competing, only twenty two managed to pass the first phase. Less than a half. Ten teams from Konoha, four Teams from Suna, two teams from Taki, two teams from Kusa, three teams Ame, and a single team from Kumo.

"Congratulations to all of you who passed the first part of the exam" Shisui said, and the Genin congratulated each other. "Nowadays, a lot of people think that being a ninja is just a matter of raw power. While power is important, controlling said power is just as important. Sometimes, you will need to capture a ninja who has valuable intel without harming them. Sometimes, a battle will break within the walls of your village, so you will need to fight without endangering civilians or causing damage to the village. People who always fight without restraint, without caring about causing collateral damage or without keeping in mind the mission don't deserve to be Chunin!

"But you demonstrated that you can think outside the box, that you can solve a problem without relying on raw power or brute force. Now, you'll go into the next phase of the exam, when your abilities will be tested further. And without further ado, meet the proctor of the second phase of the exam," and with that, Shisui, using his signature ability, disappeared from there.

A few seconds passed, and the Genin started to murmur, wondering who this proctor was or where he or she was. The answer came in the form of a giant sword falling from above against the podium, splintering it instantly, while the sword stabbed itself into the ground. The Genin felt a wave of killing intent, and suddenly, a tall, broad man with spiky black hair was standing on one foot on the sword's hilt. A man Haku knew too well.

"Hello, brats. My name is Zabuza Momochi, and I'm the proctor of the second phase of the exam," the former Kiri ninja introduced himself. Many Genin couldn't help but cower in fear before the imposing man before them. "Those who think that you are already Chunin because you passed this part of the test will have another thing coming, because my test will push you to your very limits, and

will weed the weak from the strong. Take this day to rest, because you will need all the rest you can.

"Meet me tomorrow at Training Ground Thirty Nine. Make sure you bring supplies for at least a week, as well as the scroll you obtained on this test. It's about time you learn the reality of the ninja world. That's all."

...

Senju Residence, Nighttime

The entire Senju-Uzumaki family was having a special dinner together to celebrate that both Naruto and Shizune's teams had successfully passed the first round of the exam. It might not seem like much, but given that more than half the teams competing were sent home, it was a big deal. Still, both Naruto and Shizune knew that the worst was yet to come.

"So is Naruto-niisan a Chunin now?" Kaida asked.

"Nope. He only passed the first phase of the exam. He still has more things to do," Hagane replied.

"Still, he's on the way. These exams separate the great from the mediocre. And it's good to see that Naruto leans to the former," Tsunade commented.

"By the way, Naruto," Jiraiya interceded, "Besides yours and Shizune's team, did any of your other former classmates pass?"

Naruto nodded affirmatively. "All of them, actually."

"HA!" Jiraiya clapped his hands. "I knew it! Thanks to my educational reform, the new generation of Genin will grow up to become the strongest ninja Konoha ever produced! That's how great and awesome of a Hokage I am!"

Jiraiya high fived Naruto, while Tsunade and Shizune both rolled their eyes.

"By the way, how did you let that Kiri guy be an exam proctor?" Naruto asked, still a bit terrified of Zabuza. Haku had told both him and Hinata about the former Seven Ninja Swordsman, but the man was way more impressive in person.

"Let's say that he had some interesting ideas for the exams. You see, the exams in Kiri are way more brutal, and I think we could borrow something from that."

"Jiraiya!" Tsunade shouted. "I hope you're not planning to turn our village into another Blood Mist!"

"No, of course not!" the white haired Sannin raised his hands in defense. "I just want to prepare the kids for the real world, that's it. Besides, since our Genin are way stronger, by increasing the exam's difficulty, we make sure it's them instead of foreign Genin who advance into the final phase of the exam."

"By the way, Naruto," Shizune interjected. "What do you think about the exam so far? Was it easy, difficult...?"

"It wasn't as bad as I thought. But veterans said that the first part is usually the easiest, and I'm not getting very good vibes for whatever that Zabuza guy has in store for us..." Naruto shivered a bit.

"Come on kid, after what all the things you told me you faced in the Land of the Rice Fields, I don't think Genin from other villages will be much of a challenge in comparison," Tsunade said while lightly punching Naruto in the shoulder.

"Yeah, guess that you're right" Naruto conceded.

"That's the spirit!"

"Besides, not every kid has the luck being trained by a ninja as awesome as me!" Jiraiya proudly stated. Tsunade cleared her throat in a rather not subtle way. "Oh yes, and your mom too..."

"The thing is, we're sure that you'll make us proud, Naruto" Tsunade added.

...

Author's Note: So, what do you think about my version of the Chunin Exams? I already told you that it was going to be different from canon. Well, the first two parts, the finals will be more or less the same (same as in being one on one fights, the fight themselves are going to be very different as well).

You have no idea how hard it was to do the meeting of all the Konoha teams just before the exam began. I lost count on how many times I had to rewrite that scene. Juggling that many characters at once was insane! Hopefully I won't have to do a scene with that many people again.

Anyway, the Exams has just begun, and now the Genin will have to face whatever Zabuza has planned for them. While it won't be in the Forest of Death, the challenge won't be any smaller. Until the next chapter comes, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Chunin Exams Continue

Author's Note: I want to clarify something that caused a bit of confusion in the previous chapter. The third member of Team Killer B, T, is an Original Character. As for why I didn't use a canon character like Samui or Yugito instead, that's because they're Kakashi's age, and I didn't feel like changing their canon ages.

Anyway, enjoy the second phase of the exams, way more action packed than the first one. See you at the bottom of the chapter as usual.

Chapter 22:

The Chunin Exams Continue

or

Ninjas of sweet water

Next Day, Training Ground Thirty Nine

Training Ground Thirty-Nine was a massive, elliptical lake, with plenty of derelict ships on it. Many of them were made of wood, while some were made of steel. All those ships were the last remains of the old fleet Konoha used to have, which was used whenever war was waged against Kirigakure or other maritime enemies.

After the Third War, however, the Fourth Hokage decided to sell the fleet's remaining ships to private businesses, and hire a ship whenever Konoha needed to carry their ninja across large bodies of water. Many opposed this measure, but the Fourth's argument that the ships were way too costly to maintain despite how little they were used outside times of war -and sometimes not even that- were hard to counter.

The training ground, known among Konoha as "The Ship Graveyard", was mostly used to train for battles in high sea. Many ninja, who were used to fighting on solid ground, were usually lost when they found themselves surrounded by so much water.

And that was the reason as for why Zabuza Momochi, who hailed from the Land of Water, chose this place as the battleground for the second part of the exam.

"Alright maggots, listen up!" the masked swordsman said, slamming his massive sword on the ground for added effect. "You may think that after passing that test the Uchiha put you through, you're almost Chunin now. My job is to give you a reality check, and make you realize how far all of you still are from that goal.

"This," the swordsman motioned behind him. "Is the Ship Graveyard, and the second part of the exam will take place there. But before we begin, do all the teams here have the scroll from the previous test? Those teams who didn't bring the scrolls are automatically eliminated."

All the members of every team who was carrying the scroll pulled it out and rose it to prove that they had it. Zabuza confirmed that there were no teams without a scroll, something that didn't sit well with some.

"Troublesome. I was hoping that one or two teams would forget about the scroll, and thus it would make the competition easier," Shikamaru moaned.

"Oh come on, one or two team less aren't going to make a difference," Ino rolled her eyes.

"Now, all of you, open the scrolls!" Zabuza ordered.

All the Genin did as Zabuza asked, and saw that there was a map of the training ground, with a couple points marked with an X.

"The scroll is a map that will help you navigate the area. You'll notice a X on all your maps. That X marks the location a treasure chest that you'll need to retrieve in order to pass to the third and final phase of the exam. Just like in the previous phase, the number of chests is smaller than the number of teams competing -I won't tell you how much smaller- . Unlike the previous phase however, not only fighting is allowed, but in most cases you'll have to fight other teams. Everything is permitted, killing included.

"Once that item is in your possession, you'll need to bring it to a large steel freighter in the middle of the lake. You will recognize the freighter by its size -much bigger than the rest of the ships here,- but in case that's not enough, the freighter has multiple flags on it.

"You have three days to complete this part of the exam. If you don't reach the freighter with the required item within that time limit, you fail. Also, your whole team has to be there to pass. If one of your teammates gets killed, your team automatically fails. Before the exam begins, you will need to sign a waiver that will exempt Konoha from any responsibilities in case of injury or death. Once you signed them, you will be escorted to a row boat that you can use to sail the lake. If said boat is destroyed or stolen, you'll need to find other ways to move through the lake, like water walking. If you don't know water walking... well, it sucks to be you."

Some Genin, who didn't know water walking, gulped in fear. Most of the Konoha Genin smiled proudly, since they did learn such skill at the Academy.

The row boats were evenly placed across the lake's perimeter. Once every team was in position, the second phase of the exam officially begun.

...

While Naruto and Haku rowed the boat, Hinata studied the map. Apparently, the item they needed to find was inside a ship on the northeast part of the lake. They started on the southeast part,

meaning that the chance to cross another team was high. Even if they didn't have the item yet, it was more than likely that if two teams crossed paths, they would fight for the sake of reducing competition.

As they approached the many derelict ships, they started to notice a dense fog forming. Soon they were nearly unable to see what was in front of them.

"Hey, where did this fog come from?" Naruto asked. "Fog doesn't appear all of sudden!"

"I think I know how, but just to make sure..." Haku nodded at Hinata, who nodded back in return.

"Byakugan!" the Hyuga heiress activated her Bloodline Limit and found something surprising about the mist. "The mist is laced with some sort of chakra! I can't see through it!"

"What!?" Naruto was shocked. Unlike the Sharingan, there was nothing that the Byakugan couldn't see through. The only way to fool the Hyuga's eyes were a couple of special seals. "How's that even possible?"

"Because this is no normal mist. This is Zabuza-sama's signature ability, the Hidden Mist Jutsu," the Ice Ninja explained. "It seems that he wants to make the exam as hard as possible. I doubt the mist will be the only trap he has prepared for us."

"Is there a way to dispel it?" Hinata asked.

"Fire is usually a good way. Do any of you two know fire jutsu?" Haku asked. Hinata averting her gaze and Naruto angrily crossing his arms were all the answers he needed. "Alright. I know how to use this jutsu as well, so I may be able to dispel it a little."

...

Meanwhile, Team Shizune had already boarded the ship where their treasure chest should be. The three of them were inspecting the deck, even if they knew that the chest wouldn't be there. Still, you could never be too sure.

"Karin," the redhead perked up upon hearing Sasuke calling her. "Can you sense anybody near us?"

Karin shook her head. "Nope, Sasuke-kun. While I'm sensing a couple teams, they're too far away from us to be a threat. I think."

Sakura raised an eyebrow. "You *think* ?"

"This weird mist is interfering with my sensing abilities," Karin commented. She then frowned and crossed her arms. "But not too much! You need something more than some little fog to nullify my power."

"Enough. Let's get down to business and search the ship before another team shows up," Sasuke interjected. She looked at the redhead. "Karin?"

Karin nodded and made a hand seal often associated with a certain blond. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

The redhead would forever be grateful to Naruto for teaching her such an useful jutsu.

Four Karins appeared besides the original one. Two of them scattered through the ship, while the other two remained on the deck. The original Karin and her two teammates scattered through the ship as well in order to look for the treasure chest. It didn't take long until Sakura found said chest inside the hold and called her teammates.

"Are you sure that's what we're looking for?" Sasuke asked.

"That chest looks new and shiny, while everything else on this ship is old and dusty. It has to be that," Sakura explained. "Plus if you look closely, the chest has the symbol of Konoha on it."

"I guess that's our target. Let's get it then," Karin was about to walk inside the hold, when Sakura grabbed her by her arm.

"Stop! I'm sure that the hold is booby trapped. That chest isn't even hidden. I'm sure that they left it like that on purpose for us to get confident."

"I agree with Sakura. Send a clone instead," Sasuke added.

Karin dispelled her two clones that were still searching the chest somewhere else and created another one, who started to walk towards the chest. Upon stepping on a switch under a loose plank, the clone triggered a trap, and multiple kunai flew at her from multiple directions, poofing it instantly. Karin winced twice, once after seeing the trap in action, and a second after getting the clone's memories.

"It is safe now?" Karin asked.

"Just in case, send another clone," Sasuke suggested.

They needed three more clones until it was safe to pick the chest. However, the Medical Squad was about to face another problem way bigger than mere traps.

"Shit!" the redhead cursed.

"What is it, Karin!?" Sakura worriedly asked. If the team sensor reacted like that, she had an idea of what was going on.

"Another team arrived at the ship and made short work of my clones," Karin explained. "They're Taki ninja. Pretty strong, I may add."

"They will be after the treasure chest," Sasuke concluded. He pulled out an empty storage scroll and sealed the chest inside it. "We need to get rid of them before we can go to the central ship."

"Okay, any of you have a plan?" Karin asked.

"Sakura and I will fight them head on. Karin, you will cover us," Sasuke explained. Sakura couldn't help but beam at the idea of fighting alongside Sasuke, while Karin frowned childishly.

"No fair! Why can't I be the one who fights alongside you?" the redhead pouted.

"Because Sakura is a better hand to hand fighter than you. Plus you can cover us better with your Shadow Clones," Sasuke explained. Sakura's smile grew wider, while Karin sighed in resignation.

"Okay..."

Being as silent as possible, Team Shizune returned to the deck. Sasuke could see two Taki ninja inspecting the area, who didn't notice him yet. Good, that would be their undoing. Sasuke pulled a few shuriken from his tool pouch and tossed them at the enemy ninja.

The whirling sound made by the flying steel stars warned the Taki ninja, who immediately pulled out a kunai each, which they used to deflect the incoming shuriken aside. After the failed ambush, Sakura and Karin jumped at Sasuke's side, and three of them adopted fighting stances.

"There's no need to fight," one of the Taki ninja, a man with brown curly hair, said. "We are only here for the treasure chest. Give it to us, and we'll leave you alone."

"We don't have it. We inspected the ship, and found nothing," Sakura replied.

"Yeah, don't you see that we're not carrying any chest with us?" Karin added.

"Do you take us for idiots? Storage scrolls also exist in Takigakure, you know," the other Taki ninja replied.

"We know that there's a chest on this ship. Our map said so," the first ninja continued.

"Karin, track down the third member, he or she can't be too far" Sasuke whispered. "Guess that there's no point in trying to fool you. But if you want the chest, you'll have to take it from us by force."

The two Taki ninja smirked.

"Trust me, that won't be a problem. Fu!"

Something dived at Team Shizune from above, forcing them to duck. The buzzing noise made them think of a giant insect, but it turned out to be something entirely different.

"Is that... a girl?" Karin asked, incredulous, looking at the winged girl floating above her two teammates.

"And she's flying?" Sakura added, just as shocked.

"Hiiiiii~!" the girl, who had green hair, tan skin, and was wearing very revealing clothes, greeted them cheerfully. "It's so nice to see you again! Sorry we have to fight. I hope that this doesn't deter us from becoming friends later."

"... is this girl for real?" Sakura asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Hey, I remember this girl! I saw her talking to Shino's team before the first part of the exam!" Karin pointed out.

"Oh, you're friends with Shino too? Then there's no way we can't be friends then!" Fu chirped.

"Fu, focus! You can befriend them later, right now, they're enemies" the Taki ninja with spiky black hair chided.

Fu rolled her eyes. "Okay, okay, I get it..." the flying girl made a hand seal. "Hiding in Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu exhaled a large quantity of a fine powder that reflected sunlight, creating an artificial wall of light that momentarily blinded Team Shizune. Not even Sasuke's sharingan was able to see through it.

"Water Release: Water Shuriken Jutsu!"

"Shadow Shuriken Clone Jutsu!"

A barrage of shuriken, both made of water and steel, flew at the Medical Squad. Even with his sight impaired, Sasuke knew what to do.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Pouring as much chakra into the jutsu as he could, Sasuke exhaled a massive fireball that not only dispelled the luminous powder, but managed to evaporate the water shuriken and stop the steel ones.

"Sasuke, watch out!"

Sasuke heard Sakura's voice, following by the sharp cling of metal clashing, and the Uchiha saw his pink haired teammate engaged in a fight with one of the Taki ninja, the one with the exposed abs, who tried to blindside Sasuke while he was busy stopping the shuriken barrage. And before he could even realize, the other Taki ninja was leaping at him as well.

While Sasuke and Sakura traded blows with their respective opponents, Fu decided to provide some aerial support to her teammates.

"Wind Release: Savage Whirlwind!"

"Adamantine Attacking Chains!"

Before Fu could complete her jutsu, a couple of chains seemingly out of nowhere wrapped around her legs.

"Uh?" looking down, the mint haired girl saw that the chains came from Karin's back, who pulled her into the floor displaying a surprising strength. "WHOA!"

Karin rushed at the Taki girl, gathering chakra on her closed fist, before launching said fist at her opponent's face. Much to her shock, Fu managed to catch her fist, suffering no harm other than being pushed backwards a little.

"Wow, you're really strong!" Fu commented, while Karin struggled to release her fist. "Where do you hide your muscles?" Karin's reply came in the form of another punch who was also captured by Fu's remaining hand. "Though, as you can probably see, I'm pretty strong as well."

While Karin struggled with Fu, Sasuke and Sakura struggled against the other two Taki ninja.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Multiple fireballs flew at the Takigakure ninja, who both of them smirked while one of them made some hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

A stream of water appeared from the lake, forming a protective dome around the two Taki ninja, successfully blocking the Uchiha's attack.

"Water Release: Dragon Bullet Jutsu!"

The water dome changed its shape to take the form of a serpentine dragon, which lunged at the two Konoha Genin, who jumped in opposite directions to avoid the devastating watery attack.

"These guys are really strong! I can't believe that they're Genin just like us!" Sakura commented.

Both Taki ninja tensed up upon hearing Sakura's words. And even if they had enough experience to mask their reactions from others, their efforts were useless against a Sharingan user.

"That's because they aren't Genin," Sasuke matter-o-factly added.

"What!?" both Sakura and Karin yelled in unison.

"We are Genin. If we weren't, there's no way for us to be competing here," the man with spiky black hair replied.

"They're lying!" Karin shouted. "His chakra fluctuated in an irregular way when he was saying that!"

"What so you can detect lies?" the other male Taki ninja asked incredulously.

"Yes! It's part of being a sensor!"

"Well, your powers are clearly failing you then," the Taki ninja replied, though he didn't sound very convincing.

"So, if I ask the Hokage to do a background check on you two, he won't find anything fishy going on, right?" Sasuke replied.

Their nervousness was starting to become more evident. They have been caught.

"There's no point in denying it. Your reaction betrayed you," Sasuke added.

Both male ninja looked at each other, as if they were speaking without words, until they reached some sort of unspoken agreement, and dropped their fighting stances.

"Okay, you got us. We aren't Genin, but Jonin," the brown haired man confessed.

"If you're Jonin, what are you doing here then?" Sasuke asked.

"Kegon and I are Jonin. Fu is a Genin," the black haired man clarified.

"Wait... so you're helping this girl going through the Exams? That's cheating of the highest order!" Sakura angrily accused.

"Technically yes, but that's not our mission! We're her bodyguards!" Kegon clarified.

"I can't go into more details, but Fu is a very special girl, and sending her here without escort would have been incredibly risky," the black haired man added.

"If she needs to be coddled so much, then she doesn't deserve being a ninja, much less a Chunin," Sasuke replied, crossing his arms.

"It's not coddling. You don't understand it."

"What's so special about her? Is she the last bearer of a rare Bloodline Limit?" Sakura conjectured.

Kegon and his partner traded glances once again. "You could say it's something around those lines," the former said.

"Okay, now we won't only leave you alone, but we will escort you to the main ship. In exchange, all I ask you is not to report us. Not only that would create unnecessary tension between our villages, but this exam is important for Fu as well."

"What about the other Taki teams?" Karin asked. "Are there Jonin posing as Genin among those as well?"

Kegon shook his head. "No, the rest of the teams are legitimate. Like I told you already, this team is a special case because of Fu."

"Sasuke-kun?" Sakura looked at him. "What do you think we should do?"

"Hmm..." the Uchiha youth started to ponder. "Okay, I think we have a deal. We have nothing to lose and everything to win. With this fog, an escort would be appreciated."

"Really? Aren't you afraid that this isn't a ruse to make you lower your guard and kill you in order to keep our secret?" the black haired ninja asked, raising his eyebrow.

"You yourselves stated that you're Jonin. If you wanted to kill us, you wouldn't need us to lower our guard," this time, it was Sakura who replied.

Kegon smirked. "You three are smart kids. We should have put more effort into hiding our true strength better. We clearly underestimated you."

"Next time, try to hold back a little more, and suppress your chakra a bit," Sasuke advised.

"Alright, let's hurry. We still need to find a treasure chest for us as well" the black haired ninja said.

...

Meanwhile, Naruto, Hinata and Haku had already arrived at their ship, and like Team Shizune, they found the treasure chest in the middle of the hold. It couldn't be more obvious.

"I'm seeing a seal under the chest" Hinata kept her Byakugan activated the moment they boarded the ship. "My guess is that the moment somebody moves the chest, it will spring a trap."

"Don't worry guys, I have this" Naruto made a hand seal, and a single clone popped into existence.

Without needing to be ordered to do so, the clone walked towards the chest and lifted it. The four of them waited expectantly for something to happen, but in the end, no trap was triggered.

"Well, so much for all that caution," Naruto said, almost disappointed.

"There's no harm in being cautious," Haku wisely noted.

"Whatever. Let's go to the central ship before another team arrives."

The four of them turned back and walked out of the hold, but two poofing sounds followed by a loud thud made them turn back once again. Much to their shock, in front of them was the second exam proctor, Zabuza Momochi himself, who has just destroyed the Naruto clone, causing the chest to fall to the floor.

"Zabuza-sama?" Haku dumbly asked.

"You three lowered your guard when you thought there was no danger. That's such a shame, especially for you, Haku," Zabuza teased them.

"What? That trap summoned a exam proctor himself? That's bullshit!" Naruto complained.

"A ninja should be ready to face the unexpected, so shut your mouth, blondie," Zabuza sharply replied as he slammed his sword into the floor.

"We need to take that chest back," Hinata whispered to the boys.

"I know, but this space is too cramped to fight, and Zabuza-sama can easily overwhelm us" Haku whispered back.

"Then how about this?" Naruto made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Suddenly, the whole hold was bursting with Naruto clones, who pushed Zabuza against a wall. Another of the clones grabbed the treasure chest and threw it at the original Naruto.

"Go, go, go, go!" Naruto yelled as he and his teammates left the hold.

The three of them arrived at the deck seconds later, and stopped to catch their breath.

"Come on, we need to leave immediately. Zabuza-sama will make short work of your clones in no time", Haku warned.

"Oh, come on! I know that that guy's strong, but there's no way that-"

At that moment, Zabuza burst through the deck floor and landed in front of them. An evil smirk formed under his mask.

"Destroying those clones was pretty fun. Do you have more?" the former Kiri swordsman taunted.

Far from being intimidated, Naruto scowled at him. "You bet!" he replied, and a dozen more clones came to life.

"There's no way we can defeat Zabuza-sama. One of us has to stay and keep him busy while the others take the treasure chest to the main ship," Haku explained.

"But Zabuza-san himself said that the three of us need to be in the main ship for our team to pass!" Hinata frantically replied. "Besides, if Zabuza-san is as strong as you say, he won't take much time to defeat one of us and hunt the other two. We need to stay and fight."

"That's the spirit, Hinata!" Naruto cheered, before leaving the chest on the floor. "Come on, everybody!"

A wave of Naruto clones charged at Zabuza from multiple directions. The swordsman swung his gigantic blade in a circular motion, poofing said clones instantly. However, by doing such thing, he left himself wide open. From the smoke created by the destroyed clones, Hinata appeared, her hands crackling with electricity.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palms!"

Hinata tried to strike Zabuza on his chest, but the swordsman was way nimbler than his size suggested, and dodged all of Hinata's electrical palm strikes. While he was busy, Haku decided to try his luck, his hands quickly forming hand seals.

"Ice Release: Flying Icy Fangs!"

Zabuza saw multiple sharp ice spikes flying at him. Once again, his trusty sword stopped the attack. And just like Haku did before, Naruto attempted to capitalize on Zabuza's momentarily vulnerability, and formed multiple hand seals.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto's wind attack successfully hit Zabuza and pushed him outside the ship, and into the water.

"Ha! Take that!" Naruto taunted, while pumping his fist.

"Naruto-kun, I don't believe that that's near enough to get rid of Zabuza-sama..." Haku warned the cheering blond.

And true to Haku's words, a few seconds later a wall of water rose above them, with Zabuza standing at its crest.

"Now... let's see how well do you do against this! Water Release: Crushing Wave!"

"This guy is a madman!" Naruto yelled.

"Naruto-kun, Hinata-san, come close to me!" Haku shouted as he made several hand seals.

The gigantic wave crashed against the Genin. When the wave passed, Zabuza noticed that there was now an ice dome where his opponents used to be. He couldn't help but smirk under his mask.

"Very well, Haku," the former Kiri swordsman complimented as he advanced towards the dome, dragging his sword across the wet floor. "I'm glad to see that you're nowhere near as weak as I first had feared. You didn't let Konoha influence you much."

"Well, if you liked that, then what about this?"

The dome shattered, and Naruto and Haku jumped out of it, and while they were mid air, they tossed multiple senbon and kunai at Zabuza. The masked swordsman was about to lift his sword in order to block the attack, when Naruto yelled.

"Hinata, now!"

Zabuza realized too late that the Hyuga girl was still in the dome, but before he could react, he felt a powerful electrical current painfully coursing through his body, leaving him paralyzed. Unable to move, he couldn't block the senbon and kunai flying at him, and they stabbed into his chest.

And then, much to the Genin's shock, Zabuza melted into a puddle of water.

"Uh...? What was that?" Naruto asked, confused, as he scratched his head.

"I believe that was one of Zabuza-sama's Water Clones," Haku explained. "I should have guessed it earlier. There's no way Zabuza-sama would fight us personally."

"Hinata, how is that you didn't notice he was a clone?" Naruto asked the only female of his team.

"S-Sorry Naruto-kun, but the Byakugan can't tell a difference between a clone and the original," Hinata meekly explained.

"You would have been able to tell the difference if the real Zabuza-sama was here. Unlike Naruto-kun's Shadow Clones, Water Clones only have a fraction of the original's power. Usually it's ten percent, though this one we fought appeared to be a little stronger," Haku clarified.

"Anyway, w-we should bring the chest to the freighter before we are attacked again," Hinata suggested.

Both Naruto and Haku nodded, the former picking up the discarded treasure chest, and left the derelict ship.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, two Genin teams, one from Konoha, and the other from a foreign village, were fighting for the possession of a treasure chest the former team just retrieved from the ship.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Shikamaru's shadow formed a thread and extended in front of him, aiming to catch his opponent, the only kunoichi among his current foes. A blue eyed blonde, just like Ino, though this girl's eyes were more teal than blue. Said girl was carrying a massive fan that she used to blow powerful and devastating winds.

Though right now, she was unable to attack since Shikamaru was forcing her to keep running.

"Dammit Temari, what the hell are you doing?" her teammate, a hooded boy dressed in black with purple face paint exclaimed. "Why

didn't you deal with that weakling already!"

"Why don't you try and fight him if he's that easy, Kankuro?" Temari replied. "It's not that you're overwhelming your opponents or anything."

Kankuro was fighting Ino while treading on one of the lower sail booms. Despite her unimpressive appearance, Ino was putting quite a good fight.

"Why don't you use your-"

"Shut up!" Kankuro interrupted Temari before she could finish. "I don't want people to know about my secret weapon until the time is right."

Temari rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"Choji, how are you going with the redhead?" Shikamaru yelled at the third member of his team.

The Akimichi Genin was fighting against a redheaded boy with an impenetrable wall of sand. Whenever he tried to punch him, sand would appear and absorb the impact. The boy didn't even make any attempt at moving and just stayed there with his arms crossed and a bored expression.

"Not too good!" Choji replied between pants. No matter how hard he punched, the wall of sand would never give in.

Then the redheaded boy made a hand motion and several sand projectiles flew at Choji. The Akimichi yelped and jumped aside as fast as he could to avoid the sand missiles, some of them which pierced the ship's mast when they hit it.

"That sand's going to be trouble. And worse, the guy looks as if he isn't even trying," Shikamaru mused to himself. "Ino, go and help Choji! Your water jutsu should counter all that sand!"

"On it!" Ino was about to leave the boom, but Kankuro was having none of that.

"Oh no you won't!"

Ino suddenly found herself unable to move properly. Looking back, she saw that Kankuro had cast what appeared to be threads made of chakra from his fingertips that were attached to Ino's body. The Yamanaka heiress tried to pull but Kankuro's pull was stronger.

"As you can see, I have you in a pretty tight leash. Escaping is impossible" Kankuro taunted, as his purple lips formed a confident smirk.

"We'll see about that!" Ino retorted as she continued pulling.

Kankuro pulled even harder, and his efforts paid off when Ino was slowly dragged to him. But then all of sudden, the force pulling in the opposite direction disappeared, and Ino was flying at him at an alarming speed. The blond crashed against the hooded boy, which made him fall on his back, with Ino on top of him. She then placed her hands on his forehead.

"Mind Transfer Jutsu!"

And then Kankuro's world turned black, and Ino saw herself looking at her own body. Getting on her feet in her new body, she gently placed her original body on the deck, and went to help her teammates.

Meanwhile, Temari had enough of Shikamaru and decided to push him out of the ship in one, swift strike.

"Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Upon swinging her massive fan, Temari created a powerful gale that Shikamaru had no hope of dodging. Then he remembered that besides his clan's jutsu, he also had a couple of elemental jutsu

under his sleeve. And his element happened to be the one who countered Temari's.

"Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!"

Shikamaru exhaled a stream of flames that got progressively wider. The flames drastically increased upon clashing against Temari's wind attack, but for some reason they were unable to move forwards. And much to his horror, he saw how Temari's jutsu pushed back the flames back at him.

"Damn!" he yelled as he jumped aside. Unfortunately for the Nara, there was no floor where he jumped at, only water. Still, Shikamaru managed to grab the edge of the deck before falling into the water.

"You're a tough nut to crack, I give you that," Temari walked menacingly to where he was, while trying to get back aboard the ship. She prepared her war fan for a final attack. "But in the end, there's nothing that-UCK!"

Temari was silenced when Kankuro, or somebody who was ironically using his body as a puppet, knocked her out cold with an elbow strike to the base of her neck. Kankuro helped Shikamaru up.

"Ino?" the Nara asked, and his guessed proved correct when the black clad Suna ninja nodded.

"Ino, if you're going to help me, now it would be a good time!" Choji shouted, while frantically dodging a whip made of sand.

"Let's hope this also works on a different body," Ino mused. "Water Release: Water Bullet!"

Ino-in-Kankuro's body spat multiple watery projectiles at the surprised redheaded boy, who blocked them with a wall of sand. The sand, however, absorbed all the water, and became much heavier and muddier, and thus immensely more difficult to use.

"Temari isn't going to be happy when he wakes up," the redheaded boy deadpanned.

"She probably won't. That girl screams trouble. And even if it will get her even madder, you should surrender. You look pretty strong yourself, but with your teammates out cold and Ino's water jutsu to counter your sand, you won't defeat us. Now take your teammates and leave us alone," Shikamaru told the Suna ninja.

"You speak the truth. But I'm not as defenseless as you think, especially when I have one of your teammates as hostage," the redhead replied.

"Hostage? What are you talking... SHIT!"

Much to Team Asuma's horror, Ino's inert body was almost engulfed in a cocoon of sand, with only its head exposed.

"That possession jutsu is very impressive, but it does have a downfall that's very hard to conceal. Now, release my brother, and give us the treasure chest you found on this ship, and we will leave in peace."

Shikamaru greeted his teeth. The redhead was right. In fact, he could have pretty much killed Ino there, and thus Shikamaru and Choji would be unable to finish the exam on their own. A tactical retreat was in order.

"Alright... you win."

The redhead's expression didn't change.

Ino undid her mental jutsu, and both her and Kankuro awakened inside their actual bodies, while Choji handed Gaara the treasure chest.

"Uh?... what happened...?" Kankuro groggily asked.

"Pick up Temari and let's leave for the central ship. We have the treasure chest," Gaara explained in his usual monotone.

"Wait... did we win...?" Kankuro asked, rubbing his temples.

"Yes, not thanks to you," Gaara sharply replied. "Now do as I say."

Kankuro nodded and carried the unconscious Temari on his shoulders. When the Suna Genin left, the sand that trapped Ino left as well.

"Man, this sucks" Ino groaned. "What are we going to do now?"

"We need to find another treasure chest, but we don't know which ships have one. And that's not counting on those which had been claimed yet," Choji replied a bit down.

"Don't lose hope, we still can pass this," Shikamaru interceded. He looked at the blond. "Now Ino, we're going to need your sensory abilities to track other teams."

"Sure I can track them, but how do we know if they have a chest?" Ino asked.

"Easy. Let's find two teams fighting each other. When they exhaust each other, we barge in, beat them senseless and grab the chest," Shikamaru explained.

"Or maybe we could go near the central ship, and ambush a team that's going there?" Choji suggested.

"Well thought, Choji. Now let's see what kind of team we can find first."

...

Not long after that, Naruto's team already arrived at the central ship. Like Zabuza had stated earlier, it was decorated with multiple flags that made it stand out. The deck was empty save for a couple pile of

crates and barrels, more than likely either empty or with its goods already spoiled. And guarding the only door to go inside the ship was none other than Zabuza Momochi himself. The three Genin, and two Naruto clones carrying the treasure chest, walked up to him.

"Well, well, well, look what do we have here," the Kiri Jonin mentioned as he rubbed his chin. "So, I see that you have the treasure chest. Was it hard to get it?"

Naruto eyed Zabuza carefully. "Are you the real one, or are you a clone as well?"

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "So, you fought against one of my water clones? I did sense a couple of them disappearing earlier."

"You didn't answer my question," Naruto insisted.

Zabuza rolled his eyes. "I'm the real one. Do you think that they'd put a clone in charge of verifying the passing teams?"

"Speaking of which," Naruto motioned his clones to take a step forward and brought the chest to Zabuza. "Did we pass?"

"We'll see" the swordsman mysteriously answered. Zabuza then pulled out a key from under his shirt, and used it to unlock and open the chest. Inside it, resting over a bed of straw, there were three large metallic bracers with the words "FINALIST" carved upon them. "Yes, everything seems to be in order" Zabuza then handed the bracers to the three Genin. "Keep those on as prove that you passed this test."

"Yay, we did it! One more test and we will be Chunin!" Naruto cheered, bouncing up and down in excitement.

"Don't cheer so soon, brat. You did well, but the last part of the exam is the one that counts the most," the swordsman then moved aside, and opened the door to the inside of the ship. "One of the ninja

inside the ship will show you your cabin. If you want to eat something, head to the cafeteria."

Team Kurenai did as Zabuza told them, and upon entering the ship, a Chunin was already there to take them to their cabin. All the teams who made it to the second phase of the exams had a cabin prepared in advance, marked with the names of each teammate, as well as a symbol of their village.

The cabins weren't that great, a small, cramped place with a triple bunk bed, and a small, empty wardrobe, to store their belongings while they were on the ship. Naruto scanned their provisional home, and frowned.

"Well, this isn't exactly a resort, but guess that it will have to do" the blond crossed his arms.

"I agree, but then again, we will only come here to sleep," Haku commented.

Upon hearing Haku and seeing the beds, a realization suddenly dawned upon Hinata, who started to turn red.

"Wait a minute... a-are we s-supposed to s-sleep the t-three of us... together?" the Hyuga asked, almost trembling.

"Guess that they couldn't spare more than one room per team", Haku guessed. Then he looked at his distressed teammate. "But don't worry, Naruto and I will make sure not to make you feel uncomfortable."

"Yeah, we will give you all the privacy you want whenever you need to get changed" Naruto reassured. "Anyway, fighting against the fake Zabuza left me hungry, I'm going to the cafeteria. Who wants to join me?"

"I think I'll go with you as well, Naruto-kun. I could use some food," Hinata answered.

"Yeah, me too," Haku replied.

After one of the patrolling Chunin told them the way, Team Kurenai arrived at the cafeteria. Much to their surprise, they saw other two teams already there: Kakashi's Animal Squad, and a team from Kumogakure composed of two girls and a boy.

"Aw man, two teams already here? I thought that we were the first ones to arrive" Naruto moaned.

Kiba, who was sitting with Tamaki and Shino on a table, were on the process of finishing their meals and heard Naruto's comment and turned his head at him.

"Hey, look who's finally here! You took your sweet time!" the dog ninja mocked.

"This isn't a race, Kiba," Naruto retorted, crossing his arms.

Kiba snorted dismissively. "Yeah, as if you would think that if you arrived here first."

"Actually, Naruto-san has a point. It doesn't matter if you arrive here first or last, as long as you arrive. That won't give you an edge during the next phase of the exam," Haku interceded.

"I have to disagree on that, Haku-san" Shino mentioned, as he adjusted his glasses. "Due the nature of this test, the more time you take to complete it, the smaller the chances of success. Therefore, arriving here first is an indicator of a team's skill and power. But then again, given that the difference between the time of arrival of our teams is negligible, so is the difference of our skills."

"Well, there's also luck. We got pretty lucky that we caught a team fighting against a Zabuza clone and were able to steal their chest before they noticed" Tamaki explained.

"Anyway, according to my sister, the last phase of the exam is usually a fighting tournament. That will be the best way to determine which one of us is the best ninja. Which will be me," Kiba proudly stated. Akamaru happily barked in agreement.

"In your dreams, mutt," Naruto retorted, but decided not to waste his time anymore trading bravado with Kiba, and headed for the cafeteria's counter to see what they had to eat. Much to his disappointment, there was no ramen.

Half an hour later, Shizune's Medical Squad arrived at the cafeteria. Naruto felt the impulse of taunting Sasuke about his team arriving first, but remembering his conversation with Kiba, he decided that he didn't want to be a hypocrite and bit his tongue. Still, he decided to greet them.

"Hey, what's up guys?" Naruto asked as he walked towards them. "How was the test?"

"It was okay, I guess. You could say we had a bit of luck with our opponents," Sakura replied.

"What about you, Naruto? Did you have to fight against somebody strong?" Karin asked.

"Nope, we managed to get our treasure chest before other teams arrived. Though we did have to fight against a Zabuzza clone," Naruto explained.

"Our treasure chest was full of traps, but thanks to the Shadow Clones we managed to disable all of them. Thanks again for teaching me that jutsu, Naruto," Karin replied with a genuine smile.

"It's useful, isn't it?" Naruto smiled as he put his hands behind his head. "Well, I better go back to my team. Good to see you guys make it."

Team Shizune decided to grab something to eat, and headed to an empty table. Sakura noticed that Sasuke didn't utter a word since their encounter with the Taki ninja, and while that wasn't unusual for the Uchiha teen, he also looked a bit absentminded.

"Sasuke, you've been pretty silent, is everything okay?" Sakura asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm only thinking," Sasuke replied.

"... can you tell us what worries you so much?" Sakura asked as politely as possible.

"It's about that girl, Fu. I've been trying to figure out what's so important about her to warrant an escort of two Jonin. The next phase of the exam is going to be a fighting tournament, and I want to be ready in case I have to fight her," Sasuke turned at his bespectacled teammate. "Karin, did you notice something unusual about her?"

"Well... her chakra was really potent for a Genin, and massive. Almost as much as Naruto's. Maybe I can take a better look at her chakra the next time I see her," Karin replied.

"If you see her," Sakura corrected. "There's no guarantee that her team will pass this exam."

"With two Jonin, no other team has any chance to beat them. They will pass," Sasuke interceded.

"Speaking of which, why did we agree to keep this a secret? You said you're worried about fighting that green haired girl in the finals, but aren't you worried about those two Jonin?" Sakura asked, a bit puzzled.

"Despite keeping the team together was a requirement to pass the first two phases, the teams are usually dissolved before the final phase. We will be on our own, and so will Fu, meaning that she won't

need her escorts, which I presume they will quit before the final phase, or throw their matches if they decide to keep their masquerade," Sasuke deduced, but Sakura wasn't entirely convinced.

"And what if such thing doesn't happen?" Sakura asked.

"Then we will have to denounce them to the Hokage" Sasuke firmly stated.

About an hour later, another team arrived. This time, it was Team Baki from Sunagakure. Naruto beamed upon seeing his foreign friends, and went to greet them.

"Hey, you guys made it!" Naruto cheered.

"Of course! Did you doubt it?" Kankuro proudly replied.

Temari just rolled her eyes, and decided not to reveal how Kankuro was possessed by that other blonde kunoichi.

"By the way, Naruto," Gaara spoke up in his usual monotone. "A thin boy with spiky black hair styled in a ponytail, an obese kid with brown hair, and a girl with long blond hair and blue eyes. Do you know anybody who looks like that?"

"Yeah, that sounds like Shikamaru, Choji and Ino. Why do you ask, did you fight them?" Naruto asked, and suddenly realized what had happened. "Wait, you didn't kill them, don't you!?"

"No, no!" Temari was quick to correct Naruto's assumptions. "We did fight against them, but they're okay. We didn't plan to kill any Konoha ninja your age just in case they were your friends. But it's more than likely that they won't pass this phase."

"What a pity. I was hoping that they would make it. You see, they fought alongside us on a very dangerous mission not long ago, and

we would have died if it wasn't for their help," Naruto replied, a bit saddened.

"Hey, don't look so down! This isn't the worst that can happen during these exams. They will live to try again in a few months," Kankuro said, trying to reassure Naruto.

"Now that I think about it, it's very likely that we will end up fighting each other in the finals..." Naruto awkwardly said, as he rubbed the back of his head.

"I'm actually looking forward to it, Naruto" Gaara stated, staring intensely at Naruto. "I really want to check how strong you really are."

Naruto smiled at him. "I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

...

No more teams arrived that day. Besides eating and passing time at the cafeteria, and sparring in a special room designed for light training, there was not much else to do, and the five teams who had completed the second part of the test spent most of the day at the cafeteria, chatting. The Konoha ninja sometimes gathered in groups larger than their teams, while the Kumo and Suna ninjas usually remained separated, though Naruto sometimes joined the latter for a chat.

Finally, sometime after lunchtime, a new team arrived, composed of Neji, Lee and Tenten.

"Oh boy, look how many people arrived before us," Tenten noted, shaking her head. "And most of them are rookies!"

"I know! That was mostly unyouthful on our part!" Lee excitedly claimed. "As a punishment, I will run one hundred laps around Konoha on my hands, while carrying a boulder! And If I can't do that-"

"There's no point in fretting over that," Neji interrupted his hot blooded teammate. "That's in the past. We should focus on passing the next round, whatever it is."

Lee was about to reply something, but his eyes drifted towards certain pink haired girl, sitting with her two teammates. Despite not being able to use ninjutsu, Neji and Tenten would swear he used the Body Flicker to disappear and reappear next to Sakura.

"Oh, Sakura-san, I'm so happy to see that you passed this test as well!" Lee said as he grabbed her hand. "But it should not be a surprise to see that your talent and strength are just as great as your beauty."

Sakura started to sweat. "Uh... er... you're... eh, very kind, Lee..." Sakura said as she removed her hand from Lee's.

Karin's mouth formed a wicked smile. "Sasuke-kun, I believe we should leave the two lovebirds some time alone, don't you think so?"

Before Sasuke had any time to react, Karin was dragging him away. "What?"

"Hey wait, where do you think you're going!" Sakura exclaimed. Everybody correctly guessed that she was more outraged at the thought of Sasuke and Karin being alone than being left with Lee.

Karin then blushed, and smiled tenderly at him. "Besides, I believe we could use some time alone, you and me"

"WHAT!?" Both Sasuke and Sakura shouted in unison.

Sakura immediately grabbed Karin, and the two of them started a loud argument. Sasuke took advantage of this and left the cafeteria unnoticed.

While Lee tried to regain Sakura's attention -which was focused on Karin- his teammates decided to approach Team Kurenai. Or better

said, Neji decided to approach Hinata, and Tenten followed him.

"Good afternoon, Hinata-sama," Neji greeted in his usual stoic and overly polite tone. "It seems that your team got less trouble passing this part of the test than mine, given that you arrived here before us."

"You could say we had some luck. It's good to see that you and your team made it as well, nii-san," Hinata greeted her cousin with a smile.

Tenten spoke up. "Of course! We weren't going to be left behind a bunch of rookies! No offense" she added, looking at Team Kurenai with a semi-apologetic look.

"None taken" Haku replied.

"You know, now I kind of wish we didn't finish this part so soon. This waiting is killing me!" Naruto complained.

"Be careful with what you wish for. With each passing hour, the chances of passing this test dwindle more and more. And their chances after the first day weren't so big to begin with," Neji interceded.

Haku cleared his throat. It was about time to make his move. He needed to stay alone with his crush, and knew the perfect excuse.

"Um, Tenten, may I ask you something?" the Ice Ninja asked.

"Shoot," was her reply.

"If you're not too tired, would you like to spar with me in one of the training rooms?" Haku asked.

Tenten raised an eyebrow, a bit puzzled. "You're right, I'm a bit tired right now, but guess that I could do it later. But, why me? Don't you prefer to spar with your teammates?"

"The reason I chose you is because from what I've been told, you're a mid-ranged fighter, just like me. Besides, I sparred against my teammates countless times already, and as you have with your teammates. It would be good for the both of us to fight against somebody new before the final test."

"You have a point there. I barely fight against anybody that's not a close combat specialist, so I could use a change. But now, I'm going to have something to eat, and then I will take a nap," Tenten replied. He looked at her Hyuga teammate. "Neji, you coming?"

"I'm right behind you. And we should... liberate Sakura from Lee's affections," Neji suggested.

Once the older Genin left, Haku sighed in relief. Naruto grinned devilishly.

"So, that's why you were so interested in Tenten, huh? You have a crush on her?" it was less a question and more a statement.

"She's really cute," Haku replied. "But I wish to know her better before making any moves on her. And a spar is the perfect excuse to do that, and we will be alone."

"Eh, okay. But you shouldn't let that girl distract you too much. There's still one last phase yet and we need you at one hundred percent," Naruto warned, in an almost parenting tone.

"When I asked her for a spar, I meant it. Tenten has been a ninja for far more time than us, so I believe I could benefit from sparring with her," Haku explained. Then, he smiled in a way Naruto found odd. "Maybe you two should find a room and spar as well, don't you think?"

"Right! We can't afford losing due lack of preparation now that we're so close to the finish line! What do you say, Hinata?"

"Uh... sure, I'd love to be alone with you-I mean, to spar against you, Naruto-kun," Hinata stammered.

...

By dinnertime, only one other team arrived, one with a certain green haired girl on it.

"Hello everybody, Team Fu is here!" the green haired girl announced with her usual excitement. She scanned the teams there having dinner, until she found some familiar faces.

"Fu! Over here!" Tamaki waved at her, indicating her and her team to take a seat with Team Kakashi.

After getting something to eat, Fu and her team sat besides Shino, Kiba and Tamaki and started talking. Though to be fair, it was Fu who talked with the members of Team Kakashi, while her teammates Kego and Yoro remained silent.

"So hey, how long have you been here?" Fu asked.

"Pretty much since the test began. We managed to snatch a treasure chest real quick and bring it here in no time!" Tamaki proudly recounted.

"Such luck! We had to fight against another Konoha team, but they made us retreat," Fu explained. "We were afraid that we wouldn't be able to find a treasure chest in time, but I wasn't going to leave the exam so soon! Especially not after befriending so many cool people here!"

"We're glad to see that you made it, even with some difficulty," Shino spoke up.

"Eh, it wouldn't be much fun if it was easy, would it?" Fu asked, smiling.

"Well, if it's easy, that means that your skills are above the requirements," Kiba retorted.

Fu continued talking with the Animal Squad for some time. Meanwhile, at another table, another team was keeping an eye on the newcomers.

"Karin, Fu is here. You know what to do," Sasuke instructed.

Karin just nodded, and made a hand seal. With her Mind's Eye of the Kagura, she started to inspect Fu's chakra. Just as she expected, it was abnormally powerful. Watching closer, she realized that there was something inside her that was empowering her chakra. A second source of chakra within her body. It was something that Karin already saw once.

The redhead remembered the time she sensed Naruto, who also had an extremely powerful chakra, and a second source of chakra as well. Naruto explained to her that it was a Tailed Beast sealed within him when he was a baby, and his large chakra reserves were a side effect of the sealing. Would it be possible that this Fu was a Jinchuriki too?

"I think I have something," Karin's statement caught her teammates' attention. "I believe that girl may have a demon sealed inside her too."

"Those are bad news," Sasuke replied.

"I'm sure it's not that bad. Naruto has a demon as well, and he isn't *that* strong," Sakura commented. "I mean, he is strong, but not as strong as you, Sasuke-kun. He never defeated you so far."

"Maybe. But that girl is not Naruto, and assuming otherwise would be unwise," the Uchiha retorted. "When I saw those wings, I thought it was a Bloodline Limit, but now I'm not so sure. That girl might have other hidden abilities we are not aware of."

"Uh oh," Karin muttered.

Sakura turned at her. "I don't like the sound of that."

"I just picked up another guy whose chakra signature has similarities to Naruto's and that girl. The redhead kid from the Suna team," Karin pointed out.

"Ugh, how many people have demons sealed inside them? I thought Naruto was the only one!" Sakura groaned. It seemed like the exam was getting progressively harder every minute.

...

The last day of the exam was just as uneventful as the others. Just like the previous two days, most of the Genin spent the time at the cafeteria chattering and eating, and sometimes training to blow off some steam. All that waiting was starting to make them restless.

Naruto and Hinata were in one of the training rooms, fighting against each other. They agreed that Hinata would only use the Byakugan and the Thunder Palm, while Naruto would only use clones. Those restrictions were for the sake of keeping the fight simple, as well as honing those two specific skills as well.

While Hinata started the fight really well, poofing clones left and right while keeping them at bay, she slowed down little by little, and her defense grew sloppier.

"Hinata? Are you alright?" Naruto asked.

"I used up a lot of chakra, do you mind if we rest a bit?" Hinata replied between pants.

With a hand seal, Naruto dispelled his remaining clones and smiled at her. "Sure. Sorry, I think I may overdid a little. Sometimes I forget that not everybody else has my stamina," he said as he tossed a water bottle at his teammate.

Hinata caught the bottle and opened it. "No, it's my chakra reserves. It's just too small. I think I should work harder on expanding it a bit. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to keep up with you during long fights," Hinata replied.

"Given that I have so much chakra, maybe I could share some with you?" Naruto suggested, but much to his confusion, Hinata shook her head.

"It's not that easy, Naruto-kun. People have different chakra types, and some kinds of chakra aren't compatible. It's akin to blood donations. You need a compatible type," Hinata explained.

"So if I tried to transfer my chakra to you and we weren't compatible..." Naruto started.

"... your chakra would harm me," Hinata finished. "In fact, that's one of the basics of the Gentle Fist: to introduce your chakra inside the enemy's body. Though the chakra is specifically molded so it's always harmful to the opponent, in case you fight against somebody with chakra compatibility."

"And how would we know if we're compatible?" Naruto asked.

"There's no way to know that without trying to transfer our chakra," Hinata explained.

"And... do you want to try?" Naruto asked, a bit uneasy.

"I don't see why not. Being able to share our chakra would be an invaluable ability," Hinata replied.

Naruto was unsure. "But... what if I hurt you?"

Hinata smiled at him sweetly. "Don't worry, we'll only transfer minimal amounts of chakra so the damage is negligible."

Naruto perked up a bit. "Okay! So... how do we do it?"

"Well..." Hinata started to fidget with her index fingers. "W-We need to create p-physical contact..."

"Physical contact?" Naruto suddenly grabbed both of Hinata's hands. "Like this?"

"Y-yes" the Hyuga tried her hardest not to blush. "Now t-try to t-transfer some of your c-charka into my s-system, Naruto-kun..."

As the blond prepared, he could feel Hinata's chakra almost as if he was a sensor now. And just like Hinata had said, her chakra felt different to his. That would mean that they weren't compatible. Naruto was about to let her hands go when he got an idea: he heard Tsunade explaining that in order to use her Immense Healing Network, she molded her chakra to make it compatible with Katsuyu, so the slug could use it to heal others. So maybe he could try something similar?

He gathered some chakra, and sensing Hinata's, tried to mold it so it would be similar to Hinata's. When he felt it was similar enough, he pushed the modified chakra into Hinata's system. The Hyuga shuddered upon feeling the foreign chakra.

"Hinata...? Are you okay...?" Naruto asked.

"It... it worked! We're compatible!" the Hyuga cheered, clasping Naruto's hands.

"Actually, we aren't," Hinata was visibly confused upon hearing Naruto's words, so he elaborated. "You see, our chakra was too different, but I molded my chakra so it was similar to yours before sending it. But it worked in the end!"

"You did that? That was really ingenious!" Hinata praised.

"Hehe, thanks" this time, it was Naruto who blushed a bit. "Say, do you want more? I have tons of chakra, so maybe I could replenish your chakra reserves completely."

"O-Okay, but don't overdo it. I don't want you to exhaust yourself."

Naruto nodded, and repeated the process -which was much easier the second time- until Hinata's chakra was once again at its fullest. They broke physical contact.

"How do you feel?" Naruto asked, a bit worried.

"Amazing..." Hinata scanned her body as if this was the first time she saw it. "It's like I never used my chakra to begin with!"

"Cool! Now if you or Haku run out of chakra during a mission, I can recharge your reserves!" Naruto grinned.

There was a moment of comfortable silence between the two of them, until Naruto spoke up once again.

"Speaking of Haku, I've been thinking... do you think he'll have some luck with Tenten?" Naruto asked.

"I don't know. Maybe?" Hinata never thought much about it. She didn't know Tenten much.

"I hope he does. Besides, that girl seems to be one of the few of our age not chasing after Sasuke, the others being you and Ino, so he won't have much competition. Speaking of which... Hinata, is there a boy you like?"

Hinata's face turned so red that steam started to come from her head. "W-WHAAAAT!?"

"It's just that most girls our age are already pinning for a boy, and I thought that maybe you liked somebody..."

"I... uh... e-eh... well..." Hinata wasn't even able to form proper words.

"So you do..." Naruto declared. Hinata could faint at any moment. "It's okay, I won't ask you who is, since you're obviously not very

comfortable talking about it."

"T-Thank you..." Hinata babbled.

"Whoever that boy is... I'm sure he's lucky of having a girl as amazing as you wanting to be his girlfriend" Naruto mentioned.

Yet, for some reason, the idea of Hinata having a boyfriend was something he couldn't agree with. If he was okay with Haku chasing Tenten... then why wasn't he okay with Hinata chasing somebody else?

...

When it appeared that only seven teams were going to pass the second test, Team Asuma arrived shortly before dinner, much to everybody else's displeasure, since that meant that the next phase of the exams would be a little more difficult due the extra competition. However, despite this, Naruto, Hinata and Haku were quite happy to see that they made it to the finals, regardless of the additional difficulty that it implied.

The next morning, the eight passing teams were summoned to the ship's main hold. Upon entering, they saw that the hold has been remodeled into a fighting arena, with two sets of stands at each side, and a huge plasma screen mounted on one of the walls.

In front of the twenty four Genin, were the Hokage, Jiraiya, flanked by Tsunade, Shisui, Zabuza, the Jonin-sensei of the teams that had passed (minus Fu's team) as well as a few other exam proctors. Zabuza took several steps forward.

"And now, the second phase of the Chunin Exams is now over. Congratulations to all of you who passed. But once again, don't think you are Chunin already, since the worst is yet to come," Zabuza told them.

"Man, he can't even congratulate us without slipping a threat. That guy has issues," Kiba commented, rolling his eyes.

"Thank you, Zabuza," Jiraiya spoke up. Zabuza nodded and returned to his previous place while Jiraiya took his. "You should feel proud. Almost two hundred Genin took the exam, and yet only a small fraction of that number reached the finals. That's a testament of your ability to work as a team. However, this begets a question: how do we know that all of you contributed to your team's success, and you didn't let your teammates do all the work while you shared their success? The third and final phase of the exam will reveal it all: a one-on-one fight tournament!"

Jiraiya then proceeded to explain the hidden purpose of the Chunin Exams: a war simulation between villages, as a way for said villages to showcase their power to potential customers. That's why the finals would be held in a stadium in a month's time for everybody to see, among them many nobles, including the Lord of the Land of Fire himself.

"However, there is a problem," worry started to spread like wildfire among the Genin upon hearing those words from the Hokage. "Too many Genin passed. A tournament of twenty four people would take way too long to finish. That's why we're going to cut that number in half right now."

"What!? We made it to the finals, you can't kick half of us just because you say so!" Kiba loudly protested.

"How are you going to determine which of us are going to pass to the finals then?" Ino asked, no less outraged.

Jiraiya grinned. "Easy. We're going to have twelve one on one fights right here, right now! Take a look at the screen above us: the two names displayed there will be the first two to fight for a spot in the finals!"

Author's Note: And with another phase over, the Chunin Exams are now a bit closer to their end.

Next chapter will feature the preliminaries, which will be a two parter, with six fights on each chapter, and probably the most action-packed chapters of the story so far. They gave me a lot of hell to write, so I hope you will enjoy them.

So, make your bets, people! What kind of matches will we see? Who will pass to the finals, and who will kiss the exams goodbye? I can tell you now that NONE of the preliminary fights from canon will happen. Everybody will have a new opponent (albeit in some cases, such as Sasuke, Shikamaru or Shino, it's obvious since their canon opponents aren't present this time around).

In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Preliminaries, Part I

Authro's note: And now we reach the preliminaries. At least, the first half. I've seen some fics in which the authors barely touch the "unimportant" fights and focus on the ones they deem important (like those involving Naruto, Sasuke, Gaara, maybe Sakura and Hinata...). I'm not going to do that, since that's so lazy, even Shikamaru would disprove. While not all the fights will be equally long, I tried to make them exciting and meaningful to some degree.

And as much as I'd like to ignore it, I know that AT LEAST one of the fights just in this part only is going to be controversial. Still, I hope the review section isn't on fire after this chapter. Still, I'm sure you'll enjoy this chapter:

Chapter 23:

Preliminaries, Part I

or

More than just hurt feelings

"By the way, let me introduce you the lovely proctor of the third and final phase of the exam, Yugao Uzuki" Jiraiya motioned to the purple haired woman, wearing the usual Konoha uniform as opposed to her ANBU gear. Jiraiya looked at Haku. "But I'm sure that some of you already know her."

Yugao took a step forward. "Alright, I'll be the referee during the fights, both now and during the actual finals. The fight will end when one of the combatants is knocked out, gives up, dies, or I declare a winner. Any questions?"

Sakura raised her hand. "What happens if it's a tie? Like a double KO?"

"In that case, there is no winner and both combatants are eliminated," was Yugao's answer. Sakura looked uneasy. "Any more questions? No? If that's the case, let us begin."

Everybody watched the screen as it flashed names at an imperceptible speed. After no less than thirty seconds, it finally revealed two names.

Tenten VS Omoi

"Alright, everybody but Tenten and Omoi, to the stands! Tenten and Omoi, get over here!" Yugao called.

While Tenten and Omoi got ready to fight, the Genin sat on the stands on the left side, where they were joined by their respective Jonin-sensei. Jiraiya and the rest sat on the stands on the opposite side. The stands were elevated several meters in the air, to both give the spectators a better view, and to protect them from any stray attack.

"Tenten is so lucky! I wish I was the first one to fight!" Lee pouted.

"Don't worry Lee, you will have your chance! Now Tenten needs you to cheer her on!" Gai replied.

"Right! Come on Tenten! Blind everybody with your flames of youth!"

Tenten smiled awkwardly at Lee's overly enthusiastic cheers. She then glanced at Tsunade, who was watching the fight about to begin. A painful memory from the previous year resurfaced once again...

FLASHBACK

Tenten was in a classroom inside Konoha's Hospital, alongside other ninja, studying under Tsunade to be a medic-nin. All of her classmates were already adults, her being the only Academy

student. So far, medicine proved to be harder than she had expected, but she had a good feeling about the last test she took.

That is, until Tsunade show her the results of that test.

"What?" Tenten asked, disheartened.

Of the fifty questions the test had, she only answered eight correctly.

Tsunade sighed. She didn't like what she was going to say, but she had to. For the girl's sake, at least.

"Tenten, this is the third test you fail in a row," Tsunade began.

"I know! But don't worry, I'll work harder to make sure I pass the next one!" Tenten was quick to answer.

Tsunade sighed once again. "It's not just the matter of failing. I mean, on this test, you only got eight questions out of fifty right. That's not even a twenty percent," Tsunade held up a hand when Tenten was about to protest to silence her. "Tenten, don't you think that maybe medicine isn't for you?"

"But... but... I always wanted to be like you, Tsunade-sama! You were -are- my inspiration for becoming a kunoichi!" she begged.

"And I'm glad that you see me in such light, but that doesn't mean that you have to follow the same path I did. You can be an awesome kunoichi. I saw your grades at the Academy, and they're promising. You only need to find your right calling. Right now, you're only wasting both our times. Do you understand?"

Deep down, Tenten knew she was right. Being a medic-nin was a delicate job in which the tiniest failure could have horrible repercussions, and she wasn't doing a very good job. Maybe she should quit now and find something else more suited to her.

"Alright, Tsunade-sama. I'll pick another specialty then," Tenten replied, holding back the tears.

Tsunade smiled at her and place a hand on her shoulder. "Don't let this get you down, okay? I know talent when I see it."

END FLASHBACK

"Now is my chance to show Tsunade-sama how strong I am," Tenten thought.

"Omoi can't lose this fight, he'll impress all with his might, and his opponent better sees that the best path is to flee!" Killer B rapped, while waving his arms in front of his face.

Everybody stared at the Kumo Jonin, though he didn't notice, or if he noticed, he didn't care.

"Hmmm, so the Raikage sent one of the Jinchuriki here, unprotected? Strange. I'll better keep an eye on him," Jiraiya mused.

All eyes were on Tenten and Omoi, both ready to fight.

"Begin!" Yugao made a chopping motion with her hand and jumped backwards.

Losing no time, Omoi unsheathed his katana and charged at Tenten, who smiled, and pulled out a sealing scroll. She unsealed another katana and a shoto, and charged against the Kumo ninja. Their blades crashed against each others' with loud clangs, producing sparks upon contact.

"I'm glad that you're my opponent. It's been a while since I was able to fight against another swordsman!" Tenten said as she pressed in the offensive.

"Soon you will regret that. Kumogakure is home to some of the best swordsmen of the entire Elemental Nations!" Omoi replied.

They continued trading blows, with none of them appearing to have the upper hand. That moment, Omoi decided to reveal one of his

tricks, and made several hand seals.

"Now you will feel to power of Kumo's swordsmen! Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Omoi channeled lightning through his katana, which started to crackle with electricity, and charged forwards. Tenten tried to block Omoi's vertical slash, but much to her shock, Omoi's katana sliced through hers as if it was made of butter.

"What!?" Tenten asked in shock, as she jumped backwards to avoid the slash.

"Still glad to fight against me?" Omoi asked, smirking at her.

Tenten smirked back. "Hmph. This was just a setback. If you're superior to me in close quarter combat, I'll simply switch to mid range instead!"

Tenten leaped backwards, and in mid air, she pulled another sealing scroll. Doing a somersault, she opened the scroll, facing Omoi.

"Manipulated Tools: Steel Storm!"

Multiple kunai and shuriken rained upon Omoi, who did his best to deflect them while jumping backwards and sideways to avoid those he couldn't block. Still, some of them managed to graze his skin, causing some superficial cuts.

"I can fight mid-range too!" Omoi stabbed his katana on the ground and made several hand seals. "Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Omoi cast his hands forward, releasing multiple lightning bolts, all which impacted on Tenten, still mid air. However, much to his surprise, Tenten disappeared in a poof of smoke, leaving a kunai in her place.

"What?" Omoi turned around and saw Tenten smiling at him. But he had no time to react, and the short haired kunoichi greeted him with

a kick to his jaw which sent him a few meters back.

"What the hell was that?" Kiba asked, a bit confused.

Knowing that she had no time to waste, Tenten unsealed a kusarigama from one of her scrolls and leaped at Omoi again. The dark skinned boy knew he had no time for ninjutsu, so he pulled out a couple kunai to block her attack. While on mid air, Tenten swung the spiked ball at the end of her kusarigama and tossed it at Omoi tried to block it, but much to his horror, the spiked ball was aimed lower than he had predicted, and the chain wrapped around his ankles. Tenten's foot then slammed against his face, knocking him down like a fallen tree. Tenten then placed the sickle of her kusarigama on Omoi's neck.

"Say it," the kunoichi said, pressing the sickle against his neck.

"Okay, okay, I give up!" Omoi replied. Tenten unwrapped the kusarigama, and helped Omoi on his feet.

"Winner of the match, Tenten!" Yugao announced.

Tenten jumped and squealed in joy. Gai and Lee loudly cheered her as well. Both Tenten and her felled opponent returned to the stands.

"Good fight," Omoi spoke up. "Using Body Replacement with one of your kunai was a neat trick."

Tenten smiled at him. "Thanks. And sorry that you're out of the finals."

"It's okay. I can try the next time."

"Seriously, what the hell was that?" Karui angrily asked to her returning teammate. "First fight of the day and you lose!"

"Hey, calm down! That girl was strong as hell. Plus she caught me off guard" Omoi replied.

Karui scoffed. "Yeah, I saw that."

Meanwhile, Tenten was being congratulated by her teammates, when somebody else approached her.

"Congratulations for your victory, Tenten-san" Haku praised. "Now I see that you were holding back when we sparred yesterday. You're a really strong kunoichi."

"Thanks, Haku! Haha, yes, I usually don't show my best tricks unless absolutely necessary," Tenten replied with a warm smile.

"The next match is about to begin," Neji interrupted and pointed to the screen, where more names were being flashed until it finally stopped after another good half a minute.

Tamaki VS Kego

"Alright!" Tamaki excitedly said as she jumped into the arena. "Time to kick some ass!"

"Tamaki, be careful," Kiba warned. "According to Akamaru, that guy's chakra level is way above the average Genin."

"I know, I know! Don't worry, I have a plan," the cat kunoichi reassured.

Her opponent, one of Fu's teammates, stepped in without much fuss. Once the two were in front of each other, Yugao motioned them to start.

"Begin!"

Tamaki jumped backwards, bit her thumb, and made five hand seals, before slamming her hands on the floor.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, two cats wearing blue and red kimonos over a mesh armor appeared at Tamaki's side. Kego visibly cringed.

"Are those... cats?" the Taki ninja asked, visibly scared.

"Ninja cats" Tamaki punctualized, as she put on two gauntlets with three long metallic claws each. "Why, are you afraid of cats?"

"No, it's not that, it's that- ACHOOO!" the Taki ninja violently sneezed. "I can't stay near cats because- ACHOOO!"

Tamaki couldn't help but chuckle. "You're allergic to cats? Oh boy, this isn't your lucky day, is it?"

"Tamaki-chan, what do you want us to do?" the cat with the blue kimono asked.

Tamaki's mouth formed a wicked grin. "Denka, Hina... tear him to shreds."

The two cats nodded and suddenly disappeared. Kego was assaulted by two red and blue blurs, which left multiple scars on his body, all while sneezing constantly, and trying to flail his arms aimlessly in a vain attempt to fend off his feline attackers.

"Leave me-ACHOOOOO! I can't -ACHOOOOOOO! This is-ACHOOOOO!"

"Time to end this!" Tamaki rushed towards forward, her claws glowing with a blue light. "Cross Slash!"

Tamaki made two diagonal slashes from opposing angles, forming an X. Kego managed to pull two kunai and block the attack, but the chakra released blew the tools out of his hands, and knocked him on his back.

"And now-"

"I surrender! ACHOOO! Just take those beasts away from me! ACHOOOOO!" Kego pleaded.

"Winner, Tamaki!" Yugao declared.

"Good job, guys!" Tamaki praised her cats while tossing each of them a tasty treat.

"It was a pleasure, Tamaki-chan," Hina replied as she bit her treat.

"Call us again when you need us," Denka said before both he and his sister disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Tamaki returned to her teammates, which congratulated her. From his seat a couple meters away, Shikamaru stared at her with incredulous eyes.

"A kunoichi who summons cats to combat fights against a guy who's allergic to cats. What are the chances?" Shikamaru asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, it's like if I fought a ninja that fights with food!" Choji added.

"I don't think such a ninja exists, Choji," Ino rolled her eyes.

"Still, it would be nice to fight against an opponent like that. I wish I had her luck."

Meanwhile, Tamaki's defeated opponent returned to his team as well.

"I didn't know you were allergic to cats," Yoro told his teammate.

"And I'm not" Kego replied in a whisper. "But it was a believable way to lose. And you may better start thinking in a way to throw your match without raising suspicions."

"Alright, time to start the third match!" Yugao announced as the screen started flashing names once again, until it choose two.

And it was that moment that Shikamaru realized that he didn't have Tamaki's luck. His mouth formed a grimace upon seeing the names

of the next match.

Shikamaru Nara VS Temari

Shikamaru groaned. "Why'd it had to be her?"

As they both walked into the arena -or in Shikamaru's case, dragged himself-, Asuma leaned towards his two other students.

"Do you know her?" the bearded Jonin asked.

"We fought against her team during the second phase," Choji explained, and cringed upon remembering how . "Her team is really strong."

"Well, except for that hooded guy with the painted face," Ino's eyes rested on Kankuro. "He refused to use his jutsu so not to give us intel on him, so we don't know how strong he is."

"The girl has some monstrous wind jutsu that not even Shikamaru's fire jutsu were able to counter," Choji continued.

"So, luck didn't smile at Shikamaru. Still, he's an intelligent and resourceful kid. I'm sure he'll manage to overcome his opponent's superior strength" Asuma said.

On the arena, Shikamaru and Temari were in front of each other, Temari smirking evilly, while Shikamaru had an apathetic expression.

"I'm glad that I got to fight you again. That way we can finish the fight we started at the ship," Temari spoke up. "Since I hate to leave a job half done."

Shikamaru snorted. "Well, at least one of us is happy to be here."

"Don't worry. I know you're friends with Naruto, so I'll try not to hurt you," her smirk grew. "Much."

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks, now I feel much better."

"Ready?" Yugao asked, looking at both of them. "Begin!"

Temari wasted no time and unfolded her massive war fan and prepared to unleash her devastating wind jutsu. However, Shikamaru was faster and got into position to use his.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Temari was forced to cancel her attack in order to jump and run away from Shikamaru's shadow. She zigzagged in hopes of slowing down the chasing shadow.

"Dammit, I have nowhere to run!" Temari cursed inwardly as she started to search through her tool pouch for something that could help her. "Come on, come on... ! There has to be something that can help me-oh, yes, like this!"

Showing a triumphant smirk, Temari threw a smoke bomb at an intermediate point between herself and Shikamaru, and soon both of them were engulfed by a growing cloud of gray smoke. Unable to see his opponent, Shikamaru canceled his jutsu.

"Your jutsu is useless if you can't see your opponent, isn't it?" Temari said in a taunting manner.

"Maybe, But your wind jutsu will dispel all the smoke the moment you use them. You had a good idea, but you didn't think how it would affect you," Shikamaru retorted as he looked around for Temari's more than likely counterattack.

"Oh, I thought about it just right!"

Much to his shock, Temari appeared in front of him, her fan folded and raised over her head, ready to slam Shikamaru with it. This time, it was the lazy genius' turn to dodge and run away from Temari's melee attacks.

"The shadow and fire jutsu, your underdeveloped muscles... it doesn't take a genius to see that you're a mid-range specialist, aren't you?" Temari asked while attacking ceaselessly.

"I was going to say the same thing about you," Shikamaru replied, while dodging a swing to his head.

"True, but I also trained in melee combat just in case," Temari smirked confidently.

"You don't have to swear it. Those mannish arms speak for themselves," Shikamaru pointed out.

"Just because my arms are strong doesn't mean they're mannish!" Temari protested.

Shikamaru pulled a pair of kunai and blocked the incoming fan. The blow was devastating, and the kunai flew out of his hands. That hit nearly cost him his forearms. Now that he had measured his opponent's strength, there was only one thing he could do.

"I give up!" Shikamaru said as he raised a hand.

A chorus of "what!?" and similar exclamations followed Shikamaru's statement. The loudest came from Ino.

"... uh?" Temari asked, mildly confused. "You do?"

"Just like you said, I'm a ranged specialist. My jutsu work fine when fighting alongside my teammates, but they don't much when I'm alone. You clearly are the superior fighter, and I can't hope to defeat you, hence this is the best course of action," Shikamaru explained.

"Oh, come on!" Temari protested.

"Are you sure you want to give up?" Yugao asked Shikamaru, who nodded in return. "If that's the case, then the winner of this match is Temari!"

In the stands, Kankuro cheered, while Gaara smiled a bit. Despite her victory, Temari didn't look as happy as one would expect.

"This is first match between a Konoha and non-Konoha ninja that is won by the latter. Thanks goodness it was somebody from our team," the puppeteer stated.

"That's not fair. Shikamaru's jutsu are to fight alongside others, not on his own. He's smart and talented enough to become Chunin," Choji complained.

"Maybe, but there are times in which a ninja will be alone and won't have any help, and being dependent on your team isn't good," Asuma replied.

"Besides, look at how easily he gave up" Kakashi noted. "I don't think somebody who quits when things get difficult is ready to become Chunin. Maybe he should train to become a better solo fighter for the next exams."

As Shikamaru and Temari returned to the stands, the screen once again started to flash the names of the possible next match.

"All three matches so far have been a boy versus a girl, and the girl always won. I'm glad to see that there are so many good kunoichi this year, even if some aren't from Konoha," Kurenai noted with a smile of satisfaction.

"Well, it seems that the winner of the next match will be a boy regardless of the outcome," Shizune pointed out.

Everybody looked at the screen, and knew that this was going to be a fight worth watching, given the skill level of both combatants.

Sasuke Uchiha VS Neji Hyuga

Both prodigies eyed each other before getting to the arena. Most Konoha Genin were relieved that two of the most powerful

competitors were going to fight each other, and at least only one of them would make it to the finals. The adults, however, thought pretty much the opposite.

"Come on Sasuke-kun, you can do it!" Sakura cheered.

"Yeah, show everybody how awesome you are!" Karin shouted as well.

"I wanted to fight against either of them," Lee pouted, while Tenten rolled her eyes. "Nothing seems to go my way."

"Pity this fight didn't happen in the finals," Jiraiya mentioned. "A clash between these two would surely gave Konoha plenty of publicity."

"Don't underestimate the rest of our Genin, Jiraiya," Tsunade replied. "I'm sure that they will give quite the spectacle as well."

Sasuke and Neji were in front of each other, both eagerly waiting for the proctor to start the match.

"They say that you are among the strongest Genin in Konoha," Sasuke spoke up. "Good. I wouldn't want to go to the finals because I had the luck to fight against a weakling in the prelims."

"Soon you will regret those words, Uchiha. And you will realize that luck had nothing to do with it," Neji replied.

"Ready? Alright then, begin!" Yugao announced.

As expected, the first thing both Genin did was to activate their respective doujutsu before dashing at each other. Neji attacked relentlessly with quick palm strikes. However, Sasuke was able to match his speed and block or deflect all of Neji's hits before they could touch Sasuke, though not without some difficulty. Seeing that in close combat all what he could do is defend, Sasuke jumped backwards.

"Very few people are able to fight a Hyuga in hand to hand combat. Judging by your movements, you have experience fighting against a Gentle Fist practitioner?" Neji asked.

"You could say that. And I know what the so called 'Gentle' Fist can do if you touch me, so that's not gonna happen," Sasuke remarked.

Neji chuckled. "I guess that you sparred against Hinata-sama then," the Hyuga genius concluded. "But don't think that that gives you an edge over me. The skill gap between Hinata-sama and me is as wide as it can get. You can't hope to defeat a lion just because you fought against a cat."

"No, but fighting against Hinata allowed me to learn ways to fight your kind. Such as the fact that as close combat specialists, you have no way of attacking me from afar, a limitation I don't have!" Sasuke's hands then flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a massive fireball at his Hyuga opponent. But far from being intimidated, Neji just smirked, and in a display of impressive speed, jumped aside to dodge the fireball, while dashing at Sasuke until he was once again in close combat range. Neji managed to land two successful strikes which shut down some of Sasuke's tenketsu before the Uchiha jumped back and drew two kunai.

"Such arrogance, believing that you have figured me out," Neji replied, his smirk still present. "Is it how you are, or is it a Uchiha trait? I believe to be the latter, otherwise, your clan wouldn't have been stupid enough to try to take over the whole village."

Sasuke was doing a pretty good job keeping his cool and staying focused, and that comment pretty much ensured that it would no longer be the case. Then again, that might have been Neji's intention.

"Measure your words, Hyuga, before you say something you might regret," Sasuke coldly threatened, as his grip on his kunai tightened.

Neji, however, was undaunted, and continued with his verbal beat down. "Or else what? Do you think you can intimidate me, Sasuke? Then again, it was the Uchiha who ever managed to make me experience true terror, so maybe I am underestimating you?"

"I'm warning you..." Sasuke started to grit his teeth.

Meanwhile, in the stands, people were listening intently to the exchange between the two prodigies, wondering if Neji resented Sasuke, or was there something more.

"What the hell is that brat doing?" Tsunade asked.

"I believe he's trying to rile Sasuke up so he loses his focus and fights more recklessly" Jiraiya deduced.

"I don't like it. Neji is playing a dangerous game. The fate of our clan is a touchy subject for Sasuke" Shisui commented, uneasy. "He's underestimating Sasuke."

"I don't think I will ever forget about the events of that night. Fights left and right, the sound of metal clashing, the smell of burning wood and spilled blood, my clansmen dying, all while father and Hikari-sama tried to bring Hinata-sama, Hanabi-sama and me to safety... and everywhere I looked, there were those red eyes glowing in the dark," Neji recounted. "Where were you that night, Sasuke? Where you comfortably asleep in the safety of your home while your clansmen massacred mine, unaware of the blood that they were spilling?"

That did it. As Sasuke's restraint was completely obliterated, the youngest Uchiha launched himself at the Hyuga prodigy, who was already expecting him in the usual Gentle Fist stance, and a smirk on his face, all the while marveling at how easy it was to goad Sasuke.

However, the Hyuga prodigy found that Sasuke's onslaught wasn't as easy to counter as he had expected. Sasuke's attacks were fast, and put a lot of strength in them, making them hard to block or parry. Still, Neji managed to find and capitalize an opening and stroke Sasuke in the chest with his palm. The Uchiha dropped his kunai, jumped backwards, and coughed some blood.

Neji's smirk widened. "I can sense your killing intent. It's quite potent, might I add. But your desire to hurt me won't become a reality, just like your clan's desire to rule over Konoha."

Sasuke let out a bone-chilling yell, and dashed at Neji once again. The Hyuga prodigy knew that the next time Sasuke made a mistake, it would be the end of the match. Sasuke threw his fist at Neji's face, the latter raising his palm to block it... and then his Byakugan revealed that Sasuke was somehow behind him.

"What?" was all the confused Hyuga could say before Sasuke brutally kicked him in the back, making him fall into the floor face-first. Before Neji could get up, Sasuke kicked him once again in the gut with such force that he was hurled mid air.

Upon getting up, Neji saw multiple shuriken flying at him. Despite his aching body, the Hyuga prodigy managed to nimbly dodge them. Unfortunately for him, Neji didn't notice that the shuriken had ninja wire attached to them. Sasuke pulled back the strings, and the shuriken flew in a circle around Neji, wrapping the wires around him, leaving him immobilized and with his arms pinned to his body.

"Sasuke-kun's chakra is growing darker..." Karin spoke up, as she held her hands together. "I don't like where this is going..."

"Calm down. Neji made Sasuke angry, but I'm sure that he'll be able to keep his anger in check," Shizune reassured.

Or at least, that was what the black haired medic-nin was hoping.

"You want me to be bad? Fine! I'll show you how bad the Uchiha can be!" Sasuke snarled as he made hand seals. "Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a stream of flames and used the strings to direct them at the immobilized Neji. At the last second, Neji managed to make enough force with his body to pull Sasuke and thus canceling his fire jutsu, loosening the wires and freeing his arms. Seeing this as his chance to counterattack, Neji dashed at Sasuke, ready to hit any part of his body with a palm strike. However, just like it happened before, Sasuke vanished and appeared behind him once again.

"That's the Body Flicker! How could you-" Neji quickly turned back, but did so in time to receive a painful fist to the lower jaw. Not giving Neji time to react, Sasuke continued his violent onslaught, throwing punches left and right that the battered Hyuga could barely avoid or block.

Everybody in the stands winced. Lee and Tenten got more worried by the second, while Gai lost his ever present cheerful smile, and was replaced by a serious and stoic mask. Hinata squeaked in horror, and she brought her hands to her mouth.

"I never saw Sasuke-kun this angry and hate-filled before..." Sakura mentioned, horror-stricken.

"What's wrong, asshole? Afraid of the big, bad Uchiha?" Sasuke mockingly asked before finishing with a punch to the gut that knocked Neji on his back.

Neji tried to say something, but all what came from his mouth was a pained grunt. Gathering what little energy he had left, the beaten Hyuga managed to get back on his feet

"Okay, I think I already saw enough," Yugao mentioned as she was about to declare Sasuke the winner.

"What is it, do you still want more?" Sasuke snarled as he pulled out another pair of kunai. "Alright, I'm more than happy to oblige!"

"Sasuke, no, stop!" Shizune yelled.

Sasuke then leaped at Neji, ready to stab his kunai into the Hyuga's flesh, but suddenly a grey blur crossed the arena and slammed Sasuke back into the ground. Upon realizing what happened, he saw an angry Shisui pinning him to the floor, while Yugao's sword was centimeters' away from his eyes.

"That's enough, Sasuke," Shisui calmly said.

"Release me! He has to pay for what he said!" Sasuke screamed as he squirmed, but Shisui's hold was too tight for him. "Why are you stopping me? Didn't you hear what he said about our clan!?"

"I did," Shisui replied. "But that doesn't deserve such a comeuppance. You already beat him, let it go. Doing this, you're only dishonoring our clan even further," Shisui then looked at Yugao. "End the match already."

Yugao nodded, and sheathed her sword. "Winner of the match, Sasuke Uchiha!"

Neji couldn't take it anymore and fell on his knees, before laying on the floor, completely still. Tenten and Lee quickly rushed to check him.

"How is he?" Lee anxiously asked.

"I don't know but... he doesn't look good" Tenten replied as she stared at Neji's bloodied form.

"Maybe I can be of help," a new voice said. Lee and Tenten realized that Karin was now with them. "Lift his head, please. Trust me, I'm a medic."

Deciding to trust Karin, Lee and Tenten did as she instructed them. Karin rolled up her sleeve, and placed her forearm near Neji's mouth. "Bite my arm."

Neji wondered what Karin wanted to do, but he didn't have any energy left to argue with her, and decided to obey. As he sank his teeth on her flesh, Neji felt a wave of chakra coursing through his body, restoring his energy, closing his wounds and erasing the pain. At least to some extent. After a few seconds, Neji was able to stand on his own.

"Thank you," the Hyuga replied. "But why did you help me?"

"The duty of a medic is to help the wounded. Though if you want, you can think of it as me trying to make up for Sasuke-kun's beating," Karin admitted a bit sheepishly. "Though I believe you should go with them, my ability only patched you up a little."

The three Genin of Team Gai turned back to see a couple of uniformed medic-nin carrying a stretcher. Neji agreed, and left with the medic-nin.

Back at the stands, Sakura was also healing Sasuke from the wounds caused by Neji. While healing Sasuke is something she usually enjoyed, there was no joy this time around.

"Sasuke-kun..." Sakura spoke up.

"Drop it, Sakura. Whatever you want to say or ask, just don't" Sasuke icily said before the pinkette could finish.

"O-OK..." Sakura stammered, and continued healing him until she finished. "Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes " the Uchiha grumpily replied. "Thank you."

Everybody soon remembered that the exam was still going on. The screen once again started to flash names, until it stopped after thirty

seconds or so.

Naruto Uzumaki VS Sakura Haruno

"Aw yes, finally, my turn!" Naruto cheered, pumping his fists.

"Good luck, Naruto-kun," Hinata said.

"Sakura isn't the worst opponent you could fight against, but don't lower your guard, understood?" Kurenai warned him.

"Don't worry! I have been developing a special jutsu that I'm sure will grant me victory!" Naruto said as he headed towards the arena.

Meanwhile, Shizune was also giving her student some pointers before the fight.

"... and don't let him fight you in a war of attrition. Naruto-kun has a monstrous stamina and chakra levels, and you will exhaust before he does," Shizune explained. "I know that you're smarter and have a better chakra control than him, so use that to your advantage."

"Don't worry sensei, I will," Sakura replied before walking to the arena as well.

Naruto and Sakura walked towards each other until there was only a small space between them, with Yugao on it. Both of them stared at each other, the fire of determination burning in their eyes.

"Are you ready? Begin!" Yugao announced.

Naruto jumped backwards while made a hand seal that preceded his favorite jutsu. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A dozen Naruto's appeared from small clouds of smoke and rushed at Sakura and quickly surrounded her. The clones charged at her, and Sakura expertly dodged their attacks before dispelling them with her chakra-enhanced punches. The original Naruto, who wasn't part of the attack, analyzed the experience he received from his clones.

"Damn, your super strength improved a lot," Naruto commented.
"Fighting you in close combat is not an option then."

"Wise decision," Sakura smiled in satisfaction. "I should thank you for showing me this technique. It fits like a glove with my excellent chakra control. I bet now you regret teaching this to me, don't you?"

Naruto just smiled and shook his head. "Absolutely not. This only adds to the challenge. And if I can't beat you, then I don't deserve to advance any further."

"Well said," Sakura then cracked her knuckles. "Then, it's my turn to attack!"

The pinkette launched herself at Naruto, her fist already raised. Naruto knew that under any circumstances, he couldn't let Sakura to hit him not even once, or the match would be over. Sakura seemed to think that her enhanced strength would be enough to win the fight. Naruto decided to show her how wrong she was. The orange-clad ninja jumped backwards, and once again summoned more shadow clones.

"Get her!" the original commanded, and the clones charged once more.

"Very smart, Naruto, wearing me down with your clones while you comfortably watch from the distance," Sakura said as she met the army of blondes. "But like hell if I'm going to let you do that!"

Sakura plowed through the clones, dispelling some, ignoring the rest, and going for the original. She gathered chakra in her arm.

"Uh?" Naruto dumbly asked.

"You're mine!" Sakura sank her fist into Naruto's gut, who wheezed as the air was knocked out of his lungs. Sakura smirked triumphantly.

... and much to her confusion, Naruto smirked back at her. Then he poofed in a cloud of smoke.

"What the hell?" Sakura asked in shock.

She turned around and saw the rest of the Naruto clones -she guessed the original should be among them-, charging at her, kunai in hand. Sakura pulled her own kunai and tried to parry the rain of slashes.

"What happened? Sakura saw the original Naruto creating and sending the clones," Sasuke commented. "How could he trick her?"

"Easy. Naruto used the Body Replacement Jutsu with one of his clones. That way, if the original is in danger, he can just switch places with a clone and the enemy will be none the wiser," Shizune explained.

Sasuke pondered her sensei's words. That combo wouldn't be very useful for a normal person, since even the ninja with the biggest chakra reserves couldn't create more than a few clones at a time. However, Naruto could create dozens and dozens. That meant that as long as Naruto had clones, he could avoid almost any kind of harm.

"Sakura will have a hard time countering that kind of defense," Karin mentioned.

"Don't underestimate your teammate, Karin. Sakura is a very resourceful girl," Shizune replied, confident in her words.

Back to the fight, Sakura was fending off against the multiple Naruto clones, parrying their attacks and dispelling them when she had the chance, when she was left momentarily wide open, and a Naruto clone stabbed his kunai on her shoulder.

"HA!" the clone shouted in triumph.

... and much to his shock, his kunai shattered, as if somehow the pinkette's skin was made of steel. The rest of the clones shared his shock.

"What the hell!?"

Sakura smirked, grabbed the clone by the arm, and used it to beat the rest of the stupefied clones until only one was left behind, the original Naruto.

"What the... don't tell me that you can use the chakra-enhanced strength to harden your skin! Because not even mom can do that!" Naruto asked, still in awe.

Sakura smiled. "It's much easier than that, Naruto," and then, Sakura's peach colored skin turned grayish brown, while her pink hair turned a shade of dark silver. "The name of the jutsu is Earth Release: Iron Skin. Usually you cast it beforehand, but I tweaked it a bit so it remains hidden and automatically triggers upon being hit. That way you can catch your opponents off guard, kinda like the Body Replacement."

"So you do have an impressive defense as well," Naruto replied.

"Of course. I'm a medic-nin in training, and medics are among the first ones targeted in a fight. I need to have a way to protect myself that does not rely on an escort," Sakura explained.

"Interesting. And how long does that jutsu last?" Naruto asked.

Sakura smirked at him. "Like hell I'm going to tell you. But then again, I'm not going to let you to drag out the fight for you to find it either."

"Well, good luck with that then" Naruto then formed ten Shadow Clones. "You have no way of stopping me from creating clones, and you will run out of chakra long before I do, and then you will only have your taijutsu, which no offense, isn't very impressive."

"Fortunately, Shizune-sensei taught me a jutsu that I can use to hit you and all your clones at once," Sakura made a hand seal and puffed her cheeks. "Poison Mist!"

Sakura exhaled a huge purple poisonous cloud, forcing Naruto and his clones to jump backwards and put some distance. He started making hand seals to one of his wind jutsu, when Sakura spoke up again.

"And if you're thinking in using your wind jutsu to dispel the poison, keep in mind that doing so may send the poison mist towards the people watching us, and you wouldn't want that, wouldn't you?" Sakura replied. Naruto couldn't see her, but he knew she had a smug smile on her face.

"You thought of everything, didn't you?" Naruto asked.

"Indeed I did. So you better give up now. The poison is not lethal, but it will inflict you great amounts of pain," Sakura explained.

"Give up? I don't know the meaning of those words" Naruto said with a confident grin. "Besides, just because I can't use wind to dispel the poison cloud, it doesn't mean that I can't get rid of it."

"Really? How so?" Sakura asked.

"Did Shizune nee-chan tell you that the poison she makes is extremely flammable?" Naruto asked.

"Of course I do. It's a good way to get rid of it in a fast and easy way, as well as being used as a makeshift explosive," Sakura replied. "But I know you don't have any fire jutsu."

"No... but I have explosive tags" Naruto stated.

Sakura stared at him blankly. "... shit."

Naruto tossed a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it, and upon exploding, the purple cloud went up in flames. One of the clones

used a light wind jutsu to dispel the ensuing smoke.

"And now, it's about time to end this," Naruto declared as he cracked his knuckles.

"Okay, maybe you neutralized my strategy, but we're still back at square one! With my Iron Skin, you have no way of inflicting any harm on me!" Sakura said as she angrily pointed at Naruto.

"No, but I have a jutsu that will knock you out, one that your impressive defense won't protect you from!" Naruto retorted.

Sakura scoffed. "Ha! If you had such an impressive jutsu all along, why didn't you use it before?"

"Because I didn't think it would be necessary. And frankly, because I don't think you deserve to have this jutsu used on you. You're a nice girl. Most of the time" Naruto's words were laced with a feeling of regret.

"Are you implying I'm weak!? Because I'm not! Come on Naruto, do your worst then!" Sakura taunted him.

"Alright... don't say I didn't warn you," Naruto dispelled his clones and charged at Sakura, who adopted a defensive fighting stance. "I'm very sorry Sakura, I hope you don't hate me for doing this."

Back in the stands, Tsunade was trying to figure out what kind of jutsu Naruto was talking about.

"Jiraiya, what is Naruto talking about? Because so far I can only think in a jutsu that can pierce Sakura's defense," the Slug Sannin commented. "Did you...?"

"I know which one are you thinking of, and I can tell you that I didn't teach him yet," Jiraiya replied. "It has to be something Naruto came up on his own."

"By the way he talked, it doesn't seem to be anything short of an A-Rank jutsu," Tsunade replied.

Everybody shared Tsunade and Jiraiya's curiosity about Naruto's fabled jutsu. Still, they were only a few seconds from finding out.

"Here it comes!" Naruto said, forming a hand seal.

"Whatever it is, I am ready!"

However, Sakura wasn't ready for the power Naruto was about to unleash. The poor girl would never be ready.

"Uchiha Harem Jutsu!"

"... wah?"

Multiple clouds of smoke appeared around Sakura, and when the smoke dispersed, the pinkette found herself surrounded. But not surrounded by Naruto clones, at least not normal ones. These clones were transformed into Sasuke. Into a *naked* version of Sasuke, with only a wisp of smoke covering their crotches. The naked Sasukes were in a variety of sexy poses, some of them blowing kisses to the stunned Sakura.

"Hey there, beautiful," one of the Sasuke's said in a very un-Sasuke-y way.

"Why don't you come to play with me?" another one said in a very sultry voice.

"I'm all yours," another one said.

Everybody else in the stands had different reactions to Naruto's "Ultimate Jutsu". Most of the girls his age (including Ino, regardless of how much she would deny it later) were staring at the many naked Sasukes, drooling with blood coming from their noses. The boys and some adults cringed at the display. Many women, including Tsunade, Shizune and Kurenai felt a mixture of disappointment and unbridled

rage. But it was nothing compared to the fury that Sasuke was feeling right now.

Wherever Sakura looked, all she saw was naked Sasukes. She could barely move. She tried to close her eyes, but they didn't obey the brain's orders, since they were too busy eating the eye candy before them. Until Sakura couldn't take it anymore, and the high pressure blood coming from her nose launched her into the air as if she was rocket, until she slammed into the -very high- ceiling, only to crash down into the floor.

Yugao checked the pink-haired kunoichi. She was still alive and breathing, though unconscious. A lewd smile adorned her face.

"Uhhh... winner, Naruto Uzumaki," Yugao unenthusiastically declared. The naked Sasuke's disappeared, leaving only a smiling Naruto.

"Yay!" Naruto cheered, pumping his fists.

Upon returning to the stands, Naruto was congratulated by Hinata and Haku. Kurenai, however, didn't look as happy.

"A well earned victory, I must admit," Kurenai said in an icy tone. "But you and I need to have a talk about that last jutsu you used there."

Far from being intimidated, Naruto just shrugged. "Hey, if a vision of a naked guy sends Sakura into such state... well, I wouldn't say she's ready to be a Chunin, don't you think?"

Kurenai pondered his words for a few seconds. "I guess that there's some truth to that. Still, I wish you used a more conventional way to defeat her. You won't be able to turn your enemies' libido against them all the time."

"Eh, I thought it was a good way to knock her out without harming her much. I mean, I could have summon a toad, but I thought that

was a bit overkill. Though I have would have done it if I had no other options," the blond replied.

Hinata started to wonder if she would have been able to resist a vision of a dozen naked Naruto's around her, or if she would have the same reaction as Sakura. She would never know, and she realized that maybe it was for the best.

After the medic-nin reanimated Sakura, the defeated pinkette returned to the stands, saddened.

"Well, there goes my chance of being Chunin," Sakura said, letting out a sigh.

"Don't be so glum. You did pretty good against Naruto. And you can always try again in six months," Shizune tried to cheer her up, though right now it was of little help.

Once again, everybody directed their attention to the screen, names flashing at an imperceptible speed once again, until it stopped on two names:

Choji Akimichi VS Yoro

The Akimichi clan heir and the Taki ninja went into the arena.

"Come on Choji, I know you can do it," Asuma told Choji with a genuine smile that Choji returned.

"Dammit, how the hell I'm going to lose against this fat ass and make it look believable?" Yoro thought, while his mind raced through the possibilities.

Once the two fighters were in front of each other, the match was ready to start.

"Begin!" Yugao announced, while making a chopping motion.

Choji wasted no time and charged at his opponent while doing a hand seal. "Partial Multi-size Jutsu!"

Choji's arms suddenly increased their size, and with his newly giant hands, tried to crush Yoro as if he was trying to kill a mosquito. Yoro, however, merely jumped to avoid the giant clap, and while in air, tossed a shuriken before doing several hand seals.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

The one shuriken turned into a dozen, and Choji instinctively covered himself with his giant arms. The shuriken embedded themselves into his arms, but at that size, they hurt as much as being poked with a needle. After wiping the shuriken away, Choji's arms returned back to normal.

"Not bad, kid, not bad," Yoro complimented, as he smirked at Choji.

Choji smirked back, or at least, tried to smirk. "That's only one of my clan's many secret jutsus There's more when that came from!"

"Why don't you show me, then?"

"With pleasure!" Choji made another hand seal. "Multi-size Jutsu!"

Mucho to Yoro's surprise, Choji's body bloated and inflated until turning into a human balloon with tiny arms and legs sticking from it. Then, the head and his limbs disappeared inside his clothes, as if Choji was a turtle, and the human boulder started to roll towards Yoro at an impressive speed.

"Human Bullet Tank!"

Yoro saw his opportunity and wasn't going to waste it. He made several hand seals. "That's not bad either, but that's not good enough! Water Release: Water Gun!"

Yoro expelled a stream of water from his mouth against the human boulder, managing to slow it down considerably. Yoro knew that if he

poured more chakra into the jutsu, he could push Choji back. So naturally, he started to subtract Chakra from it, allowing Choji to gain speed and momentum until he finally slammed against the Taki ninja, violently hurling him backwards.

"UGH!" everybody cringed at the thought of being steamrolled by such an attack.

Yoro was now regretting his tactic. That jutsu was way more powerful than it appeared at first. At the very least, his defeat would be believable now. Gathering his strength, he managed to get back on his feet.

"Proctor, I can't keep going!" Yoro shouted, raising a hand.

Choji apparently heard this as he canceled his Human Bullet Tank, and returned to his usual form.

"Since Yoro has forfeited, Choji is the winner of the match!" Yugao declared.

"Alright!" Choji cheered enthusiastically as he returned to the stands.

As for Yoro, he was carried away by a couple of medic-nin.

Upon returning to his team, Choji was approached by his teammates.

"You did it, Choji!" Ino cheered, patting him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, good one," Shikamaru added. "It's good to see that at the very least one of us will go to the finals."

"Make that two! I have no intention of losing my match!" Ino defensively replied.

"I wasn't implying anything about you, Ino," Shikamaru just shook his head.

"You know, given their age, those Takigakure ninjas are surprisingly weak," Haku commented.

"Uh, what do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"Well, let's say that when this round began, I wasn't betting on Tamaki-san and Choji-san making to the finals, given that of all the present ninja here, they have to be among the weakest," Haku explained.

"Well, Tamaki-san had the luck of fighting an opponent who was allergic to her summons," Hinata piped in.

"Too bad there are no people allergic to toads, or so I think," Naruto commented. "But then again, there would be no fun in winning like that."

Sasuke overheard Team Kurenai's conversation. It seemed that the Taki ninja wouldn't be able to maintain their cover for much longer. It was a stroke of luck that Sasuke's team was the one keeping their secret. Karin would have noticed Yoro purposefully decreasing the power of his jutsu to let Choji win. Ino, being also a sensor, would have noticed it as well, but she was just too happy for her teammate's victory to notice or care.

"Alright, so far so good," Jiraiya said, pleased. "We had half the matches, and with the exception of that Suna girl, all the finalists are Konoha Genin. And I'm sure that there will be more in the second half."

"Well, there are still plenty of Konoha Genin," Tsunade observed, and scanned the remaining competitors. "I'm glad that Naruto won, but it's a pity that he had to fight against Sakura. I want at least one of my medic students to make it to the finals. The world needs to see the value of our medic-nin."

"I'm sure some of them will pass. Sakura merely had bad luck," Jiraiya replied.

Once again, the screen started to flash names, until it stopped and displayed the next two combatants. There was a collective gasp, followed by a deafening silence.

Gaara's mouth curved into a smirk. "About time. I was getting tired of waiting."

...

Author's Note: Okay, a lot of discuss here.

First of all, sorry for the Shikamaru vs Temari fight. I pride myself in being original, yet I went with one of the biggest cliches when it comes to the Chunin Exams in fanfiction. They were going to fight against different people, even if Shikamaru was still going to lose and Temari was going to win. But in the end I ended up making them fight each other since I wanted more interaction between them, and this is a set up for a scene between them in a future chapter.

Speaking of Shikamaru, despite what this chapter might made you think, let me assure you that I don't hate him (far from it). But I'm sick and tired of seeing how Shikamaru always gets a promotion no matter what (sometimes he's the ONLY ONE who gets a promotion). The last straw was a fanfic in which he was promoted despite not fighting in the finals. So sorry for Shikamaru and his fans, but he won't be Chunin yet.

I always wanted to see a Sasuke vs Neji fight (at least before the gap between them was too big for such a fight not to be hilariously one sided) and I was very disappointed that neither the manga nor none of the fanfics I've read ever had one. Well, with the exception of "War of the Bijuu". I also want to write a rematch when both of them are more powerful, and their fight can be the focus of the chapter instead of having to share it with other five fights.

A Hinata vs Sakura fight is something very common to see (the winner is usually the one who happens to be Naruto's love interest), but I never saw a Naruto vs Sakura or Naruto vs Hinata, and thought that it would be interesting. Guess that most writers don't do this since Naruto is usually way stronger than either girl, and indeed it was hard to write since I wanted Sakura to be at least a moderate challenge (and Naruto still had to hold back a bit), but at the same time I didn't want her to be too overpowered. I guess it's up to you guys to decide if I was succesful or not.

And on one last note, let's talk about nobody's favorite character, Tenten. I always hate how she's always canon fodder in the Chunin Exams (again, just because she was cannon fodder in the manga), so I'm going to treat her with a bit more respect here, and hopefully show the raw potential of her abilities (but fear not, I won't make her into an overpowered Mary Sue).

Guess that's all. You know already that Gaara will open the second part of the prelims, but who will be his unlucky opponent? In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Preliminaries, Part II

Author's note: Welp, while some reviewers complained, the backlash against the latest chapter wasn't so bad as I thought. I'm glad that most reviewers liked the fights and their outcomes so far. Let's hope you also like the fights from this chapter as well. Though I'm afraid that, just like the previous chapter, at least one of the fights will draw some controversy.

By the way, Son of the Sannin is now in TVTropes' fanfic recommendation page! Thanks a lot to FoxBlueReaver for recommending it!

Anyway, enjoy:

Chapter 24:

Preliminaries, Part II

or

The battlefield is the best place to meet new people

Everybody looked at the screen displaying the names of the next two combatants, many of them with their mouths agape.

Shino Aburame VS Gaara

"Oh man, that's all kinds of troublesome," Shikamaru commented.

"Boy, poor Shino," Choji added. "Not even the three of us could beat that sand guy and he has to fight him on his own."

All the eyes were on Shino, who as usual didn't openly display any kind of emotion. Then again, the bug-using ninja never saw Gaara in action, he merely heard about his exploits.

"Good luck, pal," Kiba said, nudging the Aburame in the shoulder.

"We'll be cheering for you," Tamaki added, smiling sympathetically at him.

Both Shino and Gaara descended upon the arena and walked in front of each other. Yugao made sure that both Genin were ready for the fight.

"Begin!" she shouted before making a chopping motion.

Shino placed some distance between himself and his opponent, and spread his arms sideways. Two swarms of kikai bugs emerged from underneath his sleeves -eliciting quite a few "ewww's!" from people at the stands- and commanded them to attack Gaara, who remained immobile, with his arms crossed.

The deadly swarm of flying insects soon found itself slamming against a nearby impenetrable shield of sand.. Shino mentally commanded the swarm to split into several groups, but a sand barrier would form whenever as mass of bugs tried to get close to Gaara. Shino then pulled three kunai from his tool pouch and tossed them at the sand ninja. The results were the same.

"Whoa, that guy is untouchable! How the hell is Shino going to hit him?" Naruto asked.

"He needs to find the weak point of that shield and exploit it," Kurenai replied.

"Does that sand barrier have a weak point?" Haku skeptically asked. "It looks like there's nothing that Shino can do to pierce it."

"Every jutsu has a weakness Haku, never forget that," Kurenai pointed out.

Hinata activated her Byakugan and analyzed Gaara's sand shield. "It seems like the sand is imbued with chakra, but... not in the way of

the usual ninjutsu. It's a different chakra."

"That has to be the power of his Tailed Beast," Naruto concluded.
"Boy, poor Shino, he got one of the worst possible opponents."

Gaara decided that he had already gave Shino enough time to attack, and thought it was time to end the match. He made a hand seal.

"Wind Release: Sand Shuriken!"

Gaara shot several projectiles made of sand at an impossible high speeds. Shino managed to expertly dodge most of them, but some sliced his skin at several points.

Unfortunately for the bug user, Gaara had just started. Making another hand seal, the sand formed five tentacles, and with another gesture, the hand appendages tried to lash or wrap themselves against Shino, forcing the Aburame into the defensive.

"Man, this is bad," Kiba noted, worried. "Not only does that redhead have an impenetrable defense, but his sand also packs quite a punch. It's bad to say this, but I'm glad that I don't have to fight him."

"Don't lose hope, Shino is pretty strong," Tamaki interjected. "I'm sure that he will think a way to-"

"Proctor, I wish to forfeit," Shino calmly announced.

There were a couple gasps, but given the power of Shino's opponent, nobody was surprised by such decision. Yugao looked at the Aburame.

"Are you sure?" The purple haired woman asked.

"I'm positive. There's no way I can win this fight, so it will be pointless to drag it out," Shino explained.

"Very well," she then motioned at Gaara. "Winner of the fight, Gaara!"

As soon as Gaara was declared victor, all the sand returned to the gourd he carried on his back. The red haired ninja walked towards Shino.

"You put a valiant effort. I don't remember any Genin other than my siblings lasting this long against me," Gaara praised.

"Thank you. I'm afraid that my skill set was badly matched against yours. I believe some of my fellow Konoha Genin would have given you a better fight," Shino replied.

"Maybe. I'm sure I'll find it soon."

While Gaara and Shino returned to the stands, Jiraiya and Tsunade were talking to each other once again.

"That brat is the kid you helped in Suna some years ago, am I right?" Tsunade asked.

Jiraiya nodded in return. "Indeed. His power is nothing sort of impressive. I'm afraid to think what would have become of him if I never fixed his seal. His asshole of a father wouldn't have been of much help either."

"I wonder how Naruto would have fared against him," Tsunade wondered.

"We might get to see that, given that they're both in the finals now," Jiraiya observed. "Which means that I need to accelerate Naruto's training."

After Gaara was congratulated by his teammates and Shino was comforted by his, all the eyes were once again in the screen flashing names. More than half of the Genin there had already fought, so

those who still hadn't were starting to grow antsy. The screen displayed the names of the next two combatants:

Hinata Hyuga VS T

"Your turn, Hinata! Go and kick some ass!" Naruto cheered.

"R-Right!" The white eyed girl nodded, before heading to the arena.

"Interesting. Hinata was kidnapped by Kumo ninja when she was a toddler, and she has to now fight against another ninja of that village. What are the chances?" Kurenai wondered.

Meanwhile, T was also getting prepared for her upcoming match.

"You better not lose like this moron did, you get that?" Karui told her female teammate in a not-so-friendly way.

"Yes! Don't worry, I have this under control!" she assured.

"T is gonna put on an impressive show, all who watches will have their heads blown! As she fights in front of a crowd, she will make her village feel proud!" Killer B rapped while waving his hands wildly.

"Thank you, sensei, I'll do my best!" The blond girl replied before going to the arena.

Once the two kunoichi were in front of each other, Yugao made sure they were ready to fight.

"Begin!"

Both girls adopted a fighting stance -and in Hinata's case, activated her Byakugan-, and after a few seconds of eying each other, Hinata took the initiative and dashed at her, ready to deliver a palm strike to her chest. T blocked Hinata's attack by grabbing her by the wrist with one hand as she tried to stab the Hyuga with the other, but Hinata grabbed T's other wrist as well. After struggling for a bit, both girls broke from each other's grasp and jumped backwards.

"You're good. I wouldn't expect a foreign ninja knowing the proper way to block the Gentle Fist," Hinata praised.

"I did my homework," T smiled at her. "You're good too, not to mention pretty."

Hinata was taken aback. "... p-pretty?"

"Sure. Short hair doesn't look good in most girls, but you manage to pull it off," T began. "Plus you have a really soft skin! You have to tell me what you use to-"

"Goddamit T, stop flirting with the enemy!" Karui bellowed from the stands. "Focus!"

"R-Right! Sorry Karui!" T fearfully apologized as she grew more serious. "I'm sorry Hinata-chan, but I'll have to harm that cute face of yours."

"Hinata-chan? Cute face? Flirting?" Hinata wondered to herself. *"Is this girl...?"*

T flew through several hand seals. "Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

Suddenly, T's body started to glow with an extremely white bright light, illuminating the entire place. Everybody instinctively shielded their eyes, since it was almost like looking directly into the sun. And in Hinata's case, the Byakugan made it even worse.

"AAAAARGH! My eyes!" she yelled as she brought her hands to her eyes and deactivated her Byakugan.

T smirked, having obtained the desired effect, and pulled a bunch of kunai from her tool pouch and tossed them all at the blinded Hyuga.

However, Hinata's eyesight returned earlier than T had expected, and pulling her own kunai, she used it to deflect the flying knives aside with a series of swings while she slowly stepped back.

"She's a ranged fighter. If I have to win this, I can't let her to stay away from me. I need to get closer!" Hinata thought.

The Hyuga launched herself at the Kumo kunoichi, ready to hit her with a palm strike. However, rather trying to grab her like she did before, T made several hand seals while jumping back.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Shield!"

T's whole body crackled with electricity as blue sparks ran through her body. Hinata didn't have her Byakugan activated, but she realized that whatever that was, it wouldn't be wise to touch her and canceled her attack.

"You stopped," T stated.

"Even without my Byakugan, I know that you created some sort of protection around you that will harm me if I touch you, am I right?" Hinata asked.

T smirked at her. "It seems that you're more than just a pretty face. Yeah, you nailed it. As you probably guessed now, I'm not very comfortable in close combat. Omoi and Karui take care of that. I'm the team medic and ranged specialist. That's why I learned this kind of jutsu in case I can't rely on them to protect me."

"You thought about everything. You're a very dedicated kunoichi," Hinata praised.

"Aw, thanks. It's nice to see somebody recognizing my skill," T replied, while glancing at Karui, who scoffed.

"Though sadly for you, that shield won't do much good in the long run," Hinata commented while she made several hand seals.

T smirked once again. "You think so? Okay, come and try to test my shield's effectiveness yourself."

"I plan to!" Hinata said before launching at T once more.

T watched Hinata readying another palm strike. She chuckled. "Do you think you can overpower my shield with brute fo-"

But much to her shock, that's exactly what happened. Hinata struck the Kumo kunoichi in the abdomen, causing her to bend over. Hinata landed another hit on her jaw, sending her backwards.

"What!?" Karui asked, incredulous.

"Alright! Show her who's boss, Hinata!" Naruto cheered.

Hinata couldn't help but blush a bit upon hearing her blond teammate's encouraging words. Still, she forced herself to push Naruto out of her mind and focus solely on the recovering T, who was rubbing her jaw, her shield no longer active.

"H-How... how could you...?" T asked, incredulous. Then, she noticed something about Hinata's hands. They were also crackling with electricity. "What? You're a lightning user too? But Hyugas don't use ninjutsu!"

Hinata just shrugged. "I'm not your typical Hyuga," her Byakugan activated once again. "And I'm sorry, but I have to end this now."

T panicked as Hinata approached her and tried to made the hand seals of her blinding jutsu, but she wasn't fast enough.

"Lightning Release: Lightning-"

"Eight Trigrams: Sixteen Palms! Two palms! Four palms! Eight palms! Sixteen palms!"

Hinata guessed that the weaker version of her clan's signature combo would be enough to deal with her, and her assumptions turned out to be correct. After her attack was over, T laid on the floor, bruised and unable to move, but still alive nonetheless.

Yugao went to check the fallen Kumo kunoichi, and upon seeing her state, she took a decision. "T can no longer fight! Winner, Hinata

Hyuga!"

Hinata sighed in relief. Karui groaned, but her groans were drowned by Naruto's loud cheers. A couple medic-nin arrived to take T away, while Hinata returned to the stands with her team.

"Way to go, Hinata!" Naruto pat her on the back. "I knew you could do it"

Hinata's cheeks slightly turned pink. "T-Thank you. She was a really strong opponent."

"And if her words are to be believed, she wasn't even an actual fighter," Kurenai added. "Kumo is usually very rigorous with the training of their ninjas."

"Well that dude Tenten beat didn't look strong," Naruto pointed out.

"Because he was a close combat specialist, one of the best opponents Tenten could have faced. If Tenten had faced a long range specialist, like say, that Suna kunoichi, I don't think she would have risen victorious," Kurenai explained.

Naruto nodded, then turned at Haku. "Alright Haku, only you're left. Be sure to win, we can't go into the finals without you!"

Haku smiled at Naruto. "Don't worry, I don't plan on losing."

"There are very few Genin left. Maybe Haku-kun will be the next one to fight," Hinata said, noticing that the screen was shuffling names once again.

However, it wouldn't be Haku's turn just yet.

Kiba Inuzuka VS Karin Uzumaki

"Alright, finally my turn!" Kiba cheered as he jumped into the arena. "Come on Akamaru, we got lucky we got such an easy opponent!"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean!?" an enraged Karin asked.

Kakashi sighed. *"I thought that I had taught Kiba not to underestimate any opponent. Guess that I need to work more on that."* The Copy Ninja thought.

"Don't let him get to you," Shizune advised her. "Now, Inuzuka's usually rely in moving fast and hitting hard, so if you keep track of him you shouldn't have any problems. Don't let that dog blindside you either."

Karin nodded. "Don't worry sensei, I'll make you proud!"

Kiba and Karin walked to the center of the arena. Once Yugao checked they were ready, she announced the beginning of the fight.

"Begin!"

Both combatants wasted no time and made a hand seal with both hands.

"Beast Mimicry Art: Four Legs Jutsu!"

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Kiba stood in all fours like an animal. There was a thin veil of chakra flickering all over his body. His fangs and fingernails grew a little, but enough to give him an animal-like appearance. Meanwhile, four clones appeared alongside Karin.

"You idiot, you think that impresses me? You only gave me more targets to hit! Come on Akamaru!" Kiba shouted before charging at Karin, his loyal dog rushing behind.

Karin and her clones pulled out a kunai each, and got ready for the fight. They all noticed Kiba reaching into his tool pouch and pulled something the redheads weren't able to see.

"Take that!" Kiba shouted while tossing the items at Karin's feet, which exploded in a cloud of smoke.

'Smoke bombs?' Karin thought.

By focusing their chakra on their noses, members of the Inuzuka clan could develop a sense of smell so fine it was almost as good as their canine companions'. This allowed them track their enemies by their smell, usually in places with no or very little light. So naturally, the logical way of using this advantage is to create a situation of blindness for both combatants. With the enemy blinded, the Inuzuka's could move for the kill. Sure, they could be heard, but that could be easily fixed with stealth.

Unfortunately for Kiba, he did forget that he was fighting an enemy that had another sense that could use to replace eyesight. When Kiba and Akamaru moved to hit Karin -or one of her clones, all of them smelled the same- their attacks were expertly blocked, much to their shock, and in turn were kicked out of the smoke cloud, which dissipated on its own a few seconds later.

"What? How were you able to see me?" Kiba asked, outraged, as he stood up.

"I'm a sensor, you moron! I can pinpoint your location at all times, so trying to blind me is useless," Karin replied.

"Alright then. I didn't want to resort to this so soon, but I need to win this," Kiba pulled another object from his tool pouch, something very small, and tossed it at Akamaru, whose white fur turned red.

"The hell...?" Karin asked. "Did you feed your dog a soldier pill?"

"Indeed I did," Kiba then ate another pill himself. "Now the real fight begins. Come on Akamaru!"

Kiba hunched over and made a hand seal, and the now red Akamaru jumped at his back.

"Beast Mimicry Art: Beast Human Clone!"

After a smoke explosion, everybody saw that Akamaru had turned into a perfect copy of Kiba. Karin was unimpressed.

"You know I still can tell which is which, right?" Karin asked, as she adjusted her glasses. "Human chakra and animal chakra couldn't be more different. Though in your case, just barely."

"Hmpf. You must think I'm trying to trick you," Kiba retorted. "I'm going to tear you to shreds!"

Kiba and his human-turned dog dashed at Karin once again. The redhead and her clones adopted a defensive stance, though neither of them were ready for what was about to happen.

"Fang Passing Fang!"

Kiba and Akamaru turned into living drills, flying at Karin at high speed. The clones instinctively went to meet them in combat, all of them poofed the moment the spinning Inuzuka and his dog made contact with them. But the attack didn't end there; once Karin's clones were destroyed, Kiba and Akamaru went for the real Karin, who could barely dodge the fierce attacks.

"Dammit, why the hell did I have to underestimate the mutt?" Karin cursed inwardly. "Come on Karin, think! There has to be some weak point to... oh, I know!"

After dodging an attack, Karin's hand reached her tool pouch, and echoing Kiba's actions from before, she pulled out a few smoke bombs and threw them the moment Kiba and Akamaru dashed at her, spinning once again.

While Kiba had an amazing sense of smell, it's too hard, not to say impossible, to use it when you're rotating at high speed inside a cloud of smoke. Disoriented, Kiba and Akamaru were forced to stop.

"You have quick mind, but you're only delaying the inevitable," Kiba taunted.

"You think so?" Karin asked back.

"Yes. You can't avoid me forever. I'm faster and stronger than you, and you will run out of smoke bombs. Then you have nowhere to hide," Kiba replied.

Karin chuckled. "Oh, you'll see that I have an excellent hiding spot," Karin retorted back.

Kiba was about to say something when the smoke started to dissipate, revealing Karin's figure. Kiba was about to attack, when much to his shock, he realized that Karin was holding him PRISONER -or better said, the transformed Akamaru-, wrapped with some strange chains that came from Karin's back. The spectacled redhead was holding a kunai to his neck.

"A lot of people think that being a sensor is only good for looking missing people, and tend to ignore the many uses it has for battle. Such as locating enemies inside a cloud of smoke," Karin smirked at Kiba, while she pressed a kunai against Akamaru's neck, drawing some blood. "Now you have to ask yourself, what's more important to you: becoming a Chunin, or your doggy?"

Kiba was left speechless for a few seconds, as his brain thought possible ways to rescue his four legged best friend. But he was alone, without any kind of support, and he couldn't surprise Karin. He greeted his teeth, while cursing something inaudible.

"Okay, you win," Kiba admitted, sighing. He looked at Yugao. "Protcor, I wish to forfeit."

Yugao nodded. "Very well. The winner of this match is Karin Uzumaki!"

Karin released Akamaru, who reverted back into a dog, and walked to Kiba, whimpering in guilt.

"Hey, don't feel bad for that," Kiba reassured as he scratched the dog's ear. "It can happen to anybody. We just got overconfident, that's all. Next time we will do better."

Akamaru let out a weak bark as an apology. After that, both winner and loser returned to the stands.

"I won, I won, I won, I won, I won!" Karin cheered, bouncing up and down upon returning to her team.

"Good job, Karin. I knew you could win," Shizune praised her as she gave her a pat on her shoulder.

"We know, we saw it," Sakura rolled her eyes.

"You only say that because you're jealous you can't be as great as I am," Karin childishly stuck her tongue at Sakura, then she turned at Sasuke. "Did you see that, Sasuke-kun?"

Sasuke sighed. "Didn't you hear Sakura? We were actually watching."

This time, it was Sakura who stuck her tongue at Karin.

"Man, I'm so glad that Karin-neechan won," Naruto told his teammates. "Uzumaki clan for the win!"

Once again, the screen started to flash names at an imperceptible speed. Only six people remained, all of them were looking intently at the screen until it stopped, this time much quicker than before.

Ino Yamanaka VS Karui

"About time," Ino said as she headed towards the arena.

"Good luck, Ino!" Choji told her.

"What he said," Shikamaru added.

"Ugh, I can't afford to lose," Karui said as she eyed her opponent. "If none of us make it to the final round, Raikage-sama will flay us alive! Thank goodness my rival doesn't look too though."

"I wouldn't get too confident. Maybe she's pretending to be weak to make you lower your guard," Omoi began. "And she has some sort of super devastating bloodline limit that didn't show yet because she didn't want to draw attention, and then lots of villages will go after her for-"

"Don't be such a fool, or I'll crack your skull! Karui's not gonna lose, her foe doesn't confuse, and she can even brag, since the match is on the bag!" Killer B interrupted Omoi with one of his raps.

"Thank you, sensei. Unlike those two, I won't lose," Karui firmly stated.

Once the two kunoichi were in front of each other, the proctor checked they were also ready to fight. She made a chopping hand motion.

"Begin!"

Karui wasted no time, and like her male teammate, the first thing she did was unsheathe her katana and charge at Ino. Ino smirked and pulled something out of her tool pouch. Karui saw it was a smoke bomb. She couldn't stop the blonde from using it.

The redhead was forced to stop as she lost track of her enemy. Unfortunately for her, Ino was completely aware of where she was.

"Mind Scream Jutsu!"

Karui felt as if a hundred voices screamed at the top of their lungs into her ears. She dropped her katana as her hands instinctively

covered her ears in pain, while she stumbled back. The smoke dispelled shortly afterwards.

"My Mind Scream Jutsu doesn't have much range, but it's pretty effective, don't you think?" Ino asked, her mouth forming a smirk. "And it serves its purpose of keeping you far away from me. Judging by your katana, you're a melee type, aren't you?"

"And I guess that you're a long range ninjutsu specialist," Karui replied back. "Smart. Very smart. But like my teammate T demonstrated before, we trained to eliminate our weaknesses," she said as she pulled out a couple shuriken.

"Ohhhh, you know how to use shuriken, that changes everything!" Ino replied in mock terror as she shook her hands in a theatrical way.

"Now I'm going to give you a reason to be afraid for real! Lightning Release: Shuriken Lightning Transmission!"

The Kumo kunoichi infused her shuriken with lightning chakra and tossed them forward in a wide angle, creating a lightning chain between the two of them.

"If you think I'm afraid of that, think again!" Ino shouted before nimbly jumping over the lightning chain, landing on her feet. "That's the best you have?"

Karui smirked. "Not even close."

This time, Karui tossed a dozen shuriken, all of them forming lighting chains with each other, creating what could be described as an electric spider web. An electric spider web that was flying at Ino. The Yamanaka heiress only had a couple seconds to choose which gap she could use to avoid the attack. She jumped through the gap she thought was the biggest, but miscalculated the jump and her leg graced a lightning chain, electrocuting her.

Fortunately for Ino, the shock was painful but not powerful enough to knock her out. She only needed to shake the numbness of her body and get back to her feet as soon as possible. However, when she was trying to do that, Karui had already picked back her katana and rushed at Ino. She kicked the blonde, knocking her back on her back. Wasting no time, Karui planted a foot on Ino's chest, and pointed her katana at her face.

"Say it," Karui ordered.

Ino cursed inwardly. She knew that there was nothing she could do. "Fine. I give up."

"Winner of the match, Karui!" Yugao announced.

Her victory already secured, Karui sheathed her katana, and helped Ino on her feet. "It was a nice match. You fought with fierceness and courage," Karui told Ino.

Ino merely sighed. "Thanks, but guess it wasn't enough to win."

"Keep training, and I'm sure that you'll make it far. There will always be more exams in the future."

Both girls returned to her teams, one being comforted for her loss and the other congratulated for her win. After that, everybody else turned again to the screen, which flashed the four remaining names for a few seconds before showing the second to last -and by elimination, the last as well- preliminary match.

Kankuro VS Fu

"About time," Kankuro scoffed as he headed down to the arena.

"Yay, my turn~" Fu happily chirped as she flew down to the arena.

"So that means that I will fight against Rock Lee for the last match," Haku concluded. "Too bad I have to fight against one of the few Konoha Genin that I know almost nothing about."

"From what Neji-nii-san told me, Lee-san can't use ninjutsu nor genjutsu for some reason, and he uses exclusively taijutsu," Hinata informed the Ice Ninja.

"Which means that as long as you keep the distance between the two of you, you should be fine," Naruto added.

"Easier said than done. Lee-san looks like a tough opponent," Haku replied while looking at Lee, who in turn had all his attention focused on the second to last fight.

"You know, I'm kind of interested in Kankuro," Naruto mentioned. "He was training to be a ninja puppeteer. I want to see how they fight."

Once both fighters were ready, Yugao signaled they could start.

"Begin!"

Kankuro wasted no time and unslung the wrapped package at his back, and unwrapped it as well, revealing his puppet, a three-eyed, four-armed humanoid with jagged teeth and spiky brown hairstyle protruding from the top of its head and framing the sides, its body covered by a dull brown ragged cloak.

"Now, everybody will see the power of the ninja puppeteers of Suna! Behold Karasu, my first puppet!" Kankuro boasted as he created several chakra threads from his fingers and latched them to the puppet. "Now, let's begin!"

Kankuro made a hand motion, and Karasu opened its mouth and fired a barrage of senbon at the green haired girl. Wings sprouted once again from Fu's hips and flew high into the air to avoid being hit. Kankuro smirked.

"Do you think you can escape my puppet? There's no escape from Karasu!" Kankuro shouted while motioning his arms upwards.

Karasu elevated in mid air and dived at the flying Fu, who flew back while making a few hand seals.

"Actually, I believe I can hide!" Fu replied, never losing her smile.
"Hiding in Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu exhaled shiny powder from her mouth, forming a bright, sparkly cloud that blinded everybody who looked at it. Kankuro instinctively shielded his eyes, which incidentally made Karasu move in a random direction, getting out of the way and leaving an opening for Fu to attack.

"Gotcha!" The Taki kunoichi shouted as she dived at Kankuro,
"Takigakure Whirlwind!"

Fu's fist connected Kankuro's face, making a sickening "crunch", causing those who heard it to wince. Fu, however, was a bit confused. When she hit Kankuro, she didn't feel as if she hit flesh, skin and bone, but a much harder material, like wood. And to further her confusion, Kankuro's face started to peel and fall off, revealing Karasu.

"Uh?" she asked dumbly.

"Haha! It's me whose got you!" Kankuro said from behind. With a few finger motions, Kankuro made Karasu to trap Fu with a four-armed hug. "Now surrender, or my puppet will crush you to death!"

"You're a funny guy," Fu replied, unable to look Kankuro in the eyes.
"I never seen a ninja who uses such contraptions to fight."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Do you surrender or not?"

"Nah, I don't think so," Fu nonchalantly replied as she broke from Karasu's deathly embrace, blowing all four arms away from the main body.

"WHOA!" Kankuro shouted, shocked. Not even the adults were strong enough to break Karasu's tight grip. "What the hell do they feed you, girl?"

"Sorry for breaking your toy, by the way," Fu replied. Her apology seemed genuine. "It looks expensive."

"It is. But it's not a toy, and it's not broken. Now behold!" and with more hand motions, Kankuro reattached the four arms to the main body. "Good as new! No matter how hard you hit it, you won't be able to break my puppet!"

"I'm starting to like your puppet more and more," Fu mentioned, clearly intrigued. "Do you mind if I borrow it?"

"Ha! Like hell I'll give this work of art to anybody that-WHAT THE HELL!?" Kankuro yelled in shock. Much to his horror, Fu had created chakra threads from her fingertips and attached them to Karasu as well. "You can use chakra threads too?"

Fu shrugged. "Yeah. Can't everybody?" she asked.

Both Fu and Kankuro started to wrestle with their chakra threads for a few seconds, until Fu managed to overpower Kankuro and snatch Karasu from his grasp.

"Hey, give me back Karasu, you thief!"

"Now your toy is mine!" she childishly shouted, before making some hand motions in order to make Karasu attack, but all she did was make the puppet to move around in an erratic pattern while waving all four arms wildly. It looked as if the puppet was having a seizure. "Boy, this is much harder than it looks!"

"Of course it is! It takes years of practice to learn to control a single puppet! Now give me back Karasu!" Kankuro angrily repeated as he charged at Fu.

"Oh well. I thought it would be fun to use this to defeat you, but guess that I'll have to do it the old fashioned way," Fu dispelled the chakra threads, releasing Karasu, as wings sprouted from her hips, and flew at Kankuro, her right fist reared back.

Kankuro, who was charging at Fu as well, didn't have time to react or use the Body Replacement as the green haired girl's fist connected with his left eye, hurling him spinning backwards, making a loud 'thud' upon falling.

"Ugh..." Kankuro groaned, dizzy. After a few seconds, he managed to stand up, but after a hit like that, there was nothing much he could do.. "Proctor... I wish to forfeit..."

"Alright. Winner of the match, Fu!" Yugao declared.

Fu cheered loudly, while a couple medic-nin carried Kankuro away.

"Well, maybe he lost, but his puppet was pretty impressive," Naruto commented, as he saw the Suna ninja being taken away.

"Plus he had the bad luck to fight against somebody who happened to know how to use chakra threads, not to mention being insanely strong," Haku mentioned. "Seriously, where does she hide the muscle? Because that didn't look like Tsunade-sama's super strength technique."

"You can worry about that later, Haku. Now you have a match to win," Kurenai reminded him.

The giant screen displayed the names of the last two remaining Genin.

Rock Lee VS Haku Yuki

"I can't believe it took this long so I could fight!" Lee enthusiastically shouted. "YOSH! If they made me wait any longer, my flames of youth would have burned me on the inside!"

"If it makes you feel better, think that they left the best for the last!" Gai replied just as excitedly. "Now go there and make me feel proud!"

Lee nodded, and jumped into the arena.

"And I won't make only you proud, sensei. I'll be sure to impress Sakura-san with my youthful and powerful moves!" Lee thought while casting a glance at the pinkette.

Haku got there at a much calmer pace. He looked at his team, who smiled at him -and in Naruto's case, gave him a thumbs up-, then he looked at Lee's team, or better said, as the sole female member.

"I better be careful not to hurt Lee much. Tenten-chan wouldn't appreciate me injuring her teammate..." he then shook his head. *"What the hell I'm thinking? I don't even know how strong Lee is to think that. And I should focus on winning this. Zabuza-sama is watching me as well, besides Yugao-san. I can't disappoint them."*

"Are you ready?" Yugao asked the Genin. Both nodded in return. "In that case, let the last preliminary match begin!"

Lee wasted no time and dashed at Haku, his fist already reared back. In less than a second, he was already in close combat range, and the green clad Genin punched Haku in the face. However, Haku expertly deflected his fist with a light tap to the wrist, and dashed past him as he pulled something from between his kimono. Lee turned around and saw a growing puddle of water forming at Haku's feet. Lee could see that the water was coming from a sealing scroll. He deduced Haku would use that water for his jutsu.

"You're fast. There are very few Genin that are able to match my speed," Lee commented.

"Thanks. For ninja who aren't physically strong like myself, building up speed is essential," Haku replied. Some would say that admitting

to have a sub-par physical endurance was foolish, but in this case, it didn't matter. It's not that Lee wouldn't do anything different.

"And you used the window of opportunity to summon that water," Lee wasn't deterred in the slightest. "Alright, let's see what's stronger, your ice, or my flames of youth!"

Haku smiled, and started making hand seals at an almost imperceptible rate. "As you wish, Lee-san. Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

The water from the puddle started to rise and take the shape of three vaguely humanoid figures that quickly turned into exact replicas of Haku. The four of them scattered across the arena.

"Nice trick, but I know which one of you is the real one!" Lee declared as he dashed at one of the Haku's and jumped at him. "Konoha Whirlwind!"

However, the moment Lee kicked Haku, the Ice Ninja burst into an explosion of water that completely soaked the green clad Genin. After a moment of confusion, Lee realized what happened. "I see. You used Body Replacement with one of your clones, just like Naruto-kun did."

Haku shrugged. "We're teammates after all."

The three Haku's then pulled several senbon each and started to pelt Lee with them. The green-clad ninja managed to dodge most, but some were embedded on his flesh, causing some pain even if they didn't cause much damage. Lee managed to reach to another Haku, and delivered a punch to his face, once again making it turn into water, soaking Lee once more.

Haku and his remaining clone decided to dash at Lee from opposing sides before he destroyed the last clone. Still, Lee managed to block both attacks, and in a display of insane speed, punched the real Haku back and destroy the last clone, who soaked Lee even further.

"Fighting your clones was a worthy challenge, but I think that this ends now," Lee said as he prepared to attack the real Haku.

"I couldn't agree more," Haku replied as he made a hand seal.

Lee charged at Haku, but realized that he wasn't moving as fast as he should. He was also cold, very cold. Ice was growing all over his body, slowing him down and trapping him inside a block of ice.

"You probably thought that some water wouldn't hurt you, and didn't care about being soaked when you destroyed my clones," Haku stated as he walked towards the frozen Lee, whose head was the only part of his body not encased in ice. "Surrender, you lost."

"Surrender so soon? That would be mostly unyouthful!" Lee replied, as he tried to struggle.

"There's no way for you to break that ice. Only a Jonin level ninja could. It's impossible to break free."

Lee smirked confidently at Haku. It wasn't a smirk of smugness, but the joy of taking a worthy challenge. "Impossible only means that it hasn't been done yet!"

Lee then started to glow with a green light, as the ice encasing him started to tremble. Even if he wasn't a sensor, Haku noticed that Lee's chakra levels were dramatically increasing. The ice block started to crack.

"No! It can't be... !"

"Gate of Opening, open!"

The ice block trapping Lee shattered in a million pieces, releasing the green clad ninja, who was smiling confidently.

Back in the stands, Lee's display didn't go unnoticed to the more veteran ninja watching.

"Gai? Did you teach Lee to open the Celestial Gates?" Kakashi asked the green clad Jonin with an air of incredulity.

"Indeed I did, my rival!" Gai replied, excited as ever, especially now that he managed to surprise the Copy Ninja, something of a rare feat.

"But... that's something extremely dangerous to teach a mere Genin!" Kakashi protested.

"I couldn't agree more, but Lee is more than capable of handling the backlash of the gates, and he knows its limits and which situation should he use them!" Gai explained.

Kurenai, who heard the conversation, was worried. "If that kid is able to use the Celestial Gates, then Haku is in trouble."

Naruto and Hinata noticed their Jonin-sensei's reaction, and decided that they should get some answers.

"Kurenai-sensei, what are those 'Celestial Gates' Kakashi-sensei and Bushy Brows-Sensei talked about?" Naruto asked.

"As you probably learned in the Academy, our chakra system has eight spots that act as dams that regulate the chakra that flows through our body," Kurenai began. "However, there is a way to temporarily open those dams, increasing the chakra flowing through the body. This has a multitude of positive side effects, such as increased strength, speed and power."

"But it has a downside, doesn't it?" Hinata guessed.

Kurenai nodded at her. "Yes. This power boost is temporary, and when it ends, there's a massive backlash that damages your body, which becomes worse the more gates you open. In some cases, the damage might be irreversible. And if you open all eight gates, while it will give you the power of a god, you'll die shortly afterwards."

Naruto and Hinata pondered their sensei's words. Now they both also shared her worry for the Ice Ninja.

"Gai-sensei, how many gates can Lee-san open?" Hinata asked.

"I'm glad you asked! Lee can open up to five gates already! Quite a feat, don't you think so?" Gai stated proudly.

While most Genin didn't know if that was a lot or not, all the Jonin visibly choked. Kurenai looked as if she was going to have a heart attack.

"Haku!" The genjutsu mistress yelled. "You can't let him open more gates! You have to finish this as soon as possible!"

"Don't be afraid, Kurenai! Lee knows that this match isn't a matter of life or death. He won't risk neither his rival's nor his own safety opening more gates than necessary!" Gai interceded. However, his words did little to soothe Kurenai.

"That was a nice warm up. Let's fight for real!" Lee shouted at he dashed at Haku, fist raised ready to strike.

Haku managed to dodge the attack and Lee punched the floor, making the whole instance tremble. Haku gulped, uneasy.

"His strength and speed increased dramatically. If I let him hit me, then it's over," the Ice Ninja thought as he started to think possible strategies to counter Lee's massive power boost.

For the most part, Haku tried to run away from Lee, trying to stall for time. He either dodged or redirected Lee's vicious punches and kicks, but never blocked them. If he tried to block them, it would be over.

"Are you trying to see which one of us gets tired first?" Lee asked, not slowing down on his assault. "Very well, I accept your challenge!"

"Dammit, this doesn't look good!" Haku continued dodging hits, but he was starting to run out of breath. Suddenly, an idea formed in his brain. *"I believe this could work."* Haku thought, and made a single hand seal.

"Hidden Mist Jutsu!"

In a few seconds, a thick cloud covered the battlefield. Lee lost track of his opponent and was forced to stop his attack. In the stands, Kurenai visibly sighed.

"Good job, kid. That might give you some time to recover, and maybe even you can catch him off guard," the red-eyed Jonin thought.

Meanwhile, inside the fog, both combatants were planning their next move.

"This jutsu is easy to learn and cast. But without silent killing, it's nowhere near as useful as it could be. My stealth isn't near as good as Zabuzza-sama's, but I think it will be enough for this opponent. Or so I hope."

"Haku-san forced me on the defensive. He'll try to ambush me any time. If I know where the attack comes from before I give him time to move, victory will be mine."

A whistle alerted the green clad Genin, who caught in his hand a trio of senbon a second before they embedded on his neck, and tossed them away. Lee immediately dashed towards where the senbon came from, but Haku had already moved.

Again, the whistle of senbon flying alerted Lee. This time, he pulled out a kunai and parried them, while running towards Haku's location. The Ice Ninja moved already, but this time Lee heard the sound of his steps. An idea formed in his mind.

When a new barrage of senbon came, Lee countered it by tossing several kunai in the opposite direction, which stopped the much lighter weapons and continued flying at Haku. Paying attention to the sound, Lee dashed at the same place Haku was running to and...

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

Lee's flying kick impacted Haku in the torso, sending the Ice Ninja flying backwards, spinning mid air. The mist dispelled almost instantly.

"Oh man, that doesn't look good for Haku..." Naruto muttered.

"Have faith in him, Naruto. Haku hasn't played all his cards yet," Kurenai told the blonde, who looked at her a bit puzzled.

"Your tactics are clever, and your skill is worth admiring, Haku-san," Lee said as he walked towards Haku, who tried to stand on his feet as fast as he could. "I feel the fight is already over, but if you wish to continue, I won't deter you."

"Yeah, I'm not going to surrender yet..." Haku said as he clutched the pained sides of his torso. "At least not until I tried everything."

"Very well! Opponents who fight until the very end are the ones I like to fight the most! Your flames of youth burn bright as well, even if not as much as mine!" Lee excitedly shouted as he prepared to finish the fight.

"If that's the case... then take this!" Haku shouted back as he made several hand seals.

Suddenly, Rock Lee found himself trapped inside another block of ice, with only his head free. He wasn't afraid in the slightest, this was something he could easily break out from. Yet for some reason, this ice felt... different than the ice Haku had used before.

"This is your trump card? I'm very disappointed, Haku-san, to see you using something that proved to be inefficient before," Lee said, shaking his head.

"Try breaking that ice then, if you're so sure," Haku challenged.

"Very well!" Lee tried to either break or melt the ice with the force of his chakra, but this ice proved to be much sturdier than before. "I see that there's more to this jutsu than I initially thought, but it doesn't matter! There's no ice my flames of youth can't melt! Gate of Healing, open!" With an additional power boost, the ice wouldn't stand a chance. But much to Lee's shock, the Second Gate remained closed. "Gate of Healing, open! Open! OPEEEEEEEEEEN!"

"Save yourself the effort, you won't be able to open more gates," Haku calmly told Lee as he made a hand seal. Spikes of ice started to grow near Lee's face, who flinched when a spike came way too close to his cheek. "Now surrender. There's no way you can break that ice, I don't want to inflict you unnecessary damage."

Lee struggled one last time, but his efforts were in vain. Despite being taught to never give up in the long run, Gai also taught Lee that there were times in which you should fall back and fight another day. It seemed to be one of those situations.

"I see there's nothing I can't do. Alright, I admit that this time, victory belongs to you! But don't think this ends here! Once I redouble my training, I shall challenge you again and win!" Lee proudly declared.

Haku couldn't help but smile. "I'll be looking forward it."

"Proctor, I wish to forfeit!" Lee told Yugao.

The purple haired woman raised an eyebrow at him. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure!"

The proctor shrugged. "Alright. Winner of the match, and last finalist, Haku Yuki!"

After being declared winner, Haku fell on his knees and slumped, exhausted. Yugao walked past him, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Good job, kid," she whispered in his ear.

"Uhhh... Haku-san? Would you mind getting me out of this block of ice?" Lee asked.

"Oh, right! Sorry, I kinda forgot!" Haku replied, chuckling a bit.

However, rather than doing a hand seal or something similar, Haku tapped Lee's forehead, and suddenly the ice vanished as if it was never there. It took Lee a few seconds to realize what had happened.

"Wait a minute, that ice... that was a genjutsu!" Lee exclaimed in realization.

"Indeed. Had you reached that conclusion a minute earlier, and I would have lost the match," Haku told him.

Lee gritted his teeth in anger, and his eyes started to water. He had the victory right there and let it slip between his bandaged fingers. Haku was afraid of what the Genin of the thick eyebrows would do after realizing he was tricked. But then he wiped his tears and smiled brightly.

"Oh, I can't get mad at you for a mistake I made!" Lee said in an oddly cheerful tone. "I'll train even harder to make sure such thing never happens the next time! And if it happens, I'll run one hundred laps around the village, on my hands, with one hand, while carrying a boulder!"

Haku was a bit taken aback by Lee's extreme self-punishment, but didn't say anything.

"And you keep training as well, so when the day come that we clash again, you will still be a worthy adversary!" Lee said.

Haku smiled. "Don't worry, I have no plans on getting any weaker."

With that. both combatants returned to their teams.

"Good one, Haku!" Naruto cheered as he pulled the ice ninja into a bear hug. "The three of us are going to the finals!"

"You were amazing down there. There were times in which I was afraid you'd lose," Hinata added.

"Thank you both," Haku replied. "Though luck played a role in my victory. Had Lee realized of my genjutsu, he would have won."

"But he didn't," Kurenai interjected. "The beauty and the danger of a genjutsu is that many times it comes from not being identified as such in time. You did pretty good Haku, and your victory is completely deserved."

Meanwhile, Lee, this time not holding back his tears, walked towards his sensei.

"Gai-sensei, I'm sorry I lost. I brought shame to both of us. I'll accept whatever punishment you deign appropriate," Lee glumly told his sensei.

"YOU IDIOT!" Gai yelled as he knocked Lee on his back with a punch to the jaw, drawing everybody's attention.

"Gai-sensei...?" Tenten fearfully asked.

"You think that your defeat brings me shame? It does not! It brings me joy like no other, because even if you lost, you gave it all and showed everybody the results of your hard work!" Gai shouted excitedly as he started to cry as well. "There's no shame in losing if your heart remains unconquered! This won't be the last defeat you

face, that's for sure! Life is full of failure! But that doesn't matter as long as we keep going on and fight for what we love!"

"Gai-sensei... oh, sorry for thinking that I had ashamed you, you are so right!" Lee passionately exclaimed as he hugged his sensei.

"It's okay, Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

"Lee!"

"Gai-sensei!"

Much to everybody's shock, the makeshift arena turned into a beach where the sun was falling. Waves started to crash against the shore as master and student hugged each other.

"Okay, enough of that!" Jiraiya shouted, making Gai and Lee to break their hug, dispelling the illusion. "So, the preliminaries are over! Congratulations to all of you who passed on to the finals!"

Said finalists cheered in joy.

"Can all the finalists come down?" Yugao asked, and the Genin did as she instructed.

"Now, the final part of the exam will be held one month from today and will be like a tournament of one on one fights, which will end the moment we have a champion," Jiraiya explained.

"And said champion becomes Chunin?" Haku guessed.

Yugao shook her head. "No. There will be several examiners that will review your performance. Their reports will be sent to the Hokage and his advisors, who will decide the new Chunin based on them. It's possible to lose your first fight, and still earn a promotion. But remember that if you win, you'll get to fight more, and have a greater chance to impress the examiners."

"Wait, the *Hokage* gets to decide if I am a Chunin or not?" Karui asked, a bit indignant.

"Sorry, I mean the Hokage for Konoha ninja. For non-Konoha ninja like yourself, the reports will be sent to the head of your villages, who will decide if you deserve to be Chunin or not," Yugao clarified.

Jiraiya let out a hearty chuckle. "It would be incredibly unfair if it was up to me to decide the promotions of foreign ninja, don't you think so? It's common sense."

"The match-ups for the finals will be decided randomly, just like the preliminaries. If you look up, the screen will display the first round of fights."

The giant screen above them flashed to life once more, displaying the twelve names:

1st Match: Sasuke Uchiha VS Haku Yuki

2nd Match: Choji Akimichi VS Karui

3rd Match: Naruto Uzumaki VS Temari

4th Match: Hinata Hyuga VS Tamaki

5th Match: Tenten VS Gaara

6th Match: Karin Uzumaki VS Fu

7th Match: Winner of the 1st Match VS Winner of the 2nd Match

8th Match: Winner of the 3rd Match VS Winner of the 4th Match

9th Match: Winner of the 5th Match VS Winner of the 6th Match

Final Match: Winner of the 7th Match VS Winner of the 8th Match VS Winner of the 9th Match

Sasuke and Haku glanced at each other, both trying to hide their reactions. Karui smirked as she looked confidently at Choji, who looked at her nervously. Naruto and Temari smiled at each other, showing their eagerness to test their skills against each other. Hinata and Tamaki shared an look of indifference, before they both politely smiled at each other. Tenten looked at Gaara a bit afraid, who didn't bother to look back at her. Karin shot Fu a determined and challenging glare, and upon noticing this, Fu smiled brightly and waved at her.

Karin sighed in defeat. "There's no way to create an epic rivalry with this green haired moron..."

"Now that you know who will be your first opponent, my advice is to train like there's no tomorrow," Jiraiya began. "Training Grounds Fourteen, Sixteen and Eighteen have been reserved for Suna, Taki and Kumo respectively, and have been marked with flags with the symbol of said villages. "A boat will take you out of here. Good luck to everybody, and see you in a month."

Author's note: Like the previous chapter, long ending note incoming.

Okay, I know that some people will be a bit disappointed by how short Gaara's fight was, but honestly, of all the people who were meant to lose, none of them bar Rock Lee could be much of a challenge to him (and I wasn't going to redo another fight from canon). But fear not, the next time Gaara fights, it will be far more epic (Tenten has a month to become a suitable challenge for him).

You know, planning who was going into the finals took me more effort than writing the actual fights. You see, I had this criteria:

1. First of all, I wanted more girls. Temari being the only kunoichi who made it to the finals in canon was unacceptable.

2. Second, I wanted at least one member of every team making it to the finals.

3. I also wanted to do some fights in particular, such as Choji vs Karui, as well as others that are spoilers right now.

Even with the expanded roster of finalists (12 here vs 8 in canon) that means that some Genin who made it to the finals in canon would not make it here, so sorry for Shikamaru, Kankuro, Shino, Neji and their respective fans.

Also, before some people ask why Lee didn't take his weights: In canon, Lee only took off his weights when fighting against Gaara, a clearly deranged madman who would try to kill him. Here, Lee's opponent is way friendlier and would never try to kill or even maim him. Besides, it's not that he needed it, since Lee was already kicking Haku's ass with just one door opened and the weights still on him. All what Haku did was stall Lee, first with ice, then with the mist and lastly with a genjutsu. He just got lucky that the last one worked.

So, guess that's all. Don't expect the finals to come next. There are still two chapters for the finalists to rest, train, and go through some more character development (as well as developing several relationships). Not everything can be nonstop action ;)

Anyway, hope you enjoyed this chapter, and don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Training Begins

Author's Note: And we just reached chapter number twenty five! Let's give a review of this story's stats now that we reached such a milestone.

192873 views

950 favorites

1268 alerts

13 Communities

and 702 reviews!

Wow, look at that! I know we reached this point long ago, but damn, I never imagined that this story would become my most popular fic but such a huge margin. Thanks a lot to all of you who contributed to this fics' success!

Chapter 25:

The Training Begins

or

My new justu is stronger than yours!

Icharaku's Restaurant

Naruto, Hinata and Haku were celebrating that the three of them had passed. The celebration turned even better when Teuchi decided to treat them to the first bowl of ramen, as a way to reward and encourage them for their hard work.

"Whoa, thanks old man!" Naruto cheered as he started to wolf down the food.

"But remember, just the first bowl!" Ayame reminded Naruto, shaking her index finger at him. "Seriously, with that bottomless pit you call a stomach, we can't be too generous with you or else you'll bankrupt us!"

Everybody, including Naruto, laughed at Ayame's jab.

"By the way, how is that your sensei is not here celebrating with you? It's as much a victory for her as it is for you, given that she taught you and all that," Teuchi asked.

"Kurenai-sensei went to a bar with the other senseis to celebrate on their own," Hinata replied. "She didn't say anything, but she's a bit miffed that she won't be training any of us for the finals. Though, she will check on our progress every few days."

"How so?" Ayame asked.

"I will be training with dad, Hinata with her mom and Haku with Zabuza," Naruto explained.

"Kurenai-sensei is a great teacher, but unfortunately for her, we have other people better suited to train us in our specialties," Haku added. "Then again, I might ask her to continue training me in genjutsu if I have some time."

"I don't think genjutsu will be very useful against an Uchiha. The Sharingan can see through all but the most potent of genjutsu," Hinata interceded.

"I know," Haku replied. "But Sasuke won't be my only opponent. If I win, I'll get to fight either Choji-san or that Kumo kunoichi, and I think genjutsu will work on them just fine."

After all, genjutsu pretty much gave Haku the victory against Lee, his newfound enthusiasm about it was understandable.

"How do you feel about fighting Sasuke?" Naruto asked as he finished his bowl.

"I'm going to admit that I'm a bit worried. Sasuke-san is really strong, and I never managed to beat him in the Academy. I know how he fights, but that won't be enough. Plus I'm sure his brother and Shisui-san will train him this month, and I know that those two are among Konoha's strongest."

"Well, you're going to train with a Swordsman of Kiri," Naruto replied. "Your teacher isn't that bad, you know."

"Don't get me wrong, I wasn't doubting about Zabuza-sama's teaching capabilities, but I will need to learn all I need to defeat Sasuke-san. Besides, I'll have to make sure he doesn't get angry. Sasuke is really vicious when angry," Haku recalled.

Naruto shivered upon remembering Sasuke's fight with Neji. "Indeed! I know that that idiot had a short fuse, but that... boy, that was too much! I swear he would have killed Neji if Shisui didn't intervene. Let's hope Shizune-neechan can knock some sense into that thick skull of his. And if he does something to you..." Naruto cracked his fingers. "Well, I'll make sure he regrets such a thing."

Haku smiled at the blond. "Thanks for wanting to avenge me, but I'm sure that it won't be necessary. Then again, even if Sasuke shows restraint, it won't be an easy fight. I'm a bit jealous of Hinata-san, her opponent isn't that strong."

"Well, Tamaki-san might not have been the strongest kunoichi of our class, but underestimating your rival is unwise," Hinata replied. "Besides, her fighting style is wild and chaotic, and thus hard to fight against."

"I'm sure that you'll do fine," Naruto reassured.

"What about you, Naruto-kun? We don't know anything about those Suna ninja, but you seem to know them really well. What do you know about the girl?"

"Temari?" He was about to reply, when something dawned upon him. "Well, I know her, but I never saw her fighting until yesterday. She's really good with Wind Jutsu, even better than me, so I guess that won't be an option. Anyway, I'm sure dad can teach me something to help me beat her."

"By the way," Haku interceded. "There's a high chance we might end up fighting each other. In fact, you two will end up fighting each other if you win your first match."

Naruto and Hinata looked at each other, a bit shocked upon hearing Haku's words. Sure, they had fought a lot in the past, but those were sparring matches in which both of them held back a lot. And they couldn't afford holding back if they wanted to become Chunin.

"Eh, we'll worry about that when the moment comes," Naruto said, dismissing the topic at hand.

...

Not far from there, Sasuke was heading towards his house. After listening to what appeared to be hours of both Shizune and Shisui chastising him for his brutality during the match with Neji, Karin had asked Sasuke to go to celebrate together their victories. Sasuke declined it before Sakura had any time to protest. The Uchiha wasn't in the mood for any sort of celebration. All he wanted to do was head home, have some light dinner, sleep and erase this day from his memory.

However, when he arrived home, he'll find a surprise waiting for him.

"Hello, little brother. I presume that you made it to the finals, am I right?"

Sasuke blinked, and repressed the urge to show a smile. "Itachi?"

"Good, you still remember me. I was worried, given how little time we spend together now," Itachi chuckled as he walked towards Sasuke. "As for my question..."

Sasuke averted his gaze. "Yeah, I passed. The finals are in one month."

"Good. I suggest you to get a good night of sleep, because starting tomorrow, you're going to train as you never did before," Itachi told him.

Sasuke frowned a bit. "Yeah, I had that in mind," then, a realization dawned upon the youngest Uchiha. "Wait a minute, are *you* going to train me?"

"Sure. Or do you prefer somebody else?" Itachi asked.

Sasuke shook his head. "No, it's not that. It's that, well, with your new job... do you have time for that?"

Itachi's mouth curved into a smile. "I took this month off. Let's say that Hokage-sama owed me some vacation weeks, and I'm going to take them now."

"Really? That's great!" Sasuke said in an unusual display of cheerfulness.

"Good to see that the news improved your mood a bit. Because I can tell that something happened to you today that soured your mood. At first I thought that maybe you didn't make it to the finals, but it looked like it was something else..."

"Well, it was something that I did during the preliminaries..." Sasuke began, but Itachi held up his hand.

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me. At least not now. Go and make yourself some dinner if you're hungry, and go to bed. Tomorrow you

will tell me everything, and whatever wrong you did, we'll make sure to fix it," Itachi reassured.

Sasuke doubted that, but decided not to contradict his brother, and he was too tired for another argument. It was better to do what Itachi said.

...

At the same time, in a bar of Konoha, the five Jonin-sensei of the Konoha teams that made it to the finals were also celebrating their victory.

"To our Genin! May their victory in the finals be swift and decisive!" Asuma said, raising his glass, and the other four joined his toast.

"You know, I can't help but find it funny that, with the exception of Tenten, all the Genin that passed to the finals are actually rookies," Kakashi commented.

"Well, this generation has a lot of potential," Shizune chimed in. "We have quite a few clan heirs, and those who aren't have displayed a lot of talent. Not to mention Jiraiya-sama's Academy reform."

"But still, you'd think that age and experience would triumph over potential," Kakashi continued. "Many Konoha teams that took the exam multiple times barely made it to the second phase."

"I know luck is a factor in these exams, but the fact that no veteran Genin from the previous exams made it to the finals speaks poorly either of the Genin themselves, or their sensei," Kurenai mentioned as she took a sip of her drink, then smiled cockily. "And my guess is the latter."

Asuma chuckled. "Of course you'd say that, the only sensei whose whole team made it to the finals."

"Well, my team would have made it to the finals too if Sakura didn't have the misfortune of fighting Naruto," Shizune added, clearly miffed by Kurenai's comment. "You might not see it now, but Naruto's scarily strong. In a few years, he'll leave all of us in the dust."

"Like I said before, luck is also factor, Shizune-chan," Kurenai replied as she winked at the medic-nin, while Shizune stuck her tongue out at the genjutsu mistress.

"Well, it's all great that at least one of our respective Genin made it to the finals, but the exam is not over yet! Pretty much the opposite, the worst is yet to come!" Gai exclaimed. Upon noticing the looks he was getting, the green clad Jonin decided to get to the point. "What are you training plans for your Genin?"

Everybody stared at Gai incredulously, who was still expecting an answer, while flashing his impossibly white and pearly smile.

"Gai, some of our Genin will fight each other. Not all of them in the first round, like Tenten, but if Tenten wins her match, then there's a chance she will fight another Konoha Genin. You can't expect us to tell you what kind of training are we going to give our Genin," Kakashi calmly explained.

Gai was taken aback. "What? You think I'm asking you this in order to gain some leverage! Come on Kakashi, that would be mostly unyouthful! We're all Konoha ninja, and we should be in this together! I asked because maybe we could trade training tips and advice, nothing else!"

"Well, I can tell you what I'm going to do: nothing," Kurenai dryly replied. Before Gai could voice his reaction, the red-eyed woman continued. "Naruto is going to be trained by Jiraiya, Hinata by her clan, and Haku by Zabuza, and I think that Yugao and Hayate may train him too. Which means that other than making weekly checks on their progress, I have nothing to do."

"Really?" Shizune asked, her interest peaking. "Because if that's the case I might ask you for a favor..."

"The same goes for me. Choji is going to train with his clan, but I know I can still teach him a few useful things before the finals begin," Asuma interjected.

"Well, the only one of my Genin who passed has no clan to train her, so lucky me, I'll spend the whole month training Tamaki," Kakashi added, and then turned at Gai. "And I believe that you're going to the same with Tenten."

"True! But that doesn't mean that my two other Genin will spend the month slacking off! They will keep their flames of youth as bright as they were when they entered the exam!" Gai replied.

"Still, you should focus more on Tenten. She's the one who will fight for a promotion," the white haired Jonin insisted. "Especially given who she will be fighting against in the first round."

"Indeed. That Gaara kid is sure something. I'm glad Choji doesn't have to fight a Jinchuriki. At least in the first round," Asuma added, as he took a sip from his sake.

Shizune perked up, as if she suddenly remembered something important. "Oh, speaking of Jinchuriki, I believe there is another one in the finals besides Naruto and Gaara: that girl from Taki. Fu, I think is her name."

"She has displayed unusual abilities, but Naruto didn't tell me anything. How do you reach such conclusion?" Kurenai asked her.

"My Genin told me. Karin said that her chakra was very potent, and it felt as if she has two kinds of chakra in her body," the medic-nin explained.

"Well, four if we count the sensei of the Kumo team," Kakashi punctualized. "But he won't fight in the finals, so it's kind of a moot

point."

"Still, it's kind of suspicious that the Raikage allowed his brother to come here unsupervised," Asuma pondered.

"Oh, I'm sure he isn't unsupervised," Kurenai added.

Asuma turned at her. "What do you mean, that there are Kumo spies among us right now?"

"Indeed they are," it was Kakashi who answered. "Though they'll be more focused on keeping an eye on the Jinchuriki than anything else."

"Still, we better keep our eyes open, just in case," Kurenai added.

"Isn't that part of our job description?" Shizune asked with a chuckle.

...

Next day, Training Ground Three

Naruto and Jiraiya were at their usual training ground, ready to begin the former's training for the finals. Jiraiya contemplated his adoptive son, pensive. He was overflowing with excitement, and for good reason. He looked far more confident than usual. Guess that being one of the few to make it to the very end of the exams out of the hundred Genin who took part in the exam had such effect on him.

"Okay, you've been doing great so far, but now things will get really uphill. You won't have your teammates to rely upon if things go wrong, plus you need to do your best to impress the examiners," Jiraiya explained.

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I know. You explained that when the preliminaries ended. I have memory, you know!"

Jiraiya chuckled. "Yeah, sorry. I wanted to make sure that you know what you're going against."

"By the way, are you the real dad or a Shadow Clone?" Naruto asked, remembering that after Jiraiya had become Hokage, Naruto almost never trained with the real one.

"I'm the real Jiraiya," the Sannin replied, and before Naruto could say anything, he added: "Sarutobi-sensei is standing in for me until the finals begin. I want to make sure you have the very best overseeing your training. Now, your first opponent, Temari, looks to be quite strong, and has very powerful wind jutsu, which means-"

"... that I shouldn't use my own wind jutsu to counter hers. I can reach that conclusion on my own, dad. Can we just start the training?" Naruto impatiently asked. "Besides, Temari won't be the only opponent I'm going to face."

"She will be the only if you lose against her," Jiraiya added, making Naruto frown. "So we need to make sure such a thing won't happen. She specializes in long range jutsu, so if you manage to reach her in hand to hand combat, victory will be yours."

"Okay, get close to her, and strike her down, got it. Do you have a jutsu that can help me with that?" Naruto asked.

"While I was planning to teach you a new jutsu, I believe you won't need it to defeat Temari. Between your clones and the toads, you should be fine. That's why you will train to improve those two jutsu. Your clones need to be stronger, and you need to learn to summon toads stronger than Gamakazu."

"I already summoned stronger toads," Naruto countered.

"Intentionally?"

The blond awkwardly scratched the back of his head, and smiled sheepishly. "Okay, you got me there. But about that new jutsu...?"

"Ah yes. My fault for mentioning it so soon, but guess that the sooner you see it, the sooner you will master it," Jiraiya extended his arm,

and opened his hand. "Okay, take a look at my hand."

Naruto did so, and while he didn't see anything at first, soon a spinning sphere of pure chakra appeared on the Sannin's hand.

"Now, behold!" Jiraiya said before smashing the chakra ball against a large boulder, shattering it completely on impact.

After being stunned for a few seconds, Naruto was starry eyed. "WHOA! That was so cool! What is that jutsu?"

Jiraiya smiled, pleased he got the desired reaction. Though in Naruto's case, it wasn't that hard. The kid was easy to impress. "That, is the Rasengan. A jutsu developed by your father, the Fourth Hokage!"

"Great! Then with that jutsu, no opponent will stand in my way!" Naruto cheered as he imagined himself easily defeating all his potential opponents with the Rasengan.

"Slow down, kid. You're going to need something more than a strong jutsu to impress the judges. There's more to being a Chunin than mere power. But it will definitely help. Now," Jiraiya made a hand seal, and six Jiraiya clones appeared besides him. "We will take advantage of the Shadow Clones to speed up the training. Create twenty clones."

Naruto did so, and created as many clones as Jiraiya requested. "I can create more if you want."

"No, that will be enough," Jiraiya replied. "That way, there will be three Narutos for every me. Now, the real you and two clones, come with me. The rest, form groups of three, and follow one of my clones each."

All Narutos looked around and followed the Jiraiya that was closest to them, until all of them were gone, leaving the original Jiraiya and Naruto with just two clones.

"My clones will work with your clones in other areas that I think you could improve a little, like the aforementioned summons. Now, you will start practicing the Rasengan."

"Great! What do I do?"

Jiraiya pulled a sealing scroll from under his clothes. "The learning process consists in three steps. Now, you will need this for the first step," Jiraiya said as he unsealed the scroll's contents, revealing a large opened cardboard box.

The three Narutos quickly went to check the box, and their excitement faded upon seeing its content.

"Water balloons?" Naruto incredulously asked.

"Indeed. Now, get to work."

...

Hyuga Estate

Hinata began her training with a spar against Neji, her attacking and him mostly defending from his cousin's palm strikes. From time to time, Hikari, who was watching the match, would point whenever Hinata was doing anything wrong.

"Come on Hinata, a bit faster! Speed is essential for the Gentle Fist!" Hikari pointed out.

"Y-Yes, Mother!" Hinata replied, as she tried to attack at a faster pace. It made little difference for Neji, who continued blocking her strikes as if nothing had happened.

After a few minutes, Hikari told them to switch roles, now Neji being the attacker and Hinata the defender. Neji attacked very slowly at first, but Hikari told him to increase his attack speed, until Hinata was no longer able to keep up with him, and was overwhelmed.

"Okay, that's enough," Hikari told them, and the two teens immediately stopped. "I think I already saw enough."

"Mother...?" Hinata fearfully asked, afraid of her reaction.

"The two of you, follow me outside," Hikari said, leaving both Hinata and Neji a bit confused, but decided to obey her.

Once outside, Hikari cleared her throat before she began to speak again.

"I made you spar since I wanted to get a good look at your level with the Gentle Fist," She looked at her daughter. "Neji's level is above yours, but I believe that your level is still good enough to learn a new technique that will become really useful for the Chunin Exam finals. Now watch. Heavenly Spin!"

And without further ado, Hikari started to spin and turned into a spinning blue chakra dome. Hinata and Neji already saw her using that move against the Uchiha that invaded their home five years ago.

"This is the Heavenly Spin, our clan's ultimate defense. In order to use it, you need to spin at a high speed while releasing chakra from every tenketsu in your body at the same time. It's not easy to learn, but I think that you can learn the most basic version before the finals," the Hyuga Matriarch explained.

"Alright Mother, I won't disappoint you. I'll make sure I'll learn the Heavenly Spin in time," Hinata stated, trying to sound determined. Doing so would leave the clan in a good place.

"Hikari-sama, if may I ask, why do you need me to teach this technique to Hinata-sama?" Neji asked.

"I didn't bring you here to be my assistant, Neji-kun. You'll be learning this jutsu as well," Hikari said, smiling warmly at Neji.

The Hyuga prodigy was taken aback. "B-But... but the Heavenly Spin is a Main House technique! I'm not allowed to be taught such a move!"

While what Neji said was true, there was no rule against trying to learn Main House techniques on your own, something Neji had already started to do.

"So? The Branch House's role is to protect the Main House, so it's in my interest for you to be stronger. Besides, I'm the clan head, so my word is law," Hikari firmly stated. "Now watch carefully, I'll explain you the steps to learn this technique..."

...

Training Ground Nine

The entire Medical Squad, minus their only male member, was in their usual training spot. Since Sasuke was going to be trained by his family and Karin had no one to train her, Shizune would dedicate most of her time to train the redhead.

"Er, Shizune-sensei?" Karin asked, while eying the pinkette

"Yes, Karin?" the medic-nin replied.

"Why is Sakura here? Are you going to train her alongside me?" Karin asked, though it made it sound like it was an accusation, something Sakura didn't appreciate in the slightest.

"Why, yes, of course. Just because she didn't make it to the finals doesn't mean that I should forget about her. What kind of neglectful sensei would do that?" the black haired woman asked to one in particular.

Meanwhile, on another training ground not far from there, a certain silver haired Jonin sneezed.

"But... shouldn't you focus on me instead? I mean, I'm the one with a promotion at stake," Karin told her.

"As much as I hate to admit it," Sakura interceded while gritting her teeth. "Karin has a point. I really appreciate the thought, sensei, but Karin needs you more than I do. For the time being, at least."

"Neither of you should worry. I'm going to focus on Karin, while I asked a friend to take over your training until the exam ends," Shizune explained. Before Sakura could have a chance to ask anything else, Shizune looked at something behind the girls and smiled. "And there she is!"

Sakura and Karin turned around to see Kurenai walking towards them. She also smiled and waved at them.

"I believe you already know Naruto-kun's sensei, Kurenai," Shizune said. "Like I said before, she will teach you a couple things that I believe will make you a more versatile kunoichi."

"Good morning, everybody," Kurenai greeted. Then she looked at Sakura and smiled. "Ready for the training?"

"Uh, sure," Sakura awkwardly replied. "Don't get me wrong, I appreciate that you're taking time to train somebody who didn't even make it to the finals but... shouldn't you be training Naruto and his teammates?"

"Yeah, I should. But Naruto is training with Hokage-sama, Hinata with her clan, and Haku with Zabuza, so I have quite a lot of spare time this month," Kurenai explained, sounding not too happy about not being involved in her Genin's training.

"I see. And what are you going to teach me?" the pinkette asked.

"Genjutsu. From what Shizune told me, you have quite the chakra control, which is a must for genjutsu," Kurenai explained.

Sakura couldn't help but smile a bit upon being praised for something. "Yeah, they told me that. That's one of the reasons for becoming a medic-nin, a fine chakra control is a must as well."

"Okay, we should put some distance while training so we don't get in each other's way," Shizune suggested. Kurenai nodded in agreement. "Maybe we should meet in a couple hours or so for a spar?"

"Alright. Come on Sakura, there's much for you to learn!" Kurenai enthusiastically stated as she turned back and started to walk.

...

Uchiha Training Grounds

Sasuke was unable to dodge the fist aimed to his face, which impacted with such force that sent the young Genin into the ground, spinning. Despite restricting himself to taijutsu, Itachi wasn't kidding when he said that he wasn't going to hold back during the training session.

"Come on, get up, we just got started," Itachi said.

Rubbing his pained jaw, Sasuke complied. "Alright, but this time, I get to use the Sharingan."

"Absolutely not," Itachi coldly stated.

"Oh come on, why not?" Sasuke asked in frustration, throwing his hands into the air. "What's the point of having a Sharingan if I can't use it? It's due to some sort of misguided attempt of giving my enemies a fair fight?"

"What's the point of learning hand to hand combat, if we have kunai? What's the point of learning to use kunai, if we have shuriken? What's the point of using shuriken, if we have ninjutsu?" Itachi asked in rapid succession, leaving Sasuke utterly flabbergasted.

It was then that the third Uchiha, who was a mere silent spectator, decided to intervene.

"What your older brother is trying to make you realize is that the Sharingan is a tool, no different from kunai and shuriken, and you should learn to fight without relying too much on it," Shisui calmly explained. "The Sharingan should be our trump card, not a crutch to replace genuine skill."

"But in a real fight, I will always use the Sharingan. If I have an advantage over the enemy, it would be stupid not to use it," Sasuke countered.

"Yes, but there will be times in which you won't be able to use the Sharingan, such as having your chakra reserves depleted. If you develop your reflexes and skill with the Sharingan, they will be gone if you can't use it," Itachi added.

"Think about training with weights. It makes training far more grueling, but when you remove them, you feel much lighter and move much faster. Think of not using the Sharingan as the weight in question," Shisui continued.

"Besides, there's more to that. If you rely too much on the Sharingan, your enemies will develop ways to counter it, and then you'll be defenseless," Itachi added.

Sasuke was skeptical. "Really? How can the Sharingan be countered then?"

"A mere smoke bomb will suffice," Was Itachi's answer. "Remember that, unlike the Byakugan, the Sharingan can't see through solid matter or walls of mist or smoke."

"Plus your opponent is Zabuza's protégé, who knows how to use the Hidden Mist Jutsu," Shisui mentioned. "I'm ninety nine percent sure he'll try to use that in order to get you. So not only should you learn not to rely on your Sharingan, but not even on your eyes."

"Oh come on..." Sasuke scoffed, throwing his hands in the air.

"So that means no Sharingan until the finals," Itachi stated. "Enough chitchat, let's resume the spar. We won't stop fighting until you manage to land a hit on me."

Sasuke groaned, but complied. The youngest Uchiha adopted his usual fighting stance, and charged at his elder brother.

...

Training Ground Twenty Eight

Many of Konoha's training grounds had something that made them special. The Forest of Death has an extremely deadly fauna. The Shipyard is set in the middle of a very large lake. And many others had some sort of characteristic to emulate any possible environment a ninja might find themselves in. On the other hand, all what Training Ground Twenty Eight had was a small river crossing it, which made it a perfect place for Water Release users.

At least, that was on a normal day. Today, it had something that made it special: a very thick fog covered the place.

And inside that fog, a certain Genin was looking for his target. Pulling a few senbon from his tool pouch, Haku prepared to strike.

"Gotcha!" he whispered as he threw the metal needles at when he thought his target lied, only to hear the sound of the senbon stabbing on the ground. "What?"

A kunai appeared on his throat. Haku raised his arms in defeat.

"If this was a real fight, you would be dead," his prey turned hunter told him in cold delight. Soon, the fog began to dissipate.

"Agreed. Though I don't think the proctors will allow death to happen in the exams, so you shouldn't be worried, Zabuza-sama," Haku replied.

Zabuza raised a nonexistent eyebrow and shook his head in disappointment. "This place has surely corrupted your mind if you think like that. Haku, you must treat every moment as a life or death situation. Never let your guard down, and be ready to kill. Otherwise, you won't be prepared to face enemies that will try to kill you."

"I already faced enemies that tried to kill me, Zabuza-sama. I believe I told you about my mission in the Land of Sound? We had to face one of the Sannin and his top underling," Haku explained.

Zabuza remained unconvinced. "And just because you saw your sensei fighting Orochimaru, you think you already saw everything?" Zabuza asked in a very disapproving tone. "Haku, when we return to the Land of Water, we will have to face opponents far worse than the Sannin, hard to believe as it may be. And I don't need you to let this place make you feel complacent. It could end in your death. Or worse, in *my* death."

"You'll know such thing won't happen. I'll die before letting anybody cause you any lasting damage," Haku quickly stated.

"That's the problem, that you might die and still won't accomplish anything," Zabuza pointed out. "Haku, in the face of our long term goal, promotions in this village means nothing. But even then, this exam will be a great chance to test your skills. And if you defeat that Uchiha, you will be one step closer to being the ally I need to conquer the Mizukage's hat."

Haku raised an eyebrow. "Ally? Not a tool?"

Zabuza grunted, and looked away. "Ally, tool, they're the same. Let's not waste more time, we have less than a month to get you ready for this," Zabuza said as he made a hand seal, and the fog covered the training ground again.

Haku nodded, and prepared to fight Zabuza without the aid of his eyes once more.

...

Downtown Konoha, a couple days later

After a nice lunch at home, Naruto decided to go for a walk before resuming his training with Jiraiya. Even with clones, learning the Rasengan was way harder than he had originally expected. Of course, that wasn't nowhere near enough to deter him from trying, but even if he loved challenges, his relatively slow progress left a sour taste in his mouth.

He was hoping that either Hinata or Haku could hang out with him, but both of them were dedicating almost all their spare time to train. So since he had nobody to talk to, or even spar against, Naruto guessed that his walk would be short lived, and would return with his adopted father as soon as he grew bored.

However, there was something that snapped Naruto from his thoughts. A... presence. Naruto wasn't a sensor, but he could sense a certain person nearby, whose presence subtly pulled him towards it. With nothing better to do, Naruto decided to follow this.

His senses brought him to an almost empty bar, with a couple patrons in the counter, and a man sitting alone in one of the tables. Naruto immediately recognized the man as a Kumo ninja -the skin color was a dead giveaway-, and more specifically, as the sensei of the only Kumo team who made it to the prelims.

And, if he remember correctly, this man was, according to Jiraiya, is the Jinchuriki of the Eight Tails.

"So that's why I sensed him. Guess that the Kyubi just wanted to meet one of his old friends again," Naruto deduced.

"As if, " the Kyubi unexpectedly replied. "Do you think I have any interest in associating with any of those weaklings?"

Naruto shrugged. *"I don't see why not. They're your kin, right? Or do you hate them too, just like you hate humans?"*

"You know very little about me to make such assumptions, brat," The Kyubi scoffed.

"I know that you hate a lot of things. Maybe there is stuff you like?" Naruto asked.

"There is. A good massacre of your kind. The screams of terror are music to my ears," The Kyubi replied.

Naruto sighed, and shook his head. *"You're hopeless. But you know what? Maybe that guy can help with that nasty attitude of yours."*

This time, it was the Kyubi who shrugged. **"You're welcome to try."**

After finishing his mental conversation with his host, Naruto approached the man, Killer B, if his memory was right. He was writing something on a notebook, while he took a sip from a cup of sake from time to time.

"Hello, I'm Naruto Uzumaki!" Naruto cheerfully said.

Killer B raised his eyes from his notebook and stared at Naruto for a couple seconds, before going back to writing.

"Rude," Naruto angrily thought. "Hey, don't ignore me like that!"

"Step aside, don't you see I'm occupied?" Killer B replied.

"Doing what?" Naruto asked, taking a look at the Kumo Ninja's notebook. "Is that a song? Do you write songs as a hobby?"

Killer B glared at Naruto. "Hobby? HOBBY? Killer B is no amateur, and saying so my wrath will incur! My lines and my rhymes are pretty sweet, all who listens to them are in for a treat!"

"Okay, okay! Geez, you are so susceptible..." Naruto replied.

"What do you want, brat? I'm occupied, didn't you notice that?" Killer B asked.

"Okay, I'll go directly to the point," Naruto breathed deeply before continuing. "I know you're a Jinchuriki."

Killer B stared at Naruto. Not in shock, but as if the blond had said something obvious. "So, do you want a prize? You must think you're pretty wise."

"I also know that you have control over your Tailed Beast," Naruto continued. "I'd like to know if you could teach me."

'Hm. So this is the kid that Jiraiya guy mentioned those years ago,' Killer B thought. 'He's the splitting image of the Yellow Flash. His son, maybe?'

"I'm sorry kid, but I already have people to train, and having more would be quite the pain," Killer B replied.

Naruto sighed in defeat. He was forced to admit that there was some truth in those words. Besides, he was a ninja of a non-allied foreign village. He wouldn't aid a potential enemy like that.

"Nice work, champ," the Kyubi laughed.

"Shut up, you furball!" Naruto snapped back.

Naruto then decided that it was time to do something productive, and went back to his usual training ground.

...

Nighttime, Senju residence, a few days later

"When was the last time we did this?" Jiraiya asked, as he poured some sake in a couple cups.

"I don't even remember doing this in the first place," Tsunade replied as she gulped her cup in one drink. "Turns out being married, taking care of children and having jobs that affect thousands of people doesn't leave you with too much time and energy for these kind of stuff. Who would have guessed?"

"See? This is why I didn't want to be Hokage. Seriously, Sarutobi-sensei might not be able to be a ninja anymore, but it's not that you need unique combat skills to do paperwork, you know?" Jiraiya complained as he also finished his sake in one sip.

"Eh, I think that sensei deserves to enjoy his twilight years in peace. He had been a Hokage for far longer than the other three put together," Tsunade replied.

"How is that you never take my side?" the white haired man protested.

"I'll take your side when you make a valid point," Tsunade replied before pointing at her empty cup, which Jiraiya proceeded to refill. "Besides, isn't sensei pretty much filling for you full time now?"

"Hey, it's a special circumstance so I can train Naruto! Besides, sensei himself admitted that he didn't know what to do with all the spare time he has now," Jiraiya countered. "Contrary to what Koharu and Homura claim, being an advisor doesn't have much of a workload."

"Speaking of which, how's Naruto's training going? Did you teach him anything new?" Tsunade asked.

"With the Shadow Clones, the training is going way better than I could hope. I can train Naruto at multiple areas at once, and check this out: he learned how to do the Rasengan!" Jiraiya proudly announced.

Tsunade stared at Jiraiya in disbelief for several seconds. "What?" she flatly asked. "You taught Naruto an A-Rank ninjutsu? Like,

seriously?"

"I thought that Naruto needed something with some more packing power, you know? Besides, given that it was one of Minato's signature jutsu, I find it fitting," Jiraiya explained.

Tsunade remained skeptical. "I don't know. Do you think he's ready to handle such a jutsu?"

"The sooner he learns it, the sooner he'll be able to master it. He still takes too much time preparing the jutsu, but he got the basics down pretty quickly. Still, I told him to keep the Rasengan as a last resort," Jiraiya told her.

"Speaking of which, I decided it was about time to introduce Kaida and Hagane to the basics of elemental ninjutsu. Especially Kaida, since she needs to master her wood release. Thank goodness we have Tenzo," Tsunade mentioned.

"Nice. We can't forget about the training of the Hokage's other children, right?" Jiraiya asked with a wide grin. "And how did it go?"

"Good, albeit something really weird happened while I was trying to determine Hagane's affinity..."

Tsunade then proceeded to retell what happened earlier that day...

...

Training Ground Four, earlier that day

Kaida was in front of an unmasked ANBU, a man her mother told her his name was Tenzo. For some reason, this man also had Wood Release just like her, despite not being part of the Senju Clan. When she asked Tsunade about it, Tsunade told her that it was classified information. When Kaida asked what "classified" meant, Tsunade told her "shut up and get to the training already".

"Wood Release is a combination of two basic elements, earth and water. But I'm sure you know this already, don't you?" Tenzo asked. Kaida merely nodded. "I know that you've experimented with Wood Release, but did you try to use an earth or water ninjutsu?" this time, Kaida shook her head. "And why's that?"

"Because Wood Release is way stronger and cooler than Water and Earth Release," Kaida replied, as if stating something obvious.

"True. But given that Wood Release is a complex element, you won't be able to master it completely unless you master its components. That's why, before we start with Wood Release, we'll train on its components first," Tenzo explained.

Kaida puffed her cheeks and crossed her arms indignantly. "But that sucks! I want to master Wood Release now!"

"I know, but you can't run if you don't learn to walk first. Besides, Earth and Water Release will provide you abilities that Wood Release lacks. While not technically necessary, mastering the basic elements makes mastering the complex one much easier, and this is especially true for Wood Release, since it's different from the other elemental combinations."

Kaida raised an eyebrow. "Different? How so?"

"Fire and earth produce lava. Water and wind produce ice. Earth and lightning creates explosions. And many more. Can't you guess what makes Wood Release different from the elemental combinations I just mentioned?" Tenzo asked.

Kaida spend a few minutes thinking, until the answer came to her mind. "Unlike ice or lava, wood and plants are actually alive."

"Exactly!" Tenzo replied. "You're not only combining two elements, you're creating life. That's what makes Wood Release such a special element, and that's why all its previous users had such a potent life

force. But before you can tap that power, you need to learn how to use earth and water first. Are you ready then?"

Kaida sighed, and reluctantly nodded.

Meanwhile, not far from there, in the same training ground, Tsunade was about to introduce Hagane to the basics of elemental ninjutsu as well.

"Alright son. So far, you're doing pretty good on your medical ninjutsu training, but I know you're going to need something more potent if you want to defend yourself, and you're nowhere ready enough to learn my super strength technique," Tsunade told her son. "While this is more your father's specialty, I'm still good enough to introduce you to the basics," Tsunade produced a small brown paper, and handed it to Hagane. "The first step is to learn your elemental affinity. Channel chakra into that paper."

"Right!" Hagane enthusiastically said as he did what his mother told him. "It turned to stone! What does that mean?"

Tsunade was taken aback. "What do you mean, it turned into stone?" Tsunade took the petrified litmus paper and examined it. "No way, this thing has to be defective... do it again."

Tsunade gave him another paper, but the result was the same.

"Mom?" Hagane asked, noticing Tsunade's worried face. "Did I do something wrong?"

...

"... and every time I tried to give him a litmus paper, it turned to stone. What does that mean? No element has such a reaction!" Tsunade wondered aloud.

"Actually... I know something that causes petrification. Nature chakra," Jiraya told her.

"What? You're implying that our son's affinity is not an element, but nature itself? That's ridiculous!" Tsunade protested.

"I'm not saying it's not, but it makes sense. Remember when Hagane used that power boosting ability of his? It felt a lot like nature chakra, albeit more refined. I would need to make a few tests to determine if that's the case, though that will have to wait since I'm busy with Naruto," Jiraiya explained.

"What I'm supposed to do then if we don't know his real affinity?" the blond Sannin asked.

"Introduce him to the basics of elemental manipulation. I'm sure that there will be an element that will have an easier time mastering. Given that Kaida's affinities are earth and water, try those for starters," Jiraiya explained.

"Or maybe I could postpone this and continue with medical jutsu. He's almost as good as I was at his age," Tsunade added.

"You know, like you said, this may sound ridiculous, but maybe Hagane might be the first bearer of a new Bloodline Limit. I knew that there was something more to that power boosting ability," Jiraiya then couldn't help but let out a hearty chuckle. "Ha! My genes are so good that not only they did awake a powerful dormant Bloodline Limit, but they created a completely new one from scratch!"

"Yeah, keep thinking that," Tsunade rolled her eyes, as she took a sip from her cup. "I think that I've had enough. I'm going to bed. Wanna have sex?"

Jiraiya had a huge grin on his face. "Do you really need to ask?"

Tsunade rolled her eyes again, but smiled a bit as well. "Yeah, that was dumb."

...

Undisclosed Location

Inside a deep, underground, sealed chamber, laid a huge green cocoon, rhythmically beating as if it was a human heart. Multiple vines came from the cocoon that were attached to several White Zetsu surrounding it, each of the Zetsu standing immobile, while making a hand seal.

This chamber is Akatsuki's most well guarded secret, to the point that only two members are aware of its existence, and have the means to access it. The place was designed so it could never be accessed even if its existence or even its location managed to fall onto enemy hands.

And today marked the first day the chamber received visitors from the outside world in more than a year. From a spiraling portal, the mask wearing Akatsuki Obito Uchiha, known as Tobi or Madara to the rest of the world, stepped out. And emerging from the ground besides him appeared Zetsu, the black and white version engulfed by a giant Venus fly trap plant.

He removed his mask, since there was no danger of people learning his true identity, and without acknowledging the White Zetsu connected to the Cocoon, he walked towards it and inspected it with a critical eye.

"How long until it opens?" Obito asked one of the White Zetsu.

"It's hard to come up with an specific number, but I'd say four years. Maybe three," one of the White Zetsu replied, not moving a single muscle from his body.

"That long?" Obito complained. "This has been going on for more than a decade! Can't you do something to speed this up?"

"Please understand that this is a delicate process, Obito-sama," Zetsu told his leader. "If we fall victim to impatience, we may end up ruining all our hard work."

"Nonsense. The other cocoon already opened more than a month ago. I don't see why this one takes so long," Obito protested once again.

"The other subject was a mere test, something to see if the process was viable. If it opened so soon it was because it held an individual with far less power than this one," Zetsu explained. "Besides, what's the rush? We have all the time in the world to carry out our plans. Is not like we're on a schedule."

"Actually, we are," Obito corrected him. "Our failure in capturing the Kyubi cost us more than we thought. Konoha is now more aware of our presence and our operations, and I'm sure they won't be above sharing their intel on us with other villages, even if they aren't their allies."

"You worry about Konoha too much. We dealt a crippling blow to them by instigating the Uchiha Coup D'état" Zetsu replied.

"While that may be true, underestimating Konoha is always a mistake, which I made not once, but twice. There won't be a third time," Obito angrily stated. "Besides, Konoha is not the only thing I'm worried about. I believe Orochimaru knows that there's more to Akatsuki than we let him on."

"Do you think the snake might be a hindrance?" Zetsu asked.

"He's becoming harder and harder to control as of lately. I shouldn't let him start his own village, regardless of his excuses of how much it would benefit Akatsuki. Now he has a decent power base that can use to leave Akatsuki whenever he feels we are of no more use to him."

"Should we dispose of him before that happens then?" Zetsu suggested.

Obito shook his head. "Not yet. Unfortunately, I still need him. Besides, he more than likely made preparations in case we decided

to go after him."

"Then what should we do?"

Obito smirked at his two-faced servant. "Easy. We're not the only ones interested in seeing Orochimaru's demise, are we?"

Zetsu smirked back "I see where you are going with this, boss. I'll make the preparations immediately."

"Good," Obito placed his mask back on his face. "But first, make sure our current *guest* feels as comfortable as possible."

And thus, both men disappeared from the chamber, each using their own method of teleportation.

Author's note:

Finally, Sakura will learn some genjutsu. Are you guys happy now? Geez, it's not that Sakura was a genjutsu specialist in canon, it was just a passing comment by Kakashi regarding her superb chakra control...

Also, sorry if the meeting between Naruto and Killer B was so short. When they first met in the manga, the five villages had united against a common threat, and even then it still took Killer B a bit to train Naruto. So at this stage there's not much they can say to each other. But fear not, there will be more Naruto/Killer B interactions in future arcs.

Speaking of future arcs, since I know that the Chunin Exams loses a bit of its excitement without the invasion (I believe you all reached this conclusion by now) I left you that last scene with Obito and Zetsu as a teaser for some elements that will play a major role in future arcs, starting with the arc following the Chunin Exams, which will be the last one before the time skip (since there's obviously not going to be a Search for

Tsunade Arc nor a Sasuke Retrieval Arc, I need something epic to end the first part ;)).

Also related to future arcs: as you saw, I usually write the names of the jutsus in english, with only a few exceptions (Rasengan, Chidori, and maybe one or two more). However, I have a hard time deciding what I should I do with Pain's attacks, since the official translations aren't very good and the japanese names sound kind of badass. Even if Pain is not going to appear anytime soon, I want you guys to give me your opinion on this issue when you leave a review. What do you prefer:

-Pain's attacks written in English (Almighty Push, Universal Pull, Planetary Devastation)

-Pain's attack being left untranslated (Shinra Tensei, Basho Ten'in, Chibaku Tensei)

Next chapter, the training continues, Naruto meets another Jinchuriki, and more hints towards the last arc of Part I. In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Training Ends

Author's note: Okay, a couple things.

First, if you're a guest reviewer, and see that your review didn't appear, there's nothing wrong going on. All anonymous reviews must be approved by me before they appear (you'd be surprised of many reviews I get which are basically "this story sucks, kill yourself"), so it can take a whole day before I see and approve the review.

Second, we've reached quite a few milestones today! With this chapter, we break the 200K word barrier. And that's not the only thing that goes beyond 200K, since the number of views of this story has also surpassed such number! And not the last one, since this story has now over one thousand favorites! Let's see if we can reach over a thousand reviews, that would be my dream :D

Okay, now, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 26:

The Training Ends

or

New jutsu, New feelings

Training Ground Three

Naruto spread his right hand, focused his mind, and channeled his chakra through his arm.

"Rasengan!"

The spiraling blue sphere formed above the blonde's open palm, small at first, but started to grow with each second, until its growth suddenly stopped. Naruto tried to focus even more, as he forced the sphere to expand.

"Come on Naruto, you almost have it!" Jiraiya cheered him on.

"It's... too... hard!" Naruto replied, visibly struggling.

"You're doing fine! Remember, don't force the contained chakra too much, let it flow freely!" Jiraiya continued.

"It's easier said than done!" the blond protested.

During that second, Naruto lost focus for a moment, and it was enough to destabilize the chakra sphere, which exploded, knocking the Jinchuuriki on his back and engulfing him in a cloud of dust and dirt.

"Naruto? Are you okay?" Jiraiya asked as he waved the dust away with hands.

"Y-Yes..." the blond replied, coughing a little. "Let me try again!"

"Actually," Jiraiya stopped him before he could. "You've been working on it all morning, and you look like you could use some rest. Come on, we can continue later."

Jiraiya then sat under their usual tree and patted a spot alongside him, hinting Naruto to take a seat beside him. The blond reluctantly obliged.

"Don't feel so bad, kid. You're doing it fine. It took the Fourth three years to develop that jutsu, and six months for me to learn it. You learned it in less than one week" Jiraiya praised him.

Naruto didn't seem to appreciate Jiraiya's words. "Yeah well, it's because I used Shadow Clones."

Jiraiya snorted. "What, and you think I didn't?"

"And I still can't do it one-handed," Naruto continued.

"Neither could I, at first, but I eventually got it down. And so will you," the white haired Sannin assured him.

"I guess you're right," Naruto conceded, even if he wasn't so sure himself.

They spent the next minutes resting and silent. And there's where Jiraiya noticed that there was something wrong, or at least weird, with his son, since Naruto doesn't do silence. He didn't remember the last time the kid was silent by his own volition. There was something in his mind, and the Toad Sage knew it had nothing to do with either mastering the Rasengan or the impending Chunin Exam finals.

"Hey kid, something in your mind?" Jiraiya asked all of sudden.

"Huh?" Naruto was snapped from his thoughts, and turned to Jiraiya. "Uh... no, why do you ask?"

"You seem awfully quiet as of late. Mind telling me why?" Jiraiya inquired.

"I've just been... thinking. That's about it," was Naruto's reply.

"Thinking about what?" Jiraiya pressed.

"... stuff," Naruto uncomfortably replied.

"Naruto, you can talk to me about anything, you know that, right?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yeah, I know, dad, this is nothing you should worry about," Naruto assured.

Jiraiya decided not to pressure Naruto further. "Alright then."

They spent a few more minutes without trading a word. And Jiraiya's decision to not to pressure Naruto paid back much earlier than he had anticipated.

"Uh dad, you and mom used to be in the same team, right?" Naruto asked.

"I believe you know that already," Jiraiya answered mater-o-factly.

"And... when did you realize that you liked her?"

Jiraiya looked pensive, as if recalling the memories of a distant time. "Well... now I don't feel I can tell. Truth be told, it has been so long that I feel that I have always been in love with Tsunade-hime."

Naruto frowned. "Come on, you're not *that* old."

"Well thanks, but as the years pass, memories start to fade," Jiraiya replied, and then grinned at Naruto. "Why are you asking me this? Is there a girl you like?"

This time it was Naruto who looked pensive. "That's the problem, I just don't know."

"Is it about that Hyuga girl, Hinata?" Jiraiya asked. Naruto just nodded. That complicated things further. "I thought you said you only liked her as a friend?" the Toad Sage asked.

Naruto sighed wearily. "That's the problem. I'm not sure anymore. Hinata and I have been friends since I can remember. And it was awesome. She's nice, generous, kind, a good listener... anything anyone could ask, but now... I'm starting to see her under a different light... like I'm starting to notice things about her I never paid attention before... and sometimes it feels as if I'm talking to a stranger, when in the past I could talk to her about anything."

"Yup, sounds like a textbook teenage crush to me," Jiraiya stated.

"And what should I do? Should I ask her out? Wait a bit? See if she feels the same way towards me, or if she likes somebody else? Oh Kami, what if she DOES like somebody else!?" Naruto started to panic.

Jiraiya put a comforting hand on his godson's shoulder. "Take it easy, you know none of that. For the time being, let's focus on the training, okay? The last thing you need right now is a distraction like that. Once the exams are over, I promise I will help you with this as well."

Naruto tried to calm down. "O-Okay, dad, I'll do as you say," Naruto replied. After a few seconds, the blond realized of something. "Uh, dad, when you made the teams, why did you put me with Hinata?"

"The two of you got along rather fine, and I thought that you'd make a great team. The fact that you were also friends with that Ice Release ninja, Haku, is what made me choose him for the third member. That, and the fact that the three of you had the best qualities for the Assault Squad," Jiraiya explained. "Would you have preferred being placed on another team?"

"Oh, no, no, no! I love my team, it's awesome! It's just... well, I just got curious about what made you make that team," Naruto replied, then another realization dawned upon him. "So if I wasn't friends with Hinata and Haku, you wouldn't have put me in a team with them?"

Jiraiya shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. What I wouldn't have done is putting yourself on a team with people you don't get along with, since that would have been a huge obstacle for teamwork. For example, given the kind of relationship you have with Sasuke Uchiha, I don't think that the two of you would have made a good team."

"Why not?" Naruto could already imagine why, but he wanted to hear Jiraiya's reasons.

"Well, for starters, you guys are kind of... competitive. And that's something to avoid at all costs. There has been far too many failed missions and dead ninja as a result of two teammates who couldn't

put their rivalry aside, and more often than not, a negligent sensei unable to instill some order in their team.

"There's the fact that both of you have strong personalities that lean towards leading rather than following, which would add even more troubles for the team dynamic. I myself, have plenty of experience in that regard: back in the day, your mother, Orochimaru and myself clashed a lot over who was the team leader."

"And let me guess: mom always ended up as the leader, right?" Naruto said with a huge grin.

"Some things never change, do they?" Jiraiya chuckled. "Anyway, some people are made to lead, others are made to follow, while others switch between leading and following depending on the circumstances. You are the first kind, while I'm the third. On the other hand, people like your teammates are clearly the second kind. Not to say that they lack initiative or are incapable of independent thought, but they usually perform better when it's somebody else issuing orders. That's why Sasuke's two teammates are people willing to follow more than lead as well."

Naruto spend a few moments processing all what Jiraiya had explained. He had a pensive look plastered on his face. "Wow... and you had to take into account all of that while making teams?"

"Of course. If not, you have not one, but multiple disasters waiting to happen," Jiraiya replied.

"Being Hokage is way more complicated than it looks at first glance..." Naruto commented.

"Of course it is! Why do you think that many days I come back home so late? It requires a lot of work and dedication. Imagine all the complications of having a girlfriend, of being a team's commanding officer, and imagine that the girlfriend or the team is the whole village, and you get a good picture of what being a Kage means," Jiraiya explained. He noticed that Naruto looked a bit overwhelmed

as he tried to imagine it. "There's a good reason for why I didn't want to take the job to begin with. Speaking of which, do you still want to become Hokage?"

Naruto's dubious mood instantly dispelled, and grinned widely at Jiraiya. "Of course! I never back down to a challenge, and I'm not going to start now!"

Jiraiya smiled at him. "Good to see that there's nothing that can dampen that indomitable spirit of yours. Anyway, I believe that we've been resting enough time, shall we continue the training?"

"Right!"

...

Hyuga Estate

In the Main House's dojo, Neji and Hinata were in the middle of a spar under Hikari's watchful eye, a usual sight for the past couple of weeks. These fights were far more intense than their usual spars, given what was at stake, at least for Hinata. Still, Hikari was there to assure that nobody would get unnecessarily hurt.

As they traded blows, Neji noticed that while still below his level, Hinata was nowhere near as slow or weak as he remembered. He never liked sparring against her due to how unchallenging she was, but now... the improvement after she graduated the Academy was notable. Not to say that Neji didn't improve since then either.

He couldn't help but feel a little jealous of his admittedly less talented cousin having a shot at becoming Chunin, while he'll have to wait at least six months. But then again, Neji knew that fate was a cruel mistress. Neji couldn't help but agree with Gai, as much as it pained him, when the green-clad man told him that he could have defeated Sasuke if he hadn't engaged in such "unyouthful" taunting.

But Neji couldn't help it. Despite being one of the Hyuga who lost the least that fateful night, especially compared to his cousin, who lost her father, the Hyuga prodigy could never forget the terror he experienced that night. And even if the rational part of his brain screamed at him that Sasuke was not to blame for the death of his clansmen, he still wanted an Uchiha to experience that same fear.

It was a shame that his fear tactic had the opposite effect, and Sasuke nearly killed him. Rage is indeed a double edged sword. A sword that, unbeknownst to him, the Uchiha Clan had mastered its use for generations. He had no hope of beating one of them at their own game.

"Okay, I believe that's enough for today," Hikari stated.

Both Hinata and Neji immediately stopped and bowed to each other as a sign of mutual respect, before walking towards Hikari so she would assess them.

"You two are showing noticeable improvement. Though Neji, I believe that you're pushing yourself a bit too hard," Hikari told him.

"I need to, if I am to become stronger. I disgraced both the clan and my team with my shameful display in the preliminaries," Neji explained. "I need to better myself as soon as possible."

Hikari just shook her head. "But you still need to recover from the injuries you sustained during said match, and if you push yourself that much you'll only end up injured. Promise me you'll take it easy for the time being. There's still plenty of time to train until the next exams."

Neji nodded. "I'll do as you say, Hikari-sama."

The Hyuga matriarch smiled. "Good," she then turned towards her eldest daughter. "Hinata, so far you've progressed at a steady pace. But I know that you can do better. Doing 'just fine' won't be enough to impress the examiners. Your speed isn't as good as it could be."

"I know, mother. I'll train as hard as possible," Hinata replied.

"I believe that's all for the time being. We will resume training in the afternoon. Why don't you go for a walk around the village to clear your head and breathe some fresh air?" Hikari suggested.

"We will," Neji laconically replied. "See you later, Hikari-sama."

"Bye mother," Hinata added as she and Neji left.

During the past week, Hikari decided to teach Hinata and Neji two of the Clan's most powerful techniques: The Eight Trigrams: Sixty-Four Palms, and the Heavenly Spin. Neji managed to master them pretty quickly, while Hinata was still trying to do them correctly. Then again, Hinata was also trying to improve in other areas, such as Medical Ninjutsu or her Lightning Release, so if she decided to focus all her time and effort on those two techniques, maybe she would have mastered them already.

The Hyuga prodigy couldn't help but feel a little bitter. Had he classified to the finals, he was positive he would be able to score a promotion, regardless of who he had to fight against. On the other hand, Hikari expressed doubt that Hinata, who did classify, would be impressive enough to be considered for a promotion, even with a complete S-Rank mission under her metaphorical belt. Fate could be a cruel mistress, but he already knew that.

"No," Neji told himself. "Fate has nothing to do with this. It was me who ruined my chances of making it to the finals."

"Nii-san?" Hinata asked, snapping Neji from his thoughts.

"Huh?"

"Is something wrong? You look worried," Hinata observed.

Neji's face remained as stoic as ever. "It's nothing, Hinata-sama. Say, what do you plan to do now? See if Naruto is available to have

lunch with you?"

Hinata blushed a bit. "Yes. We haven't seen each other much since the preliminaries ended. I kind of miss training with him and Haku-kun as a team. But since the three of us passed to the finals, we agreed to train on our own so we can go in blind against each other and nobody has an advantage."

"Wise decision, given that that's the kind of conditions you will face in real missions," Neji commented.

"But that doesn't mean I should completely isolate myself from them until the finals are over, don't you think so?" Hinata asked, giggling a little.

"I guess you're right," Neji replied. "I guess I'll see you in the afternoon then."

"Bye!"

As Neji saw his cousin walking away, he began to ponder what he should do with his spare time. Maybe he should go to his team's usual training ground and see how Tenten was doing. He felt a bit bad for choosing to help train Hinata instead of her, even if Tenten reassured him that she was okay with that. Still, he should go see her, check her progress, and maybe, just maybe, give her some words of encouragement would be something she'd appreciate.

The Hyuga prodigy went his way towards his chosen destination when something caught his attention. A flash of red hair he caught from the corner of his eyes. Turning around, he saw that teammate of Sasuke, Karin, if he remembered correctly. She healed him with that strange power of hers after being beaten into the ground by the enraged Uchiha.

He felt that the fact that she had crossed paths with him wasn't a coincidence -not that Neji believed in coincidences, mind you,- and

remembering that the Hyuga didn't thank her properly for her help, decided that it was a good time to mend such mistake.

"Hey," Neji called, raising his voice a little, as he walked towards her.

Karin apparently took the hint that she was being called, and turned around to see the white eyed prodigy. "Oh, it's you. Hello. Neji, right?"

"Indeed," Neji nodded. "Excuse me, but are you currently busy with any endeavor? Maybe training?"

Karin shook her head. "I've been training all morning with Shizune-sensei, and she gave me a couple hours to eat and rest. Why? Do you need something from me?"

"Not exactly. I wanted to thank you for healing me during the preliminaries. The medics told me that whatever you did accelerated my recovery by weeks," Neji stated.

Karin smiled a little. "Well, you're welcome! I usually don't let everybody bite me, but given that it was my teammate who harmed you so much, I felt it was my responsibility to do something to fix it."

"Still, I think that mere verbal gratitude is just not enough," Neji continued.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Karin shook her head while raising her hands. "No need to do anything more! I'm fine, really."

"I insist," Neji said. "Let me do something, small as it may be. Say, how about if we have lunch together? My treat."

Karin's brain took a few seconds to proceed the prodigy's words. She started to blush.

"What? Oh, you mean that... well, it's just that..." the redhead started to babble as she averted her gaze.

Karin's mind became a mess in a matter of seconds. Even if she considered herself attractive, and has been trying to make Sasuke notice her for quite some time, this was the first time a boy asked her for a date. She considered taking Neji's offer, while still thinking about Sasuke. Even if she was sure Sasuke would fall for her charms sooner or later, she had been unsuccessful so far. Besides, Neji also fit her type of ideal boy, so why not?

"O-Okay!" she stammered. "Where do you want to go?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking that? This for you, you know," Neji replied.

"Oh, right!" Karin replied, giggling a bit. "There's this place that serves a pretty killer Okonomiyaki. You're going to love it!"

And thus, Neji and Karin headed towards their first date. Or at least, Karin thought it was a date.

...

In any other circumstances, Hinata would be worried about finding Naruto. And while Hinata knew where Naruto usually trained on his own or with his parents, she couldn't go there. What if she caught him developing some new jutsu for the finals? That wouldn't be fair.

Fortunately for Hinata, there was a place that she knew Naruto would drop by sooner or later, any day of the week, especially when it was lunch time, like now.

"Hey, Hinata!" Naruto cheerfully called when he saw her.

Hinata smiled. When in doubt, go to Ichiraku's.

"Hello, Naruto-kun," the Hyuga replied as she took a seat beside him. There was already several empty bowls of ramen besides him. "Hello to you as well, Teuchi-san, Ayame-san."

"The usual, I guess?" Ayame asked Hinata. The Hyuga nodded.
"One chicken ramen bowl, then!"

"It's so great that you dropped by here," Naruto commented, while eating from his bowl of ramen. "We haven't seen each other much lately."

"Indeed," Hinata agreed. "I've been very busy with training for the finals, as well as my training as a medic-nin, and I kinda missed being with both you and Haku-kun. It's a pity that he wasn't able to join us."

But then again, Hinata wasn't *that* sad that Haku couldn't be with them. Of course, she would never say that out loud.

"Yeah, that sucks. Guess that Zabuza is putting him through some hellish training regime," Naruto guessed. "Fortunately, everything will be back to normal when the finals are over and the three of us are hopefully Chunin."

"Technically, things won't be the same if even just one of us scores a promotion," Hinata replied. Chunin had far more duties to attend than Genin "But not that different, I think."

"Yeah, it's not that we will be placed different teams or stuff like that," Naruto added.

After a few moments, Ayame returned with Hinata's order. The Hyuga started to slowly eat her chicken ramen.

"So... have you learned any new killer jutsu?" Naruto asked. However, before Hinata could have the chance to answer, he immediately realized of what he just said. "Sorry! I forgot about our agreement! It's that... well, I wanted to keep talking and was the first thing that crossed my mind!"

Actually, it was the second, but Naruto wasn't going to say it out loud.

Hinata smiled reassuringly. "It's okay, there's nothing wrong with asking that. I'm sure that you have been working on a very powerful jutsu as well."

Naruto's eyes grew wide, as his irises shrunk. "What!? How do you know that!?"

"I didn't know, I just guessed. But it's something logical, right? That you would try to learn at least one new jutsu for the finals. Well, pretty much everybody else as well. But you specially."

Naruto calmed down, and laughed a bit awkwardly. "Hehe, I guess you're right. You know me really well, Hinata."

Hinata blushed a bit. "Well, when you know somebody for so long..."

That sentence remained unfinished. It was followed by a long, awkward silence. Technically, Hinata didn't know Naruto as well as she thought. But the blond thought that maybe it was a good idea to let her know him a little more.

"Um... Hinata? Are you..." Naruto began, stuttering a bit. "... are you nervous about the finals?"

"Hm?" Hinata replied a bit absentmindedly. "Well, yes, yes I am. Not only are the stakes are high for us, but we're going to fight in front of thousands of people. It's kind of hard not to feel intimidated by such thing. You know, sometimes I wish I had your spunk."

"Haha, yeah..." Naruto laughed a bit. Then he grew serious. "Um, truth be told... I'm kind of scared as well."

Hinata looked at him as if he just said an obscenity. "What?"

"You said it yourself. It's kind of hard not to feel nervous when you're before such a trial," Naruto replied a bit defensively.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you have no right to feel intimidated or overwhelmed," Hinata rectified. "It's just that... well,

you're so strong. I can't think why you aren't in a more optimistic mood, given that you have the best odds out of all of us to score a promotion, plus your parents-

"That's actually the problem!" Naruto replied, raising his voice a bit.

"Your... parents?" Hinata asked, a bit puzzled. "Is there something wrong with them? Did you have an argument?"

"No, it's not none of that," Naruto replied. "You know, I didn't notice it until Lee wanted to challenge me to a fight, but... well, I have quite of a reputation in the village."

"Of course you have," Hinata smiled at him. "Because you're among the strongest Genin of Konoha. And soon, you will be among the strongest Chunin."

Naruto forced himself to smile back at her. "I know but... I know that most of that reputation is thanks to my parents."

Hinata grew indignant. "What? That's not true!"

"Yes it is!" he fired back. "My parents are ninja of renown. Walking legends! Do you think that if it wasn't for them, I would be where I am now?"

"I can't answer that question," the Hyuga heiress replied as she started fidgeting with her index fingers. "I mean, yeah, I'm sure that Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama helped you a lot, but I think what they did was develop your potential. If you weren't good enough, you wouldn't be here."

"I guess that makes sense," Naruto replied, now a bit more calm. "But that doesn't change the fact that thanks to being the 'Son of the Sannin' people expect a lot of me. I'm not worried about what people might think about me, but I can tarnish my parents' reputation if I do poorly. And if I manage to score a promotion, some people my dad will accuse of playing favorites with his son."

"Oh," was all Hinata could say for a few seconds as her brain processed Naruto's plight. "I know that I'm your friend, and thus my opinion on you might not be 'unbiased'... but I'm sure you won't disappoint anybody. And if you think so... well, I know how you feel."

This time, it was Naruto who was taken aback.

"You do?" Naruto lamely asked.

"Naruto-kun, I'm Hinata Hyuga, heiress of the Hyuga Clan, one of the strongest clans of Konoha. There's a lot of eyes placed on me as well," Hinata reminded her blond friend. "Many people from my clan believe that I'm not a worthy successor to my late father, and they believe that I will only embarrass the clan in the finals."

"WHAT!?" Naruto shouted indignantly. "That's nonsense!"

"Maybe. But there's nothing that I can do to fix it. Other than, of course, train as hard as I can in order to prove them wrong," Hinata calmly replied. She smiled at Naruto. "At least, that's what you would do, right?"

"Of course!" Naruto proudly replied. "And I'm going to show everybody what I am made of! I will master the Rasengan and leave everybody open-mouthed!"

"Rasengan...?" Hinata asked.

Naruto slapped his forehead. "DAMMIT! I just revealed my trump card!"

"Oh. Well... it's not that I can piece together on what that jutsu is based on the name alone," Hinata reassured Naruto. "Do you want to see the jutsu I've been practicing, to be even?"

"No, not at all. It was a mistake on my part, it would be unfair to you," Naruto replied. He smiled at her. "Show it to me in the finals, okay?"

Hinata smiled at him. "Okay."

"Speaking of which, there has been something I've also been working on..." Naruto said as he began to look for something inside his ninja tool pouch.

"Naruto-kun, didn't we just-"

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on using it during the exams. I won't be able to finish it in time," the blond replied, finally finding what he was looking for.

"Ah, what is it then?" the Hyuga asked, her curiosity sparked up a little.

"This," Naruto proudly said as he showed Hinata his incomplete work. "Once complete, will be my weapon of choice."

Hinata took the weapon, and looked at it closely. She wasn't impressed. "A... normal kunai?" she asked, a bit flabbergasted.

"What? No! Well, yes, it's a kunai, but it's far from normal! Look at the blade closely," Naruto told her.

Hinata did so, and the Hyuga noticed something she didn't see at first. "Oh. There are some seals engraved on the blade."

"Yup! And that's not all. Now take a look with your Byakugan," Naruto added.

Hinata activated her Bloodline Limit, which allowed her to see more secrets of Naruto's work in progress. "The blade is also imbued with chakra. Your chakra, to be precise."

"Exactly!" Naruto replied, as he took his kunai back.

"And... what does this kunai do?" Hinata asked.

"The idea is to combine mom's chakra scalpel with chakra flow in order to create a sword of chakra. By pushing my chakra into this kunai made of chakra-conductive metal as opposed to normal

steel..." Naruto did so, and a short blade of pure chakra was projected from the kunai.

"Wow!" Hinata said, now impressed. "It's kinda like Asuma-sensei's trench knives."

"Hehe, well, I also took inspiration from those knives too. But when this one's complete, it will be much better in every way," Naruto said, swinging the weapon.

"And you did it by yourself?" the Hyuga asked.

Naruto nodded. "I got the idea while studying fuinjutsu. I might do more weapons when I'm done with this one. Once it's complete, I will be able to create a sword not of normal chakra, but of wind chakra. It will be a sword whose blade will never break or get dull, will cut through almost anything, and I'm the only one who will be able to use it!"

"It's pretty amazing. It's a pity that you won't finish it by the time the finals begin," Hinata replied.

Naruto deactivated the kunai, and put it back on his pouch. "Yeah. Dad told me that I should forget about that for the time being and follow his training schedule. And as much as I hate to admit it, he's kinda right."

Hinata smiled at Naruto. "Hopefully, you will finish it by the time we're assigned a new mission. I can't wait to see it in action."

"Yeah, me too!"

...

Training Ground Nine

For the first time in weeks, the Medical Squad got the chance to train together. Granted, like the Assault Squad, they weren't going to show their strongest moves just now. Well, at least Sasuke and Karin

weren't, Sakura was more than happy to show them what she learned about genjutsu during the past weeks with Kurenai.

At first, they took turns sparring against each other while the three adults overseeing them evaluated their abilities. Then, the three of them fought together against of the adults, Shisui, while the other two, Itachi and Shizune, watched expectantly.

The two of them remained silent as Shizune's squad battled the one-eyed Uchiha, who restricted himself to taijutsu and low-level ninjutsu -but still refused not to use his signature ability, much the Genin's frustration-. Still, they put up a very good fight.

"You know, it's been a while since you and me did anything together," Itachi commented.

"Haha, yes," Shizune laughed awkwardly. "I barely saw you since I started dating Shisui. And then my new job as Jonin-sensei and-"

"You don't need to apologize," Itachi interrupted her. "I was merely stating a fact. You're not the only one with new responsibilities. My job as the village's main information gatherer isn't easy either, and keeps me out of Konoha for long periods of time. We're merely victims of our circumstances."

"Do you think it was a good idea to take such job so soon after the Uchiha Insurrection? I think you should have spent more time with Sasuke-kun," Shizune pointed out.

"Sasuke didn't want his father's killer around him. He needed space, and I gave him that," Itachi stated matter-o-factly. "I was there for him whenever he needed it, but I don't know if our relationship can be as it was before our clan's demise."

"Your relationship isn't going to get any better if you remain absent for most of his life, Itachi," Shizune countered.

"You have a point, but it's too late for that. I can't just quit this job without proper justification. What I do is important for Konoha. Plus Sasuke isn't alone. He has Shisui, and now he has you."

"Neither Shisui nor I can replace you, Itachi," Shizune replied.

"I'm not asking either of you to replace me. Just make him feel that there's somebody else besides me that loves him," Itachi explained.

Shizune shook her head. "Sasuke-kun already knows how Shisui and I feel towards him. But he's not so sure about you," Shizune told him in an almost chiding tone. "Then again, taking a few weeks to help him train was a step in the right direction. You two need to spend some time together."

"I know we do," Itachi admitted, then decided that it was time to switch the topic. "You did a good job training Sasuke."

"Thanks! Although he's a bit out of my specialty. Sakura and Karin are aspiring medics, but I don't have much to teach somebody who follows a more offensive-oriented path," Shizune said.

"A sensei's job is more than just teaching him combat or ninjutsu. They also have to provide guidance," Itachi watched the way Sasuke fought and coordinated with his two teammates in order to take down a superior opponent. "Sasuke used to believe that personal power was the key to everything and that teammates would only slow one down, but now look at him, fighting together with those two girls as if they were one."

"Ah yes, that's my greatest accomplishment," Shizune replied, allowing a smug smile to form on her lips. "You should have seen how that team was when we started. I thought it would take longer for those three to form a cohesive unit."

"I can't wait to see Sasuke in the Chunin Exams. Hopefully the fiasco of the preliminaries won't happen again," Itachi mentioned.

"He better not!" Shizune's blood still boiled whenever she remember such a shameful display of violence. Still, she calmed down quickly. "But I'm sure that such thing won't happen. I made sure he understands that what he did was unacceptable."

"And if he doesn't, remind him about how such thing would dishonor the clan even further," Itachi suggested.

"I feel if I do that too often, he'll become resented with the rest of Konoha, and Kami knows what he would do like that," Shizune shook her head. "I have to have faith in that he will do the right thing."

"Sasuke will always do the right thing," Itachi added. "What I'm worried about is if he'll be able to tell what *is* the right thing to do."

...

Training Ground Ten

Most of the Genin who failed to make it to the finals, regardless of the moment they dropped out of the exam, were naturally jealous of those who were about to fight to become Chunin. A promotion would ensure no more of those pesky D-Rank missions, a bigger paycheck, and a better status among the village.

Shikamaru Nara wasn't one of them.

While Shikamaru did plan to become a Chunin, he wasn't in a hurry. While they could be tedious, he found the D-Rank missions easy and sometimes even relaxing, he didn't care about status, and thought that his current paycheck was good enough. Plus being a Chunin meant more dangerous missions, more training and less spare time. That fight against Orochimaru and his lackey gave him a taste of what being a high ranking ninja was like.

No, Shikamaru was very happy with the state of his life right now. While those poor fools trained their asses off for a promotion that

might not even come, he relaxed, watching clouds and laying on the soft grass.

Or he would be watching the clouds if a girl-shaped shadow didn't block his view of the sky.

"Why I'm not surprised to see you wasting your time like this," the girl said while rolling her eyes.

"Nice to see you too, uh..." Shikamaru didn't recall her name, nor felt like trying to jog his memory.

"Temari," the girl said, annoyed.

"Right, Temari," Shikamaru repeated. "Is there a reason as for why you're disturbing my cloud watching session instead of training? Your first opponent is one of the strongest Genin of Konoha."

Not that Shikamaru cared about Temari's performance during the finals. Something Temari was aware of, but decided it wasn't something worth an argument. She decided that brutal honesty would be the best course of action.

"I came here because I want to fight you," Temari stated.

Shikamaru found such thing so outrageous, it made him to sit up. "Come again?"

"You heard me," Temari replied, crossing her arms.

"You know, I could understand such thing if I defeated you. Revenge and all that. But we already fought twice, and both times it was clear that you can kick my ass every day of the week, and twice on Sundays," Shikamaru replied.

Temari's expression didn't change. "No, those weren't fights. The first time we were interrupted when your teammate possessed my brother. And the second time you gave up before the fight could even begin. I already told you that I hate to leave a job half done. I

want our fight to end properly. Which makes me wonder, why did you surrender so quickly? Are you such a big defeatist?"

"No, I'm a practical person. I analyzed my odds to victory, and they weren't good. Hence, the best option was to cut my losses and stop wasting both of our times. What could I get from a fight that I was never going to win?" Shikamaru asked.

"The satisfaction of knowing that despite you lost, you gave it your all?" Temari replied.

Shikamaru's lips formed a small smile. "You have a gift for comedy. It was nice to meet you, Temari," Shikamaru said as he lied down again, and went back to his cloud spotting.

Temari's eye twitched. How he dare to dismiss her like that! She grabbed him by the neck of his shirt and forcefully lifted him up to her eye level. "If you think you can get rid of me that easily, think again! I'm not leaving until we fight! So you better fight me now, and you better put effort into it!"

"You don't have your war fan," Shikamaru noted.

Temari realized that it was true. She probably left it at the hotel room. "I don't care! I still can fight you unarmed!"

"Yeah, those manly arms of yours look like they could bend a steel bar," Shikamaru pointed out.

"Just because my arms are *strong* doesn't mean they're *manly*, you know!" Temari angrily replied. "Now fight!"

"No."

"Then I'll beat the crap out of you until you fight back!"

"Will you do that?"

Temari struggled with her thoughts for a few seconds, before realizing that no, she would never fight somebody unable or unwilling to defend himself. She released the lazy Nara.

"Ugh, you're impossible!" Temari groaned. "I don't know how the hell did you manage to get so far into the exams."

Shikamaru just shrugged. "You know, you look tense. Might I suggest something that can calm you down?"

"Like what? Cloud spotting?" Temari asked sarcastically.

"Don't knock it out until you tried it," Shikamaru replied as he lied once more against the grass.

"No, thank you," Temari said as she was about to leave. However, she didn't move from her spot. And after a few seconds of hesitation, she lied next to Shikamaru. "I hate you."

"I'm sure you do," Shikamaru said, unable to repress a half smile.

"How do you play this?" Temari grunted.

"You look at the clouds, until you see one that looks like an object or an animal. For example," Shikamaru pointed out to a circular cloud with a few bulges. "That cloud looks like a turtle."

Temari was about to say that that was stupid, until she noticed that Shikamaru was right. Still, she let out a scoff. "And you do this often?"

"Whenever I'm not playing shogi," Shikamaru replied. "Don't you like it?"

"It's dumb," Temari said. "But I must admit that looking the clouds drift is kind of relaxing."

Shikamaru smiled. "See? I told you. You should do this more often."

"I can't. Clouds are a rarity in the skies of the Land of Wind," Temari explained. "Still, it's not that I have usually that much spare time to spend it watching the sky."

"Then the more reason to do it now, don't you think so?" Shikamaru asked.

"Guess that I could, until I need to go back to training," Temari admitted, shifting in her spot.

"Still want to fight me?" Shikamaru asked.

"Yes. But I'm starting to think that it wouldn't be a very spectacular or satisfying fight," Temari stated. "So I think I'll pass for now."

"Think the worst, and you'll never be disappointed," Shikamaru replied.

"You're quite a strange fellow, did anyone tell you that?" Temari asked.

Shikamaru simply shrugged. The two of them spend the rest of their time together watching the clouds, and enjoying the calm and the silence of the place they were in.

...

After his meal with Hinata -and remembering how much he enjoyed being around her, new and alien feelings notwithstanding- Naruto headed back to his usual training grounds, where he hoped Jiraiya would be waiting for him in order to wrap up training for the finals.

Suddenly, he felt another presence pulling him. It was a very similar sensation to the time he was near Killer B. But this time it wasn't Killer B.

"Could it be Gaara?" Naruto wondered aloud.

Once again, Naruto allowed himself to be pulled by that strange feeling, which took him to a busy street. It didn't take him long to notice a green haired girl, looking around a bit disoriented, as if looking for something. She remembered that girl as a Taki kunoichi who was very chummy with the Animal Squad.

And she was another Jinchuriki, if Jiraiya was to be believed.

The girl then turned around and looked at Naruto, and her expression changed, as if she suddenly found what she was looking for. Naruto thought that, just like how he sensed her presence, maybe she sensed him as well.

"Hey!" the green haired girl waved at Naruto as she ran at him.

"Hi there!" Naruto saluted back, hoping that such a bubbly girl wouldn't turn out to be another jerk like Killer B. "I'm Naruto Uzumaki. Your name was Fu, right?"

"That's correct!" the girl happily replied. "You know, I kinda wanted to talk with you for some time, but I didn't have the chance during the exam, and then I was unable to find you. Until now, I mean, hehe!"

"I'm glad to see you as well. It's always nice to meet another Jinchuriki," Naruto earnestly told her.

Fu's expression suddenly became one of shock. "Wait a minute... you're a Jinchuriki too!?"

Naruto sweat dropped. "Y-Yes. Didn't you-?"

Fu then started laughing. "Hahaha, I was just kidding! Of course I knew you're a Jinchuriki! I sense your beast inside you, just like you probably sensed mine," Fu replied, then she touched her exposed belly. "Or maybe it's my stomach? I didn't eat anything since this morning. I usually eat what my teammates and I cook, but I want to eat somewhere in the village before I have to leave. Do you know any nice restaurant?"

Naruto's mouth formed a huge grin. "Of course I do! If you want to taste Konoha's finest cuisine, the best place is Ichiraku's Ramen! It's situated near the gate of the village."

"Sounds neat! Wanna come with me? Food tastes better when eaten in good company," Fu suggested.

Naruto then grew a bit uneasy. "Well, I'd love to, but... I just came from there just now. Besides, there's this girl that I like and... well, if she or somebody else sees us eating together..."

"... they might get the wrong idea," Fu concluded. "It's okay, I get that. There's somebody else who got my interest as well. I'm sure you know who I'm talking about."

"Sure, it's Shino, right?" Naruto asked.

Fu tilted her head, puzzled. "Who?"

Naruto sweat dropped again. "You know, the one with the coat and sunglasses? Kind of mysterious? His body is full of bugs?"

Fu then burst into laughter again. "Hahahaha, I was kidding again! Of course I know who Shino is! What kind of person I'd be if I forgot the name of my first friend!"

This time, it was Naruto who was puzzled. "Wait a minute... you didn't have any friends until you met Shino?" he asked in shock.

"Well, there aren't much people my age back in Taki," Fu recounted. "Plus everybody keeps watching over me and trying to 'keep me safe' all the time, like I'm some sort of fragile china doll. Shino and his friends were the first people who didn't treat me like that."

"I know that feeling. My parents can be quite overprotective sometimes. My mom was on the verge of tears when I told her about my first mission out of the village. Guess that being a Jinchuuriki doesn't make it any better," Naruto replied.

The green haired girl gasped, and her eyes grew wide. "Wait a minute... you're a Jinchuuriki too!?" Fu asked in shock.

This time, Naruto's expression turned deadpan, and crossed his arms. "Not buying it this time."

Fu chuckled, and shrugged. "Had to try."

Naruto then decided it was a good time to board a certain topic. "Speaking of which... do you have any control over the power of your Tailed Beast?"

Fu shook her head. "Nope. Lucky Seven does what Lucky Seven pleases. She sometimes helps me, but like I say, that's when she feels like it."

"Lucky Seven?" Naruto asked, a bit confused.

"That's her name. Or at least, what she told me to call her. She said she brings luck, but guess that she isn't so lucky herself, hehe!" Fu chuckled, patting her bare midriff.

"So I guess your beast is the Seven Tails?"

Fu nodded. "Yup! What about yours?"

"Add two more tails," Naruto replied.

Fu winced. "Yuck, the fox! That's one big meanie!"

"Understatement of the century," Naruto deadpanned. "By the way, did you know that there are other two Jinchuriki here right now?"

"Yeah! That weird guy from Kumo, and the creepy redhead from Suna, right?" Fu replied.

"Hey, Gaara isn't creepy!" Naruto protested. "He might be a bit reserved and not very talkative, but he's rather nice if you get to know him. But yeah, the guy from Kumo is pretty weird."

"Oh. Well, guess that I'll have to take your word for it," Fu conceded. Then, her stomach let out an audible growl. "Okay, now I'm sure it's hunger what I'm feeling. And since you're not available, let's see if I can find somebody to eat with. Ichiraku's, right?"

"Yeah! Trust me, you won't regret it!"

And with that, a pair of green wings grew from Fu's hips, and the Taki kunoichi flew away.

"Boy, what a weird girl," Naruto said as he watched her disappearing into the sky.

...

Undisclosed Location, somewhere in the forests of the Land of Fire

Two groups of ninja were standing in front of each other. One group was composed of ninja wearing black robes and animal masks, not unlike the ones used by Konoha's ANBU division. The other ninja were wearing black and gray camouflage clothes, and their faces were also concealed, albeit by black balaclavas.

The two leaders of each group took a step forward, while their escorts were ready to attack in case the other did something funny.

"So, Danzo," the leader of the Oto ninja began, almost with a chuckle. "I presume that you have something important to tell me if you requested a meeting in person."

As usual, the leader of the supposedly disbanded organization remained impassible. Not even somebody like Orochimaru was enough to faze him.

"As the Chunin Exams approach their conclusion, security around the village is tighter than ever. I can't just risk sending a messenger anymore," Danzo explained. "In fact, that's the reason as for why I wanted to contact you."

"It doesn't look as if you're going to bring me good news, don't you think so?" Orochimaru asked, and grinned.

Danzo ignored that remark. "I heard that both the Raikage and the Kazekage are going to be present for the finals," Danzo announced, and as expected, Orochimaru's grin disappeared. "With both Kage and their respective entourages there, the attack cannot happen."

"You can't ask me to call off the invasion," Orochimaru's tone grew colder. "I have been planning it for more than a year. You can't ask me to throw all that away!"

"I am not asking you to do that," Danzo replied, as calm as ever. "All I ask you is for you to delay the attack a couple weeks. Can you do that?"

"You were the one who told me that attacking during the Chunin Exams would be the most viable option," Orochimaru protested.

Yes, it was Danzo's idea. The Chunin Exam finals were a big event. Not only would the stadium be overflowing with people wanting to see the matches, but many of Konoha's usual and potential customers, including the Fire Lord himself, would come to watch the Genin fight for their promotions. And as such, a lot of the security would be focused on the stadium, leaving the rest of Konoha more vulnerable than usual, making the job of penetrating the walls all the easier.

But even Orochimaru knew that Danzo had a point. Attacking Konoha with the Raikage and the Kazekage there would not only make it much less likely to succeed, it also would be seen as an act of war against their respective villages too, not just Konoha. Orochimaru knew that Konoha hadn't launched an invasion of the Land of Sound yet is because they hadn't proved to the other nations that Otogakure is a threat. That would seal the deal.

"And I'm pretty sure that you didn't acquire any new allies, did you? Otherwise, I would have known it," Danzo guessed.

Once again, the leader of ROOT was right. Suna was out of question since their relationship with Konoha had improved a lot over the past years. Kiri was still embroiled in their civil war. Ame was out of question since that would draw attention towards the Akatsuki leader -not that Orochimaru cared,- and Kusa and Taki were formal allies of Konoha. That left Iwa and Kumo, but despite their animosity for Konoha, neither of them were interested in starting another war.

And his fellow Akatsuki members were occupied doing high profile missions and tracking the Jinchuriki, so with the exception of Obito, they weren't an option.

"I might have failed at securing other villages' help, but I do have a new weapon that will tip the balance in my favor," Orochimaru replied.

"I see. Even then, I insist you postpone the invasion plans. You said you've been planning this for a year. I'm sure you can wait a couple more weeks," Danzo told him.

"It's not that simple. I will have to redesign the offensive strategy from scratch since the security detail won't be the same," Orochimaru protested.

"What about that 'ultimate weapon' of yours?" The one eyed man suggested. "Can't you use it to bypass Konoha's defenses?"

Orochimaru looked pensive. He had planned to use his ace in the hole to assassinate a certain somebody, but as the circumstances had changed, so his plans had to change as well. It's not that he couldn't use them multiple times.

"Alright, I'll use it, even doing so will make me lose the surprise factor," the Snake Sannin conceded.

"Good. I'll send you a messenger when the time to strikes comes," Danzo told him, as he and his bodyguards started to turn around. "Now if there's nothing else that needs to be discussed..."

"Actually, there is," Orochimaru replied, forcing Danzo to turn back at him again. "It's not about the invasion, but more... personal curiosity."

Danzo was annoyed, but he didn't make it evident. "I'm sure I'll be glad to answer any question you have."

"Why are you doing this?" Orochimaru asked. "Helping me, I mean. You say you serve Konoha, but here you are, helping somebody planning to destroy it. What do you gain by doing this?"

Even if it was small, Orochimaru knew that there was a chance that this would make Danzo to reconsider their partnership. But the Snake Sannin *needed* to know. Thirst of knowledge is the force that always drove Orochimaru, and there is little that made him madder more than questions without answers. And that question left him unable to sleep for multiple nights.

Danzo allowed himself to emote, and a small smirk appeared on his face. "Yes, my actions don't look like they make much sense, do they?"

"But deep inside your twisted mind, they do, right?" Orochimaru asked.

Danzo nodded. "As ninja, many times we gain wounds from battles. Sometimes, those wounds become infected. And in order to stop that infection to spread to the rest of the body, we sometimes need to sacrifice a limb.

"Konoha is currently infected, not by a disease, but by an ideology. An ideology perpetuated by my friend and rival Hiruzen, your former sensei, as well as Jiraiya, the current Hokage and your former teammate."

"Trust me when I say that I have something *unforgettable* prepared for them," Orochimaru gave a hint of a sadistic smile. "But you're not letting me attack Konoha just to get rid of people who inconvenience you, are you?"

"That's just the tip of the iceberg," Danzo replied. "Those two did nothing but weaken Konoha with their ideologies of forgiving our enemies and helping them in their time of need instead of destroying them when they're vulnerable. To let ourselves be carried away by our emotions, instead of doing what we know is best. I mean, Sarutobi had the chance to put an end to you, yet thanks to his weakness, here you are. We knew that the Uchiha were a threat, but Sarutobi refused to act on them until it was too late. We need to make Konoha's inhabitants realize of its weakness, and that a different approach is needed if we want to survive."

"Some might say that you are as much of a threat as the Uchiha were, given that you're conspiring with me," Orochimaru was somebody who delighted in irony.

"Yes, some might see it that way," Danzo admitted. "But those people forgot about the teachings of Tobirama-sama: a ninja must be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the village. Yes, Konoha will burn. But from its ashes, a new Konoha shall rise, one that will not make the mistakes of the past. One that will be strong, fearless and merciless," Danzo smiled again. "One in which people like you will have a place in it."

Orochimaru couldn't help but chuckle at the ROOT leader's offer. "Tempting... but I'm very happy as a freelance agent, thank you very much. Even then, I hope that my negative doesn't end our partnership."

"It will continue as long as it remains useful," Danzo stated.

"Are you implying that you'll try to have me killed the moment I stop being useful?" Orochimaru asked, grinning.

"Wouldn't you do the same to me?" Danzo asked. "A ninja is nothing but tool towards a greater goal. The moment the tool is no longer useful, it must be discarded."

Orochimaru chuckled again. "Kukuku... I like how you think, old man. By the way, how are the body modifications I made you? Did they stand the test of time?"

Danzo took a few seconds to answer. "I didn't have the chance to test them in battle, but so far they fulfill their purpose. Like I said before, Konoha would benefit from your genius."

"I prefer if my genius benefits just me instead," Orochimaru replied.

"Alright then," Danzo decided to put an end to that topic. "Did I satisfy your curiosity?"

"Indeed you did," Orochimaru replied.

"If that's the case, we better get going. The longer we stay here, the higher the chances of our operation being jeopardized," Danzo declared, and turned around. His minions followed him.

Orochimaru decided that it was time to return to his hideout as well. He had a lot of planning to do, and he needed to gather more forces if he wanted the invasion to succeed. When he was halfway there, he stopped and told his minions to continue without him. After a few seconds of waiting, a masked man appeared besides him, coming out from a spiraling vortex.

"How did it go?" Obito asked.

"I'm pretty sure you know already, don't you?" Orochimaru asked back.

"Indeed, but I wanted to know if both versions coincide," the Uchiha noticed something odd about Orochimaru. "You're not wearing the uniform."

"No. I believed it was best if I wasn't dressed like that for the occasion," Orochimaru replied.

"I'm sure Danzo knows you're already part of the organization," Obito retorted.

"Maybe, but there's no reason to confirm his suspicions, don't you think so?" Orochimaru gave Obito a hint of an unnerving smile.

"Anyway, what do you want?"

"To tell you my plan to capture the Jinchuriki of the Nine Tails," Obito told him. "Your invasion of Konoha might be the best opportunity to do it."

Orochimaru couldn't help but chuckle. "Ah yes. Third time's the charm, isn't it? What made you think that this time will be different?"

Obito ignored that jab. "I realized that my mistake was to try to take the Jinchuriki out of the village by force."

"And what do you suggest we do?" the Snake Sannin asked.

This time, it was Obito who smirked. "Easy, we will make him come to us instead."

...

OMAKE: Chapter 25, What Could Have Been

Dejectedly, Naruto left Killer B alone, a bit sad that the man wouldn't teach him how to tame the Kyubi.

"Guess that he prefers to write lame songs about mature women with large breasts..." Naruto thought aloud. He had seen some of the man's lyrics, and wasn't impressed. Then, an idea dawned upon him. "... mature women with big breasts? Of course that's it!"

A few minutes later, Naruto returned to the bar, with Killer B still on it.

"Yo, Killer B, I'm back!" Naruto announced.

The Kumo jinchuriki groaned, and raised his head in annoyance.
"Didn't I tell you that I was-WHOA!"

"Hello there, handsome."

Turns out, Naruto didn't return alone, since Tsunade was with him. The Slug Sannin was wearing an incredibly skimpy black dress that showed a lot of skin, showed off her killer figure, and offered a generous view of her equally generous cleavage. Upon seeing such sight, Killer B was unable to utter a coherent word.

"What are you doing?" Tsunade asked in a sultry voice as she looked at his rhyme booklet. "You're a singer? oh, I love singers, there's nothing sexier than a man who can sing!"

"I... I c-can sing..." Killer B babbled, unable to take his eyes from Tsunade's cleavage.

"And you look soooooo strong," Tsunade cooed as she sat on the table, and crossed her legs. "Strong men make me melt..."

"Y-Yeah, I'm strong too!" the Jinchuriki replied.

"But do you know what I find even sexier than strong men who can sing?" Tsunade asked, as she massaged her breasts in an incredibly unsubtle way. Killer B, who was seconds from fainting, merely shook his head. The Sannin then came closer, and whispered on his ear: "Men who know how to train a jinchuriki how to control their tails beast."

"I can do that too!" B exclaimed.

"Really? Because if you could train my son here," Tsunade pulled Naruto to her, and both of them put their best smile. "It would make me really, really, *really* happy."

Suddenly, Naruto found himself being dragged by the arm by an excited Killer B.

"Come on kid, no time to waste, I want to feel those boobies, so make haste!"

"Hey, that's my mom you're talking about!" Naruto protested.

As Tsunade watched the two Jinchuriki running away, she dispelled the transformation, going back to her usual clothes, and leaned against the counter.

"Girl, you still have it. Not even menopause can keep you down," she congratulated herself. Then she looked at the waiter, and slammed her hand on the counter. "Barman! Why there isn't a cup of sake in my hand!?"

"R-Right away, Tsunade-sama!" the scared waiter replied.

Author's Note: So, what do you think about my first omake? I wasn't planning on making any, especially not this late, but reviewer Naruhinalover20 suggested such a good idea, I had to go with it. There might be more omakes in future chapters.

While not any fights, a lot of things happened on this chapter, most of them regarding future relationships. And yeah, this was the scene between Shikamaru and Temari that I was talking about that forced me to make them fight in the prelims. A short fight during the second test wasn't enough for them to come close.

And just like I promised, a meeting between Naruto and Fu. Did I tell you guys how much I love writing for Fu? Because I love writing for Fu. It's going to be a pity when this arc ends and Fu goes back home. Also, I finally did a scene between Itachi and Shizune. I can't believe I went so long without writing something with those two.

Anyway, next chapter, the Chunin Exams Finals finally begin! Sasuke vs Haku, Choji vs Karui, and Naruto vs Temari! (I was originally planning on doing just two fights per chapter, but in the end I decided to do three to speed things up) Place your bets people! In the meantime, don't forget a review! Tsunade finds people who leave reviews really, really, really sexy! XD

Fight to become Chunin, Part I

Author's Note: Well, the wait is finally over, and now you can see what you've been waiting for, the Genin beating the crap out of each other. This fights are longer and more intense, so it will take more than just two chapters to cover all of them. At first I thought that two fights per chapter would be enough, but I realized that then this arc would advance way too slowly, so every chapter will have three fights instead.

Anyway, enjoy:

Chapter 27:

Fight to become a Chunin, Part I

or

Fire, Ice, Wind, Lightning and... Food?

Konoha Stadium

Four Taki ninja walked inside the stadium. One of them was Shibuki, Takigakure's leader. The other two were his two chosen bodyguards. Kego and Yoro usually filled that spot, but he wasn't dumb enough to have them around in Konoha after the stunt he pulled. And the fourth one was Fu, the only Taki ninja who made it to the finals.

"Well, this is where we separate," Shibuki said, breaking the silence. "I'll be eager to see you in action."

"I'm eager to see myself in action too," Fu chuckled.

"Jokes apart, seeing you here makes me very happy, and proud," Shibuki stated. "Not just for you, but for our whole village. Even among the minor villages, Taki isn't very powerful or influential. We

don't have numbers, clan history or ninja with Bloodline Limits. But now you will not only bring pride and glory to yourself, but to our home as well."

"I'll do my best, Shibuki. You know I will never do something to upset you," Fu solemnly replied.

This time it was Shibuki who chuckled. "If only that were true..."

"Hey! I mean serious stuff!" Fu protested, as she childishly stomped her foot on the ground.

"Anyway, jokes aside, I'm sure that you'll do fine. And remember not to use-"

"Yes, yes, I know, only if it's an emergency. Now go already! Don't you need to meet with the other village honchos?" Fu reminded him.

"I guess you're right. Good luck, Fu," Shibuki said as he and his two bodyguards went their way.

...

"Hokage-sama, the preparations are almost ready," Itachi told Jiraiya. "The Finals can begin whenever you give the order."

Jiraiya had been overseeing the preparations for the Chunin Exam Finals, and wanted to make sure that everything went smoothly. He noticed that even if it was still a bit early, some people were already starting to fill the seats of the stadium.

"Good," Jiraiya laconically replied. "What about our 'honored guests'? Have they arrived?"

Itachi nodded. "All three of them."

"If that's the case, tell somebody to guide them to the Kage Box. Then return to me at once," Jiraiya ordered.

"As you wish, Hokage-sama," Itachi said before vanishing.

As one of the strongest, and possibly most loyal ninja of the village, Jiraiya had chosen Itachi to be one his bodyguards during the event. The other one, Zabuza, was nowhere near as loyal, but Jiraiya had a good way to keep him in line.

As the white haired Hokage headed towards the Kage Box, he felt something. Three of his tracking seals had entered the stadium, those who belonged to his three children. He smiled. He would have hated that Naruto would have been eliminated from the exams for being late. Fortunately, it would be extremely unlikely that Tsunade would let such a thing happen.

"Come on kid, show everybody what you're made of," Jiraiya thought.

Shortly after Jiraiya arrived at the Kage box and took one of the four seats, the first of his guests arrived. A man he wasn't exactly happy to see again. Still, he decided it was best to stand up and greet him as a Kage deserved.

"Kazekage-dono. It's an honor to have you here," Jiraiya said, as politely as possible.

Rasa took a few seconds to inspect Jiraiya, dressed in the Kage garb, something unusual for him.

"So it is true that they made you the new Hokage," Rasa stated. Jiraiya was expecting some kind of demeaning comment that never came.

"Anyway, take a seat," Jiraiya motioned to the four throne-like chairs. "And enjoy the fights. Two of your kids are taking part in the finals."

"Yes. Let's hope they don't leave Suna in a bad place," the Kazekage said as he took a seat, the one in the left extreme. His bodyguards stood beside him at each side. Jiraiya recognized one of them, a

woman with purple cheek markings, but she couldn't remember her name. "But given the way I've been training them. I find that unlikely."

"Well, your daughter at least will have a hard time, given that she's going up against my son," Jiraiya thought, deciding it was for the best to keep that comment for himself.

Jiraiya didn't have time to sit down, since the next of his guests appeared. A man Jiraiya liked even less than Rasa, if that was even possible. Jiraiya was about to greet him, but his second guest spoke first.

"So, we meet again, Jiraiya," A the Raikage stated, though some could say it was a snarl.

"This time, under better circumstances, or so I hope," Jiraiya hated to be polite with such a rage-filled asshole, but he couldn't leave Konoha in a bad place, not in front of the leader of such a powerful village.

"Hn," was the Raikage's response.

"I hope you find our humble village hospitable," Jiraiya added.

"I'm planning to leave as soon as the finals end, so I don't think I'll be in position to answer your question," the Raikage bluntly stated.

"A pity, but understandable," Jiraiya conceded, then he motioned at the seats. "Please take a seat."

The Raikage walked to the seats, and seeing the Kazekage in the left most one, he chose the right most. His bodyguards, a black man with blond hair that carried a broad sword, and a white blond man with feminine features, both of them which Jiraiya remember from the time he met them so many years ago, positioned themselves between him, a step behind.

Jiraiya wondered if Rasa and A had some sort of enmity he wasn't aware of. While he knew there was no shortage of bad blood between Suna and Kumo, he was unaware if there was any recent event that sparked hostility between the two villages.

Or maybe assholes tend to repel each other, like two magnets of the same pole.

The last of the special guests arrived at the Kage box.

"Jiraiya-sama. It's a pleasure to be here," Shibuki, leader of Takigakure, said as he entered the place.

"What is that man doing here?" the Kazekage asked. "I thought that this box was only for the Kage, and he isn't one!"

"Shibuki-san is the leader of an allied village, and thus he will be treated with the respect such a position deserves, even if he's not a Kage," Jiraiya wondered if treating Shibuki as an equal would mean an offense to Rasa and A, and maybe even the Kage as a whole, but frankly, he wasn't feeling like pleasing his very unpleasant guests, political consequences be damned. "Now Shibuki-san, please take a seat."

Despite Rasa's hostility, Shibuki chose to seat beside him. Guess that A was just that scary.

"Zabuza, are the participants ready?" Jiraiya asked one of his bodyguards.

The former Kiri swordsman nodded. "All twelve are accounted for."

"Excellent, then we can finally begin," Jiraiya said, as he walked towards the edge of the box. He could see that the stadium was boiling with people, many clamoring for the matches to begin already. They wouldn't have to wait much. "Ladies and gentlemen, both from Konoha, and visitors from other villages, the Chunin Exam Finals are about to begin!" the crowd roared when Jiraiya made his

announcement. "Make sure to make your bets before the matches begin, or else they won't be valid. As for the Genin, good luck to all, and hope you put an impressive show for your audience."

...

Back in the stands, Tsunade, accompanied by Shizune, Sakura, Shisui and the twins, was holding all her betting tickets like they were her babies.

"That brat will win if he knows what's good for him," Tsunade stated. "I bet all my savings on him."

"Great, now you jinxed him," Shizune rolled her eyes. But then again, she found Tsunade's faith in Naruto heartwarming.

"Come on Shizune, you should know already that Naruto is always a safe bet," Tsunade reassured her apprentice.

"Even then, is betting all your savings such a good idea?" the younger woman asked. One of the perks of not being wanderers anymore is that Shizune now had control over her own money, and Tsunade wouldn't be able to waste it on bets, like it happened so many times in the past.

"Shizune, if I didn't bet all my money on Naruto, I'd imply that I don't have enough faith on him, and that would make me a bad mother. So by doing so, I'm showing both Naruto and everybody how much I trust his skill. You could say is my duty as a mother to bet all my money on him."

Shizune just stared at her for a few seconds. "Wow... your brain must be sore after all those mental gymnastics you went through to justify your bullshit, Tsunade-sama."

Tsunade glared at her apprentice, and mumbled something under her breath.

Kaida then gasped in horror. "Mom, you can't say THAT word!"

...

The twelve Genin walked forward into the arena where the proctor, Yugao Uzuki, was already waiting for them.

"I'd introduce myself, but you know me already from the prelims," Yugao said. "People are getting impatient, so let's not drag this any longer. Sasuke Uchiha and Haku Yuki, get into position. Everybody else, go back to the Competitor Box and wait there."

Sasuke and Haku got into position, while the other ten Genin walked away.

"Good luck, Haku! Show him who's boss!" Naruto stated.

"We will be rooting you," Hinata added.

Haku smiled at them. "Thanks. I'll do my best."

"And you will find that your best won't be enough to beat me," Sasuke added as he smirked at him.

...

"Go Sasuke-kun! I know you can win!" Sakura cheered as she waved at Sasuke, hoping for him to notice her.

"Well, there he goes. Let's hope he can keep his temper in check this time," Shizune commented, letting out a sigh. "Even if he wins, the examiners might not appreciate unnecessary brutality."

"He will. He knows what's at stake," Shisui replied. "Plus this is also a good way to score some good PR for the clan."

Shizune hoped her boyfriend was right.

...

Haku and Sasuke were in front of each other. Haku noticed that Sasuke was now carrying a sword, probably a katana, buckled to his belt. He wondered how Sasuke was able to learn a new fighting art just in the month of training, instead of focusing exclusively on his already existing strengths, such as taijutsu, ninjutsu, and shuriken. This match would determine if adding sword fighting to the mix is a display of talent or arrogance.

Yugao eyed both Genin and decided it was time to begin. She hated not being able to wish good luck to her surrogate son, but she had to be neutral.

"The first match of the Chunin Exam Finals between Haku Yuki and Sasuke Uchiha from Konoha... begin!" she shouted while making a chopping motion.

Haku wasted no time, and a handful of senbon appeared on his hand. He jumped backwards while tossing the iron needles at Sasuke, while he used his other hand to find something inside his robe.

Unfortunately for Haku, Sasuke remembered the fight against Rock Lee, and knew what the Ice Ninja was about to do. His eyes flared red, and pulling out a kunai, he charged at Haku while deflecting the incoming senbon. Pumping chakra into his legs, the youngest Uchiha reached close quarter combat range just when Haku was pulling a storage scroll from his haori.

Sasuke smirked evilly. "I'll be taking this, thank you."

Haku was unable to stop Sasuke from snatching the scroll from his hand. Then, the Uchiha made a hand seal, and moved several meters behind him. At a distance he deemed safe, Sasuke pumped his chakra into the scroll, which began to burn.

"Sorry, but I'm not letting you to-"

Sasuke was interrupted by the sound of water flowing. Turning around, he saw that his rival had not one, but two storage scrolls unfurled in the ground, both of them pumping water as if they were fountains. In no time, a large puddle formed at the Ice Ninja's feet.

"Wait, so the first scroll was just a bait?" Sasuke wondered in disbelief.

This time, it was Haku who smirked. "It would have been horribly foolish on my part to bring just one scroll, don't you think so?" Haku then looked at the growing puddle, and smiled in satisfaction. "Yes. I believe all this water will be more than enough to fuel my jutsu."

Sasuke snarled, and angrily tossed the burning scroll away. "This changes nothing! You can't defeat me, and you know it!"

"Now that's an interesting theory which I'd love to debunk," Haku said as he made several hand seals. "Ice Release: Thousand Ice Needles of Death!"

Some of the water at his feet turned into icy senbon that flew at Sasuke. The Uchiha replied with a jutsu of his own.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke exhaled a huge fireball that consumed and melted the ice senbon, but it dissipated before it could reach Haku. The crows roared at such impressive display of power from both ninjas.

...

"Ice Release? I thought that bloodline was extinct!" A shouted.

"And since when does Konoha has a kunoichi with such power?" Rasa asked.

"Well, you know what they say, a man's trash is another man's treasure. If the Land of Water didn't want people with Bloodlines,

Konoha is more than happy to give them shelter," Jiraiya replied, smiling wide. Then he turned at Rasa. "Oh, and Haku is a boy."

The Raikage snarled. As somebody who wished to increase his village's strength by incorporating more people with Bloodline Limits, A had tried to rescue some of those people in order to recruit them into Kumo's ranks, but his ninja either failed to locate such people, or they weren't fast enough to save them before they met a grisly death. Guess that Jiraiya was luckier than him.

"Wait a minute, then that guy..." Rasa pointed at Zabuza. "I knew your face was familiar! You're Zabuza, the Demon of Kirigakure!"

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "I'm glad to see that a Kage recognizes me without the aid of a bingo book. Do you want my autograph?"

"Hokage, what's the meaning of this!?" Rasa shouted.

"Let's say that Zabuza has a debt with Konoha, and is currently in the process of paying," Jiraiya explained. "Don't worry, he's not a danger to anyone present here."

"Do you know that Zabuza is wanted for crimes against Suna?" Rasa angrily asked. "He's responsible for the murder of seven of our ninja!"

Jiraiya turned at Zabuza. "Is that true?"

Zabuza merely shrugged. "I'm as surprised as you. I mean, it's possible. I don't keep track of all the people I kill. My memory isn't that good."

Jiraiya turned back at Rasa, and smiled. "I'm sure we can reach an agreement in due time. Now, let's enjoy the fight. These two are among Konoha's strongest Genin."

...

"Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!"

Haku's jutsu formed a spear made of ice with the water at his feet, which flew at Sasuke like a missile. Sasuke had already prepared the counter.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Once again, Sasuke's fire attack neutralized Haku's ice jutsu, but when the fireball was dispelled, Sasuke saw other three Hakus. All four of them pulled out senbon and threw them at Sasuke. The youngest Uchiha jumped backwards, unsheathed his katana, and used it to deflect the incoming flying needles. Haku and his clones readied another barrage of senbon.

"Like hell if I'm going to let you!" Sasuke shouted, and katana in hand, dashed at the many ice ninjas.

Though rather than attacking from a distance, the clones charged at Sasuke as well. Upon meeting in melee range, Sasuke's katana, which started to glow with a faint blue light, cut through the first one, which burst into water. Sasuke was smart enough not to let the clone soak him, since he remembered the Ice Ninja's fight against Rock Lee. He methodically repeated the process, making sure not a single droplet of water touched him.

Once the clones were dealt with, Sasuke pumped even more chakra into his sword and dashed at Haku. However, before his sword could sink into Haku's flesh, it was parried by another sword.

"What?" Sasuke asked dumbfounded, noticing that Haku was holding a sword. It took him a couple seconds to realize that Haku's weapon was made of pure ice.

With admirable dexterity, Haku almost knocked Sasuke's katana out his hand and delivered several rapid swipes that forced Sasuke on the defensive.

"Since when do you know how to fight with a sword like that?" the incredulous Uchiha asked. He always had pegged the Yuki as a ninjutsu focused, ranged specialist.

"My three parental figures are accomplished swordfighters. Is it so unbelievable that they passed some of their skills onto me?" Haku asked while sporting a small smirk.

Even if she managed to hid it from almost everybody, Yugao couldn't help but smile with pride.

Despite such display, Haku broke the fight by discarding his ice sword -which quickly melted back into water the moment it hit the ground,- and put some distance by jumping backwards a few times.

"Even then, I'm not arrogant enough to think I can last long in melee combat against you," Haku told him. "Now let's neutralize that fancy eye of yours," Haku made a hand seal. "Water Release: Hiding Mist Jutsu!"

In a matter of seconds, a thick fog covered the area. People in the stands started to murmur, with some complaining that they weren't able to see anything.

"Smart, very smart," Sasuke admitted. "But your strategy has a glaring mistake."

"And that would be...?" Haku tentatively asked.

By following his voice, Sasuke had already pinpointed his location, but it wouldn't hurt to talk a bit more. "The fact that the point of these matches is to show off and impress the examiners. Even if you beat me, it won't help you score a promotion if nobody can see how you do it."

"Maybe you're right. But I can always show off in the next match. After all, I'm sure that whoever my next adversary is, it can't be worse than you, Sasuke-san."

Sasuke was taken aback. Now Haku's voice came from a completely different direction. How could he be so fast?

Meanwhile, Haku smiled. The Hidden Mist Jutsu wasn't of much use without a refined silent killing. However, thanks that this other new jutsu he developed with the aid of Zabuza, Sasuke wouldn't stand a chance.

A whistle alerted Sasuke of several senbon flying at him. He unsheathed his katana and deflected the iron needles. Another barrage of senbon came from a completely different direction, although Sasuke was able to parry them as well.

"This makes no sense. There's no way Haku could have moved so fast in so little time, unless he knows the Body Flicker. And even then, if he used the Body Flicker, there would be a disturbance in the mist..."

Sasuke's thoughts were interrupted by another barrage of senbon, again from a completely different direction. Then, he had an idea, and made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke exhaled a huge fireball. Even if he didn't know where his opponent was, the attack did what Sasuke intended, and the heat dispelled some of the mist. But much to Sasuke's frustration, the mist reappeared in a matter of seconds.

"Zabuza-sama fought against somebody who used fire to dispel his mist, and improved the jutsu accordingly. It was a good idea, though," Haku conceded. "You're putting a valiant effort in resisting me, but sooner or later, you'll run out of energy," Haku taunted. "There's no need to drag this any longer. Ice Release: Thousand Ice Needles of Death!"

Multiple whistles were heard as dozens of ice senbon flew at Sasuke from multiple directions. He deflected many of them thanks to the

Sharingan and his dexterity, but many of them embedded into his flesh, in the back, legs and arms.

"Impressive. You're still standing. Your endurance is even greater than I had expected. Still, it won't change anything in the long run. Ice Release: Thousand Ice Needles of Death!"

The pain and death-heralding whistles were heard again, as the ice needles flew at Sasuke. However, as the youngest Uchiha struggled, an idea popped in his mind. Pumping all the chakra he could into his feet, he jumped as high as he could, successfully avoiding the needles. But that wasn't everything. While on mid air, Sasuke made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A volley of fireballs rained from above in a wide range, causing many explosions when they hit the ground. Said explosions dispelled the mist, but when it tried to reform, another explosion prevented it from happening. When Sasuke landed, the mist was no more.

"Very well, Sasuke. You got rid of the mist. But you're not any closer to defeat me than before," Haku replied.

"We'll see about that," Sasuke confidently replied.

As the smoke cleared, Haku finally came into view, but much to the Uchiha's confusion, the Ice Ninja was inside what appeared to be a floating mirror made of ice. Sasuke was taken aback by such thing.

"What the...?" the confused Uchiha babbled.

"Do you like this, Sasuke? This is my clan's ultimate jutsu, The Demonic Mirror Ice Crystal. I'm glad that somebody of your caliber will be the first one to test the power of this jutsu," Haku mentioned.

"Your clan? Your clan is from the Land of Water! Where did you learn such a thing?" Sasuke asked in disbelief.

"Zabuza-sama was kind enough to travel to our former homeland and gather information about my clan in order to train me better. He found this secret hideout of my people, where he discovered a scroll with multiple ice jutsu written on it," Haku explained, as he made a hand seal. "Prepare yourself! You'll find this a step up from the mist."

Sasuke raised his sword upon seeing Haku making a hand seal. Suddenly, multiple ice mirrors appeared at several points in the arena, all facing Sasuke. He stayed alert, wondering what the mirrors would do.

Then all of sudden, Haku's image appeared on every mirror, and before the youngest Uchiha could react, he found himself at the end of a brutal beat down. All what the spectators could see was Sasuke being hit by a blur that appeared and disappeared at random times, but thanks to his Sharingan, Sasuke saw that it was Haku who moved from one mirror to another at a surreal speed. Sasuke tried to grab or attack Haku, but even with the Sharingan, the Ice Ninja's speed was just too much.

"How the hell are you able to move so fast?" Sasuke yelled in frustration.

"I could tell you, but that wouldn't be very smart on my part, would it?" Haku asked, as he resumed his onslaught.

Once again, Sasuke tried in vain to catch Haku or strike him with his katana, but he moved too fast. More wounds and bruises appeared on his body as a result of the gradual beat down.

"I need to destroy those mirrors!" Luckily, Sasuke managed to dodge one of Haku's attacks while making several hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a huge fireball at two mirrors that were close to each other. But much to his shock, the mirrors were unaffected by the attack.

"Nice idea. Sadly, you'll need flames as hot as the sun itself in order to melt my ice, *"Haku commented. "Let's hope he doesn't find out that I need to use my chakra in order to keep the mirrors from melting, or else, my jutsu would be undone,"* Haku thought. "Now prepare to fall before the power of the Yuki clan!"

...

"An exciting fight, don't you think so?" Jiraiya asked with a wide grin.

"If you say so," Rasa replied, not hiding his boredom.

Since both combatants were from Konoha, none of Jiraiya's fellow Kage nor Shibuki were particularly invested in the first match, something the Sannin knew all too well.

"Indeed. But it's only a matter of time before Haku defeats the Uchiha. Haku is the most talented ninja of his generation I've ever seen," Zabuza commented.

"Do not underestimate Sasuke, Zabuza-san. Especially since he had already proved multiple times how strong he can be," Itachi countered. "I admit that Haku is indeed talented, but you should remember that Sasuke earned his victory in the prelims thanks to his strength and skill, while luck played a huge role in Haku's."

"Does it look like the beating Haku is giving your brother is a product of luck, Uchiha?" Zabuza sneered.

"Just wait and see. Sasuke still has quite a few aces in the hole," Itachi replied.

...

Meanwhile, back in the arena, Haku continued his vicious onslaught, albeit this time he landed less hits on his opponent, since Sasuke was slowly but surely learning to dodge and counter his extremely

fast attacks. Even then, it wouldn't be long until he sustained too many injuries.

"Dammit, I didn't think I'd had to use this so soon, but I have no other options," Sasuke thought as he made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Burning Man!"

Sasuke suddenly burst into flames. The flabbergasted Haku didn't have time to stop, and burned his hand the moment he tried to slash Sasuke with a trio of senbon he was holding. The sudden searing pain made him lose his balance and crash into the ground.

"Do you like this, Haku?" Sasuke asked. "I got the idea from that Kumo girl Hinata fought against. Now not only you can't even touch me, but I've become impervious to your ice attacks."

"We'll see about that!" Haku replied as he resumed his attack, but this time he only limited himself to throw senbon, which Sasuke managed to expertly deflect with his katana. *"Maintaining that fire shield covering his body must consume a lot of chakra. All I need to do is fight smart and wait for him to run out of chakra."*

While Haku continued his fast paced onslaught, Sasuke made more hand seals.

"Fire Release: Annihilation Nova!"

"What?"

Sasuke's fiery aura started to burn with more intensity, and it quickly expanded into a huge fireball, as if Sasuke himself was a living bomb. Despite his speed, Haku was unable to avoid the ever-present fire, and was caught in the blast radius, which burned him as well as pushed him backwards with an impressive force.

When the nova disappeared, Sasuke breathed heavily. That attack had used an inordinate amount of chakra, and could no longer

sustain his fire aura. But Haku was left in an even worse state than him. Though, even burned and bruised, Haku managed to stand up.

"I need to go back to the mirror..."

"Like hell I'm going to let you!" Sasuke's voice shouted. "Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Haku saw his opponent leaping at him, katana in hand. Haku noticed Sasuke no longer had the fire aura surrounding him, but his blade was still wreathed in flames. Haku managed to generate another sword made of ice that successfully blocked Sasuke's blows, fire and all. Even then, the fire nova left Haku very weakened, and could barely parry the Uchiha's vicious assault. That's it, until he couldn't continue anymore, and Sasuke swiped the sword from his hand. Exhausted, Haku fell to his knees.

"Do you surrender?" Sasuke asked, pointing his flaming sword at Haku.

"Y-Yes..." Haku conceded. "I give up!"

Yugao couldn't help to feel a pang of sadness upon hearing his surrogate son losing the first match, but there was nothing she could do.

"Haku has forfeited. Winner of the match, Sasuke Uchiha!" Yugao announced.

The crowd erupted into a mix of cheers and boos. Even if Sasuke wasn't one who sought general approval, he couldn't help but feel comforted to know that at least some people cheered for him.

Yugao called some medic-nin to take Haku to the stadium's infirmary while she instructed Sasuke to go back to the competitors' box and wait for his next match.

"There will be a ten minute recess!" Yugao announced to the crowd.
"Then, the second match will begin!"

...

Shizune let out a sigh of relief as she leaned back on her seat.
"Thank goodness. He won without going berserk this time. Then again, Haku isn't the kind of person who seeks to rile his opponents."

"Relax, I already told you that Sasuke knows what he's doing," Shisui told her. "Let's just hope he doesn't let the boos affect him much..."

"It doesn't seem so," Sakura noted. "By the way, what was that fire jutsu?"

"Oh that? Something Sasuke created. He wanted a jutsu way more powerful than any of which already had, and wasn't happy with what Itachi or I could teach him," Shisui explained. "But then again, it consumes a lot of chakra, so I don't think it's worth it, even if it gave him the victory."

"I can understand that. If it wasn't for the chakra-enhanced technique, I wouldn't have anything with enough packing power as well," Sakura replied.

...

Kurenai had been watching the match from the stands, alongside Asuma. She let out a sigh after Yugao announced Sasuke's victory.

"And the first defeat of the day goes to the Assault Squad," Kurenai sadly moaned. "Guess it was much to ask for Haku to break Sasuke's undefeated streak."

"Hey, don't be so glum," Asuma told her as she put an arm around her shoulder. "You still have two more Genin in the finals. Plus Haku gave Sasuke quite a hard time."

"Guess you're right," Kurenai admitted. "That doesn't make Haku's defeat any easier to swallow, still."

"Now it's Choji's turn to fight," Asuma said. "He's been training with his clan, so I don't know how strong he's now. Let's hope he can defeat that Kumo kunoichi. She's already responsible for one of my Genin being out of the exam."

...

Asuma wasn't the only one eager to see Choji's match. Shikamaru and Ino were also sitting in the stands, not far from their sensei.

"Choji better not lose this one. If he wastes his chance to avenge me, I'm going to kill him!" Ino screeched.

"Hey, calm down. It's not like that Kumo girl did something that horrible," Shikamaru pointed out. But when he saw Ino's furious glare, he decided to shut up.

...

"Aw man, I can't believe Haku lost!" Naruto whined. "Well, on one side that means I can beat Sasuke myself... but I would have preferred if Haku won. Now he won't be Chunin."

"Actually, Haku-kun can still be Chunin. He put up a good fight. Or at least, that's what I think," Hinata added. "However, Haku-kun may have made things easier for us."

"Huh?"

"That huge fire jutsu Sasuke-san used consumed a lot of chakra. Even if he can rest until his next match comes, he won't be able to regenerate the chakra Haku-kun made him spend," Hinata explained.

At that moment, Sasuke arrived back at the competitors' box. He was badly bruised and had multiple cuts in his clothes. He walked

towards the only other member of the medical squad.

"Karin, I need you to heal me," the Uchiha told the redhead.

However, rather than nodding eagerly before healing him, Karin merely put her hands on her hips and replied: "Would it kill you to say 'please' just once?"

Every Konoha Genin watched the redhead as if she suddenly grew another head. Sasuke was the most surprised, and while indignant, he wasn't in the mood nor have the energy to get into an argument with the bespectacled girl.

"Karin, would you be so kind to heal me, please?" Sasuke asked, gritting his teeth.

"That's much better. See? It's not so bad being polite once in a while, don't you think so?" Karin stated as she began treating Sasuke's injuries.

"Did... did..." Naruto started to babble. "Did Karin-nee-chan... give Sasuke.. attitude?"

"I'm as surprised as you are," Tamaki mentioned.

Hinata might have an idea for Karin's sudden change of attitude towards Sasuke, but decided to remain quiet for the time being.

"Well, I better get going," Choji stated. "Ino told me many times that I have to avenge her loss at the prelims."

"Actually, it will be you the one needing to be avenged as well," Karui replied as she exited the box.

"Don't listen to her! I'm sure you'll do great, Choji!" Naruto told his former classmate.

"We will be cheering for you, Choji-san," Hinata added.

"Thanks! I'll do my best!" Choji replied, before joining her opponent in the arena.

...

Since the next match involved the only Kumo ninja who made it to the finals, the Raikage's interest was much greater now. Still, he couldn't help but feel puzzled upon seeing Karui's opponent.

"Hokage, there must be a mistake," A told Jiraiya. "There's no way that lard ball can be Karui's opponent!"

"I know that at first sight, the members of the Akimichi Clan don't look all that threatening, but trust me, there's a reason as for why they earned a spot among Konoha's strongest," Jiraiya confidently replied.

The Raikage snorted. "Please. That fat boy won't even be a warm up for Karui."

...

Choji and Karui stood in front of each other while Yugao made sure they were ready to fight.

"Ready to lose, fatty?" Karui asked. "I've seen you fight, I know that as long as I don't let you crush me under your weight, I'll be fine."

Choji grit his teeth and curled his hands into fists, and repressed the urge of beating the dark skinned girl into the ground. Fortunately for him, one of the things his father and him worked on during the training was his temper.

"Choji, I know that you're sensitive to some kind of insults, but if you're to become a Chunin, you can't let people goad you so easily. You need to learn to channel your rage instead of being consumed by it," his father had told him.

"You've seen nothing," Choji darkly replied.

Yugao could feel the killing intent coming from the Akimichi kid, and thought that it would be best to start as soon as possible.

"The second match of the Chunin Exam Finals between Choji Akimichi from Konoha, and Karui from Kumo..." she raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

The moment that word came out of Yugao's lips, Choji was already preparing his next attack. He placed his hands together, and separated his legs.

"Partial Multi-Size Jutsu!"

Choji's arms suddenly swelled and grew in size. He slowly raised his right arm, and tried to smash Karui under his giant fist. The Kumo kunoichi expertly jumped aside, dodging the smash, as she withdrew her katana and charged at Choji.

"Thank you for being left wide open!" Karui exclaimed as she dashed for the kill.

However, much to the dark skinned redhead's shock, Choji's other arm moved at a surprising speed and smacked her away as if she was a fly.

"Dammit, he pretended to be much slower than he was to trick me," Karui cursed inwardly as she stood up.

Choji's arms then returned to normal, and made a hand seal.

"Multi-Size Jutsu!"

Choji's body bloated like a balloon, and his head and limbs disappeared inside his clothes, before he started rolling like a boulder down a mountain, ready to crush Karui.

"Human Bullet Tank!"

"The same attack he used to defeat that Taki ninja. I shouldn't try to stop it, at least from the front. An attack like that must consume a lot of chakra, so I'll dodge it until he gets tired," Karui decided, as she jumped aside the moment the human boulder got close to her.

Choji noticed that he had missed his mark, as he immediately turned around and tried to roll over Karui again. The dark skinned kunoichi jumped aside once more, but Choji didn't appear to stop. The process repeated many times. Karui was started to grow tired.

"Dammit, how can this fat ass have so much endurance?" the Kumo kunoichi thought in frustration.

"Just like I guessed, she thought that I would be the one to tire first," Choji thought in satisfaction. *"Now, let's reveal one of my secret weapons!"*

"Fire Release: Human Flame Bullet Tank!"

Choji's body burst into flames, turning into a boulder made of fire. His speed increased, and he left a trail of fire wherever he passed.

"Shit!" Karui shouted as she tried to dodge the gigantic human fireball. "I can't continue dodging like this! I need to stop this!"

...

"Well, Raikage-dono, did you expect Karui to have such a hard time against Choji?" Jiraiya asked with a wide grin.

The Raikage glared at him back, and growled. "The match is far from over. I'm sure Karui will end up victorious!"

...

"Whoa, look at that Hinata! It seems that you're not the only one who combined elemental ninjutsu with a clan jutsu!" Naruto pointed out.

"It always surprised me that nobody thought of that yet," Hinata replied. *"But then again, I only combined Lightning Release with the Gentle Fist because I wasn't good enough for the normal Gentle Fist. Other people might not think their clan jutsu are in need of an improvement,"* she thought. Naruto would have disagreed.

"Maybe I should do that too, given the results. Wonder if I could combine Wind Release with the Rasengan." Naruto thought. Then he cast those thoughts aside, and decided that he should study that idea later while he now focused on the finals. "Come on, Choji! Show her who's boss!"

...

Now the tables had been turned. Using the Multi-size Jutsu once again to enlarge his arms, Choji was now relentlessly attacking Karui, forcing her to dodge his deadly blows, making her grow tired. Karui wasn't going to let such thing happen, and she jumped backwards as she pulled multiple shuriken from her many ninja tool pouches.

"Let's see how good are you against the technique that took out your blonde friend," Karui then infused the steel stars with her lightning chakra. "Lightning Release: Shuriken Lightning Transmission!"

Choji's mouth formed an uncharacteristic smirk as he saw the electrical spider web flying at him. "Just as expected. Thanks goodness that dad had something to counter that," His arms quickly returned to normal, and started to run at her while making a hand seal.

"Reverse Multi Size Jutsu!"

Suddenly, much to Karui's disbelief, Choji started to shrink, and became small enough in time the lightning-charged shuriken harmlessly passed over his head. However, he continued shrinking until he disappeared from sight.

"The hell? Where is he?" Karui asked as she started to frantically look around.

"Down here!" a high pitched voice said from behind.

Karui looked down, and saw a diminutive Choji between her feet, looking up at her. The red haired kunoichi smirked evilly.

"Now that was a good way to avoid my shuriken, hehehehe," she then raised her foot over Choji threateningly. "But that jutsu of yours has a *major* downside. Allow me to show you!"

Choji jumped in time before Karui's foot flattened him, and in a few seconds he found himself a couple meters above her.

"At this size I might be vulnerable, but I can jump so high and move so fast she won't be able to touch me. And now, time to show her that size doesn't matter!" Choji thought while he made a hand seal mid-air. "Partial Multi-Size Jutsu!" while tiny, Choji's body bloated once again. "Mini Human Bullet Tank!"

Taking advantage of gravity, Choji then slammed his body against Karui's eye.

"OW! MY EYE!" Karui yelled as she held her eye in pain.

But Choji wasn't done. Taking advantage of the bounce caused by the first attack, Choji rammed his body against Karui's other eye.

"OW! MY OTHER EYE!" she yelled again, holding both eyes.

"Haha, yeah! Take that you bitch!" a voice that sounded awfully a lot like Ino's shouted from the stands.

After landing on the ground a couple meters from Karui, Choji made a hand seal, and returned to his normal size, since being small for long would be a huge risk. Anyway, now that he had blinded his opponent, victory was at hand.

"Now time to finish this!" Choji shouted as he enlarged one of his arms, and readied to punch Karui into the other life.

"Like hell it is, you fat ass!" the still blinded Karui replied as she flew through hand seals. "Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

Karui's body turned into a living lantern, flooding the stadium with a potent, white light that blinded everybody unlucky enough to have their eyes open at that time and were not wearing sunglasses. Which frankly, were most of the people attending there.

The next few minutes were completely uneventful, as neither Choji nor Karui dared to attack each other. It was a race to see who would recover their eyesight first, and thus earning a game-changing advantage over their respective rival.

Forcing her eyes open as they slowly adapted to the natural light, Karui appeared to be that person.

"Okay, he's still blind. If I play my cards correctly, I can win this," Karui thought as she made a hand seal.

A few seconds later, Choji also regained his eyesight, and saw that Karui had just made a clone. Noticing it casted a shadow, the Akimichi heir realized that it was a Shadow Clone. Even if a single clone wasn't much of a threat, he didn't lower his guard.

The Kumo kunoichi and her double wasted no time and ran towards Choji while increasing the distance from each other, at the same time they made identical hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Transmission!"

An electrical chain formed between the hands of Karui and her clone, as they both rushed at Choji. The Akimichi clan heir didn't have much time to react, but fortunately, he knew exactly what to do.

"Multi-Size Jutsu!"

Choji's arms grew again in size, and managed to stop the two dark skinned Kunoichi on their track by catching them in his now huge hands.

"Gotcha!" Choji claimed. He then started to squeeze them. "Now let's see which one of you is the clone."

Two things happened, both which shocked Choji. Literally in one case. The first one was that both of them turned out to be clones, as they burst once enough pressure was applied. The second was that they weren't Shadow Clones as Choji had guessed, but Lightning Clones, resulting in a painful electric shock.

"NOW!"

Unfortunately for Choji, he didn't have time to realize that there was a large boulder near him that wasn't there a few seconds ago. Said boulder turned burst into smoke, revealing Karui, and leaped at the Akimichi as she unsheathed her katana before doing several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Still stunned by the previous shock, Choji was unable to move in any way, and Karui's electric katana sank into the flesh of Choji's shoulder. The constant stream of electricity did the rest.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRGHHHHH!" Choji yelled as electricity surged through his body.

After a few seconds, Choji couldn't take it anymore, and collapsed on his back as if he were a fallen tree. Karui pulled her sword from Choji's shoulder. Upon seeing that Choji didn't move, Yugao immediately went to check the fallen Akimichi. While he didn't move, his still had a heartbeat, and he was breathing.

"Choji Akimichi can't continue fighting! Winner of the second match, Karui!" the purple haired woman declared.

Upon being declared victor, Karui sighed in exhaustion. She had won, but she had to work for that victory and she didn't walk out of the fight precisely unscratched.

"I better step up my game if want to get that promotion," Karui thought.

While Choji wasn't exactly the most popular ninja of his generation among any circle outside his family, the sight of a Konoha ninja being defeated by a foreign fighter didn't sit well with the majorly-native crowd, who erupted into a cacophony of boos and insults aimed at the Kumo Kunoichi.

For her part, Karui flipped all of them the middle finger before returning to the Competitor's Box.

Yugao called some medic-nin to take Choji to the stadium's infirmary. "There will be a recess of ten minutes!" Yugao announced to the crowd. "Then, the third match will begin!"

...

"See? I told you there was no way Karui would lose!" the Raikage claimed.

"Indeed. That kunoichi is very talented. But you must admit that Choji made her work for the victory," Jiraiya countered.

"That doesn't matter, Hokage. In our world, all what matters are the results. Karui won, how much she had to struggle or what did she do to win is completely irrelevant," A replied.

"I have to agree with the Raikage," Rasa interjected.

"Of course you do, somebody who sees his own children as nothing but weapons," Jiraiya thought with disdain.

...

"And the second defeat of the day goes to the Tactical Squad," Asuma sadly said.

"Now you know how I feel," Kurenai said as she placed a hand on Asuma's shoulder.

"Well, you still have two more Genin competing. Choji was my team's only representative," Asuma replied. "Wonder if his performance will be enough to merit a promotion. Anyway, Naruto goes next. Let's hope that he will do better than Haku and Choji."

...

Not everybody booed Karui. The Kumo delegation, as well as her teammates and sensei, cheered for her. But sadly, their cheers were silenced by the overwhelming boos.

"Good thing Karui won. Otherwise, Kumo would have been left in a bad place, and the Raikage would be really angry. And once the Raikage gets angry..." for once, Omoi didn't want to imagine one of his many possible overly convoluted scenarios.

"Karui is really strong, and those who doubt it will be proved wrong! All his opponents might as well flee, since he was trained by an amazing ninja like me!" Killer B rapped.

...

Shikamaru sighed sadly, while Ino groaned in frustration.

"Damn Choji... I was planning on treating him to an all-you-can eat buffet if he avenged me..." Ino said as she clenched her fist.

Shikamaru let out a whistle. "Then your wallet dodged a deadly shuriken, Ino."

"I know, I keep reminding myself that in order to calm myself down."

...

Upon returning to the Competitor's Box, nobody congratulated Karui on her victory since she was the only kunoichi from Kumogakure. Not that she cared, mind you. She then pulled a hand mirror and checked her face.

"Oh man, look at that. That fat kid did a number on my face," Karui whined upon seeing her swollen, blackened eyes. She then pulled out a storage scroll that was holding a small med kit, and applied some medicine to her eyes.

While Karui healed her eyes -and hoped for the next matches to be as long as possible so she could have as much time to recover as possible before her duel with Sasuke Uchiha- everybody else's attention were on Naruto and Temari, the next ones to fight.

"So, our turn finally comes," Temari stated as she walked towards Naruto. "Ready for our fight?"

"Heh, you can bet on it! I was born ready!" Naruto proudly declared.

"Let's hope you last longer than Pineapple Head. I don't like easy victories," Temari replied.

Naruto scratched his head inc confusion. "Pineapple Head? Who are you talking-oh, you mean Shikamaru!" Naruto said in realization, then he started to laugh. "Pineapple Head, that's a good one, hehehe!"

Temari just rolled her eyes, but smiled.

"Anyway, to answer your question, you won't have an easy victory," Naruto's face grew serious. "Because you're not going to win."

Temari's smile grew a bit. "Well, at least you have more motivation. Regardless of the winner, this will be a fight to remember."

"I hope so! Shall we go?" Naruto asked.

"I'm right behind you," Temari replied.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata called. "Good luck in your match!"

"Thanks, Hinata!" the blond replied with a wide, confident smile. "But you don't need luck when you're as strong as I am, hehe!"

Hinata smiled as she saw her crush walk into the arena alongside his opponent.

"Even then, a little luck can never hurt, right?"

...

"Naruto-niisan's going to fight now!" Hagane cheered upon seeing Naruto walk into the arena.

"NARUTO-NIISAN! WE'RE HERE!" Kaida yelled at the top of her lungs as she waved her arms. Her voice managed to be heard among the constant uproar, and Naruto waved back at his younger siblings.

"He saw us!" Hagane exclaimed.

"That brat better win if he knows what's good for him," Tsunade said as she protectively held her betting tickets.

"Tsunade-sama..." Shizune said in a pleading tone.

"What? Do you know how much money is at stake?" Tsunade asked her apprentice.

"It's not that Naruto-kun forced you to bet on him, didn't he?"

...

"Look at that, Hokage. It's time for our respective children to fight," Rasa pointed out.

"A match I wouldn't miss for anything," Jiraiya replied, eager to see Naruto in action.

"Maybe you will change your mind after seeing your son humiliated by my daughter," Rasa smugly said.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Naruto is an extremely strong ninja for a Genin," Jiraiya remarked.

"And Temari is the strongest kunoichi of her generation. Nobody but Gaara is able to beat her. She's pretty much a Chunin in all but name. And soon, you will see it," Rasa replied, very sure of himself.

...

In the stands reserved for the Suna delegation, Kankuro observed his sister and her rival walking into the arena.

"Let's see how you deal with my sister, Naruto," the puppeteer apprentice thought. "You'll need something more than a few naked pretty boys to take Temari down."

...

Back in the arena, Naruto and Temari were in front of each other, both of them eagerly waiting for Yugao to officially begin the match.

"The third match of the Chunin Exam Finals between Naruto Uzumaki from Konoha, and Temari from Suna..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

The second Yugao started the match, Naruto already made a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two Naruto clones appeared flanking him while the original pulled out a couple of kunai. The two clones grabbed Naruto by each side, jumped and tossed Naruto at Temari while in mid air shortly before disappearing.

The flying blond was ready to slash Temari, but the Suna kunoichi parried the attack with her folded war fan. Temari smirked at him.

"You thought that as a ranged specialist, if you managed to close the starting gap you could beat me already?" she shook her head in disappointment. "Tsk, tsk, I didn't expect you to underestimate me like that, Naruto."

Temari then counterattacked by quickly swinging her folded fan like it was a steel club, as well as adding a few kicks for good measure, pushing Naruto back.

"Dammit, this girl is pretty strong in melee combat too! There goes my original strategy..." Naruto cursed inwardly as he parried Temari's attacks as he could.

"Heads up,!" Temari said as she unfolded her war fan. She then continued to physically beat Naruto up with it, except that every swing was accompanied by a powerful gust of wind. After swinging her fan with enough force, Temari was able to produce a tornado that hurled Naruto backwards several meters. She then folded the fan, and stabbed it into the ground. "That's it,?"

Naruto jumped back on his feet, his determination unbroken. "You wish!"

"Good. I was fearing that Shikamaru was the standard of Konoha ninja," Temari sharply replied. "So, what are you going to do now, Naruto?"

"How about this?" Naruto then made the same hand seal as before. "Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Dozens of Naruto clones popped into existence, albeit they didn't appear around the original or at random locations; they appeared forming a circle around Temari, who didn't look impressed.

"Quantity does not equal quality," Temari pointed out.

"Quantity has a quality of its own," the real Naruto replied. Then he move his arms forwards. "Attack!"

Shouting multiple battle cries, the Naruto clones charged at Temari.

"Very smart, Naruto. You now that while my attacks cover a wide area, they aren't wide enough to repel an attack from every side. But if you think you already got me, you have another thing coming,"

Temari thought as she merely leaped in the air seconds before the charging clones could get her.

However, while she was in mid air, Temari saw that, much to her horror, only half of the Naruto clones had charged, and the other half remained back, and were pulling out kunai and shuriken from their ninja tool pouches. Temari wouldn't be able to dodge the incoming steel storm while in mid air.

"NOW!" the real Naruto cried.

Kunai and shuriken flew to her from every direction. If Temari was a less skilled kunoichi, the fight would have been already over.

"Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

"Huh?"

Rather than aiming at the incoming projectiles, Temari swung her war fan downwards, creating a powerful tornado that quickly pushed her upwards into the air, allowing her to avoid the clones' steel barrage.

"Wait until she gets down, then attack again!" Naruto ordered his clones, who quickly pulled out more weapons from their pouches.

However, while still in the air, Temari then placed herself on top of her unfolded war fan, and used it to glide above the stunned Naruto clones like she was surfing in mid air, and gracefully landed at a safety distance from the orange clad army. Upon touching the

ground, Temari folded her fan again, and smugly smirked at the dumbfounded Naruto.

"Cool, huh?" she asked, then quickly unfolded her fan once again. "I believe I let you attack me long enough, now it's my turn. Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Swinging his giant fan again, Temari created an incredibly powerful gale-force wind that pretty much poofed all the Naruto clones which were caught by surprise by the sudden attack. When the wind attack was over, only Naruto remained.

"Well, you're indeed a tough nut to crack," Naruto stated. "I'm starting to see why Shikamaru wasn't that eager to fight you."

"Don't tell me you're already thinking in giving up..." Temari exasperatedly replied.

"Oh, no, never! This only adds to the challenge!" Naruto laughed. "Is that, well, I kind of expect you to be strong, but you *blew away* my expectations."

"Nice pun. And by 'nice' and I mean 'god awful'," Temari replied as her face grimaced. "Let's continue this."

...

Shikamaru and Ino watched the match unfold with a lot of interest. At least, Ino looked interested, her teammate looked as impassible as always.

"You should be more invested on this match, given that Naruto is fighting against the girl that eliminated you from the exams," Ino pointed out. "You should cheer Naruto so he can avenge you."

"I don't want Naruto to avenge me," the lazy Nara replied, and upon seeing Ino's murderous glare, he added: "I do want Naruto to win,

because he's a friend and a fellow Konoha ninja, but the fact that he's fighting against Temari is irrelevant to me."

"Come on Shikamaru, where is your pride?" Ino exasperatedly asked.

"I think I left it at home, alongside all my fucks to give regarding revenge," Shikamaru cheekily replied, making Ino frown.

...

"Well Naruto, what are you going to do now?" Temari asked, smirking confidently.

"Keep fighting. Is there any other option?" Naruto then made a hand seal, creating a handful of clones at both his sides.

"You must think clones are a solution to everything," Temari mentioned as she shook her head.

"You'd be surprised," Naruto grinned before making several hand seals. "Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto cast his arms forward, releasing a powerful wind vortex at Temari, who smirked even wider.

"Oh, so you're a wind type too? Interesting, I thought that there were only in Suna," Temari commented before swinging her war fan. "Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

The two wind blasts clashed, but Temari's attack was way more powerful than Naruto's, who despite the fact that he was still channeling chakra into it, it was slowly being pushed back. However, this is something the jinchuriki had already predicted.

"NOW!" he told his clones as he tried to push back Temari's wind jutsu.

Upon seeing the clones pulling out kunai, Temari adopted a defensive stance. However, rather than tossing them at her, they tossed them at the ground. The Suna kunoichi noticed that the kunai had paper bombs attached, albeit of a different kind. Rather than being dull yellow, the tags were bright red. She identified the kanji of "fire" on a nearby one, which gave her a bad feeling.

"Activate the flaming seals!" the original Naruto ordered, and Temari lost all the color of her skin.

Several Naruto clones made a hand seal, and tags exploded in a fiery ball of fire, which was exponentially enlarged by the two wind jutsu colliding in the middle. The fire completely engulfed both of them, but since Naruto was still channeling his, the giant wall of fire moved towards Temari.

"SHIT!" she yelled as she tried to find a way to come up. Only one thing came to her mind, but it was dumb to the point of being suicidal. With nothing to lose, Temari swung her fan again.

"Wind Release: Wind Cutter Jutsu!"

The wall of flames roared with more intensity upon being fanned, however the wind managed cut the incoming wall of fire in two. Temari threw herself at the fissure before it closed again, trying to ignore the pain coming from the flames licking her skin. Thankfully, she managed to come out of it, but she was far from unscathed. Her clothes were badly burned, as was a good chunk of her skin, albeit they weren't very grave burns since Temari used her chakra to shield her whole body from the fire's heat, something Suna genin are taught as means of chakra control instead of water walking.

Temari, however, had no time breathe, as three Naruto clones charged at her.

"Do you like the Flaming Seals the boss created? They go really good with his Wind Release jutsu," one of the clone said as he tried to kick Temari.

"They're very easy to make. All he needed was to tweak the existing explosive tags and the help of somebody with a fire affinity," another clone explained as he threw a punch at Temari's face.

Fighting against those clones wouldn't be too hard, but her burns and wounds made her feel intense pain whenever she moved an arm or a leg. Even if she defeated those clones, Temari wouldn't last long.

Swinging her folded fan in a wide arc -that almost made her drop it due the intense pain- Temari was able to destroy all three clones. Then, much to her horror, she saw Naruto and the rest of his clones charging at her.

"This ends now!" Naruto exclaimed as two of his clones tossed him into the air. Then, other two clones jumped, grabbed Naruto while still mid air, and tossed him against Temari, feet forward. "Uzumaki Sky Bomb!"

Temari didn't have enough energy to dodge the attack, and Naruto's dropkick connected. Thanks to the additional momentum gained, he hit her with such force that she was sent hurling backwards, her body slamming against a wall, before falling back to the ground with a thud.

Temari tried to stand up, but was unable to. Yugao went to check the fallen kunoichi, and realized that she was in no fighting condition.

"Temari can't continue fighting! Winner of the third match, Naruto Uzumaki!" the female proctor declared.

"YES!" Naruto loudly cheered as he jumped up and down.

The crowd erupted into a massive uproar. After the previous fight, the Konoha spectators were really happy to see a native ninja beating a foreign one. Naruto started to run around the arena, waving at the public, and even throwing kisses at them. Meanwhile, a pair of medic nin carried Temari away.

...

"I always knew that girl would be a disappointment," Rasa spat in disgust.

"Don't say that," Jiraiya replied. He was about to rub in Naruto's victory, but he didn't want to insult his opponent, especially given how skilled she had proved to be. "She gave Naruto quite a good fight. You should feel proud of her."

"It doesn't matter if the fight is good or not, all what matters is the result, and she lost. I don't think why I should feel proud," Rasa retorted. "Let's hope Gaara doesn't bring as much shame to my village."

Jiraiya looked at the Sunagakure leader in disgust, and shook his head. It was a miracle that those children appeared so well adjusted after being raised by such a douchebag.

...

"YAY! Naruto-niisan won!" Kaida cheered as she hugged her brother.

"Good thing he did. That Temari girl was a really powerful opponent," Shizune commented. "Say, Tsunade-sama, do you think that this match will be enough to earn him a promotion?" Shizune asked, but Tsunade didn't reply. She then noticed that the seat besides her was empty. "Tsunade-sama?"

"Get out of my way!" Tsunade's voice shouted from afar as she pushed several spectators aside. "I need to cash these winning tickets! Oh, I knew that brat would make me rich!"

Shizune noticed that Tsunade was heading towards the betting booth. She sighed and shook her head in defeat.

...

"A victory at last," Kurenai stated as she sighed in relief. "I was fearing that Naruto would fall against that Suna kunoichi."

"I knew that that girl was strong, but I didn't image just how much," Asuma pondered. "She's easily as strong as the average Konoha Chunin. Poor Shikamaru never had a chance to begin with."

"Indeed. Okay, let's hope that this won't be the Assault Squad's only victory. Hinata goes next."

"Against Kakashi's pupil. I'm sure it will be a fight worth watching," Asuma observed.

...

After deciding he had enjoyed the cheers and applause from the public long enough, Yugao told Naruto to return to the Competitor's Box. There, his remaining teammate awaited him.

"Naruto-kun, you did it!" Hinata stated in an unusually loud display of joy.

"Ha! Was there any doubt?" Naruto proudly replied. "And I did it without using my best moves!"

"By the way, let me heal you," Hinata offered, and used the Mystical Palm Jutsu on her crush.

"Hinata, you shouldn't use your chakra on me when you have a fight now..." Naruto told her.

"Nonsense. This won't take any effort," Hinata dismissed Naruto's concerns as she continued healing him.

"Congratulations on your victory, Naruto," Gaara's monotone voice said, startling the blond. He didn't hear him walk towards them.

"Uh, thanks," Naruto uneasily answered. "Uh, about your sister..."

"You don't have to apologize. She's a ninja, she knew what she was getting into. You did what you had to do, and so did she," Gaara stated. "As I expected, your power is truly worthy of admiration."

"Haha, thanks! I can't wait to see you in action as well! That fight against Shino was really short."

"I see," Gaara looked away pensive, then looked back at Naruto. "I hope I can put on a better display of my abilities during my match."

And then Gaara walked towards another side of the box, leaving Naruto and Hinata alone. After Hinata finished healing Naruto. they stared at each other, as if thinking something to say, but no words came from their mouths. The voice of Yugao calling for the next competitor's snapped them back to the real world

"Alright Hinata, your turn! Show everybody what you're made of!" Naruto told her.

The Hyuga heiress nodded. "Y-Yes! I've been training a lot for this moment."

"You're not the only one who has been training," Tamaki interjected, while she did some stretching. "By the way, you don't happen to have an allergy to cats, do you?"

"I don't think so..." Hinata replied.

"Good, because if I won another match because my opponent is allergic to my summons... well, it could raise a few eyebrows, don't you think so?"

"Don't worry. I'm sure it will be a great match, regardless of who wins," Hinata replied as cordially as possible.

"I have no doubts about it," Tamaki replied with a smile, before walking out of the box. "I'm heading to the arena," her smile went

from polite to cruel. "I guess that you'll want some time with your boyfriend before we fight, don't you?"

Both Hinata and Naruto turned very red, and averted their gazes as they tried to babble a response.

"Anyway, don't make me wait too long, okay?" she said as she playfully winked at them.

Naruto and Hinata spent a few moments in an uncomfortable silence.

"Uh... Hinata?" Naruto asked.

"Y-Yes, Naruto-kun?" the Hyuga replied.

"... good luck out there."

Hinata's face slowly returned to its usual pale tone, and smiled warmly at him. "Thank you."

And thus, Hinata went into the arena in order to face her fellow Konoha kunoichi and former classmate in order to fight for a promotion.

Author's Note: Congratulations to all of you who guessed that Sasuke, Karui and Naruto would be first three victors. But then again, that was rather easy to predict. So, the next chapter will open with Hinata vs Tamaki, followed by Tenten vs Gaara and Karin vs Fu. Who will go to the second round?

Also, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Fight to become Chunin, Part II

Author's Note: Okay, it seems that the beginning of the finals got quite a nice overall reception. That's pretty good, thank you guys for reviewing. Anyway, enjoy the second part of the first round.

Chapter 28:

Fight to become a Chunin, Part II

or

Cats, Tanukis and Beetles, oh my!

"Look, it's Hinata-nee chan's turn to fight!"

A week before the Finals had started, Hikari Hyuga had reserved several front row seats for herself, her closest relatives, and some other Hyuga members. To her left was Hanabi, her youngest daughter, and to her right were Neji and his father Hizashi. A dozen other Hyuga members of both Main and Branch houses occupied the remaining seats, among those were some whom had disproved of Hinata being kept as the heiress as opposed to Hanabi. Naturally, they weren't going to voice their thoughts in front of her mother, but it was no secret to anybody as to who weren't fond of Hinata.

So far, the mood had been quiet among the Hyuga, even during the Naruto fight, but seeing their heiress walk into the arena alongside her opponent caused them to stir with excitement.

"It was about time," Hikari told her daughter. "Let's hope the results of the training pay off."

"Hinata-sama's opponent didn't strike me as a particularly strong opponent. Hinata-sama shouldn't have any trouble defeating her."

"Maybe you're right, Neji-kun, but underestimating your adversaries is not a wise thing to do. I thought that after your battle against the Uchiha, you'd know that," Hikari reprimanded him.

Neji couldn't help but frown at the mention of his most brutal humiliation so far. His only consolation was that nobody from the clan besides Hinata was there to watch Sasuke pounding the Hyuga prodigy to near death. Not that it made the memory any less painful.

"There's nothing wrong in making a general assessment of your adversary as long as you keep your guard up," Hizashi intervened. "And while I agree with Hikari-sama's statement, I also agree with Neji in that Hinata-sama's match will end in victory."

"I hope you're right, Hizashi. We all have high hopes on Hinata's performance," Hikari replied.

...

Meanwhile, in the arena, Hinata and Tamaki were in front of each other, waiting expectantly for Yugao to announce the start of the match.

"The fourth match of the Chunin Exam Finals between Hinata Hyuga, from Konoha, and Tamaki, from Konoha..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

Wasting no time, Tamaki started to form hand seals that Hinata recognized as those used for the Summoning Jutsu.

"I can't let her summon her cats!" Hinata thought as she activated her Byakugan and launched herself at her adversary.

Tamaki had to interrupt the seal sequence in order to avoid Hinata's palm strike. However, much to her shock, Hinata's Byakugan detected two blurs that rushed towards her. Upon closer look, she realized the blurs were Tamaki's cats, who leaped into the air, ready to pounce her.

With almost no time to react, the Hyuga heiress turned around and managed to kick the male cat, Denga, before he could slash her. She managed to hit the female cat, Hina, with a palm strike, but not without taking a painful scratch from her in return.

"How did you do it?" Hinata asked as she proceeded to heal the scratch. "I interrupted your summoning jutsu!"

"That you did," Tamaki said as she started to put on her bladed gauntlets. "But Denka and Hina were already in the stadium. I knew that you wouldn't let me summon them."

"She baited me by pretending to summon her cats, when the cats were already there... I have to stay alert, Tamaki might not be the strongest kunoichi, but she's really crafty," Hinata thought.

Tamaki just finished putting on her gauntlets. "So are you ready to fight? This time for real?" Tamaki asked as she and her cats adopted a fighting pose.

...

As Naruto watched Hinata and Tamaki fight each other, he was approached by the third jinchuriki in the Competitor's Box.

"So, that's the girl you told me about?" Fu casually asked.

"Yeah.." Naruto replied with a small smile.

"She's pretty cute. And looks like a nice girl. No wonder why you like her," Fu stated.

"Yeah... well, if only she liked me back..." Naruto sadly replied, looking down.

Fu looked at him with her eyes wide open, as if Naruto said an obscenity. "Are you kidding me?"

"Huh?" the blond dumbly asked.

"Come on, that girl's crazy for you!" Fu exclaimed. "Didn't you notice the way she acts when she's around you?"

"... how?" Naruto asked, not sure if that was a rhetoric question.

"The same way you act towards her?" Fu asked, hoping that it would ring a bell. "My goodness, you may thank Kami for your good looks and skill as a ninja, because otherwise you wouldn't go a long way with that empty head of yours," Fu stated as she lightly knocked Naruto's head with her knuckles.

"Knock it off!" Naruto protested, swiping Fu's arm away. "Listen, it's not that easy, okay?"

"How so?" the green haired girl asked.

"Hinata and I know each other since we were little. We were each other's first and best friend for half our lives. And I absolutely loved how things used to be. But now I find myself seeing her with different eyes, and realize that things will never be the same no matter what I do. Hell, even if she does like me back and we become a couple... what if things don't work out and we break up? We won't be able to go back as just being friends like nothing happened."

Fu placed a comforting hand on Naruto's shoulder. "Yes, you're right. Things will be different. But they may be better as well. Nothing ever stays the same, and trying to force them so is foolish. It sounds to me that your friendship with Hinata wants to become something more. You should let things flow their natural course, don't fight against it. Besides, even if things don't work out, I'm sure you'll never stop being friends. If Hinata was the kind of person that would give up on you the moment things don't go smoothly, you wouldn't be her friend either, right?"

Naruto stared at Fu in disbelief for a few seconds. "... don't take this the wrong way, but you're way smarter than you look."

"Of course!" Fu proudly replied. "People tend to assume that just because I'm bubbly and outgoing, I'm easily distracted, and more often than not say the first thing that crosses my mind without thinking first..." Fu then paused, and looked confused. "... wait a minute, where I was going with all of this?"

"... that you're smart?"

"Ah, yes, of course! That I'm super smart and you should totally follow my awesome advice!" Fu energetically declared once again. "So when the match is over, I want you to walk towards Hinata and give her a huge kiss in the lips!"

Naruto remained silent for a few seconds. "I think that maybe I should try to tell her how I feel first. Thanks for your advice. So how about if we focus on the current match?"

Fu smiled. "That's a good idea too."

"Come on Hinata, you can win this!" Naruto shouted.

"Go Tamaki! Kick her ass!" Fu cheered. Naruto then turned at her with an indignant scowl. "What? Hinata may be your crush, but I don't know her at all, while Tamaki is a friend of mine."

...

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Hinata activated her signature jutsu, as her hands started to crackle with blue and white electricity, before she tried to strike Tamaki. The cat kunoichi elegantly jumped back, avoiding the attack.

"Guess I better do my best to avoid your sparky hands," Tamaki commented.

"Your hands aren't exactly fit for caresses either," Hinata replied as she dodged a swipe from Tamaki's bladed gauntlets. Her Byakugan detected one of the cats trying to attack her from behind, but she

was quick enough to repel him with a good placed kick. 'Thanks to sparring with Naruto, I'm used to fight against multiple opponents at once,' Hinata proudly thought. Upon seeing the cat, Denka, easily standing up, she added: 'But these cats won't poof after taking one hit.'

This time, both Tamaki and her cats lunged at Hinata from different directions. Hinata merely jumped aside, hoping for the three to crash into each other. But displaying their agility, the two cats managed to quickly turn around and leap at Hinata once again. She quickly struck one of the cats, the male one, with an accurate palm strike, but the other one sank her fangs on that very hand.

"OW!" Hinata yelped as she tried to shake the cat from her arm.

"Gotcha!" Tamaki shouted before lunging at Hinata, her metal claws aimed at her.

Even with the cat still biting her arm, Hinata managed to jump aside, and Tamaki's blades only slashed her coat. Hinata managed to get rid of Hina by strongly smacking the cat's head. Then, she looked at her partially shredded coat.

"I really liked this coat..." Hinata whined as she looked at her now ruined piece of clothing.

"My grandma sells clothes. I'm sure you can find something. Besides, aren't you Hyuga like completely loaded?" Tamaki asked as she dashed against Hinata once again. "Death Steel Ring!"

Once she was close to her target, Tamaki started to rapidly spin with her arms extended. As fast as she could, Hinata took off her jacket and tossed it at Tamaki, who instantly tore it to shreds the moment it touched her. When she was about to counterattack, Hinata was once again blindsided by Denka and Hina.

"Don't forget about us!" Hina meowed.

"Vacuum Palm!" Hinata was able to blast Hina away, but Denka managed to slash one of her arms. "You know, I used to love cats, but after this fight, I don't think that will be the case."

"You should admire cats for their skill and intelligence!" Tamaki mentioned as she dashed towards Hinata once again. "Drill Claw!"

Tamaki leaped at Hinata with her gauntlets facing forward, as she started to spin while on mid air. The attack was similar to Kiba's Fang Passing Fang, except that Tamaki moved faster while her spinning speed was lower.

"Vacuum Palm Wall!"

Hinata thrust both palms forward, releasing a powerful vacuum shell, blasting Tamaki away and countering her attack.

"Tamaki-chan!" Denga cried as he and his sister rushed towards the brown haired girl.

"Ugh... that was surely something..." Tamaki dizzily commented as she tried to stand up. "But such a strong attack must have cost her a ton of chakra. I think this is the time to counterattack."

...

Back in the stands, Kiba, Shino and Kakashi were watching the match.

"Boy, Hinata surely is way more than she looks," Kiba commented. "I thought that Tamaki would win easily, but Hinata is proving to be especially strong."

"Just like how you thought that Karin would be an easy win?" Kakashi sharply replied. Kiba frowned, and averted his eyes.

"Hinata may be silent and meek, but that does not make her weak. Don't forget the clan she hails from," Shino punctualized. "Then

again, Tamaki had only been using the most basic moves of her arsenal."

"Indeed. Tamaki has been smart in trying to assess her opponent's strength before going all out. I think she's about to get serious," Kakashi observed. "Though I wouldn't put past Hinata to still have an ace in the hole."

...

"And now... !" Tamaki dramatically exclaimed as she crossed her arms in front of her face. "... you will experience the power of feline ninjutsu!" Tamaki spread her arms outwards, and she was enveloped by a fiery blue aura of chakra. "Let's go!"

Tamaki dashed at Hinata at an amazingly fast speed. All what Hinata could do was adopt a defensive stance and hope to block the incoming hit and counterattack.

"Cat Claw Dash!"

Hinata tried to dodge, but even then Tamaki managed to leave a minor scratch. Her Byakugan noticed that upon rushing past her, Tamaki turned around was heading towards her once more.

"Cat Claw Dash!"

This time, Hinata managed to completely avoid Tamaki's onslaught, but unfortunately this time she didn't attack alone, and Denka and Hina managed to add more scratches to Hinata's ever growing collection.

The process repeated quite a few more times, with Tamaki viciously assaulting Hinata, the two cats blindsiding her, and the Hyuga doing nothing but trying to defend herself.

'If I continue like this, she will beat me!' Hinata thought as her mind tried to come up with a solution. 'Just like she does to me, I need to

attack her when she's vulnerable.'

Upon dodging one of Tamaki's fast attacks, Hinata quickly formed several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Blue lightning bolts came from Hinata's fingers and flew towards Tamaki. However, making a display of cat-like agility, the brown haired girl merely leaped above the electrical attack, which merely hit the ground instead. Once again, she was left wide open to Denka and Hina's attack.

...

"I don't like it. Hinata-sama is cornered, and is forced to fight on the defensive," Neji observed. "If this continues, she might lose."

"Ha, look at that! The clan heiress, losing to some clan less kunoichi that relies on cats to fight!" a Hyuga elder stated. "Look at how awful the clan's image will be after this!"

"If she's losing this badly against that girl, I can't imagine if she were to fight against somebody truly powerful like the Uchiha or Naruto-san," a younger Hyuga added.

It was clear that Hinata's poor performance made her detractors more eager to share their thoughts about the current heiress.

"Shut up! Hinata-nee chan will win! You'll see!" Hanabi protested.

"The match hasn't ended yet," Hikari reminded everybody. "Do not cast your judgment before the proctor announces a winner."

Despite her protest, Hikari was afraid that Hinata would lose. So far, her efforts of teaching her the clan's two most powerful jutsu weren't as fruitful as she had hoped. "Come on Hinata, I know you can do it!"

...

"Okay, I believe that this has been going on for long enough," Tamaki declared. "Denka, Hina, get ready, we're about to finish this!"

"Alright, Tamaki-chan!" Denka replied as he and his sister moved in opposite directions.

"That's it, this is the end," Hinata grimly thought. "I have no way of countering Tamaki's attacks, and this one seems to be even stronger than the ones before. If only I was able to master the Heavenly Spin..."

Hinata then briefly remembered when she tried to learn the Heavenly Spin. She had seen Neji mastering it in no time, but even with her mother's help, she was unable to get it right, so she decided to ask Neji for advice.

"Show me how you do it," Neji asked as he activated his Byakugan.

Hinata nodded, and started the jutsu. However, when she was mid spin, she tripped on her feet and fell into the ground face first.

"Ouch!"

"I believe I saw where the problem lies," Neji stated as he helped her back on her feet, his Byakugan now deactivated. "The Heavenly Spin requires speed. You don't spin with enough speed, and thus you're unable to build enough momentum, so when you release your chakra, you lose your balance."

"My mother said something similar," Hinata replied. "She told me the same about the normal Gentle Fist. That's why I had the idea to combine it with Lightning chakra. It makes my strikes faster."

"And why don't you use the same method for the Heavenly Spin, then?" Neji asked.

"I tried, but while generating lightning chakra in my hands is easy, generating it through my whole body is much harder. Not to mention

that I'll need to do it while spinning, and it requires a lot of concentration," Hinata explained, then she looked downwards. "Besides, now I see it was nothing but a crutch to make up for my lack of prowess. It would be better if I try to learn the clan's jutsu the old fashioned way instead of relying on these shortcuts."

"I don't believe they're shortcuts. You clearly aren't as suited for the Gentle Fist as the rest of us, so you changed it to fit you better. Maybe that's what you need to do in order to master the Heavenly Spin."

Despite Neji's thoughts, Hinata had been trying to learn the Heavenly Spin like any other clan member would, with little success.

"Maybe if I followed Neji's advice and tried to add lightning to it... but it's too late now," Hinata thought in resignation. *"... or is it?"*

Tamaki and her cats charged at her from three different directions.

"No, it is not. I still have one chance to do this...' Hinata thought as she ran through the hand seals she used for the Thunder Palm, except this time she tried to spread the chakra through the whole body. Soon, she felt her body crackling with electricity. 'Now's my chance!'

Hinata noticed that she was starting to spin at a much faster rate than when she tried to do it normally. And when she reached the optimal spinning speed, she released her chakra through all her tenketsu.

"What the...?" a confused Tamaki asked as she was about to skewer Hinata.

"Heavenly Spin!"

What happened next left everybody else completely dumbfounded, the Hyuga more so. Instead of turning into a spinning blue dome of chakra, Hinata released several chakra shockwaves in every

direction, as well as plenty of lightning bolts. The energy released was so powerful that it hurled Tamaki and her cats backwards, and slammed them against the arena's wall.

The Hyuga heiress stopped spinning, and then started to walk in a zig-zag as if she was drunk, before falling on her knees.

Yugao checked Tamaki. She was unconscious and had multiple bruises and burns, but nothing too threatening. She noticed that Hinata didn't look much better, at the very least she was conscious.

"Tamaki can't continue fighting! Winner of the fourth match, Hinata Hyuga!" the purple haired woman declared. "There will be a recess of ten minutes before the next match begins!"

Once again, the crowd erupted into cheers. While the medics took Tamaki away, Yugao noticed that Hinata didn't move from her spot. She went to check if she was okay.

"Hey girl, are you feeling alright? Can you continue?" Yugao asked.

"I feel a bit dizzy..." Hinata explained.

"I think you exhausted most of your chakra," the purple haired woman explained.

"I see... did I lose?" Hinata asked.

Yugao stared at her, confused. "No, you won. Didn't you hear me declaring you the winner of the match?"

"What?" now a bit less dizzy, Hinata noticed the medics taking Tamaki away on a stretcher.

"Are you feeling alright?" Yugao asked. Weakly, Hinata nodded. "In that case, you should return to the Competitor's Box and wait for your next match."

...

"Kurenai... did you teach her that?" Asuma asked his girlfriend. The power of that jutsu left the Sarutobi completely stunned.

"I can tell you I have nothing to do with that. That must be something she learned from her family," Kurenai replied, just as astonished.

"I don't think so, that doesn't look like the traditional Hyuga jutsu at all. It has to be something she came up on her own," Asuma countered. "Albeit it looked like something she improvised in the spurn of the moment than an actual justu."

"I'll have to ask Hinata about it. Then again, I don't mind the means, Hinata won her fight. And I believe her improvisation may land her a promotion."

...

"Mother... what was that?" an incredulous Hanabi asked.

"I'm as perplexed as you are, honey," Hikari replied. "It's as if Hinata tried to combine the Heavenly Spin with lightning chakra."

"Whatever it was, it was amazing!" Hanabi gushed. "When the exams ends, Hinata-nee chan has to teach me that jutsu!"

"It was impressive, indeed, although it looked out of control," Hizashi observed.

"I believe Hinata-sama tried to use lightning chakra in order to reach the necessary speed to perform the Heavenly Spin. However, she didn't take into account how the elemental chakra would affect the jutsu as a whole. Hence such chaotic results," Neji wondered aloud. "You might not be a prodigy like me, Hinata-sama, but you're surely resourceful."

...

"Wow, Hinata, that was amazing!" Naruto cheered upon seeing his teammate back.

"T-Thank you..." the Hyuga weakly replied.

"Truth be told, I didn't like the idea of fighting you but after seeing that... boy, I can't wait until the first round is over so we can fight each other! It will be epic!"

"I'm glad you look forward it, Naruto-kun, but I don't think I will be able to give you much of a fight. I'm almost completely out of chakra," an exhausted Hinata told him.

"Oh, that has an easy solution!" Naruto then grabbed his hand, and Hinata soon noticed her chakra reserves being replenished.

"Naruto-kun, you're giving me your chakra?" Hinata asked in disbelief. "But-"

"No buts!" Naruto interrupted her. "Listen, you healed me before, and besides, I want to fight you at your full power. Don't worry about my chakra, I have plenty to spare. I don't think I ever suffered from chakra exhaustion in my life."

"If you say so..." Hinata conceded as she felt Naruto's chakra being pumped into her system, and she started to heal her many, many, many scratches and wounds Tamaki had left on her.

"Naruto," Gaara's voice said, startling both the blond and the Hyuga again, since neither of them heard him coming. "My match is about to begin. I hope that this time, you can get a better appreciation of my skills."

"Yeah, sure! I won't take my eyes from the fight!" Naruto told his fellow Jinchuriki. "Good luck out there!"

"It's not him the one who needs luck," Tenten, who had heard the conversation, thought. "Let's hope Gai-sensei's training was enough to defeat that sand guy."

"Oh, Tenten!" Naruto called her.

"Yes?"

"Haku isn't here, but if he was, he'd wish you good luck!" Naruto said as he gave her a thumbs up, and winked at her in a very unsubtle way. "If you know what I mean..."

Tenten looked at him puzzled, and tilted her head as if saying "no, I don't know what you mean" but she merely thanked him, and followed Gaara into the arena.

"Naruto-kun, that was really sweet," Hinata praised.

Naruto widely smiled. "Thanks!"

Hinata then grew serious. "But please, don't do it again, ever. It was painful to watch."

"... huh?"

...

"Well Kazekage, your son is about to fight," Jiraiya mentioned. "I heard that he's quite powerful, somebody befitting his status."

"Indeed. He may not bring shame to our village like his sister did," Rasa coldly stated, his eyes fixed on the redhead.

"What is this 'status' you talk about, Hokage?" the Raikage asked with mild interest.

"The son of the Kazekage, of course," Rasa replied. "Given that you're the son of a Kage yourself Raikage, I'm sure you can see my point of view."

...

Gaara and Tenten went in front of each other. Tenten was uneasy, and seem to nervously shift on the spot. Gaara was calm to the point

of looking bored, his arms crossed. Upon checking that both combatants were ready, Yugao proceeded to start the match.

"The fifth match of the Chunin Exam Finals between Tenten, from Konoha, and Gaara, from Suna..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

The moment Yugao's last word left her lips, a huge amount of sand started to pour from Gaara's gourd. Tenten yelped and jumped backwards a few times in order to put some distance. Gaara made no attempt at closing the gap.

"Okay, let's see how strong that sand of yours really is," Tenten stated as she pulled out a medium sized storage scroll, and leaped mid air while she opened it. "Manipulated Tools: Steel Storm!"

A rain of kunai and shuriken fell upon Gaara, but the sand formed a barrier that protected him from any harm. Gaara made a couple of hand seals.

"Wind Release: Sand Shuriken!"

The wall of sand shot several razor sharp projectiles that, despite their speed, Tenten managed to swiftly dodge. However, one of them managed to grace her left leg, leaving a superficial gash, making her wince.

'I better step up my game,' Tenten thought as she pulled out yet another sealing scroll, from which she pulled a simple metal staff. She twirled the staff a few times, before adopting a battle pose.

Gaara took it as a hint to attack. Motioning his arm forward, Gaara commanded the sand to attack.

"Sand Barrage!"

A torrent of sand flowed at great speed at Tenten. Keeping her cool, the Konoha kunoichi stepped aside to avoid it, and dashed at Gaara

at a fast pace. When she was in melee range, she was about to smack him with her metal staff when another wall of sand automatically appeared between her and the redhead.

"I already got you," Gaara thought as he prepared a counterattack.

However, when Tenten was centimeters away from hitting the wall of sand -and have her weapon stuck on it-, she stopped, and much to Gaara's puzzlement, she vanished before him.

"Huh?" Gaara dumbly asked.

The reply came in the form of a painful hit to the back of the head that sent him falling into the ground (fortunately, the sand formed a cushion on the spot he was about to fall, making it a bit less painful). When Gaara was standing up, Tenten suddenly appeared before him and kicked him in the ribs, hard. Before the sand had the chance to repel the odango-haired threat, Tenten appeared behind him again and smacked him in the legs.

Seeing no other option to keep Tenten away, Gaara formed a tornado of sand around himself. Tenten was forced to jump out of the tornado's area of effect if she didn't want to get shredded by the sand.

...

In the Kage box, Rasa was speechless.

"That girl..." he babbled. "How can that normal girl be beating Gaara like that?"

"Our Genin are full of surprises, don't you think so?" Jiraiya replied with a complacent smile.

...

Neji was just as speechless as Gaara's father.

"When did Tenten become this fast?" he pondered.

...

In another section of the stands, Tenten's sensei and second teammate were watching the fight with utmost interest.

"YOSH! Tenten's training is finally paying off!" Lee exclaimed.

"Indeed! We did a great job fanning her flames of youth, don't you think so?" Gai asked. "Now Tenten is so fast that the sand can't keep up with her!"

"And the best part it's that she didn't use her ace in the hole yet!"

Yes. It has to believe that such amazing speed was nothing but a positive side effect of the real training she underwent.

...

Tenten assessed the situation. It didn't appear that the sand tornado would slow down any time soon. She'd need to find a way to break that defense. She pulled out another scroll and jumped.

"Manipulated Tools: Rain of Fire!"

A storm of kunai rained upon Gaara, which were all stopped by the sand. However, these kunai all had explosive tags attached to them. The Konoha kunoichi made a hand seal, detonating all of them at once.

Multiple explosions rocked the stadium. When the dust cleared off, part of Gaara's sand had been turned into glass, but he still had plenty to spare. The tornado had disappeared, being replaced by a dome of sand with presumably Gaara inside of it. A few grains of sand detached from the dome, and formed an eye that floated above it.

"Huh? Is that an actual eye? I guess that he uses it to see while inside that dome," Tenten deduced. "Anyway, I better try to break that shell."

Discarding her metal staff, Tenten pulled out that same weapon storage scroll and unsealed a couple long swords. She then rushed at Gaara, and tried to slash at the sand dome.

However, when she was at fighting distance, a giant arm of sand emerged from the dome, and tried to grab her. Tenten was able to stop in time and jump backwards, but the arm followed her. Each of the hand's finger took the shape of a serpentine dragon and tried to bite her, but once again the weapon mistress managed to avoid them. When she fell back enough distance, the dragons returned to the dome and disappeared.

"So, that's your strategy, uh? To fight defensively and wait for me to get tired trying to breach your unbreakable defense," Tenten thought as she stabbed both long swords into the ground. *"Okay, let's see what you do when your defense fails!"*

The odango haired kunoichi crossed her arms in front of her face, and started to channel her chakra. Her body started to glow with a faint green light, as small pieces of dirt started to float in mid air. She then spread her arms outwards, and her body burst with chakra in such a sudden and potent way that even non-sensors were able to feel it.

"Gate of Opening: Open!"

...

"What!?" Neji exclaimed out loud. "Gai-sensei taught her how to open the Celestial Gates!? I never thought he'd do such a thing... but then again, I don't think there's nothing else she could have done if she wanted to beat Gaara."

...

Both Gai and Rock Lee were trembling with excitement upon seeing Tenten opening the first Gate.

Technically speaking, opening the Gates is a very easy process, and once you know how to open one, you can open all eight of them. The problem, though, is handling the backlash of the gates. The first time Tenten opened a Gate, despite the immense rush of power, it afflicted her body so much afterwards that she needed a whole day just to recover her mobility.

So, besides her usual training in marksmanship and armed melee combat, Tenten joined Gai and Lee on their morning workouts in order to train her body to be more durable, stronger and faster (qualities she also needed to defeat her opponent). Thanks to the intensive training, Tenten's body was good enough to at least withstand the backlash of the first Gate.

Although, when Gai offered to teach her the Front Lotus, Tenten declined, claiming that she had another idea in mind of how to use her newfound power.

...

"Okay, Gaara, let's see how your defense can withstand this," Tenten said as she unsealed a single kunai from a storage scroll. Upon grabbing it, the kunai started to glow with a blue aura. "HA!"

Tenten tossed the kunai at the sand dome with such force and speed, that it tore both an entry and an exit hole on it, briefly revealing a stunned Gaara inside before the holes slowly closed, before they crashed against the ground, making a small explosion.

"She pierced my sand dome? How?" The puzzled jinchuriki wondered.

Tenten smiled wickedly as she pulled out eight more kunai, holding four on each hand. After infusing them with chakra, she tossed four

of them at the same time, and as it happened before, they pierced the sand dome as if it was wet paper.

"This is bad, if she can bypass my defense, I can't stand still!" Gaara thought as he undid the sand dome and started to run.

Tenten laughed at the running redhead. "You can run, but you can't hide from me and my flames of youth!" the odango-haired girl claimed, and upon noticing what she said, shuddered in disgust. "Ew! Why did I say that?"

Tenten continued to pelt Gaara with her chakra-enhanced weapons. The Suna jinchuriki could only try to dodge the steel projectiles, or try to deflect them with his sand.

"I can't let her force me to fight defensively, I need to attack too!" Gaara thought as he made several hand seals. "Monstrous Sand Arm!"

Gaara's sand formed a huge arm ended in a clawed hand that shot at Tenten, and tried to grab her. The kunoichi proved to be too fast for Gaara's sand, and vanished before his very eyes. Feeling a hunch, Gaara repeated the action, except he aimed the arm backwards.

The attack failed once again, but the sound of a female voice yelping followed by brief air current made him realize that his hunch was right.

"Dammit, he realized that I would attack him from behind! I better not be so predictable!" Tenten thought.

"She's too fast. I need to stop or at least slow her down," Gaara thought as he started to send sand underground. *"She likes to jump a lot, but sooner or later she'll fall in my trap."*

Tenten continued pelting Gaara with her enhanced weapons, which Gaara barely avoided by moving as fast as his nonathletic body

allowed him to, and using sand to slow and divert the attacks. Both combatants started to notice that Tenten's pace was starting to slow down, and her green aura looked more dim.

"Oh no! The power boost of the first gate is fading already?" she thought in horror as her energy started to slowly being replaced by exhaustion.

"She's slowing down, now's my chance!" Gaara thought as he made a hand motion. "Sand Coffin!"

Sand burst from under the spot Tenten just landed on. She tried to jump, but she wasn't fast enough, and several sand tendrils wrapped around her legs, stopping her from moving. More sand started to wrap around her body until it formed a cocoon that left only her head exposed.

"And so it ends," Gaara declared, as he walked towards her. "Now please surrender. I have no wish of inflicting you more harm than the already done."

'Dammit he got me good! What the hell am I supposed to do?' Tenten's brain raced through the possibilities, until she came up with a solution, albeit one that she didn't like one bit. 'I haven't mastered it yet... but I can't give up so soon...'

"Well?" Gaara was waiting.

"I don't think I can surrender just now," Tenten replied, as the green aura surrounding her started to once again glow with more intensity. "Gate of Healing: Open!"

The burst of chakra was so potent that it completely blew the Sand Coffin apart. Taking advantage of Gaara's shock, Tenten managed to close the distance gap in less than a second and kick him in the face before his sand protection had any time to react, sending him flying backwards. Rather than follow on the attack, though, Tenten went to

retrieve the two long swords that she discarded earlier, and dashed towards Gaara, leaving a green glowing trail behind.

"I haven't mastered this technique yet, but if it worked for Hinata earlier, I don't think why it couldn't work for me," Tenten thought before leaping mid air.

"This is bad! Sand armor, now!" Gaara thought as sand start to form a skin-tight protection around him.

As she fell, Tenten spread her arms and started to spin. "Raging Bladestorm!"

Tenten turned into a tornado of razor-sharp death that rushed towards Gaara. Using the sand as a spring, he jumped out of Tenten's way, who stopped spinning upon missing. However, much to Gaara's frustration, she attacked again.

"Raging Bladestorm!"

"Not this time," Gaara replied, still keeping his cool while he went through hand seals as fast as he could. "Wind Release: Roar of the Desert!"

Gaara sent a barrage of sand at her, but Tenten was spinning at such speed that she somehow managed to cut the sand stream in two, which was unable to even stop her down. Gaara tried to jump aside, but he was unable to avoid multiple cuts on his body that thankfully, were absorbed by the sand armor, which started to crack.

"I see I have to crack that armor if I want to do any damage," Tenten thought as she prepared to attack again.

"Here she comes..." Gaara thought as he prepared his counterattack.

However, rather than using the same attack for the third time, Tenten vanished before his eyes, and appeared a second later in front of

him, centimeters from his face. Before Gaara -or his sand- had any time to react, Tenten kicked him in the jaw, which sent him flying upwards. But it didn't stop there, as Tenten managed to jump into the spot Gaara was kicked to, and smacked him again, sending him flying into different directions, his armor cracking with each hit. With the last hit, that send Gaara back into the ground, the armor was completely broken.

"I'm running out of energy, I need to finish this now!" Tenten thought before raising both swords above her head. "Reverse Raging Bladestorm!"

This time, Tenten spun vertically, turning herself not in a tornado but more like a human buzz-saw, flying down at Gaara.

Gaara, upon seeing Tenten coming down, knew that there was only one thing he could do.

"Ultimately Hard Absolute Defense: Shield of Shukaku!"

Between Gaara and Tenten appeared a toy-like replica of the One Tailed Beast, wearing a wide-brimmed rural hat, that was roughly thrice the size of Gaara. Upon impact, Tenten started to cut through it.

"Impossible! Nobody is able to bypass my ultimate defense!" a concerned Gaara shouted aloud.

Unfortunately for Tenten, her spinning speed started to slow down, until she was forced to cancel the attack, and jump backwards to put some distance.

"Damn, I ran out of energy before I could finish this... 2 Tenten thought in frustration. *"Every bit of my body hurts... I could win this if I opened another Gate, but then the backlash would be so bad it could end my ninja career forever... guess I'll have to try in six months..."*

Tenten dropped her long swords - which felt like they weight a ton each - and raised her hand.

"Proctor, I wish to forfeit," Tenten said between pants.

"Are you sure?" Yugao asked.

The weapon mistress nodded. "I don't have any more energy left. If I keep pushing my body further... I'm afraid I may not make it. I can always try next time."

"Good choice, girl," Yugao replied with a smile. "Tenten forfeits the match! Winner of the fifth match, Gaara!" the purple haired woman declared. "There will be a recess of ten minutes before the next match begins!"

Tenten sighed and dropped on her knees. "Can you call the medics, Yugao-san?"

The proctor nodded, and made a hand signal, prompting two medic-nin to enter the arena. But before they could take her away, Gaara walked to her, as he recalled his sand back into the gourd.

"You proved to be much stronger than I had initially thought. I wasn't expecting a worthy adversary until the later rounds, but you proved me wrong. Even in defeat, you should feel proud of yourself," Gaara told her.

"T-Thank you..." Tenten said between pants. "Maybe one day... you can... give me a rematch?"

"You can be sure of it," was the last thing Gaara said before Tenten was carried away to the infirmary, and Gaara himself returned to the Competitor's Box.

...

"Jiraiya, I'm going to admit it," Rasa began, still refusing to address the Hokage by his title. "That girl gave Gaara quite a fight. But she

was destined to lose even before the match started."

"You seem to have quite a lot of hope in your kid, haven't you?"

Jiraiya replied. "Tenten proved to be exceptional, yet she isn't even among the strongest Konoha Genin in the competition. Others such as Naruto or Sasuke might be able to defeat him."

"I find it unlikely. There's no Genin who can defeat Gaara," Rasa replied as he dismissed the idea with a hand wave. "No matter who he fights against, he will rise victorious."

"We'll see about that, Kazekage. We'll see."

...

"In the end, Tenten lost. What a pity, I was sure she was about to win," a deflated Lee said.

"She had the bad luck of having to fight against an extremely resilient opponent. If we only had a bit more time to master the Gates..." Gai wondered aloud in resignation.

"Still, that Bladestorm was really impressive," Lee observed. "She knew how to take advantage of the Gates' power boost, and apply it to her area of expertise."

"Yes, even if she lost, she gave it everything!" Gai agreed. "Who knows, maybe she impressed the examiners enough to promote her!"

...

"So, how I was out there, Naruto?" Gaara asked upon returning to the waiting area.

"Simply amazing!" Naruto praised. "Now I can't wait to fight you, and see how well my jutsu will do against yours!"

"Maybe we can use that as an extra motivation to win our following matches," Gaara replied. "Though even if I do not wish to demean or underestimate our potential rivals, I'm sure I can defeat almost everybody here until our paths inevitably cross."

"You're pretty strong, so I wouldn't say it's a crazy idea," Naruto admitted. "But I'm pretty strong too!"

"You don't have to tell me. I see you made a number on my sister," Gaara reminded him, which caused Naruto to laugh very awkwardly.

...

"So, this will be the last match of the first round," Shisui commented.

"Yes. Now it's Karin's turn to fight against that Jinchruiki from Taki," Shizune mentioned. "First Sakura and now her. Why did all my Genin end up fighting against a Jinchuriki? That's not fair."

"Sasuke didn't fight against one," Shisui reminded her. "Anyway, I saw how strong Karin grew during this month. I'm sure she'll do fine."

"Thanks for the assurance, but I doubt her opponent spent this month slacking off."

"At the very least, Karin seemed confident that she could win," Sakura piped in.

...

"Alright, Fu is finally going to fight," Shibuki stated, eager to see her in action. "I wish her fight was a bit sooner..."

"You must feel really proud of her, don't you, Shibuki?" Rasa asked. "After all, a minor ninja village being able to compete against the Great Villages... you must feel like a kid that's allowed to hang out with the grownups, aren't you?"

"With all due respect, Kazkeage-dono, Takigakure might not be a Great Village, but that's no reason to underestimate us," Shibuki firmly replied. If Rasa thought that he could use his status as a Kage to bully him, he had another thing coming.

"I agree with Shibuki. Let's see his Genin fight first before casting a judgment," the Raikage intervened.

Rasa frowned, while Shibuki looked at A in disbelief, surprised that the scary-looking man would come to his defense, something Jiraiya found mildly amusing.

"T-Thank you, Raikage-dono..." Shibuki stuttered.

...

"Alright, it's my time to fight!" Fu excitedly claimed. "Why am I always one of the last to fight? It's as if everybody forgets about me or something."

Naruto chuckled. "You know, people also tend to forget about Shino as well, being so silent and all that. Another thing you have in common?"

"Har har," Fu sarcastically laughed. "Oh, and by the way, thanks a lot for telling me about Icharaku! I didn't know you could eat so good! Albeit my teammates were rather mad at the bill I ended up racking..."

"I know, right? That's the best place to eat in the world!" Naruto proudly agreed.

"And the manager and his daughter were super nice to me!" Fu continued, just as excited. "And were very sad that I wasn't going to stay in Konoha. Then he said something about wanting to move to a bigger house, which frankly I don't know what it had to do with anything... anyway, I better not start rambling, my match is now, wish me luck!"

"Hey!" Fu's rival, Karin, protested, as she walked towards the Jinchruiki duo. "It's *me* whom Naruto should wish luck!"

"Oh. Why, exactly?" Fu asked, as she scratched her head.

"Because we're from the same clan, the Uzumaki!" Karin told her.

"Really? That's so cool!" Fu replied, cheerful as ever. "If you're family of Naruto, then I need to know you better! Say, how about if we go to eat something after the exam is over? Though you will have to pay, since I already blew up all our money on ramen..."

"You blew all your money on ramen?" Karin asked incredulity.

"It's that I couldn't decided what kind of ramen I wanted to order, so I order one of each to see which one I would like the most... and I ended up liking all of them so much that I ended up ordering one of each ramen again! Too bad neither me nor my teammates have enough money anymore... though maybe I can ask Shibuki for more money since he's here...?" once again, Fu lost herself in her thoughts.

"I think I'm going to the arena..." Karin stated as she left, not wanting to be caught by Fu's inherent weirdness.

"Fu, I think you should go too," Naruto told her.

"Huh? Why?" the green haired girl asked. "Oh, right, the match! Karin-chan, wait for me!"

And Fu rushed into the arena after Karin.

...

Unlike the other Chunin hopefuls, Karin and Fu didn't get into position to fight each other. In Fu's case, she flew around the stadium, scanning the stands, until she found the people she was looking for: Kakashi's Animal Squad. She smiled and flew down at them.

"Hey guys!" Fu chimed in. "I'm so happy to see you here! Hope you cheer for me even if my opponent is a Konoha ninja!"

"Given that Karin is the reason for me being already out, let's say that I wasn't planning on cheering her," Kiba replied.

"Sure, Fu, you will have our support for your match," Shino agreed.

"Although I wouldn't count on Shino cheering you on very loudly," Kiba said before chuckling.

"Haha, yeah, that wouldn't be him. But knowing that he's rooting for me is enough," Fu replied.

"Fu, I don't want to be rude, but shouldn't you go back to the arena?" Kakashi pointed out. "You may get disqualified for fooling around. You can always talk once the exams are over."

"Oh, right! I better get going!" Fu said before flying back into the arena.

"Wings..." Kakashi thought, his interest mildly stirred. *"Are they the product of a Bloodline Limit... or something else?"*

...

While Fu had a brief talk with Team Kakashi, Karin was also looking for somebody else, two people to be precise. Thanks to her sensor ability, she was able to find said people in no time. The first was her mother, whom she waved at despite sitting in one of the middle rows. But lucky for her, the other one was sitting in one of the first row seats.

"Hey, Neji-kun!" Karin shouted as she waved at him. "Wish me luck!"

In normal circumstances, Neji would have merely nodded at her, but at that distance Karin wouldn't notice such a subtle gesture, so he was forced to wave back at her to acknowledge her. This display didn't go unnoticed to his immediate family.

"That girl seems to be very familiar with you, Neji," Hizashi observed.
"Who is she?"

"A teammate of Sasuke Uchiha," Neji replied. "After Sasuke... beat me near death, Karin healed me back. If it wasn't for her intervention, my recovery wouldn't have been so quick."

"I see," Hizashi said.

"And that's it?" Hikari asked, a bit confused. She felt there was something more to the redheaded girl.

"No. A few weeks ago I treated her to lunch as way to thank her for her kind action," Neji explained. "She liked my company, so she requested for us to eat together some more. I must admit, I do enjoy her company as well."

"So you're dating her," Hikari concluded.

"Ohhhhhhhh, Nii-san has a girlfriend!" Hanabi stated in a teasing tone.

"No, Hikari-sama. Why do you say that?" Neji asked.

The Hyuga matriarch barely resisted the urge of both slap her forehead, and slap Neji quite a few times. The worst part was that Neji seemed to be awfully oblivious about it. For a so called "genius", he could be unbelievably dense.

"Neji-kun, when we're back home, you and I are going to have a serious talk," Hikari stated in a firm, almost reprimanding tone.

"I don't understand, Hikari-sama. Did I do something wrong? Do you not approve of me spending time with that girl?" Neji asked in confusion.

"Actually, it's the complete opposite."

Hikari's answer left Neji even more baffled.

...

After a delayed start, Karin and Fu were in front of each other, ready to prove which one of the two was more deserving of being a Chunin. Yugao wasted no time to start the match.

"The sixth match of the Chunin Exam Finals, and final match of the first round, between Karin Uzumaki, from Konoha, and Fu, from Taki..." the ANBU raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

Karin wasted no time and opened the fight with her blond relative's signature jutsu.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Unlike Naruto, Karin's limit was still four clones. Not even the month of training was enough to push beyond that limit.

"Scatter!" the original redhead ordered her clones, which did as she said, and surrounded Fu in a circle.

"Did you forget that I can fly?" Fu said as her wings sprout from her back and started to fly. "Surrounding a flying target is useless."

"Oh, I was expecting that," Karin replied with a wicked chuckle. "Everybody, now!"

"Adamantine Sealing Chain!"

Karin and her clones cast one hand upwards, and shot a chakra chain from the palm of their hand. During her training, Karin was able to learn how to cast her chakra chains from her hands instead of her back. While the hand only has enough surface for one chain, it was much easier to direct and control as a result. Never mind that it used less chakra, and it was easier for a clone to do it.

"Oh shit!" Fu cursed after narrowly dodging a chain. "Oh shit!" Fu cursed louder when another chain almost touched her. "OH SHIT!" she cursed the loudest when a chain wrapped around her legs.

Karin and the clones who failed to catch her quickly dispelled their chains and rushed towards the clone who succeeded. And between the five of them using Chakra Enhanced Strength, they forced Fu back into the ground.

"OH SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!" Fu yelled as she was jerked down, before being slammed back into the ground with such force that it made a crater on impact.

"Haha, yes! Good work, girls!" Karin congratulated as she high-fived her clones.

However, much to their shock, Fu emerged from the crater with nothing but a few bruises. She appeared to be a bit dizzy by the way she moved.

"W-Wow... that was... b-brutal..." Fu slurred. She shook her head in an effort to return her mind back to normal. "Sooooo... shall we continue?"

Fu's nonchalant attitude only made Karin even madder. She gritted her teeth, and angrily pointed at her. "Everybody, get her!"

The clones nodded, pulled out a pair of kunai each, and charged at the green haired girl. Fu also pulled a kunai, and charged at the clones as well. When she met them, she started to expertly hack them down as she parried their blows. In less than ten seconds, the clones were no more.

"That was fun, but how about this?" Fu stated as she put back the kunai on her tool pouch and started to make hand seals. "Wind release: Savage Whirlwind!"

Fu created a whirlwind of dust that flied at Karin. The redhead replied with an elemental jutsu of her own.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

Upon finishing the hand seal, Karin slammed both hands down, erecting a wall of earth that managed to stop Fu's wind attack. However, much to her shock, the Taki kunoichi broke through the wall as if it was never there, and charged at Karin.

"She could have easily flown over it. She did that to try to intimidate me. This girl isn't as stupid as she looks," Karin thought as she braced for the impact.

"Dammit, how could I forget that I could fly over the wall? I broke a nail punching it down!" Fu absentmindedly thought as she charged.

...

"That kunoichi of your village is pretty strong, Shibuki-san," Jiraiya told Shibuki.

The young Taki leader smiled. "Thank you, she's indeed a very special girl."

Jiraiya nodded, and then leaned towards Shibuki. "Nobody would ever guess that she got so far thanks to the help of two Jonin, right?" Jiraiya whispered on Shibuki's ear, low enough so neither Rasa nor A would pick up what he was saying.

Upon hearing those words, Shibuki's face lost all trace of color. "Uh, H-Hokage-dono... I'm s-sure that..."

Jiraiya shot a fake reassuring smile at the panicky Shibuki. "Relax, Shibuki-san. Enjoy the fight. We will talk about this once the exam is over," Jiraiya told him, then he frowned, adding an unsaid *"Because we will talk about this."*

...

When she was in close quarter distance, Fu threw a punch at Karin, which the redhead managed to catch. She later tried to do the same with her other hand, but the result was the same. Upon seeing that

Fu was unable to shake her hold, Karin smirked, and started to spin Fu in circles before tossing her high into the air.

Unfortunately for Karin, Fu spread her wings while mid air, and dived straight at Karin.

"Oh shit!" Karin blurted before jumping aside.

The redhead barely avoided the green-haired meteor that crashed against the ground. Still, the resulting shockwave was enough to make Karin fall on her butt. Like before, Fu emerged from the crater as if she barely register the hit.

"Seriously, what the hell do they feed you!?" Karin asked in frustration. *"It can't be because she's a Jinchuriki. Naruto is also one and he isn't invulnerable!"*

"I ate a lot of ramen this week, but I believe we already had a similar conversation," Fu replied, before letting out a loud belch. "Sorry, I think the spicy beef ramen didn't agree with my stomach."

"Guess I'm going to need some more firepower then!" Karin angrily stated as she pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it and tossed it at Fu's feet.

Fu yelped, and jumped backwards, barely avoiding the explosion. Karin tossed three more explosive kunai, and seeing that she would be unable to put enough distance while on land, Fu once again spread her wings and took off.

"Oh no, you don't!" Karin said as she made a hand seal.
"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

This time, Karin shoot several times from her back. Fu managed to dodge some, but two of them wrapped around her legs. With her opponent trapped once more, Karin grabbed the chains and pumping as much chakra as she could into her arms, she began to pull down.

However, Fu wasn't going to allow being slammed into ground a second time, and she began to pull in the opposite direction. The girls engaged in a game of tug of war for a couple minutes, with none of them gaining the upper hand. Until an idea popped on Fu's chaotic mind, and not only stopped pulling, but she flew down at Karin.

Karin at first grinned in victory upon being able to pull Fu down, but her grin was short lived when she realized that the Taki jinchuriki was flying at her at an unbelievable speed, her fist forward. The poor redhead was unable to avoid the brutal impact, which made a thundering noise, and raised a dust of cloud.

When the cloud dispelled, everybody could see Fu sitting on Karin's stomach. The Uzumaki girl didn't move, and her forehead was bleeding. Her glasses laid broken a few meters from her. Yugao could still sense her chakra, which meant she was still alive, but clearly she wasn't going to continue fighting.

"Karin is in no condition to fight! Winner of the sixth match, Fu!" the purple haired woman declared. "There will be a recess of fifteen minutes before the next round begins!"

Fu, being the third foreign ninja defeating a local one, and the second in a row, didn't sit well with the public, who filled the air with their boos and profanities. However, like Gaara, and unlike Karui, Fu paid them no heed and much to everybody's shock, Fu broke into a happy dance.

Naturally, everybody took this as a sign of mockery, and boos grew louder. But this didn't deter Fu, who continued dancing as if no one was watching her. The boos eventually died down, but Fu made no sign of stopping her dance.

Yugao walked to her, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Fu, you need to-" The purple haired woman was interrupted by Fu grabbing both her hands and forcing her to dance as well. Yugao, however,

forcefully made Fu stop. "Enough of this! If you don't return to the waiting area this instant, you will be disqualified, you got that?"

"Okay, okay! Sheesh..." Fu grumbled as she walked away. "I didn't know Konoha had laws against dancing..."

...

"I guess it was much to ask for both of my Genin to win their matches," Shizune sadly stated, before letting out a long sigh.

"Hey, Karin fought really well. She might still be a Chunin," Tsuande reassured her. "Well, at least one of the medics did make it to the final round, even if it wasn't one of your pupils."

"Yes, I'm happy for Hinata, but I doubt she'll go much farther given that she's going to fight against Naruto-kun," Shizune pointed out.

"Do you think Naruto-nii san will be able to fight Hinata?" Hagane asked.

"Nah, Naruto's super crazy for her. He'll probably hold back," Kaida replied.

"What about Hinata? Will she hold back too?" Hagane asked.

Kaida pondered for a few seconds before answering. "Maybe? I mean, I don't see Hinata going all out against our brother."

"Then it's going to be one boring match," Hagane replied.

...

Infirmary, shortly before the second round begins

Tenten opened her eyes. Where was she? The last thing she remembered was that she was fighting Gaara. As her memories slowly returned, she remembered that she had forfeited due her sheer exhaustion. And now she was lying down on a bed, her body

full of bandages. Being unable to recognize her surroundings, she tried to sit up, but her body was hit by a wave of pain when she tried to move.

"UGH!" she moaned.

"Easy there. I don't know what you did, but you looked pretty beaten up when they brought you here," a voice said besides her.

Tenten turned her head left, and saw Team Kurenai's only Genin who didn't win his first round match, Haku. Looking around, she also saw other beaten participants lying on beds, such as Choji, Temari and Tamaki. It was hard to tell if they were asleep or not.

"Haku...? How long have I been here?" she asked.

"About twenty minutes. The stadium has trembled a couple times, I guess that's what woke you up. Pity, it looked like you needed the nap," Haku told her. "So, how was it?"

Tenten let out a long sigh. "I was this close to winning. I risked my body in a way you couldn't imagine... and in the end it was for nothing. That Gaara was nearly impossible to beat."

"I know what you feel. Fighting Sasuke-san wasn't exactly a walk in the park," Haku emphatically said. "Funny thing is, have I been the one to fight against Gaara, I might have won since I'm a Water Release user."

"I'm lightning, but I haven't worked on elemental ninjutsu much," Tenten admitted.

There was a moment of silence that was interrupted by another thundering noise, maybe caused by the kunoichi fighting now.

"Hey, Tenten-chan?" Haku asked.

"Yes,?" she replied, turning her face at him again.

"There was something I wanted to tell you..." Haku began. He swallowed, and tried to keep hold of his nerves. "I planned to wait until the finals were over, but given that both of us are out already, I don't see any reason to wait anymore."

Tenten tilted her head quizzically. "And that would be...?"

"Well..." Haku began, and swallowed again. "I know that we don't know each other much, but you're smart, confident, strong, not to mention pretty girl, and... I really like you. So... would you like to go out with me sometime?"

"What? You like me...?" Tenten dumbly replied as the Ice Ninja's words started to sink. "You like me?... Oh my..." this was something completely new for her. Despite being fourteen years old, she had decided to focus on her ninja career first, and never showed any interest in any boy (and much to her chagrin, made her realize that until now no boy ever showed interest in her).

"I'm sorry if I'm being too forward or blunt, but I don't feel like keeping it to myself anymore.." Haku said in an apologetic tone.

"No, it's okay. Oh boy, now I understand why Naruto told me that..."

"What did Naruto tell you?" Haku asked, mildly concerned.

"It doesn't matter now," Tenten replied. "As for you... well, you kinda caught me by surprise with that confession," Tenten laughed awkwardly. "And I don't think I should give you an answer now without thinking about it first. This... was kind of unexpected. Just give me a couple days to make up my mind, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, I can wait."

"This doesn't mean I'm going to say no. Or yes. I mean, I don't want to give you false hopes. It's just... well, very unexpected. I don't want to give you false hopes."

"I know. You just said that," Haku smiled at her. "Don't get so flustered. Take all the time you need."

"Y-Yeah. I better try to get some sleep."

"That would be good."

"But I don't think I'll be able to sleep anytime soon after you dropped that bomb on me."

...

Author's Note: And with that, the first round concludes. The second round will be the next chapter, and the finals the one after that. So get ready for Sasuke vs Karui, Naruto vs Hinata and Gaarav vs Fu.

And speaking of the latter, did I mention how much I love writing Fu? Because I do. A lot.

But there won't be just fights, and as hinted in the last scene, more relationships will take off in the following chapters ;)

Now, something a little different. I've seen several authors issuing story ideas, challenges, so I decided to follow suit. So here it is:

Shattered Team Seven Challenge

The story begins at the beginning of the Sasuke Retrieval Arc, when Sakura confronts Sasuke, and asks him to let her go with him. However, unlike canon, Sasuke allows her to come with him. Since Sakura was the one who alerted everybody of Sasuke's defection, by the time anybody notices their disappearance, it's too late and they're already gone. Fortunately, they arrive just after Orochimaru possessed a new body, so there are still three years left to bring Sasuke back.

Sakura, however, managed to send a message to Konoha telling everybody that she's still loyal, and will try to convince Sasuke to go back to Konoha, as well to spy on Orochimaru.

These developments made Kakashi to be consumed by guilt, and in order to atone decides to train Naruto in order to make him as strong as possible. This idea clashes with Jiraiya, who wanted to take Naruto on a world trip in order to train him. Eventually they reach a compromise: Kakashi will train Naruto for a year, then take the Chunin Exams, which he will take Shikamaru's spot on Team 10. After that, once he's promoted, Naruto will leave with Jiraiya. Kakashi will teach Naruto about elemental manipulation, while Jiraiya will teach him how to use Sage Mode.

Then, the time skip happens. You can write the new Chunin Exams, as well as other arcs you might want, or skip directly towards the beginning of Shippuden.

At this point, whatever happens to Sakura is up to you. She can continue as a spy loyal to Konoha, decide to turn traitor for real and pledge her loyalty to Sasuke alone, or even have her true intentions being found by Orochimaru, who either kills her or has her experimented on. If you choose the two former options, she may get medical training from Orochimaru and/or Kabuto. You can choose if it's Sakura who had a positive influence on Sasuke, or if it was Sasuke and Orochimaru who were a harmful influence on Sakura.

Now, some additional points:

1) Pairings: The pairing I recommend is Naruto/Hinata, for obvious reasons. Though if you prefer, you can pair Naruto with any girl of his age group minus Sakura (with this kind of plot, it would make zero sense). No harem and no yaoi, please.

2) Since Sakura will no longer be Tsunade's apprentice, you can have another character fill her spot. You can have more than one character training under Tsunade as well.

3) Naruto and Kakashi will be in need of two more teammates to form a full squad. Which characters you choose is up to you. The only condition is that these spots must be filled by CANON characters. You can have two permanent additions, or pick temporary members from other teams. If you want to use the first options, here are some suggestions: Sai, Yamato, Shizune, Anko, Yugao, Genma.

4) If you must include bashing, keep it to a minimum.

5) If you take the challenge, remember to send me a PM so I can read, review and recommend your story.

I might issue more challenges in the future if I have any good idea.

Well, that's all. I will post the challenge on my profile as well if you want an easy place to check it. Let's hope some people find the challenge worth doing. Also, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Fight to become Chunin, Part III

Author's Note: I'd like to dedicate this chapter to Fox McCloud, a good friend of mine on this site and a regular reviewer of this story, whose birthday is today. I hope this chapter made your day even sweeter :)

Chapter 29:

Fight to become a Chunin, Part III

or

Swordsmen, Lovers and Jinchuriki

After the first round, people were already eager to see the second. All winners have proved to be exceptionally powerful, so the public was eagerly expecting to see even more epic fights. While the public spent the intermission buying snacks, going to the bathroom, or betting money on which Genin would win which match, the Genin themselves were trying to relax and mentally prepare for the next round.

Despite the fact that most of them were tired and had even more challenging opponents this time around, their mood was much better than before. Winning their matches made them think that it would make them worthy of promotion, forgetting their respective sensei's words about Genin who won their matches (sometimes more than just one) but failed to get promoted, while Genin who lost impressed the examiners enough to recommend a promotion.

...

"So, it seems that we're about to fight now," Karui's voice snapped Sasuke from his thoughts. "I'm glad to see that I'll have the chance to fight a fellow swordsman," she said as she eyed the sheathed

katana on his back. "Kumogakure has the best swordsmen in the Elemental Nations, and as an aspiring one, it is important to me to be able to show my skill with the sword in front of Raikage-sama."

"I thought that the best swordsmen came from Kirigakure," Sasuke pointed out.

"Those punks? Please," Karui scoffed. "They might have fancy swords with nifty abilities, but take their swords away, and what do you have?" She slowly unsheathed her own katana. Sasuke could see that, besides being a very well crafted weapon, there was nothing that set it apart from any other sword. "A sword is just as good as the person who wields it."

"While I agree with that, I wouldn't dismiss the Seven Swordsmen so easily," Sasuke replied. "I had the chance of seeing one in action more than once, and his skill isn't an exaggeration."

"If you say so," Karui shrugged. "But if the Seven Swordsmen were so hot, a generation of them wouldn't have gone down so easily against a single Genin."

That caught Sasuke's attention. "Come again? You can't be serious."

"I am. In fact, I'm surprised that you didn't know about such feat, given that it was a *Konoha* Genin," Karui pointed out. "Seriously, I was expecting to see a statue of the guy or something when I came here."

Sasuke was left utterly baffled. How is that he never heard of that ninja if he did such an impressive feat?

...

As he saw Karui walking alongside his opponent into the arena, the Raikage couldn't help but sport a smirk of superiority.

"Ah, yes, now this is a worthy adversary for Karui," A stated. Despite their dive in reputation, he was aware of how well known the power of the Uchiha was. "When Karui publicly defeats the Uchiha in front of such a large audience, Kumo's might and superiority will be more than proved."

"That girl is talented, everybody can see that," Jiraiya began. "But so is Sasuke. And not just because of his clan, that kid has a lot of talent and drive to prove himself."

"Speaking of which, it surprises me that you still keep the remnant of that rebellious clan still around, Hokage," the Raikage noted as he glanced at Itachi. "If anybody on Kumo, be a single ninja, a clan, or a whole faction, rebelled against the village's legitimate government, I would have crushed them without mercy."

"With all due respect, Raikage-dono, not all the Uchiha are disloyal to Konoha," Itachi interjected, even if he knew he shouldn't speak up. "So I don't think why should those who remained faithful to the village should share the same fate as those who betrayed it."

Darui and C flinched. The Raikage glared at Itachi, as he released no small amount of killing intent. "You better watch your mouth, brat! You might be in a place reserved for the Kage, but it does NOT make you one! Don't even think for a second that it allows you to speak me as if I was your equal!"

"Excuse my bodyguard, Raikage," Jiraiya intervened. "You brought up a very sensitive topic, and even if his outburst was completely out of place, I can't help but side with him. I'm not going to punish a loyal ninja because of the sins of their kin."

"Hm," the Raikage grunted. "Though given the kind of criminal rabble Konoha houses nowadays, the Uchiha aren't so out of place." The Raikage stated as he eyed Zabuza.

...

Sasuke and Karui stood in front of each other. Yugao made sure both combatants were ready to fight.

"The seventh match of the Chunin Exam Finals, between Sasuke Uchiha, from Konoha, and Karui, from Kumo..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

Sasuke's Sharingan flared to life. Both Genin unsheathed their respective katanas, and lunged at each other, firmly holding their weapons. Sharp noises of metal clashing filled the air of the stadium. They spent quite some time trading blows, pushing back and forth in a sword duel, without resorting to ninjutsu, genjutsu, or using any other kind of weapons.

After a few minutes of sword fighting in which none of them managed to gain the upper hand, they paused their duel to regain some breath.

"You're pretty good handling a sword. Your previous boasts weren't unjustified," Sasuke praised the foreign kunoichi.

Karui smiled. "Why, thank you. I've been training with a katana even before I became a Genin. Sword fighting runs through my veins."

Sasuke shot her a condescending smirk. "Funny thing, given that I started learning how to use a sword not a month ago, and we're evenly matched."

Her anger flaring inside of her, Karui gritted her teeth and charged Sasuke once more. This time, her blows were way more vicious and aggressive, however, they weren't any more sloppier as the youngest Uchiha had imagined. Karui's onslaught pushed Sasuke back as he struggled to parry his opponent's swings.

"That fancy eye of yours will be of little help against me!" Karui shouted as she pressed the attack.

"Damn, that didn't work as intended. She knows how to keep her anger in check and keep herself focused," Sasuke thought as he broke the fight and jumped backwards. "Let's try something different."

"How about that, Uchiha? Still think of yourself as my equal?" an angry Karui asked as she pressed her attack.

"I must admit that that wasn't half bad," Sasuke replied as he flew through hand seals. "Now let' see if you can keep up with me after this. Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

The blade of Sasuke's katana was suddenly wreathed in flames. He twirled his flaming sword a few times, and smirked.

"Do you think that impresses me? I can do that do!" Karui protested as she went through different hand seals. "Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Karui's katana started to crackle with electricity, sparks flying from its blade.

No more words added, both swordfighters charged at each other, their elemental-enhanced blades at hand. However, this fight was much shorter than the previous one: the moment the blades clashed, Karui's sword cut Sasuke's as if it was made of butter. Sasuke watched in shock his blade being sliced in two, Karui's swing had still enough momentum to make a superficial cut on Sasuke's shoulder.

"ARGH!" the Uchiha yelled as he dropped his now useless weapon and clutched his damaged shoulder while he jumped backwards. The added electricity made most of it numb, yet it still hurt a lot.

"Awwww, did that hurt? Hahaha!" Karui cackled in triumph. "Guess that the struggle to see which one of us is the best swordfighter is no more."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Sasuke then pulled out a small storage scroll, and unsealed a second katana. "I can't believe you forced me to use my spare katana. Now Shisui is never going to live this down."

...

"Ha! And Sasuke said that brining a spare katana was unnecessary!" the oldest Uchiha stated, enjoying the natural satisfaction of being proven right. "I'm going to make sure he never hears the end of it!"

...

This time, Sasuke decided not to engage in melee combat, and pulled four shuriken from his ninja tool pouch, and tossed them at Karui with the skill the Uchiha were known for. Karui, however, looked undeterred.

"You don't learn, don't you?" Karui said as she pulled shuriken of her own. "Lightning Release: Shuriken Lightning Transmission!"

The Kumo kunoichi's lightning-charged shuriken easily sliced Sasuke's just like it happened when their respective katanas clashed, and continued flying towards him. Sasuke made the hand seals of his clan's signature jutsu.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Pouring a lot of chakra into the attack, Sasuke breathed a fireball large and powerful enough to stop the shuriken's momentum, heating them so much they started to melt. When the fire dispelled, he didn't saw Karui in front of him. His Sharingan managed to pick and out of place shadow, and looking up, he saw the Kumo kunoichi leaping down at him, holding her lightning-infused blade above her head.

Karui smirked as Sasuke raised his own sword to parry the incoming blow. Even if it was probably an unconscious reaction, the red haired girl couldn't help but find funny the futility of such a gesture.

"I hope you brought more spare swords!" Karui taunted as her blade clashed against Sasuke's. However, much to her surprise, this time she was unable to cut through her opponent's blade. "What?"

"This is what happens when you underestimate the Uchiha!"

Now it was Sasuke who smirked, and taking advantage of Karui's momentary lack of focus, he pushed her blade sideways and kicked her backwards. It was then when Karui noticed that the Uchiha's blade was also sparkling with electricity. An infuriating revelation dawned upon her.

"Wait a minute, the Thunder Blade... you copied it from me!" an angered Karui shouted.

"Guilty as charged," Sasuke nonchalantly replied. "I figured out that an electric charged sword would be unable to cut through another one. And my theory was proven right."

"So that's how your clan made a name for yourselves, right? By stealing other people's power and using it against them!" Karui angrily accused.

"We're ninja. We do everything necessary to win," Sasuke replied as he charged at her.

Karui snarled in anger upon seeing that she had lost her main advantage over Sasuke in such underhanded way, but she was not going to lose. She was a strong, resourceful kunoichi, and had every intention to prove it.

"Okay then, let's see how your Sharingan does against this!" Karui pulled out a couple of smoke bombs from her tool pouch and tossed them at an intermediate space between the two, creating a barrier of smoke.

Sasuke stopped on his tracks, and decided that it was better to wait for Karui's next move.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Transmission!"

Karui and a clone of her dashed at Sasuke, as they held a chain made of electricity on each hand.

"I did see your fight against Choji. Do you think I don't know both of them are clones that will zap me if I touch them?" Sasuke said as he jumped backwards in the air while making several hand seals. "Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A shower of fireballs rained upon the two Karuis, who due their speed and current state of keeping a complex jutsu active, were unable to dodge the barrage, and both of them disappeared in an electric flash. Sasuke smirked in satisfaction.

"Time to end this," Sasuke thought as he ran through hand seals. "Fire Release: Burning Man!"

Once again, the youngest Uchiha was covered from head to toe in a cloak of flames, and dashed at where he guessed Karui would be, leaving a trail of fire in his wake, and just like he foresaw, the Kumo kunocihi was still behind the smoke wall, ready to throw some shuriken, which Sasuke had no problems dodging. The Konoha ninja sank his flaming fist into Karui's stomach before she had any time to do anything else... and exploded in an electric flash, zapping Sasuke.

"AARRGH!" the youngest Uchiha shouted as he clutched his body, while his coat of flames disappeared.

One of the shuriken Karui had tossed, now in the ground, exploded in a cloud of white smoke, revealing the real Karui, who started making hand seals.

"Didn't see that, Uchiha? Even if you will see this, you won't be able to stop it," Karui finished doing her hand seals and unsheathed her sword once again, which crackled with electricity. "I'm done playing games. I wasn't planning on using this now, but I will have to do it."

Karui's sword started to glow each second brighter. Sasuke tried to move, but the electric zap had numbed his body to a degree in which dodging was not an option. Not knowing what Karui had in store for him, Sasuke decided that it would be a good time to do the hand seals of his second strongest fire jutsu.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Dragon Blast!"

Karui swung her sword forward, releasing a thick lightning bolt shaped like a dragon from it, which flew at Sasuke, letting out a metallic sounding roar. Fortunately, Sasuke had already finished his hand seals as well.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Stream!"

Sasuke exhaled a flame breath that also took the shape of a dragon. Both elemental dragons clashed, pushing back at forth, but none of them were able to gain the upper hand. Both Sasuke and Karui poured more chakra into their respective attacks, and by doing so, the struggle started to solve in Sasuke's favor.

Karui started to panic. *"No! I can't lose here! I can't let both my village and Raikage-sama down! I need to win!"*

This prompted the golden-eyed girl to channel even more chakra into the attack, pushing it backwards once again. Upon seeing her strategy working, she put even more chakra into the attack, believing she had already won.

However, the power of both attacks became so big, it ended up destabilizing and creating a huge explosion. And combined with the fact that Karui was closer to the explosion than Sasuke, she had almost no chakra left to spare and her body was completely exhausted, this meant that her run on the Chunin exams had come to an end.

The explosion's shockwave pushed Karui backwards, violently slamming her against the arena's wall, knocking her unconscious

instantly. The blast also created an even bigger crater than those which were caused by previous fights.

This didn't mean that Sasuke came out unscathed, but he was definitely in better shape than his opponent.

Yugao sensed that Karui still had some chakra in her, and quickly motioned for the medic nin to take her away. Seeing that the danger had already passed, Sasuke emerged from his hiding spot.

"Karui can't continue fighting! Winner of the seventh match, and first finalist, Sasuke Uchiha!" the purple haired woman declared. "There will be a recess of ten minutes before the next match begins!"

The image of a Konoha ninja defeating a foreign one which had already defeat another local made the crowd to erupt in a wave of applause and cheers for the member of the usually not that liked Uchiha clan.

Still, Sasuke paid them no mind, and headed back to the waiting area before Yugao had to tell him to.

...

"Aw man, Karui lost," a dejected Omoi stated. "She's going to be so mad when she wakes up."

"Well, I think she put up a good fight. Plus her opponent was pretty strong," T observed. "Now I get why do everybody mean by the power of the Uchiha. If this guy's just a Genin, I don't want to see the stronger ones can do. It's bad to say this, but I'm kind of glad that most of the clan was wiped off during that insurrection."

"Do you think Karui will score a promotion, sensei?" Omoi asked.

"Hmmm..." Killer B crossed his arms, and started to think. "Even if Karui's result was defeat, her fight was quite a feat. She did her very best, and I believe she passed this test, since even if she lost, she

proved to be stronger than most. Let's hope the examiners share my view, and Karui becomes the first Chunin of this crew."

"I hope you're right, sensei," T added.

...

"Yes! Another victory for the Uchiha clan! Go Sasuke!" Shisui excitedly yelled, his fist high in the air. Then she looked at his girlfriend and smiled awkwardly. "And another victory for the Medical Squad too. I didn't forget about that."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm happy that Sasuke won, but, well..." Shizune grew uneasy. "It's kind of a bummer seeing the only non-medic of the Medical Squad doing well. And after this victory, Sasuke's promotion is pretty much assured. If only Karin had won her match too..."

"Look at the bright side. Your team was the only one besides Team Kurenai who got more than one Genin to the finals. Plus the only Genin of the other respective three teams also lost their fights as well," Shisui pointed out. "The Chunin hopefuls for this year's exam are pretty powerful, and not just the ones from Konoha. You'll see how Sakura and Karin do much better the next time."

"Yeah. Maybe the next exam there won't be any Jinchuriki," Shizune mentioned, once again seeing how Jinchuriki had become the bane of her team.

...

While the Raikage didn't make it evident, Karui's defeat left him fuming. It appeared that not even somebody as loud and prone to anger as A wanted to throw a tantrum in front of other two Kages (it wasn't sure how did he feel towards Shibuki). However, the amount of killing intent he was radiating evidenced his mood. Itachi's small but still noticeable smirk didn't help either.

"Don't get mad, Raikage. Karui put an incredible fight against Sasuke. Plus it's not that she didn't give her village a prior victory," Jiraiya began. "If I was an examiner, I would recommend her for a promotion."

The Raikage turned his head at Jiraiya and shot him a chilling glare. "You haven't see me mad yet, Hokage. And pray you would not be present if such day arrives."

...

As Sasuke allowed himself to relax, he noticed how much chakra he had expended for the fight, and how sore his muscles were. Unless his opponents ended up in the same predicament, there was no way he could give it all in the final. He entered the Competitor's Box, hoping for the next two matches to be as long as possible so he could have some time to rest his tired body.

"Hey, Sasuke!" Naruto's loud voice called. He looked at the blond. "Nice work you did out there!"

"Thank you," Sasuke replied in a polite tone.

"It would be a shame if you lost before we could get to fight," Naruto added, laughing a bit.

"For that to happen, you still have one match to win," Sasuke reminded him. "And while your girlfriend doesn't look like much at first sight, her match showed that there's more to her than meets the eye."

"Haha, yeah, Hinata is pretty strong and... hey, wait a minute, girlfriend?" Naruto asked, blushing a bit.

"You two aren't exactly subtle. And frankly, it's getting kind of annoying now," Sasuke stated.

"Then... do you think it's true that she might like me back...?" Naruto asked, lowering his voice so Hinata couldn't pick up the conversation.

Sasuke just stared at his blond rival. "Sometimes, I wonder how the hell you got so far with that empty head of yours."

"Hey!" Naruto protested. It was the second time somebody told him that. "Take that back! I'm as smart as I'm strong!"

"But then again, what you lack in brains, you make up in raw power and determination, so I think you should be good," Sasuke added. "I won't bid you good luck, since good ninja don't rely on such a thing."

"Uhhhh... thanks?"

The blond then headed towards Hinata, who was at the edge of the waiting area, absentmindedly looking at the arena.

"Is she just as nervous to fight me as I am to fight her?" Naruto wondered. The two of them were the only ones who would have to fight a teammate. "Hey, Hinata, you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Hinata replied. "Thanks again for sharing some of your chakra with me, I don't think I'd have any strength to fight if it wasn't for that."

"Hey, then the match would be no fun, right?" Naruto asked, and laughed a bit. "So, should we get going?"

Hinata nodded, and started walking alongside Naruto.

...

"Look, neechan's about to fight again!" Hanabi excitedly pointed out as Hinata and Naruto walked into the arena. "Hope she will use the Heavenly Thunderstorm again!"

"Heavenly... Thunderstorm?" Hikari replied, confused.

"Yeah, that move she used to knock out her earlier opponent. Because that definitely wasn't a Heavenly Spin, that's why I gave it another, more fitting name," Hanabi explained. "I want to see it again."

"Even then, that move seemed to be the result of hasty improvisation," Hikari replied. "And I don't think it will work against such a skilled opponent like Naruto-kun. And that's not even counting that he's a wind type."

"It can't be..." Neji said in awe, his Byakugan activated.

"What's wrong, son?" his father asked him.

"Hinata-sama's chakra reserves... they're completely full..." the Hyuga prodigy pointed out.

Hikari raised an eyebrow. "That can't be right. The Heavenly Thunderstorm drained a good chunk of her chakra," she activated her own Byakugan, and noticed that her nephew was right. "Impossible!"

"Maybe she ate a ration pill?" Hizashi suggested.

"So are we calling it Heavenly Thunderstorm? Good!" Hanabi said, pleased. "Let's hope neechan also likes the name..."

...

"So, Naruto and Hinata are about to fight. Now I know how Shizune felt when Naruto fought Sakura," Kurenai said. "I can't root for one over the other!"

"Try to think that whoever wins, one of your Genin will go to the finals," Asuma told her.

"I would have preferred it if both of them made it to the finals..." Kurenai dejectedly replied.

"Hey, at least one of your Genin will go there. My only Genin lost the first round," Asuma reminded her. "And in the end, there can only be one winner. By the way, given that they're your students... who do you think it's going to win?"

"That's easy. Naruto, no contest," Kurenai flatly replied.

Asuma raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Wow, that was fast. You didn't even take a minute to think about it. Is the difference between their skill and power that big?"

"Not just between them. I'd say Naruto is way stronger than most of his former classmates. The only ones who would give him a challenge are Sasuke Uchiha, Neji Hyuga, Rock Lee, and maybe Tenten."

It was commonly assumed that all Genin, Chunin, etc, had more or less the same skill and power, but that was a lie product of oversimplification. There could be a huge difference between two ninja sporting the same rank.

Both Kurenai and Asuma were Jonin, but while Kurenai was recently promoted after staying a few years as a Special Jonin -mostly thanks to her talent with Genjutsu-, Asuma managed to reach the rank before he was eighteen, just like Gai and Kakashi. And it was unlikely that other Special Jonin she knew, such as Anko or Ebisu, would even be promoted anytime soon.

The five mentioned by Kurenai could be considered "Elite Genin". They were so above the average Genin, that their rank was pretty much in name only, which was a testament of their skill and strength. When they were promoted, they would only remain as Chunin for a couple years at most before they were promoted again to Jonin or at least Special Jonin. Most of their teammates would take much longer to achieve such rank, that's it, if they managed to move past Chunin.

"Well, Sasuke is a finalist. If Naruto makes it to the finals too, at the very least we'll get an exciting fight to see."

...

"Come on Naruto, you have to make me a rich woman!" Tsunade stated in excitement, holding a multitude of betting tickets against her chest. "But after Temari, Hinata shouldn't be much of a challenge."

"You're forgetting about Naruto-kun's feelings for Hinata, Tsunade-sama," Shizune reminded her. "And thus it might hamper his performance. Not to mention that Hinata isn't as weak as she looks."

Tsunade frowned. "That brat better listen to his brain instead of his hormones. If he knows what's good for him."

"Go, Naruto-niisan!" Hagane yelled.

"But don't hit Hinata too hard or else she won't want to marry you!" Kaida added

...

"God damn it, why can't they keep those brats silent?" Naruto cursed inwardly. He then looked at Hinata, who was blushing, and staring to the ground. *"Great, they made Hinata upset!"*

"Combatants ready?" Yugao asked, looking at both the blond and the bluenette, who looked rather uneasy but nothing seemed apparently wrong. "In that case the eighth match of the Chunin Exam Finals, between Naruto Uzumaki, from Konoha, and Hinata Hyuga, from Konoha..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

Hinata raised her head, no longer blushing, her face no longer appeared bashful, but now reflecting a look of determination.

"I know I can't win this fight. Naruto-kun is way too strong for me," Hinata thought. *"But that doesn't mean that I shouldn't give my very*

best. For Naruto-kun. For my family. For my promotion. I'll make sure this is a fight no one will ever forget!"

"Byakugan!"

Hinata's Bloodline activated, and adopted a fighting stance. Naruto grinned and made the hand seal of his most used jutsu.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A multitude of clones appeared alongside him. Hinata wasn't fazed, she was already used to it thanks to the countless hours she sparred against Naruto. Though she had to remind herself that this time Naruto would go all out against her.

"Attack!"

Upon the order was issued, the clones charged forward. Some of them pulled a few kunai and shuriken and tossed them at the Hyuga. Hinata also pulled out a couple kunai, and used them to deflect the incoming projectiles. However, while she did so, most Narutos were already in close combat range. This didn't deter Hinata in the slightest, though.

"Eight Trigrams, Thirty-two Palms! Two palms! Four palms! Eight palms! Sixteen palms! Thirty Two palms!" Each strike was a precise blow that managed to dispel each clone, until only the original remained in the back. Seeing it was her turn to attack, Hinata made several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

An array of blue lightning bolts flew from her fingers at the confident blond, which also made several hand seals of his own.

"Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

A tornado formed around Naruto, which easily stopped and dispelled Hinata's electrical attack. However, while he was doing so, Hinata

used the moment to close the gap between them, and readied a palm strike.

"Come on Hinata I've sparred against you countless times, I know how to block the Gentle Fist..." Naruto thought as he was about to push Hinata's wrist aside.

However, much to his surprise, Hinata's hand closed into a fist, and instead of aiming at one of his easiest to close tenketsu in the chest, the Hyuga moved her fist towards his face. This sudden change made Naruto fail to deflect the attack, and given that Hinata was using Tsunade's Chakra-Enhanced Strength to the best of her ability, it resulted in a painful hit that send the Jinchuriki flying backwards until his body slammed against the arena's wall.

"Oh man, I knew that Sakura wouldn't be the last time mom's technique would come back to bite me in the ass..." Naruto thought as he got back on his feet and rubbed his hurt face, trying his best to ignore the pain. "Nice one, Hinata. Didn't see that coming."

"Thanks," Hinata replied, not dropping her fighting stance. "I know I can't defeat you if I am predictable."

Hinata then formed several hand seals, which Naruto knew too well.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Hinata's hands started to crackle with electricity. Her signature jutsu now active, the Hyuga heiress charged at Naruto.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A barrier of orange clad clones appeared between Hinata and the original Naruto. Without Naruto having to tell them anything, the clone army charged at Hinata. The first clone managed to sink his fist into Hinata's gut, who strangely enough made no effort to defend herself...

... and vanished in a cloud of smoke, leaving a large rock in her place.

"What the...?"

The blond had no time to think before Hinata suddenly appeared in close quarter combat range and managed to deliver a couple lightning-charged palm strikes to Naruto's gut and the right shoulder. Clutching his injured areas, Naruto jumped back. Hinata tried to continue her onslaught, but the clones once again got in the way.

"Lightning Release: Eight Trigrams Thirty Two Thunder strikes!"

While Hinata destroyed the clones, Naruto used the Mystical Palm Jutsu to heal the zones Hinata had damaged with her sneak attack. He managed to heal his shoulder completely when Hinata destroyed the last of his clones.

"Dammit, since when did Hinata become this aggressive?" Naruto asked in disbelief. "I might have to use the Rasengan if she keeps such a pace!"

After she was done with the clones, Hinata wasted no time and went for the original Naruto, still healing himself. However, upon seeing his teammate turned temporary enemy, Naruto stopped and made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto projected an horizontal cyclone from his hands, which caught Hinata just a couple meters before she could reach him in close combat, and violently knocked her backwards, making her fall on her back.

"You almost got me there, Hinata," Naruto praised as he tossed a couple kunai with a Flaming Seals on them, much to Hinata's horror. The Hyuga tried to get up as fast as possible while Naruto made the same hand seals as before. "Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

This time, Naruto only used one hand to cast his most used wind jutsu, resulting in a weaker version. When the cyclone passed over the Flaming Seals, Naruto made a hand seal with his other hand in order to activate them. The seals exploded in two balls of fire, which merged with the cyclone into a tornado of flames.

"Vacuum Palm Wall!"

Hinata thrust both hands forward, releasing a huge vacuum shell that clashed against the vortex of fire. The collision of both attacks resulted in a huge explosion. Even if its shockwave wasn't strong enough to knock down either combatant, it raised quite a few clouds of smoke and dust.

"This is my chance! I can see through the smoke while Naruto-kun can't!" Hinata thought as she charged forward.

However, Naruto wasn't stupid, and knew that Hinata would use the smoke and dust to her advantage, and prepared a countermeasure.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Naruto expelled a powerful stream of wind through his mouth, quickly dispelling the large cloud of smoke and dust obscuring most of the arena, and revealing Hinata dashing at him. However, the moment he just finished that jutsu, Hinata grabbed something from her tool pouch and tossed it to the ground, revealing to be a smoke bomb when it detonated and created a second cloud of smoke, one that Naruto wouldn't have enough time to dispel. Of course, that didn't mean that Naruto was defenseless, not in the slightest.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Once again, a barrier of clones appeared in front of Naruto.

'Thank goodness this jutsu is instant, or else I would be screwed,' Naruto thought in relief. 'And even with the Byakugan Hinata has no way of telling which is the real me. She'll have to fight against

the clones while I dispel the smoke... wait, why I don't hear my clones fighting?'

The answer came a couple seconds later in the form of an unexpected explosion that completely poofed all the clones instantly, while sent Naruto rolling backwards against the arena's wall.

"So she threw an explosive tag at my clones instead of directly attacking herself. Oh boy... she's taking this 'not being predictable' thing very seriously..." Naruto groaned as he stood up.

"Come on Naruto-kun! I know that you're much stronger than this!" Hinata called as she dashed at him.

"She's right. I'm not giving it all. Is it because I like her? Because she's my friend and teammate?" he thought. "Yet Hinata is fighting with every ounce of her power. Yes, I can't hold back. I have to fight against her as if she was any other enemy!"

With new resolve, Naruto made several hand seals just in time before Hinata could hit him with a palm strike.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Shockwave!"

A tornado formed around Naruto, creating a windy shield that pushed Hinata back whenever she tried to touch him. Naruto poured more chakra into the jutsu, increasing the power of the tornado, which now it didn't just kept Hinata way, but it also sent her flying back several meters. Naruto then tossed a shuriken at her before making several hand seals.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

The single shuriken turned into fifty, and much to Hinata's shock, she found a swarm of steel stars flying at her.

"Multiple Vacuum Palms!"

Hinata thrust one palm forward at a time a quick pace, releasing a barrage of vacuum shells that managed to block the incoming shuriken. Though even with the Byakugan, Hinata was so focused on stopping the shuriken barrage that she didn't notice Naruto sneaking upon her until he was at close quarter range. And much to Hinata's confusion, Naruto engaged her in taijutsu combat.

Taken aback by such an unexpected action, Hinata was forced to fall back before Naruto's barrage of not very refined but very strong punches and kicks. Still, once the shock wore off, Hinata once again gained the upper hand, it was Naruto the one being pushed back. Naruto put some distance by jumping back before being overwhelmed, something Hinata took advantage of, and made several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Hinata's hands cracked with electricity once more as she lunged at Naruto, ready to deliver a palm strike. Naruto wouldn't have time to make the seals of one of his many wind jutsu. However, he did have a jutsu that took no time to cast.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Another army of orange wearing blonds appeared in a circle surrounding Hinata. The Hyuga, however, ignored them and decided to focus on the original. The palm strike connected... and Naruto disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"Clone Replacement. Of course," Hinata thought.

"Byakugan or not, you won't be able to defend from an attack that comes from all directions!" all the Naruto clones stated as they charged her.

Hinata's mouth formed an uncharacteristic smirk. "That's where you're wrong, Naruto-kun."

Even if it was a risky move, there was no other option. Hinata spread the lightning chakra from her hands to the rest of her body, as she started to spin. Naruto was too late to stop upon realizing what she was going to do.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Hinata turned into a spinning thunderstorm, releasing lightning bolts in every direction, that instantly poofed all the Naruto clones, while blasting the original back several meters. Still, the blond could help but notice that this version of Hinata's new attack was much less destructive than the one before, maybe because the second time Hinata knew how to control it a bit better, and not to use so much chakra on it.

When Hinata was done spinning, she wasn't dizzy, and her body was still flickering with electricity.

"Damn, that attack again..." Naruto stated as he got up. "I can't believe I forgot about that!"

"I think I'm starting to get the hang of it," Hinata said, mildly satisfied. "Come on Naruto-kun, I'm sure you have a way to counter this!"

"I do," Naruto admitted. "But I was hoping I could defeat you without having to resort to it. Guess I have no choice," Naruto extended his arm, and on his hand a sphere of chakra began to form. "Okay Hinata, you're going to be the first to witness the jutsu I've been working on this past month. Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, Naruto-kun."

Through her Byakugan, Hinata saw that that despite its relatively small size, the sphere had an incredibly dense chakra. If all that chakra were to be released at once, the effect would be devastating.

"That jutsu is way too powerful for any Genin to resist. If my version of the Heavenly Spin can do the trick..." the Hyuga thought.

Naruto dashed at Hinata, holding the chakra sphere on one hand. Hinata wasted no time and started to spin again.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Fortunately, Naruto was close enough to her to use his trump card before Hinata's defense could knock him back.

"Rasengan!"

Both attacks collided, trying to overpower each other. However, after a few seconds of struggle, the Rasengan started to expand, while Hinata's spinning speed started to slow down. The result was a massive explosion, blasting both combatants flying in opposite directions, landing with a loud thud.

When the smoke dispersed, everybody saw Naruto and Hinata down on the ground, immobile. People started to murmur, wondering what could have happened, and the possibility of a double knockout. However, after a couple seconds, Naruto started to get up.

Yugao went to check Hinata. She was still miraculously conscious, albeit in great pain. Her whole body trembled. She tried to move, but her body was too exhausted. Meanwhile, Naruto was already back on his feet. The winner was clear.

"Hinata is no condition to fight! Winner of the eighth match, Naruto!" the purple haired woman declared. "There will be a recess of ten minutes before the next round begins!"

"YES!" Naruto cheered. Not even the thought of his crush and best friend being already out of the competition -by his own hand, no less- was enough to keep the blond down. He then walked towards Hinata, still lying on the ground. "Hinata?"

"N-Naruto-kun..." the Hyuga replied in a whisper. "H-How... how was I...?"

"You were amazing!" the jinchuriki beamed. "I had no idea you were so powerful! There were some times I thought I was going to lose."

"You would never lose... against somebody... I-like me..." Hinata replied.

"Don't sell yourself so short, Hinata. Like you said before, you wouldn't have gotten so far if you didn't deserve it," Naruto told her.

Hinata smiled. "I guess... you're right. It will be a pity that... I won't be able to see you... in the finals..."

"Pity indeed. But I know that you will be rooting for me, and that's enough," Naruto replied.

The stadium's medic-nin arrived, and placed Hinata on a stretcher before they took her away. With nothing else for Naruto to do, the blond returned to the waiting area.

...

"HAHA, YES!" Tsunade loudly cheered. "Now if you excuse me, I have to make my fortune even bigger!" Tsunade said before leaving to change all his tickets for cash, which she would use to buy more betting tickets.

Shizune shook her head at Tsunade, but then smiled upon seeing Naruto talking with the downed Hinata. "I think that this had to be Naruto's hardest fight so far."

"What are you saying? You told me the kind of opponents Naruto had to face before. Hinata wasn't among the strongest," Shisui pointed out.

Shizune shook her head again. "That's irrelevant. Hinata is Naruto's first and best friend for quite a long time. And his recent feelings for her go beyond mere friendship. Being forced to fight against such a person, even in a friendly and controlled environment like this one, is

never easy. Let's hope Naruto, nor any of us, have to fight against a loved one again in the future."

Shizune's words reminded Shisui of the night the Uchiha Clan rebelled. Itachi probably had to fight and kill many clansmen he was close to, including his own father. The ninja world was a cruel place indeed.

...

Hikari sighed in resignation. "I had hopes that Hinata would be able to defeat Naruto-kun, but in the end it wasn't meant to be."

"Naruto is a very strong opponent. Hinata-sama never had a chance," Neji somberly stated. "But the fact that she pressed Naruto so much in order to make him resort to such a powerful jutsu to defeat her speaks volumes."

"Does this mean that Hinata-nee-chan won't be Chunin anymore, mother?" Hanabi asked.

Hikari shook her head. "She still has a chance if the examiners were impressed enough with her fights, Hanabi-chan."

"Well, *I* was impressed. Very impressed. Only an idiot wouldn't think that Hinata-nee-chan isn't good enough to be a Chunin," Hanabi stated.

...

When Naruto returned to the Competitor's Box, he was greeted by the sight of the three remaining Genin, Sasuke, Gaara and Fu. And soon one of the latter two would be out.

"Congratulations on your second victory, Naruto," Gaara told him.

"Yeah, it was a fight to remember!" Fu added.

"See? I told you that you could defeat her," Sasuke told him. "Even if she gave you a harder time than I expected. But then again, I could see you were holding back."

"I wasn't holding back!" Naruto protested. "Hinata is strong as hell! I mean, I had to use the Rasengan to defeat her, while I was hoping I could show it when I was fighting either you or the other finalist."

"Speaking of which, I hate to admit it, but it was one hell of a jutsu, Naruto," Sasuke praised. "Now I have to come up with something strong enough to surpass it."

"Ha! You'd wish! That jutsu was created by the Fourth Hokage himself! Good luck coming up with something better," Naruto boasted.

Sasuke crossed his arms, and snorted dismissively. "Even the lowest of the Uchiha are geniuses compared to the average ninja, and I stand among the best of them. And with the help of Itachi-niisan and Shisui it won't even be a challenge."

Naruto had the feeling that Sasuke's words weren't just empty boasts, but was looking forward to see what his rival would come up with. In fact, an idea was already brewing in Sasuke's mind.

...

Meanwhile, in the Kage Box, two of the leaders present were eagerly expecting the next match, both with high hopes for their only representative.

"Well, Shibuki, your girl is indeed an impressive kunoichi, but she had the misfortune to be matched against Gaara," Rasa stated, his lips forming a smile of superiority. "There's no way she can defeat him."

Shibuki wasn't going to let this bullying asshole to intimidate him or demean his village. "And I admit that Gaara's defense is truly

something to behold, but like that Konoha kunoichi proved, there's no such thing as an impenetrable defense. "

"Maybe, but do you think that your girl can pierce it? You have her in too high esteem, it would seem," Rasa replied.

"Fu is way more powerful than she lets on. You aren't the first one who underestimates her abilities," Shibuki rebuked.

"You mean because she's a Jinchuriki?" Rasa casually mentioned. Both Jiraiya and A raised an eyebrow (albeit in Jiraiya's case, he was pretending to be surprised), while Shibuki paled for the second time that day. "Oh, don't give me that look, the girl isn't exactly subtle. That careless attitude will get her killed one day."

"Say, how about if we enjoy the fight instead?" Jiraiya intervened before the discussion could get more heated. "Besides, it will be a good way of finding out which one is right."

...

Gaara and Fu walked into the arena. Since this fight involved two foreign ninjas, the public didn't show as much interest as in previous match. Still, there was a noticeable number of people eager to see them fight, simply because the red haired boy and the green haired girl proved to be very strong ninja, and their fight would be everything but boring.

"Don't think I forgot what you did," Fu stated in an oddly threatening tone. "And I didn't forgive you!"

A confused Gaara raised a nonexistent eyebrow. This was the first time he even traded a line with the bizarre girl, so he couldn't help but wonder what he did to merit such reaction.

"I'm afraid I don't know what are you talking about," Gaara replied in his usual calmness.

"Ha! Don't think that by pretending to have amnesia that I'm going to go easy on you!" Fu replied, as she stomped her foot on the ground.

"I'm being sincere. I never saw you in my life, so I don't know what kind of felony I did to enrage you so much," Gaara insisted.

"In that case, I'll refresh your memory: you eliminated Shino from the exams!" Fu dramatically stated as she pointed an accusatory finger at Gaara. "And as his friend -and hopefully something more one day- it is my duty to avenge him!"

"Oh," was all what Gaara said.

...

"See? That's what I was talking about!" Ino told Shikamaru. The lazy Nara merely rolled his eyes in annoyance.

...

"Did she...?" Kiba began, a bit flabbergasted. "Did she loudly shout that she wants to be more than just friends with you, Shino?"

"So it seems," Shino replied in his usual stoicism. "I believe that this deserves a thorough conversation with her in order to establish the kind of relationship we want."

"No offense Shino, but I never thought you were the type of guy that could get a girl fall for him so fast," Kakashi commented. "Then again, as kids your age usually say, chicks dig mysterious guys."

"None taken," Shino replied. *"She's a great girl, but I don't know her that much. Plus the fact that she's from another village would make it even more complicated. Do I really want a relationship with her?"* the Aburame heir thought.

...

Seeing that they no longer traded anymore words, Yugao thought it was about time to begin.

"You two ready? In that case the ninth match of the Chunin Exam Finals, between Gaara, from Suna, and Fu, from Taki..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

Sand started to pour from Gaara's word the second Yugao's last word left her lips. For her part, Fu stepped backwards and made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Bullet Jutsu!"

Fu released a powerful stream of water from her mouth. Gaara's sand automatically erected a barrier around him. However, the barrier soaked the water, becoming mud in the process. Just like Fu had planned.

Summoning her wings, the green haired flew at Gaara, plowing through the softened sand barrier, her fist reared back ready to punch the Suna ninja's face. However, much to her surprise, the sand erected a second barrier centimeters from Gaara's face, which managed to absorb the force of the green haired girl's punch. When the sand moved to wrap around her, Fu quickly flew upwards, escaping a potential defeat.

"My turn," Gaara said as he made a hand seal. "Wind Release: Sand Shuriken!"

Deadly sand projectiles flied at Fu at an amazingly fast speed. The flying kunoichi had a hard time matching their speed, and while she managed to dodge most of them, one of her wings was hit, nullifying her flying ability, and making her to crash into the ground below, creating yet another crater in the arena.

"Ouch..." Fu muttered as she climbed out of the crater. "My wings... my beautiful wings!"

"Sorry," Gaara stoically, but sincerely said. "Will they heal?"

"Yes. But it will take a lot of time!" the green haired girl protested.

"I see. Nevertheless, don't expect me to go easy on you because of that," and with a hand wave, Gaara launched a tide of sand at the Taki kunoichi.

Fu instinctively deployed her wings, only to feel a wave of pain instead. Cursing, she was forced to run away in order to avoid being buried under the sand tsunami.

"Dammit! Was I so dependent on my wings that I'm this helpless without them?" the green haired girl cursed inwardly. *"No! I still have plenty of tricks to spare! I'll show that creepy kid and everybody else!"*

Fu made a single hand seal. "Hiding in the Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu opened her mouth, and exhaled a large quantity of glittery powder, which reflected so much light that it blinded pretty much everybody. Fu took the chance and dashed at Gaara -reminding herself of not using her wings- ready to punch his face. Unfortunately, her fist only connected with a wall of sand.

"What? The sand can act on its own?" Fu asked, flabbergasted.

"Indeed," Gaara replied, as he rubbed his eyes. A thread of sand then coiled around Fu's legs. "However, this is all my doing."

"Hey, what are you- WHOAH!"

Gaara's sand whip started to repeatedly slam Fu into the ground, switching between swinging her to the left and to the right. Eventually, he let her go when he thought that she had enough. But Fu's resilience proved to be too much when the girl got up as if the severe beating only gave her a minor headache.

"Oh, wow, everything spins..." Fu slurred as she grabbed her head with one hand. "I think I might have a concussion... so, are you going to ask me what do they feed me?"

Gaara raised a nonexistent eyebrow. "Why should I ask such a thing?"

The green haired girl shrugged. "I dunno. Everybody does. Usually after they beat me into the ground just like you did. I don't know what it has to do with anything, but it has been a thing since I got here."

"I'm not from Konoha," the redheaded ninja stated in a neutral tone.

"That might explain it. Anyway..." Fu made a hand seal.

"Transformation Jutsu!"

In a puff of smoke, Fu transformed into Gaara, much to everybody else's confusion. Fu pulled out two kunai and dashed at the jinchuriki of the One Tail.

"You didn't see that coming, do you?" Fu asked in Gaara's voice, but with her usual cheerful and chipper tone.

However, when Fu tried to stab Gaara, she found herself hitting once again a wall of sand. Gaara wasted no time, and trapped her in a cocoon of sand which left only the head exposed. Her transformation was also undone.

"I don't know what you were trying to do with that," Gaara began.

"Well, I kinda noticed that your sand goes on its own, so I thought that maybe I could fool it by disguising myself as you," Fu explained, not too concerned about her current predicament.

"Not a bad idea. Would have worked if the chakra that moves the sand wasn't connected to my very being," Gaara replied. "Then again, such a mistake will cost you this match."

Fu smiled widely. "No, it won't."

And she disappeared in a poof of smoke, leaving a log behind. Gaara felt a current of air at his back, and turned around to see Fu with her fist reared back, said fist surrounded by a small tornado.

"Hurricane Punch!"

Once again, Gaara's ultimate defense triggered, making a wall of sand that absorbed the impact of the punch. However, it failed to absorb the burst of wind the attack unleashed, which sent Gaara flying back several meters. The sand, however, made a cushion that softened the fall.

"Now is my chance!" Fu said as she dashed towards Gaara, as wind began to whirl around her arms. When she closed the gap, she thrust both arms forward. "Double Hurricane Punch!"

Fu released two powerful horizontal tornadoes that managed to bypass Gaara's sand shield and hit the Suna ninja... who promptly burst into sand.

"Like I already told you, you already lost," Gaara's voice said behind her.

Fu tried to turn back, but she couldn't looking down. She saw her legs being trapped by sand, leaving her stuck. Threads of sand started to dangerously whirl around her.

"Please surrender," Gaara continued as she walked towards her, his arm extended. "I do not wish to cause you more harm than necessary."

"And I told you that if you expect me to give up, you have another thing coming!" Fu defiantly replied, as she struggled with the sand trapping her feet, unable to break free. She rummaged through her ninja pouch hoping to find something that could help with her current predicament, when her fingers touched something she had forgotten was there. Pulling it out, she saw it was a vial with a blue liquid on it.

Shibuki had given her that vial, and told her to only use it on a life or death situation.

The green haired girl wondered if she should drink the vial or not. On one hand, this wasn't a life or death situation. She could easily surrender, and go back home completely unscratched.

But on the other hand, what would people think of her village if its only representative walked away when things got difficult? No, giving up wasn't an option. Shibuki had trusted the village's future to her, and she couldn't betray that trust. Her decision already made, Fu opened the vial and drank its contents. At that moment, a second sand cocoon formed around her body, leaving only her head exposed.

"I believe you don't have another Body Replacement prepared in advance," Gaara guessed. "So this-"

The effects of the vial were immediate. Fu felt a surge of power rushing through her body, and her chakra flared forming a glowing blue aura around her. It was so potent, it was able to push the sand away, breaking the cocoon.

"OH YES! THIS IS AMAZING! Fu yelled at the top of her lungs. "Get ready for the worst beating of your life, redhead!"

And the green haired girl vanished in front of him.

...

"NO!" Shibuki yelled as he got up from his chair and rushed towards the edge of the box. "No, no, no, no, no!"

"What's wrong, Shibuki-san?" Jiraiya asked, confused. "Fu seems to be doing pretty good so far. Why the outburst?"

"You... you don't get it," Shibuki replied, shaken. "What Fu did... I told her only to do it under extreme circumstances, but guess that I

had to specify that these matches didn't count. Tell me Jiraiya, do you know about the treasure of my village?"

...

Fu didn't recover the ability to fly, but she was moving so fast it barely made a difference. Coupled with her hard hits, the green haired girl had become a genuine threat.

"Why do I always have to fight against people who outspeed my sand?" Gaara internally complained. "Then again, not all victories can be as easy as against the bug ninja."

Fu snapped Gaara from his thoughts thanks to a well aimed punch. Even if his sand armor absorbed most of the impact, he could still feel the pain of the punch. Before Fu had time to continue her onslaught, the redhead called the sand back and used it to form a protective dome. Fu began to wildly pound on the dome, which started to crack. Gaara made a hand seals, and huge sand spikes grew in every direction, forcing the Seven Tails Jinchuriki to jump back.

"Do you think you can hide from me!?" Fu yelled as he made several hand seals. "Water Release: Water Bullet Jutsu!"

Fu expelled from her mouth an incredibly powerful stream of water, almost like a torrent, towards the sand dome, which was unable to hold the attack, and crumbled down as it absorbed the water and turned into mud. Gaara used his remaining sand to propel himself upwards.

Fu smirked. "Gotcha."

In a split second, Fu leaped into the air, and found herself in front of Gaara. However, before she could punch him again, she noticed a tentacle of sand wrapping around her leg.

"Oh shit, not this again!"

The sand tentacle only slammed her against the floor once. However, Gaara was already preparing his next attack, and five streams of sand were already upon her. Making use of her newfound speed and agility, Fu skillfully dodged the constant sand attacks, but she was unable to find an opening to attack.

Eventually, Fu made a mistake and didn't dodge a sand stream, which made her lose her balance and fell down on her butt.

"NOW!" Gaara thought as he quickly brought his palms together.
"Sand Tsunami!"

Gaara used all his sand, and then some, to bury Fu alive. He used every ounce of his strength to keep her underneath. If he was able enough to contain her until she lost consciousness, the match would be over. Unfortunately, it didn't last as long as he had expected.

All that sand wasn't enough to contain Fu, which burst from the sand tomb with an overwhelming force. All those present noticed that her blue aura had turned red.

"I'M SICK OF YOUR SAND!" Fu bellowed as she dived at him.

Gaara managed to jump backwards before the green haired meteor hit the ground, adding yet another crater to the ground -the arena floor was mostly craters right now- but that didn't deter her in the slightest.

...

"Hokage-sama, you have to stop this!" Shibuki pleaded.

Jiraiya nodded "Indeed. I know how dangerous can-"

"You won't do such a thing, Hokage," Rasa interjected.

Jiraiya looked at his fellow Kage as if he grew a second head. "Are you mad, Kazekage? Fu is losing control of her Tailed Beast! She's a danger to everybody, herself included!"

"I'm aware of the dangers, Hokage. But I'm sure Gaara can handle this," Rasa reassured. He looked at the arena, oddly satisfied. "You'll see it now."

...

Upon seeing her new chakra cloak, it didn't took long for Shino to put two and two and deduce the source of the girl's strange powers.

"So, she's a Jinchuriki like Naruto and Gaara," the Aburame thought. "This is... an interesting turn of events."

...

"DIE!" Fu yelled as she dashed towards Gaara once again. Her chakra cloak had taken the form of a beetle, with a tail forming on its back.

"I can't believe I have to resort to this a second time..." Gaara thought as he made a hand seal. "Ultimately Hard Absolute Defense: Shield of Shukaku!"

Another hat-wearing replica of Shukaku appeared between Gaara and Fu, except this time it was twice as big as the one he summoned against Tenten. Undeterred, Fu crashed against the sand shield, and in her enraged state, rather than simply circumventing it, she tried to tear it down with the force of her fists. Each hit boomed loudly through the whole stadium, and soon the Shukaku replica started to crumble, until a particularly strong punch tore it in half.

"YES! DESTROYED! NOW YOU GO NE-!"

"Ultimately Hard Absolute Attack: Spear of Shukaku!"

Fu didn't have time to ask where did Gaara got that halberd, apparently made of sand, before he embedded it into her shoulder, and pinned her into the ground.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!" She screamed as she futilely tried to remove the spear from her shoulder. However, it didn't bulge.

Little by little, as the pain increased, Fu noticed how her strength withered away. Even the Tailed Beast chakra could only help her so far, and her red aura flickered away. Eventually, the immense pain combined with her diminishing strength made the green haired girl to lose consciousness. Once Gaara made sure that she was out, he undid the spear, which turned back into sand.

Yugao went to check the fallen kunoichi. She was badly wounded, but alive. She gestured the medic nin in order to take her away.

"Fu can't keep fighting! Winner of the ninth match, and third finalist, Gaara!" Yugao announced. "There will be a recession of fifteen minutes before the final match begin! Unlike the previous rounds, the finalists will receive medical attention before the match begins!"

...

"See? I told you Gaara could handle her," Rasa told Shibuki while sporting an incredibly smug smile. "And, as you can see, she isn't exactly careful with her jinchuriki status. After that display, you can forget about keeping it a secret."

Shibuki sighed in defeat. "I should have never given her the Hero Water, but I wanted her to be safe."

Kakashi had told Jiraiya about the Hero Water when he and his team escorted Shibuki to Taki a few weeks ago. It was a special liquid produced by the Great Tree of Taki once every hundred years. Drinking it greatly increased the power of your chakra for a short time, but the backlash would potentially harm the body in a permanent way, similar to the Celestial Gates.

And as it was shown moments ago, if a Jinchuriki drank it, not only increased the power of their chakra, but of their Tailed Beast as well, which would make the Jinchuriki to lose control of their power.

"Hokage-sama, is it okay if I go to the infirmary to check on Fu?"
Shibuki asked, ignoring the Kazekage.

"Sure you can, but you're going to miss the final match," Jiraiya told him.

Shibuki chuckled sadly. "Given that no Taki ninja takes part, I don't have much interest in seeing it. I have no doubt it will be spectacular. Raikage-dono, Kazekage-dono, if you excuse me..."

And Shibuki left the Kage Box. Not that A or Rasa minded. In fact, the latter seemed to be satisfied that there were only Kage and their bodyguards present.

Truth be told, A didn't have any interest in the match either, and was tempted of using Shibuki's excuse as well, but it would be seen as a gesture inappropriate for a Kage, and thus decided to stay.

"Well Kazekage, the final match will begin shortly. Aren't you excited? Because I certainly am," Jiraiya told his fellow Kage.

"Oh, yes, about that," Rasa replied as if he suddenly remembered something. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I know what you're planning. The two Konoha Genin will double team Gaara to kick him out of the fight as early as possible, so they can hog the spotlight. I won't tolerate such thing happening."

The Toad Sage raised an eyebrow. "What? You can't be sure of that! Besides, Naruto has a bond with Gaara since both of them are Jinchuriki. Maybe it's them who team up against Sasuke. Or nobody teams up and it's a three way brawl."

"I stand by my demands, Hokage. I want a different outcome," Rasa insisted.

"And what do you want me to do? There are only three Genin left, and I can't kick one of them out of the competition like that."

"Easy. Have the two Konoha Genin fight each other. The winner can fight Gaara," Rasa suggested.

"Are you insane? I'm not going to do such a thing that would put my Genin in a such disadvantageous position!" Jiraiya fired back, indignant.

"Okay, I know that I'm asking much without giving something else in return," Rasa then looked around, as if trying to come up with something, until his eyes rested on Zabuza. "How about if I drop all charges against Zabuza? I believe it's a generous offer."

Jiraiya pondered the Kazekage's words. Not having to deal with Zabuza's past crimes against Suna later was indeed a plus. On one hand, only one Konoha Genin would make it to the finals, and said Genin would be more tired than Gaara, giving the redhead an easy victory, and a lot of publicity to Suna.

On the other hand... Naruto and Sasuke were two of the most, if not the most, powerful Genin right now. Even if it wasn't the finals, a match between them would also impress Konoha's current and potential customers.

Besides, it's possible that such gamble would backfire on Rasa. Some people would see it as a cowardly gesture, that Suna is too afraid to face difficult odds. If that's what he wanted, then so be it.

"Alright, I accept your terms. On the condition that the winner will also be healed once again before he faces Gaara," Jiraiya added.

"I find it reasonable. We have a deal, then?" Rasa said with a smirk of superiority. "Good."

Jiraiya didn't know how much longer he could resist before he succumbed to the burning desire of strangling Rasa to death.

...

Meanwhile, in the arena, after being properly healed, the three finalists were in front of Yugao.

"Sasuke Uchiha. Naruto Uzumaki. Gaara. Congratulations for making to the finals, but the hardest part comes now. Sometimes, a fight will involve more than just two parties, and thus you will need to know how to-"

Yugao was interrupted when Itachi Body Flickered besides her, startling everybody there.

"Brother...?" Sasuke asked in confusion.

Itachi whispered something inaudible at Yugao's ear, who turned at him in surprise and mouthed something Sasuke identified as "you have to be kidding me", but Itachi was serious. His message once delivered, Itachi returned to the Kage Box.

"Uh... I have orders from Hokage-sama. There has been a change of plans," Yugao said out loud. People started to murmur. "There will be one more match. Sasuke Uchiha and Naruto Uzumaki will fight each other, and the winner will fight Gaara in the finals!"

"What!?" Naruto asked in shock.

"That can't be true!" Sasuke protested.

And they weren't the only ones. The public erupted in a cacophony of loud complaints and boos, as well as insults towards Suna and the Kazekage.

"So... Gaara, please return to the Competitor Box. Sasuke, Naruto, prepare to fight."

Author's Note: So yeah, sorry if you were expecting a three way brawl, but... I really, really, really wanted to make a Naruto vs Sasuke fight. I'm sure you guys will love it.

I got some complaints in the previous chapter about how much I nerfed Gaara to show off Tenten, that he stayed on the defensive all the time and only won when she run out of power. And I had to admit that those complains had a point. I tried to make Gaara more proactive in his fight against Fu, and I hope it was better and truer to the character as a result.

Ah, Naruto vs Hinata. Another fight I've been wanting to do even before this story began, since I never saw one (and yes, I know that "Yet Again" has a NvH fight in the Chunin Exams). Like with Sakura, I had to make Naruto to hold back a little so the fight wouldn't end so soon. Even then, it was a delight to write, and hope it was also a delight to read.

Also, question: a couple reviewers told me they'd like if Hinata got her "Protection of the Eight Trigrams" attack she learned during that filler arc (you know, the one where she briefly appeared naked, you pervs). I think she doesn't need it, but I decided to ask all of you just in case. So do you want Hinata to learn that jutsu, or do you think that with her current repertoire, she doesn't need it? (For the record, regarding of what you answer, Hinata WILL learn many more new attacks in the future).

And I believe I don't do this often enough, but thanks to gio8 for his work betareading this story :)

The finals will be in the next chapter? Who will face Gaara, Naruto or Sasuke? Or maybe it's a tie and both of them get to fight him. Or it's a tie and *neither* of them get to fight him and Gaara wins by default. Oh the possibilities...

One way or another, the Chunin Exams will come to an end next chapter! In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Fight to become Chunin, Part IV

Author's Note: As expected, pretty much everybody wants Hinata to learn the anime-only attack "Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty-four Palms". So be it. However, I'm not going to show any kind of training sequence where she learns that move. It will be part of her repertoire once this fanfic reaches Part II (she learns it during the time skip).

Finally, enjoy the two final matches of the Chunin Exam Finals:

Chapter 30:

Fight to become a Chunin, Part IV

or

And the winner is...

Stadium's Infirmary

After being taken away from the arena floor to the infirmary, Hinata had remained awake, even if just barely. The stadium's medic-nin did as good as expected in healing all her injuries. Her body was still sore and exhausted, but she now felt much better.

"Alright, that would be all," the medic-nin, an old man with grey hair and a mustache, stated as he finished healing her.

"Thank you, medic-san," Hinata would have bowed if she was able to.

"Now rest and try not to move much," the man then chuckled. "You know, given that you were at the receiving end of the Fourth's jutsu, I expected your injuries to be much worse. That rotation technique you used to withstand it is truly impressive."

"The Rasengan was created by the Fourth?" Hinata asked in shock. She couldn't help but smile in pride knowing that she pushed Naruto so much to make him resort to his trump card, as well as feel admiration for her crush to master a jutsu so advanced. "Naruto-kun is truly something else."

"Indeed," the medic-nin agreed. "I'm sure he will win the tournament and earn a promotion, but those who managed to do well against him might be worth considering as well."

"Ahem," somebody said behind them.

The medic turned around to see the Hyuga clan matriarch, Hikari, standing in front of them.

"Thank you for healing my daughter, medic-san. If you are finished, may I talk with my daughter alone?" Hikari requested.

"Of course, Hyuga-san," the medic replied, before leaving. "If you need anything else, call me or any of the other medics."

"We will, thank you again," Hikari politely replied. Once she was technically alone with her daughter -there were other Genin in nearby beds-, she sat on her daughter's bed, besides her. "How do you feel, Hinata?"

"Better," Hinata replied. She became a bit dour, and averted her gaze. "Sorry I lost. I know the clan had high hopes for me, and I disappointed them."

Hikari emphatically smiled, and placed a hand on Hinata's leg. "Don't be so harsh on yourself. Naruto-kun was a tough opponent to beat. I doubt that anybody would blame you for losing against him. In fact, you put up a very good fight."

"Thanks, mother," Hinata replied.

"In fact, I don't remember seeing you fighting as fiercely as you did just now," Hikari pointed out, drawing Hinata's attention. "Seeing your fight today reminded me of somebody."

"Really? Who?" Hinata asked, her curiosity peaked.

"Myself," was Hikari's response, shocking Hinata a bit. "It has been so long that I have forgotten but... seeing you fight down there made me remember how much I used to be like you."

Hinata couldn't believe what she was hearing. Hikari had always been her role model, her ideal of a perfect woman. Kind and caring, but strong and skilled. A perfect balance between gentleness and firmness Hinata always tried to emulate, but was unable to. If that was true... there might be hope for her as well.

"Our clan had always valued power, and strove to be recognized among Konoha's strongest. Like you, I was told that I was too kind and gentle for my own good. And I was also told that I wasn't worthy," Hikari recounted, bitterness lacing her words.

"Worthy of what?" Hinata asked.

"Of being your father's wife," Hikari replied. "Of course, the wife of the future Clan head had to be somebody strong and imposing, not a delicate wallflower like me. But I couldn't stop my heart from longing to be with him, just like yours probably does the same for Naruto-kun."

Hinata became incredibly red. She tried to babble a response, but her mother interrupted her.

"Yes, I know. I'm your mother, of course I know," Hikari shot her daughter a teasing smile. "But even if I wasn't, I don't think it'd take too long for me to figure out. I have noticed that you fight with an inner fire whenever Naruto-kun is present. You want to impress him. To show him what you're capable of. To make him notice you. Am I right?"

"Do you... do you think I impressed him?" Hinata knew better than trying to deny her mother's statements.

"Oh, I'm completely sure. Didn't he tell you himself?" Hikari asked her.

"Well... he might have said that just to be polite," Hinata insecurely replied.

"I doubt that. Naruto-kun is the kind of person who wears his heart on his sleeve. He wouldn't praise somebody if he didn't mean it," Hikari reassured her daughter.

"Still... I have the feeling that I could have done better. If I had mastered the Heavenly Spin, maybe I could have put up a better fight," Hinata said.

"Maybe. But the Heavenly Thunderstorm was a sight to behold. Even if imperfect, it net you a win during the first round. Not everybody can create a new jutsu of such caliber in the middle of a fight," Hikari told her.

"Heavenly... Thunderstorm?" Hinata asked.

"That's the name Hanabi gave it. Though you can name it in a different way if you don't like it," Hikari told her, then she chuckled. "And rest assured that Hanabi won't leave you alone until you teach it to her."

Hinata smiled. "Heavenly Thunderstorm sounds perfect. And tell Hanabi-chan that I'll teach her how to do it whenever I can. But first, I'd like to learn the Heavenly Spin myself. Neji-niisan told me I lack speed, so maybe I should focus on building that."

"Neji-kun stated that his sensei, Maito Gai, is an specialist in physical training. Maybe he can help you with that," Hikari suggested.

"I'll go talk with Gai-sensei and ask him if he's willing to train me, then."

"One last thing," Hikari said, as if remembering something important. "At the end of your fight with Tamaki-san, your chakra reserves were almost drained. Yet when you fought against Naruto-kun, your chakra pools were full. Did you eat a soldier pill?"

Hinata shook her head. "Naruto-kun shared some of his chakra with me. His chakra reserves are so big, he only needed a tiny fraction to restore mine completely."

Hikari pondered Hinata's words. "So Naruto-kun's chakra is compatible with yours?"

Hinata shook her head again. "No. We tried to test it when he brought the possibility of sharing his chakra with others, given that he has so much... but he somehow is able to alter his chakra to make it compatible with other people's."

Hikari's eyes were wide open. "Are you telling me that Naruto-kun is a universal chakra donor? That's very rare! With his huge chakra pool, that makes him even more of an invaluable ally."

Hinata smiled. "Naruto-kun is truly something, isn't it?"

"Indeed he is. And speaking of him, how about if we watch him fight?" Hikari suggested. "His match has to be right now."

"I'd love to... but I doubt that the medics will let me out," Hinata replied.

Hikari rolled her eyes, but smiled. "Hinata, did you forget about the Byakugan? Being lovesick certainly messes with one's mind."

Hinata blushed furiously. "Oh, right, Sorry."

...

Stadium's Arena

It took some time for everybody to accept the Kage's decision of having one more match in order to have a more "traditional" fight for the final. And everybody was completely sure that the Kazekage had something to do with it.

Still, as soon as the realization that a duel between Naruto and Sasuke wouldn't be any less spectacular than a three-way fight, the complaints began to die down as the public got ready for what they knew it would be a very memorable match.

"I can already see it: a new house, bigger, with staff, a private onsen, a bigger garden..." Tsunade gushed as she hugged her betting tickets. "Oh! And a private massage therapist! Kami knows how stressed I come home some days..."

"Do you think it's safe to bet so much for Naruto, Tsunade-sama? Sasuke has never been defeated by any other Genin yet," Shisui asked her.

Tsunade shook her head in a condescending manner. "'Yet' being the key word, my dear Shisui. Naruto has improved a lot since he left the Academy."

"I can agree with that," Sakura interjected. "I'm pretty sure that Naruto was holding back in the prelims, and from what I could see he got even better. I want Sasuke-kun to win, and I know he can, but Naruto is going to be a tough opponent to beat."

"Keep dreaming, pinky! Sasuke might beat Naruto-niisan in prettiness, but when it comes to kicking ass, there's nobody better than him!" Kaida defiantly replied.

...

Naruto and Sasuke stood in front of each other, studying their rival while expectantly waiting for the match to begin.

"You know Sasuke..." Naruto began. "Even if it kind of sucks that we got cheated of the finals... I'm glad that I get to fight to you one on one. You have no idea how much I've been waiting for this moment. The moment I finally defeat you."

"Your wait will end in disappointment, then," Sasuke replied with a smirk. "Then again, I would lie if I say that I'm not excited to fight you. You're one of the few people here that can give me a challenge worthy of my skills."

"I believe Haku and that Kumo girl already did that," Naruto retorted. "You should stop underestimating your rivals."

"It's not underestimating if it's true. Didn't I defeat both of them?" Sasuke asked. "Just like I will defeat you."

"I see you guys are ready. In that case the tenth match of the Chunin Exam Finals, between Sasuke Uchiha, from Konoha, and Naruto Uzumaki, from Konoha..." the purple haired woman raised her hand in the air. "Begin!"

In less than a second, Sasuke activated his Sharingan, unsheathed his katana, and dashed at Naruto ready to strike. Despite his speed, Sasuke wasn't fast enough to stop Naruto from using his signature jutsu.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

By the time Sasuke reached close quarter combat, Naruto was surrounded by an army of clones. With a quick swipe of his blade, Sasuke managed to dispel some of them. However, the remaining clones wasted no time in pulling several kunai and shuriken and tossed them at Sasuke, forcing him to fall back.

While Sasuke was deflecting and dodging the incoming projectiles, the Naruto clones charged while the original remained behind, something Sasuke already expected.

"He'll want to trick me into attacking the original, but then he'll switch with a clone and I'll be left wide open. Fat chance about that happening, Naruto," Sasuke thought as he made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a massive fireball, which caught most clones off guard, instantly dispelling them, as it flew towards Naruto while leaving a trail of scorched earth behind. The original Naruto merely tossed a kunai with a deep blue tag on it, which upon being activated released a massive amount of water, canceling the fireball, and leaving the arena covered in steam.

Sasuke saw several flashes of orange crossing the steam cloud. A Naruto clone then appeared from behind, delivering a punch to his side, disappearing in the steam before the Uchiha had any time to react. Another clone kicked him in the shin, before vanishing again.

"Dammit, this is like Haku's mist all over again!" Sasuke inwardly cursed. Fortunately for him, the steam dispelled by itself in a couple of minutes, revealing Naruto as well as a dozen clones.

"I didn't thought that I'd have to resort to this so soon," Sasuke stated as he started making hand seals. "But guess that if I want to defeat you, I can't afford to hold back, even if that means I'll be at a disadvantage in the finals. Fire Release: Burning Man!"

Sasuke's whole body was wreathed in flames. The youngest Uchiha smirked under his cloak of fire. "Now not only you can't touch me without hurting yourself, but your wind jutsu will be useless."

Naruto wasn't impressed. "And you think that setting yourself on fire is going to-"

The blond was interrupted when a red blur dashed at him, instantly dispelling all the clones it touched. When it reached Naruto, he was able to use Body Replacement with one of the remaining clones, which was instantly poofed.

"Shit! I forgot the fire also made him insanely fast! Guess that I'll have bring reinforcements!" Naruto thought as he pulled out a smoke bomb and tossed to the ground, creating a cloud of smoke.

The burning Uchiha was forced to stop on his tracks, but that wouldn't be enough to deter him. "You won't be able to hide from me!" Sasuke stated as he started making hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Another side effect of the Burning Man is that the user's fire jutsu were way more powerful, as evidenced by the even bigger fireball Sasuke managed to breathe. However, Naruto had already a way to counter that.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

The air displaced by the summoning managed to blow away the smoke, revealing a three meter tall blue skinned toad with a yellow belly, holding a kanabo in one hand, and a large rectangular metal plate in the other. Upon seeing the fireball coming, the amphibian immediately yelped and covered behind his makeshift shield, which successfully blocked the fire attack.

"Dammit Naruto, don't summon me to act as a meat shield so suddenly!" the toad complained.

"Sorry Ryoko, but there was little I could do," Naruto, standing on the toad's head, apologized. "Say do you think you can help me win this match? I'm in the Chunin Exam finals."

The toad looked around, and noticed the large crowd gathered around. "Wait, you're fighting in front of such a large crowd...?" the toad then smiled widely. "Why didn't you summon me earlier? I love to show off my awesome moves!"

"Good to see we're on the same page," Naruto sighed in relief. He then pointed at Sasuke. "That's our rival."

Ryoko grew confused. "Why is that kid on fire? Is he okay?"

"Hn. Do you think a fat frog is going to help you win?" Sasuke dismissively asked.

Ryoko didn't take the insult well. "First of all, I'm not a frog, but a toad! Second, I'm not just any toad, but the great Ryoko, Warrior-Sage and hero of the Toad Clan! And third, I'm not fat, I'm bulky!"

Sasuke didn't say anything in return, and made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A volley of fireballs flew at Ryoko, which he again hid behind his oversized metal plate. However, while he was doing so, the youngest Uchiha, taking advantage of his current speed, flanked the large toad and prepared to attack him from the side. Too bad for him, Naruto was already waiting for him.

"Going somewhere?" Naruto asked as he summoned several clones who jumped at Sasuke.

Sasuke made quick work of them, but by the time he was finished, Ryoko had turned around and his kanabo was descending upon him. The youngest Uchiha leaped in the air a couple seconds before the large metal club smashed into the ground.

"Ryoko, now!" Naruto called.

Ryoko nodded, as his dewlap swelled. "Water Release: Water Bullet Jutsu!"

The large toad exhaled a powerful stream of water, which Sasuke was unable to dodge mid air. The attack was strong enough to put out his cloak of fire, and had enough force to push him backwards several meters, before he finally falling to the ground with a loud thud.

"We got him! Time for the final blow!" Naruto commanded.

Ryoko nodded, and leaped high into the air, falling right where Sasuke was, still trying to stand up.

"SHIT!" the Uchiha yelled upon seeing Ryoko's frame looming over him, and made a hand seal.

Naruto could see Sasuke Body Flickering just before Ryoko landed on the ground with a loud crash, and looking around, noticed Sasuke several meters behind him. He was making several hand seals.

"Ryoko, behind you!" Naruto pointed out. "Let's attack together this time!"

"I'd hate to share my spotlight, but I can see that this rival is unlike any other," the large toad admitted.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

"Sage Art: Morning Breath!"

Ryoko opened his mouth, releasing a nasty looking green gas, which combined with Naruto's wind attack, formed a green, more than likely toxic tornado. However, Sasuke finished his jutsu just in time.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

The Uchiha slammed his palm on the ground, creating a cloud of smoke. And from the smoke, a black hawk the same size as Ryoko emerged, flying above the deadly attack, carrying Sasuke on its back.

"What the hell!?" Naruto indignantly asked.

...

"Sasuke has a summon?" Sakura asked in disbelief, looking at Shizune.

The older medic-nin shrugged. "Don't ask me. I'm as surprised as you," she replied, before turning at Shisui.

The oldest Uchiha nodded. "Yeah, that was Itachi and me. Sasuke asked if we could get him a Summoning Contract in order to increase his arsenal. We were going to offer him to sign the Crow Contract, but Itachi remembered that the clan used to have a Hawk Contract hidden in one of our secret hideouts, reserved for the most exceptional members. Itachi thought that said contract would fit Sasuke better than the Crow one."

"Is this the first time he uses it?" Shizune asked.

Shisui shook his head. "Obviously no. Sasuke was able to summon some of the smaller hawks when we trained, but this is the first time he summons one so large."

"Shizune-sensei, can I have a summoning contract too?" Sakura asked with pleading eyes.

"It's not that easy, girl," it was Tsunade who replied. "Summoning a creature, even a small one, takes huge amounts of chakra, and your reserves aren't exactly that big. I have no problem allowing you to sign my Slug Contract, but you won't get much mileage out of it."

Sakura visibly deflated, and slumped on her seat. "Oh," she sadly replied. "And is there a way to increase one's chakra reserves?"

"Increasing your stamina is a good way," Shizune replied. "Maybe I could ask Gai to give you some more intensive physical training if you wish."

"Training under Gai-sensei...?" Sakura asked, as an horrible image appeared in her mind. "He won't make me wear a jumpsuit, will he?"

...

"You must be Sasuke Uchiha, aren't you?" the hawk asked in a feminine voice. "The new summoner. The chicks told us about you."

"Indeed I am," Sasuke confirmed.

"My name is Kazehane, pleased to meet you. What can I do for you, Sasuke-san?" the hawk replied.

"I'm fighting in the Chunin Exam Finals. See that blond kid on top of a toad? I need to defeat them in order to pass," Sasuke explained.

Kazehane eyed at the Uchiha's opponents, and tilted her head in curiosity. "A toad summoner. He must be quite a skilled ninja if the toads allowed him to be their summoner."

"Can you help me defeat them nor not?" Sasuke asked, a bit impatient.

"You can count on it," Kazehane replied before diving at Naruto and Ryoko, legs forward.

"Suddenly I feel like eating fried chicken!" Ryoko replied as he hid behind his shield and readied his kanabo. Naruto was also ready to attack as well.

"Then I see hunger in your future!" Kazehane replied as she latched onto the toad's large shield, and pried it from its webbed hand.

"Sasuke-san, now!"

Sasuke jumped from the Hawk's back and made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Naruto wasted no time and pulled another kunai with a water seal on it and tossed it at the incoming fireball. The ensuing explosion of water canceled Sasuke's attack, creating a cloud of steam. But Sasuke was already waiting for that reaction.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

"Shit!" Naruto and Ryoko said in unison.

Sasuke emerged from the steam cloud with his sword drawn and crackling with electricity. Naruto tried to made the hand seals of one of his wind jutsu, but it was too late. Sasuke stabbed his electric sword into Ryoko's gut, and the toad instantly disappeared, leaving a cloud of smoke behind.

"Crap!" Naruto cursed as he landed. He didn't have any time to do anything before Sasuke pressed the attack and delivered a painful flying kick to his temples, sending the blond flying back, before he was caught mid air by Kazeane's talons.

"You fought well, kid," the hawk praised as she flew upwards. "But I believe it's about time for you to yield."

"You'd wish! By the way, how much weight can you carry?" Naruto asked as an idea formed in his mind.

"I... what's the point of that question?" the giant bird asked in confusion.

"Oh, you'll see now. Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Suddenly, Kazeane found herself being weighted down by dozens of Naruto clones who appeared from nowhere and latched onto her, forcing her down. Some of the clones tried to immobilize the wings.

"Too... much... weight!" the hawk cried, but the weight was too much, and she violently crashed against the ground, before disappearing in a cloud of smoke, alongside most of the clones.

Naruto and his surviving clones got up and dusted the dirt from their clothes, before their attention was drawn by Sasuke's slow clap.

"Bravo, Naruto. A really smart way of getting rid of my summon. You're all what I expected to see in a worthy rival," Sasuke's face then turned into a frown. "But the fight ends now."

"Come on, you don't have to surrender!" Naruto jokingly protested.

Sasuke did not acknowledge the blonds' taunt, and made several hand seals in quick succession.

"Fire Release: Burning Edge! Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Sasuke grabbed his sword with his right hand and a kunai with the left, the former being bathed in flames, and the latter crackling with electricity.

"He can use two elements at the same time? I took so long to master just one!" Naruto thought as he gulped.

"Despite never doing it before, weaving lightning is something so easy to me, it comes naturally," Sasuke boasted as he took a fighting stance. "All Uchiha have fire affinity, and I didn't seem to be an exception, so I never bothered with the litmus papers. However, I'm starting to believe that Sakura wasn't the only one who had a double affinity."

In less than a second, Sasuke was already in close quarter combat range, his flaming sword already being swept at Naruto. The blond managed to narrowly dodge it, but then came another sweep from the electric kunai, once again forcing Naruto to jump back. While doing so, he pulled out several shuriken and tossed them at Sasuke.

The Uchiha merely smirked and swung his sword once again, this time releasing a crescent shaped fire blast that quickly traveled through the air, stopping all of Naruto's shuriken. A panicky Naruto tossed a kunai with a paper bomb attached to it, and the resulting explosion nullified the attack.

"Not bad, but how about this!" Sasuke then crossed his flaming sword with his electric kunai, and from the crossing point fired a beam of flames coated in lightning bolts.

On his part, Naruto made several hand seals. "Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

Pouring as much chakra as he could, Naruto generated a tornado around himself that blocked the bi-elemental attack, but the energy clash was so great that it resulted in an explosion. When the smoke cleared, Naruto stood there, with some minor burns and bruises across his body.

"Despite the challenge you provide, your resistance to lose is becoming a bit irksome, Naruto," Sasuke stated as he walked calmly towards him.

"What can I say? Even if I can't win, I will make sure that the enemy has to work for it," Naruto cheekily replied.

"You haven't used the Rasengan yet," Sasuke noted.

"I didn't see any need to use it," Naruto just shrugged. "But if it's any consolation, that may change soon."

"I'll make sure that you use it. Now watch this," Sasuke raised his flaming sword, which also started to crackle with electricity. "See this? Two elements at the same time! This is my most powerful move! And I even make it on the spot. If your girlfriend can do that, then somebody like me could do it as well."

"Fire and lightning at the same time... isn't that a bit overkill?" Naruto asked, as he began to feel uneasy, while beads of sweat dropped from his head. "Are you trying to emulate Plasma Release?"

Plasma Release was the combination of Fire and Lightning Release, and one of the most destructive Bloodline Limits ever seen. The clan who possessed it was so feared and powerful, it spurned the Senju and the Uchiha into forming a truce in order to annihilate them. After a gruesome campaign that lasted eight months, they put a swift end to the clan and erased that Bloodline forever. Unfortunately, this was

before the time of Hashirama Senju, so nobody learned anything and both clans went back to killing each other.

"Yes it is. And maybe the Sharingan can't copy Bloodline Limits, but my talent is enough to create an equally deadly facsimile," Sasuke replied, his voice full of pride and satisfaction. "So what do you say, Naruto? Do you want to see which one of our jutsu is the strongest?"

Naruto just smiled, and held his hand upwards, generating a sphere of chakra. "I guess that I don't have much choice, do I?"

Without further ado, both Genin lunged at each other, ready to unleash their respective most powerful attacks.

"Double Elemental Release: Plasma Sword!"

"Rasengan!"

Both attacks clashed, the Rasengan growing three times in size, and Sasuke's sword releasing lightning bolts and fire waves everywhere. Both Genin poured as much chakra as they could in an effort to overwhelm the other, but neither of them bulged.

That is, until for a second, Sasuke's concentration wavered, and as a result the lightning from Sasuke's sword flickered out, much to the Uchiha's horror, leaving just the fire.

"WHAT? NO!" he cried in horror.

With only the power of one element, Sasuke's attack was unable to withstand the Rasengan which started to push with such force that it blew Sasuke's sword out of his hands. With no way to protect himself, the sphere of chakra pretty much exploded in his face, violently hurling him backwards, crashing on his back with a loud thud.

A moment passed. Naruto collapsed on his knees, and breathed heavily. On the other hand, Sasuke remained lying down, his only

movement being erratic trembling. Yugao walked close to the Uchiha in order to check him. He was in pain and was barely able to move, but he was still okay. But clearly in no condition to continue fighting.

"Sasuke Uchiha can't continue fighting! The winner of the tenth match is Naruto Uzumaki!" Yugao announced, and the crowd erupted into a wave of loud cheers. "There will be a recession of twenty minutes in which Naruto will be healed before facing Gaara in the finals!"

...

"YES!" Tsunade roared as she held her winning tickets in air as they were a trophy. Kaida and Hagane cheered alongside her as well.

"YES! That's my son, people! My son beat the Uchiha genius!"

Shisui sighed in defeat. "So this ends Sasuke's run in the exams. At the very least, he managed to score quite a few victories. Let's hope it's enough to earn him a promotion."

Sakura's mouth was wide open. "Wow... I knew that Naruto was strong, but that... even with all the training I did with Kurenai-sensei, I'm not even close to his or Sasuke-kun's level."

"Still willing to train under Gai?" Shizune asked her. While the black haired woman could teach Sakura about medicine and ninjutsu, if she wanted raw power it was either Gai or Kakashi.

Not without resignation, Sakura nodded.

...

There was a certain somebody who watched the match with an unusual amount of attention, especially the last part, when Naruto used the Rasengan to gain victory.

"Hey Number Eight, did you see what the brat did last? I believe that it was no normal blast," Killer B asked.

"Yes, I had that impression the first time he used it, but now I'm completely sure," the Eight Tails replied. "That kid's jutsu is based on the Tailed Beast Ball"

"How did he do it while being in human form? That's almost like trying to tame a storm," Killer B mused. "The brat has talent, that's pretty sure, which is so surprising given that he's also so immature!"

"B... you're not the most indicated to blame others of being immature..." the Tailed Beast replied.

...

Meanwhile, in the Stadium's Infirmary

As she recovered her consciousness, Karui began to groan, and stirred. Despite the medical attention, her body was still sore, and it hurt to move any limb, so she decided to remain still for the time being. Opening her eyes, she slowly scanned her surroundings as they adapted to the artificial light.

The last thing she remembered was that she was fighting Sasuke Uchiha, and then everything went black.

"W-Where am I?" She managed to ask.

"In the infirmary," a male voice besides her said.

Not without effort, Karui turned around to see Choji, sitting on his bed.

"Ah," she lamely replied. "So this means... that I lost?"

Choji nodded. "You should have seen yourself when they brought you here. Sasuke did a number on you. What you did to me was nothing in comparison."

Karui deflated. She was hoping for at least a double KO.

"I see," she replied, and let out a sigh.

"Don't feel bad. Sasuke Uchiha is one of the best Genin of Konoha. Hell, I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't have lasted half the time you did," Choji reassured her.

"You shouldn't sell yourself so short either. You made me work for my victory back then. I thought that I had my work cut..." Karui said.

"... because the way I look?" Choji asked, looking at her with sad eyes.

Karui took a few moments to reply. "Yes," she finally admitted. "By the way... um, listen, I'm... I'm sorry for calling you fat before."

Choji smiled. "Thank you," he replied, followed by another moment of silence. "You know... you're the first one."

Karui looked at him with incredulous eyes. "The first one who ever defeats you?"

"Haha, I'd wish," Choji chuckled. "No, I mean the first one who apologizes after calling me fat."

They both smiled at each other. The moment, however, was interrupted when a pair of medic nin carried no other than Sasuke Uchiha on a stretcher, looking as if he'd been trampled by a herd of enraged rhinos.

Karui looked at the mangled Uchiha wide eyed, her mouth forming a grimace of incredulity and shock. After some moment, she was capable of producing a coherent sentence.

"Wow, I don't know who the hell left the Uchiha like that, but I don't even want to cross paths with such person," Karui stated, as she winced.

"Yeah. I'm more and more glad each moment that I lost to you," Choji replied. Karui couldn't help but chuckle in response.

...

Naruto and Gaara, the last remaining Genin standing, walked into the arena. The crowd began to cheer as they appeared. The previous match had left everybody stunned by the sheer skill and power displayed by mere Genin, and thus were expecting something similar to happen now, since both combatants had made extensive use of their abilities. Yet there were still some who thought that they hadn't revealed everything yet.

"You know, Naruto," Gaara spoke up. "Even if it's under such... unfair circumstances, I'm glad I got to fight you one on one."

Naruto grinned at him. "Haha, yeah, me too! And don't worry, the medic-nin left me good as new!"

"Good. I wouldn't be satisfied with anything less."

Neither of them knew the extent of the other's abilities, but now they had a pretty good idea. Gaara was a very defensive fighter, often tanking the enemy's attacks, waiting for them to wear down and grow tired, before finishing them off. That doesn't mean that he lacked in the offensive department, as his sand made for a terrifying weapon.

But as Naruto, among others, had guessed, that was also a huge weakness: remove the sand, and Gaara was helpless. Then again, taking the sand out of the picture was something nobody has been able to accomplish yet.

On the other hand, Naruto was the complete opposite. His philosophy when it came to fighting was hitting the opponent before he had the chance to hit you first, and then hit them again before they had the chance to stand up. And unlike Gaara, Naruto had a very wide arsenal. Clones, weapons, ninjutsu, summons... you name it.

To summarize, you have somebody who did plenty of things ranging from good to great, fighting an opponent who was the absolute master of one thing. Everybody agreed it was an interesting combination.

Yugao took a look at both Genin, both eager to fight even if only one of them showed it. She raised a hand. "The Final Match of the Chunin Exams between Naruto Uzumaki from Konoha, and Gaara, from Suna... begin!"

Naruto wasted no time and opened the match with his signature move.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A dozen of Naruto clones appeared besides him. While this happened, sand started to pour from Gaara's gourd.

"Attack!" the blond commanded.

The small clone army pulled out several kunai and shuriken and dashed at Gaara, uttering loud battle cries and cheers. On his part, Gaara merely made a hand motion, and the sand formed several tentacles. With another hand motion, the tentacles fell upon the clones. Some of them managed to dodge them, while others were instantly poofed. The clones that managed to get close tossed their weapons. As expected, a wall of sand intercepted the barrage of pointy metallic death.

While they were attacking, the remaining clones were destroyed by the sand tentacles. Once the blond army was no more, they directed their attention towards the original, who made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

The horizontal cyclone managed to not only stop Gaara's attack, but dispel the sand as well in no time, even if the sand was technically still there.

"Just like I thought, besides water turning it into mud, your sand can't stand a powerful wind current," a proud Naruto stated, grinning widely.

"It would be mostly unwise to underestimate my abilities just because you found a couple weakness in them, Naruto," Gaara stated while waving his hand, making the sand form a cloud above the arena. "Sand Bullet Barrage!"

The sand cloud began to shoot sand projectiles at such speed that they left holes in the ground upon impacting. Naruto yelped, and was forced to run and jump aside in order to avoid the deadly sand projectiles. Along the way, he sometimes created one or two clones to use as human shields. However, his speed faltered for a moment, which was enough for a sand bullet to hit him right in the gut. Air was forced out of Naruto's lungs, and the blond fell on his butt.

"Now's the moment," Gaara said as he made another hand wave.

The sand of cloud stopped raining sand missiles, and formed an arm made of sand. Naruto quickly reached his ninja tool pouch, and pulled out a kunai with a water seal and tossed it at the incoming arm. However, a thin tendril of sand suddenly grew from one of the fingers, and quickly lashed the kunai away.

"Crap!"

The arm managed to grab Naruto before he had time to do anything else. The sand arm lunged him into the air before slamming him against the ground. It repeated the process multiple times.

"OW! AW! OWW! MY BACK! MY ARM!" Naruto cried as he was being repeatedly smashed. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Naruto exploded into a multitude of clones, and used the Clone Replacement to escape the giant smashing arm of doom.

"Oh boy..." Naruto panted, as he winced in pain. "That's not something I want to do anytime soon."

...

"I don't like this. Gaara is dominating the whole fight," a worried Shizune commented.

"Sure, but I know that Naruto will turn the fight around. He always does," Tsunade replied, sure of her statement, but the amount of force which she was gripping her betting tickets betrayed some worry.

"Naruto-niisan's movements are slower," Hagane noticed.

"Really?" Kaida asked her brother, before turning back at the arena. "Naruto-niisan, you have to move faster!"

"It's not that easy," Shizune interjected. "While the medics have treated Naruto-kun of all his wounds, and still has plenty of chakra to spare, there's something no medical jutsu can't relieve in an instant: physical exhaustion."

"And Sasuke forced Naruto to give it all. After such a fight..." Shisui intervened. "Well, Naruto's muscles have to be a bit sore."

...

Stadium's Infirmary

Speaking of Sasuke, just that moment he finally recovered consciousness. Like what happened to the other Genin there, his body still hurt, he felt disoriented, and it took a few moments to notice where he was. But unlike the other Genin there, there was a certain somebody sitting on his bed.

"Ugh..." Sasuke groaned. As his eyes used to the light, and his vision became less blurry, he could identify the figure. "Itachi?"

"You remember me. Good, that means that Naruto didn't hit you that hard," Itachi replied.

"Did I... did I lose?" Sasuke asked, his words laced with regret and a bit of fear.

"Given where you are, I think that the answer to that question is obvious," Itachi bluntly replied. "How are you feeling?"

"My body hurts a bit," Sasuke replied. He also wanted to say that physical pain was nothing compared to his hurt pride, but the youngest Uchiha decided to shut up. He merely grunted and averted his gaze.

Of course, his brother wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily. "Now Sasuke, what I want to ask you is why do you think you lost."

Sasuke grunted once again. "Why do you ask? I'm sure you were watching."

"Indeed," Itachi nodded. "I even had my Sharingan activated so I wouldn't miss any single detail. However, the reason behind my question is to see if you know where you failed."

Sasuke shifted on his seat, and crossed his arms. "Naruto's attack overpowered mine. It's just as simple as that."

"We both know that's a lie. You were doing fine at first," Itachi replied, hoping for Sasuke to continue.

"Until I found myself unable to sustain my jutsu, and everything went to hell," Sasuke replied, his voice dripping with irritation.

"Correct. And do you know why such thing happened?" Itachi pressed.

"Handling two elements at the same time was harder than I expected. I thought that I could have do it, but I guess I overestimated myself," Sasuke admitted, his voice still oozing anger.

"Yes, yes you did," Itachi agreed. "Now tell me Sasuke, do you think such thing would have happened if you used a jutsu we practiced this month, as opposed to something you came up on the spot?"

"Hinata made up a new jutsu on the spot and it gave her the victory of a match she was on the verge of losing," Sasuke countered.

"Yes, and look what happened when she tried to use that bastard version of the Heavenly Spin to stop a Rasengan. Just like you did," Itachi chided.

"There was no jutsu in my repertoire with enough power to counter a Rasengan. Turns out I'm so good with Lightning Release it might be a secondary affinity, and if I combined both fire and lightning..."

"You didn't need to counter the Rasengan per se," Itachi countered. "You could merely dodged it, then wait for Naruto to make a mistake, and go for the win. But I guess that seeing Naruto using a jutsu so powerful prompted you to show everybody that you were able to come up with something even better, right?"

"Naruto had always been beneath me. He had no right to steal my spot as the best ninja of our generation," Sasuke grumbled.

They were briefly distracted by Choji's laughing at something Karui said, with the redhead laughing as well.

"You had a good idea," Itachi told his younger brother. "The problem, though, was the lack of practice. Channeling two elements at once is something not even Shisui nor myself even attempted to do, and seeing you doing such a thing was nothing sort of impressive. Once the exams are over, we will work on that new jutsu of yours. Hopefully with the display you put out there, you'll have your promotion assured."

"By the way, what are you doing here?" Sasuke asked, after he realized that something wasn't quite right. "Shouldn't you be protecting the Hokage?"

Itachi stood up, and smiled at Sasuke. "What makes you think I'm not?"

And "Itachi" disappeared in a poof of smoke.

...

"Boy, when I saw you fighting I thought that I could take you on easily," Naruto said, as he painfully got up and healed his wounds with the Mystical Palm Jutsu. "But now I know why Tenten and Fu struggled so much against you."

"I've been looking forward this fight, and thus I'm going to use every ounce of my skill," Gaara calmly replied. "Besides, after what you did to Temari, I have to avenge her."

"WHAT!?" a shocked Naruto screamed. "But you said you have no hard feelings! What happened to 'she knew what she was getting into' and all that!?"

"Don't get me wrong. *I* don't have any hard feelings. *Temari* on the other hand, can be quite vindictive," Gaara explained. "And if she learns that I didn't take the chance to avenge her... I will never hear the end of it."

...

"See?" Ino asked to an annoyed Shikamaru. "He gets it!"

"Ugh, troublesome women," he whined. "I bet you will never see a man so obsessed with revenge."

In the infirmary, Sasuke sneezed.

...

"Alright," Naruto said as he bit his thumb, and started making hand seals. "Prepare to meet the biggest, baddest toad that has ever been summoned! Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto slammed his palm on the ground, releasing a cloud of smoke. Everybody watched intently as the smoke dispelled, wondering what kind of toad he would bring to battle. Ryoko proved to be a strong toad, and this time Naruto would call one even stronger.

"Hey, what's up, man?"

Or at least that was the idea. When the smoke dispelled, it revealed a very small red toad with a small jacket. This was Gamakichi, one of the first toads Naruto had summoned, but due to his small size, he wasn't planning to summon him to battle yet.

The crowd erupted in a loud laughter, adding to Naruto's embarrassment.

"AAAAAAHHHHH! What are you doing here!?" a distressed Naruto yelled, grabbing his head with both hands in horror.

"Uh... you summoned me?" the amphibian replied, scratching his head.

"I didn't mean to summon you! I'm in the middle of a big fight!" Naruto replied, just as distressed.

"Hey, no biggie, I can be of help," Gamakichi confidently replied as he jumped on Naruto's head. He then eyed Gaara, who was gathering all his sand. "So, that's our enemy, right? Yeah, he looks like a big deal."

"Dammit, I thought I already had the hang of this," Naruto inwardly complained. Unbeknown to him, the physical exhaustion from Sasuke's match was starting to take its toll, and that was affecting his ability to gather and mold chakra. "Well, guess that Gamakichi will have to do."

Unlike other possible adversaries, Gaara didn't make any snide or dismissive comment of Naruto's failed summon, and merely prepared to attack again. He made a single hand seal.

"Wind Release: Sand Dragon Bullet!"

The sand gathered and formed a serpentine dragon. The sand dragon let out a roar, and charged at Naruto.

"I've got this!" Gamakichi cheerfully said before jumping in mid air.
"Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

Gamakichi's dewlap swollen, and exhaled a surprisingly large fireball. The fire bullet hit the dragon, which crystallized it almost instantly. Naruto then pulled out a kunai and tossed it at the dragon, shattering it completely.

"See? I'm useful!" Gamakichi cheered.

"Wind Release: Multiple Sand Dragon Bullets!"

This time, Gaara formed five several sand dragons, slightly smaller than the first one, which charged at Naruto and his toad friend from five different sides. Gamakichi yelped, and jumped back towards Naruto before the sand dragons could get him.

"Gamakichi, I'm going to try something, When I say 'now', I want you to use that fire jutsu of yours, okay?" Naruto asked. The toad merely nodded. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Naruto created once again an army of clones, and they charged towards the dragons. The sand dragons, however, plowed through the clones like they were made of paper. However, they weren't the blond's target, as the original, with Gamakichi on his head, was heading towards Gaara. The redhead noticed Naruto's advance, so he commanded the sand dragons to focus on him. However, Naruto would simply create more clones to act as human shields. When he reached a close enough distance, he put his plan into motion.

The Konoha jinchuriki pulled out a single shuriken from his tool pouch and tossed it at Gaara. The moment it left his hand, he made many hand seals.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

An then, the lone shuriken turned into fifty. A wall of sand quickly rose, ready to block the deathly rain of steel.

"GAMAKICHI, NOW!" Naruto yelled.

"Alright!" Gamakichi jumped from Naruto's head, while taking air.
"Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

The fire projectile managed to pass the shuriken, and exploded against the wall of sand, turning it into glass. The shuriken then hit the glass, shattering it, and leaving Gaara completely vulnerable. Naruto knew this was his chance, and formed a Rasengan in his hand. Gaara opened his eyes in shock, and started to move back, but it was too late.

"Naruto, wait!" Gamakichi called.

"Rasengan!"

The spiraling chakra sphere hit the Suna jinchuriki right in the guts, and it began to expand before exploding...

... and Gaara suddenly burst into a cloud of sand.

"Naruto, that one's a clone!" Gamakichi called. "The real one is over-ACK!"

The small toad didn't notice sand slipping close to him before it was too late, and was forcefully unsummoned.

"So, a clone replacement," Naruto said in realization. "You pulled it very quick."

"Indeed. Had I been a second slower, I would have lost," Gaara admitted. "That jutsu of yours is truly something. Maybe it can even manage to bypass my defense.."

Naruto just chuckled. "The previous matches already showed that your defense is all but unbreakable. You know, Sasuke thought that his jutsu could be able to match mine, and look at what happened. Do you want to try?"

"This should answer your question," Gaara replied as he made a hand seal.

Suddenly, a wall of sand formed between Gaara and Naruto. The latter grinned, and merely extended his hand, forming the sphere of destruction once again. Naruto charged at the wall, who grew multiple spikes the moment the blond was closer, not that they did much to deter the charging Konoha ninja.

"Rasengan!"

The effect was instant, and the ensuing chakra explosion completely tore the wall apart. Naruto could see that Gaara had made multiple walls behind the first one, but the explosion had still enough energy to blow them up as well.

"How about that?" Naruto cockily asked.

"Impressive, mostly impressive," Gaara praised. "Now I certainly know that I have to make sure you don't get near me at all costs."

"Well, you will try," Naruto said as he adopted a fighting stance.

Gaara made a hand seal. "Wind Release: Maws of Shukaku!"

Gaara's sand gathered and formed the head of monstrous tanuki - which Naruto guessed was the One Tail-, which opened its huge and terrifying maws while it moved towards Naruto, as if he tried to engulf the blond. Naruto once again tossed a kunai with a water seal on it, but another sand whip appeared out of the sand construct and flicked it away.

As fast as he could, Naruto started making hand seals, but the sand construct closed its jaws upon him. However, a second later the sand monster was blown away by a tornado coming from the inside.

The sand took no time to gather and form into several tentacles which launched themselves at Naruto. The blond, however, had a plan.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A handful of clones appeared around the original. Several charged at Gaara, while others moved in the opposite direction. The sand tentacles took no time to stop the clones from getting to close, but while this was happening, the other clones went to pick the kunai with the water seals, while the original made some hand seals.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

The Naruto clones tossed the kunai at the wind jutsu while activating the water seals, creating a huge horizontal water vortex aimed at Gaara. The sand raised several walls, but all what they did was to absorb the water, and becoming mud. It was the time to strike.

Naruto formed a Rasengan on his hand and dashed at Gaara, easily plowing through the softened walls of sand, getting closer to a panicky Gaara. However, the Suna ninja had still one last card to play.

"Ultimately Hard Absolute Defense: Shield of Shukaku!"

Once again, Gaara summoned a toy sand replica of Shukaku between Naruto and himself. The sand construct gave him the victory against his previous two opponents, and this time he made it even bigger, spending almost all his remaining chakra yet. Still, Naruto was undeterred.

"Rasengan!"

The spiraling chakra sphere clashed against the sand construct, expanding and releasing all the contained chakra at once. The ground started to shake as the sand construct tried to absorb the energy of the Rasengan. Cracks started to appear and spread around it, and chunks of sand started to blow apart. Naruto grinned, while Gaara's panic increased, as he poured even more chakra into his jutsu...

... which resulted in the damage made to the sand creature partially repaired, and the whole construct hardened even more. With no way to break it, the energy released by the Rasengan was pushed outwards, and Naruto's own jutsu exploded on his face, hurling him backwards.

"Now's my chance!" Gaara thought as he dispelled the Shukaku's Shield and gathered all his remaining sand. "Desert Funeral!"

Before Naruto had time to get up, Gaara buried his opponent under all his remaining sand -which was still quite a lot-, trapping Naruto. He was expecting the blond to burst through his attack like he did multiple times before, but nothing happened. One minute passed, nothing happened. Two minutes. Three minutes. After that, Gaara tentatively removed the sand, to reveal an immobile and unconscious Naruto.

Yugao went to check the blond. Thankfully, he was still alive and breathing, but in no condition to fight anymore. Sighing, she proceeded to do her job.

"Naruto can't continue fighting! Winner of the match, and champion of the Chunin Exams... Gaara of Suna!" Yugao declared.

The public burst into a mix of cheers and boos. Cheers because it was a spectacular match which got the people's interest, and didn't care much that a foreign ninja won. Others, however, weren't so kind to forgive the way Gaara got into the finals. Still, the redhead didn't seem to care much.

Shibuki was sitting besides Fu's bed. The green haired girl was still asleep, and the Taki leader didn't want to disturb her. The Konoha medics made an excellent job patching up all her wounds, almost appearing as if the Taku kunoichi never got her shoulder pierced by a spear made of super compressed sand.

He couldn't help but feel guilty about giving Fu a vial with some Hero Water. He should have realized that, being a Jinchuriki, it would have increased the power of the Tailed Beast inside her. In hindsight, it was a good thing that Gaara ended up winning, or else the match would have ended up in a tragedy.

And, unfortunately, Rasa's words turned out to be prophetic. After such display, there's no way everybody watching wouldn't guess that Fu was a Jinchuriki. Soon the word would spread, and she would be in an ever greater danger.

"See? This is what I didn't want you to come here..." Shibuki moaned aloud.

"You can't protect her forever," a voice behind him said, startling the young leader. "She needs to learn how to defend herself, and such thing won't happen if you keep her caged."

Shibuki turned around to see the white haired Sannin, Jiraiya. He knew what was coming next.

"Your medics did a wonderful job healing her," Shibuki praised.

"After Tsunade-hime took charge of our healthcare, our medics have become true miracle workers," the Hokage replied. "Come with me. Don't worry about her, she will be fine."

Not without resignation, Shibuki obliged. Before shooting her one last glance, he joined Jiraiya, and both village leaders started to walk through an empty hallway.

"I guess that you want to talk about how I had two Jonin pose as Fu's Genin teammates, am I right?" Shibuki fearfully asked.

"You went right to the point. I think I'm starting to like you," Jiraiya smiled at him. "But don't think for a second that repercussions won't be any less severe."

"I'm... I'm listening," Shibuki told him.

"Okay then. First of all, Fu shall be promoted to Chunin," Jiraiya began.

Shibuki nodded. Fu had made quite a display of power in both her matches. If she went to another exam, with even more training and experience, she would completely steal the spotlight, and thus potential clients from other villages.

"Second, whenever Konoha needs Taki's assistance for whatever reason, you will send it. No exceptions, and no excuses." Jiraiya firmly stated.

"What if we don't have enough ninja available?" Shibuki asked.

"You will leave fifteen percent of your total forces inside your village as a reserve force just in case," Jiraiya quickly countered. "And lastly, ten percent of Taki's next year's income will go to Konoha. Do you accept my terms, Shibuki-san?"

When the elders knew of what happened, they would claim for his head. He had to think something to let him keep the leader seat. Then again, he had no other options.

"Yes, Hokage-dono. I accept," Shibuki replied, and sighed in defeat.

"Good!" Jiraiya heartily smiled. "I will prepare a treaty to make it official. Let this be a lesson on what happens when you try to fool me, Shibuki-san."

...

Sometime later, Naruto opened his eyes. Like many Genin before him, he found himself laying on a bed on a place he recognized as an infirmary of some sorts. The stadium's infirmary, he deduced. His body was all sore, and trying to move his arms or legs caused him no small amount of pain.

"Hey, you're awake, Naruto-kun," a female voice besides him said.

Turning around, and blinking a few times, his eyes recognized Shizune's form. The Jonin was sitting besides his bed, smiling sweetly at him.

"Shizune-nee-chan...? What happened...?" Naruto groggily asked. He had very vague recollections of the later stages of his last match, but if he was in the infirmary then it only could mean one thing. "..Did I lose?"

Shizune gave him a consoling smile, and nodded. "But in your defense, you made Gaara work for his victory."

"I see," Naruto replied, deflated. He then noticed that the room was strangely silent. Looking around, he noticed that the other beds were empty. "Where is everybody else?"

"They have been sent to their homes," Shizune explained. "You've been here for a few hours now. I've been waiting for you to wake up so we can go home. Hopefully, you will be almost completely recovered by tomorrow."

"I see. Where are mom and dad?" Naruto asked.

"Jiraiya-sama is in a meeting with the council of advisors. They already have the examiners' report, and are discussing which Genin deserve to be promoted," Shizune explained. Before Naruto could say anything, she added: "If I were you, I wouldn't be worried. Given your performance, you have the promotion in the bag."

"Hehe, good to know," Naruto replied, his usual mood slowly coming back. "And mom?"

"She took the twins home, but she later came back," Shizune told him. "Tsunade-sama bet a large sum of money on you during the last match, and losing it all... well, she didn't take it very well."

Naruto shivered in terror. "Oh boy, I think I better pack my things and leave the village, right?"

Shizune laughed at Naruto's reaction. "Nah, it won't be that bad. I believe she should have blown off the steam by now. Honestly, it's a miracle that her yells didn't wake you up. Anyway, I better tell her that you're awake so we can go back home."

The Jonin got up and walked towards the door.

With no small amount of effort, Naruto sit up. He looked around the empty room once again, and sighed. "You know... I was planning on asking Hinata out once the exams were over. Pity she isn't here anymore."

When she was opening the door, Shizune turned around. "Funny thing you should mention that. You have no idea how much it took to make her leave. She wanted to stay at your side until you woke up. She'd been watching over you until her clan retrieved her about an hour or so ago."

"Really..?" Naruto asked in disbelief. He smiled softly, and looked down. "That was... very nice of her."

"Indeed it was. Now, take all the time you need before we go back, okay? Nobody wants you to force your body," Shizune said before leaving. "I'll get a wheelchair."

Naruto nodded, as he started to slowly get out of the bed. He couldn't help but think about what Shizune told him regarding Hinata.

"Maybe those guys who told me that Hinata likes me might be right after all..."

...

Author's Note: And thus, the Chunin Exams come to and end! What do you think? You know, at first I was planning on having Naruto winning the whole thing, but beating Gaara after having to fight Sasuke would make Naruto look way too overpowered. Plus it was a good chance to give him a loss. Far too many authors turn Naruto into an overpowered, invincible Gary Stu, and I don't want to be one of them.

Besides, Naruto can't win if Tsunade bets for him XD Shout out to Storyman09, who guessed how Tsunade's luck would affect Naruto.

Speaking of Gaara... boy, I grew to hate writing his fights. Everything about Gaara is a wave of sand, arms of sand, whips of sand, a sandstorm, sand constructs, sand, sand, sand... (cue Anakyn Skywalker screaming in anger). So after three fights in a row with nothing but sand, I'm glad I won't have to write Gaara fighting again until Part II.

And before you ask, yes, Plasma Release is my invention. There wasn't a name for a Fire/Lighting combination. Same with Wind/Lightning. I plan on using "Maelstrom Release", but if you have a better idea, feel free to share it with me.

Anyway, the Chunin Exams may be over, but this arc has one chapter left, and you guys don't want to miss it. Not only because we will see which Genin managed to score a promotion (only Konoha Genin, mind you. Non-Konoha nin like the Sand Siblings, Fu or Karui won't appear again until Part II, and by that time all of them will be Chunin or higher), but also because several romantic subplots will finally reach their

conclusion. Yes, including THAT one ;). Your patience will be rewarded, rest assured of that.

In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Chunin Exams End

Author's Note: You know, finally publishing this chapter, who has been on my mind since the moment I started writing this story waaaaaay back in October 2016, make me really happy. And that's not the only reason for my good mood.

First, last episode broke the 900 reviews mark. 99 more reviews, and this story will reach 1k reviews! Let's hope it doesn't take too many chapters for such thing to happen!

Also, I was stunned by the amazing reception the last chapter got, despite many complains about Naruto losing the final fight. Very few chapters managed to surpass 30 reviews, and the last chapter got 36! Thank you guys again!

And lastly, this story now has its own page at TVTropes! So if any of you have an account there, I'd really appreciate if you added tropes to the page from time to time.

Well, enough of celebrations, let's go to the chapter:

Chapter 31:

The Chunin Exams End

or

Promotions in Love and War

Just like Shizune had told him, after a good night of sleep, Naruto was completely recovered. While the rest of the Genin who took part in the finals were good enough to get out of bed and walk, their bodies would take another day or two to completely heal before they would be able to take missions, or even train. Even then, the couple days of vacation for the Genin were appreciated by all of them.

Naruto, alongside Shizune, Kaida and Hagane, were headed towards the Hokage Tower, where at eleven o'clock, Jiraiya would announce the results of the Chunin Exams. While Naruto was evidently nervous, the Hokage had assured him that he had nothing to worry about.

Unsurprisingly, a large crowd had gathered around the tower, where they had placed another podium, similar to the one they put at the beginning of the Chunin Exams, from where Shisui addressed more than a hundred Genin as the exam began. It would be fitting that it would officially end in a similar way.

Naruto could see that all of his former classmates were already there, even those who didn't make it to the finals, as well as their families, alongside other ninja and civilians of the village. Guess that very few people wanted to miss the announcement of the newest Chunin. Even people from other villages were there to witness the event.

Upon seeing Hinata, he waved at her. The Hyuga heiress noticed him, smiled and waved back. Hinata was accompanied by her mother, her little sister, Neji, and other clansmen Naruto didn't recognize. He also saw Haku, with Hayate and Yugao. Other people Naruto saw were Sasuke, Sakura, Karin, the Sand Siblings and Fu.

The crowd began to murmur as Jiraiya, followed by Tsunade, Hiruzen, Koharu, Homura and multiple ANBU, exited the Tower and headed towards the podium. Two of the ANBU carried a stack of diplomas and Chunin flak jackets, still inside their transparent plastic wrapping. Jiraiya took a step forward and cleared his throat, earning the crowd's attention.

"Hello everybody, and welcome to the Chunin Promotion Ceremony," Jiraiya began. "Yesterday, another edition of the Chunin Exams, one I might say was one of the most memorable and spectacular of the last few years, came to an end. I got the examiners' report as soon as the Finals ended, and my advisors and I spent yesterday afternoon discussing which ones of the finalists deserve a promotion.

"We agreed to promote four Genin. Two boys, and two girls. So without further ado, here are the new Chunin. As common courtesy dictates, ladies go first. The first promotion to Chunin goes to... Tenten!"

The crowd broke into an applause. The odango-haired girl couldn't repress a loud squeal as she dashed towards the podium, where one of the ANBU handed her a diploma, and another handed her a flak jacket. Tsunade walked towards her and put a hand on her shoulder.

"I told you I knew talent the moment I see it," Tsunade told her with a sincere smile. "Good job, kid."

"T-Thank you, Tsunade-sama!" Tenten replied, unable to repress her tears.

She returned to the crowd as fast as she ran to the podium, where an excited Gai and Lee were waiting for her.

"Gai-sensei, I did it!" Tenten squealed, lifting the diploma and flak jacket as if they were trophies.

"Of course you did! There's nothing you can't do if you work hard enough for it!" Gai enthusiastically replied.

"Yeah, even if you lost your match, your flames of youth burned so bright they blinded everybody!" Lee added.

Tenten was so caught in the moment that she tackled and hugged Gai, with Lee joining them as well in a three-way hug.

"Gai-sensei!"

"Tenten!"

"Lee!"

"Tenten!"

"Gai-sensei!"

"Tenten!"

"Lee!"

"Tenten!"

The sun began to set even if it was eleven in the morning, and the Hokage Monument was suddenly replaced by a beach with waves crashing against the shore.

And for a split second, Neji swore he saw Tenten wearing a green jumpsuit, orange leg warmers, and her hair sporting a bowl haircut as opposed to her usual twin buns. And during that moment, the idea of becoming a missing nin became increasingly alluring for the Hyuga prodigy.

After the "Genjutsu of Youth" finished and Tenten was released, Haku saw it as a fitting opportunity to congratulate her as well.

"Congratulations for your promotion, Tenten-chan," the Ice Ninja's greet was much less enthusiasm than that of her teammate and sensei, but not any less sincere. "You really deserve-"

Haku only had a vague recollection of what happened next. Apparently, the promotion had worked Tenten up so much -not helped by Gai and Lee's antics- that the moment Haku was close to her, she grabbed his head and pulled him into a really long and intense kiss.

A wave of "ohhhhhhhhhs!" and "awwwwwwwws!" ensued.

And while Jiraiya kept a cool façade on the outside, he was giddy on the inside. *"Yes! My long term plan is working! In a few years, wedding bells, and then Ice Release babies!"*

When the kiss broke, was Haku was completely flustered, his face sporting a deep shade of red. His brain took a few moments to

process the long and intense kiss.

"So..." Haku began. "Does this mean your answer is 'yes'?"

The question seemed to snap the overly excited Tenten back to normal. Her eyes started to open widely as she started to process her recent actions. Her face flushed as well.

"Good Kami... I kissed you like that... in front of everybody!" Tenten babbled.

"So does it mean...?" Haku began to ask.

"No, no! I do want us to become a couple!" Tenten assured. "It's that, well... doing things this bold is so unlike me..."

"Hey, it's okay, you were caught in the moment. It happens to everybody," Haku reassuringly said.

Tenten just smiled at Haku, blushing a bit.

Jiraiya cleared his throat once again. "Yeah, yeah, young love is always very nice and heartwarming, but let's go back to the business at hand, okay? The second and last kunoichi who will get a promotion is... Hinata Hyuga!"

Once again, the crowd applauded, with Naruto's cheers being heard above them. Even if her reaction was more subdued than Tenten's, Hinata looked no less happy. On the other hand, Karin and Tamaki were visibly deflated. They had hopes that they could still get a promotion despite losing their respective matches, just like Tenten, but those hopes were dashed away. Logically, they weren't going to award either of them over somebody who did win a match.

"Congratulations, Hinata. That new jutsu of yours was really impressive. Very few people have the combination of creativity and talent to come up with something new, much less in the middle of a

fight," Jiraiya told her as the ANBU handed her the diploma and the flak jacket.

"Thank you, Hokage-sama. I feel really honored," the Hyuga heiress politely said as she bowed her head before him. She then got down of the podium, and returned back to her family.

"Good work, Hinata. Today, you made your clan proud," Hikari told her, as she bent down and hugged her, something quite shocking for the Hyuga clan head to do in public.

"Thank you, mother. I'll make sure I will keep honoring both you and the clan," Hinata replied.

"Hey, Hinata-nee-chan! Will you teach me the Heavenly Thunderstorm?" Hanabi asked, impatiently tugging her older sister's sleeve.

"Well, first you need to train in elemental ninjutsu," Hinata replied. "And master the Heavenly Spin too."

Hanabi didn't look deterred in the slightest. "Okay then, that will be my number one priority!"

"Alright, now let's go with the boys," Jiraiya continued. "This one won't surprise anybody, given his amazing performance during the finals. The first male Genin promoted is... Sasuke Uchiha!"

Surprisingly, the crowd applauded once again. It wasn't as intense as with Tenten and Hinata, but the lack of boos was something the three Uchiha appreciated. Sasuke's face barely changed as he walked up to the podium and got the diploma and the flak jacket. And after a laconic "thank you" to the Hokage, he returned to his elder brother and cousin.

"Good job, Sasuke! We knew you could do it!" Shisui congratulated him as the one-eyed Uchiha heartily patted Sasuke on the back.

"And Konoha seems to be slowly warming up to us. See? I told you things would get better," Itachi added.

Sasuke allowed himself to sincerely smile.

"And last, but not least..." Jiraiya said in a dramatic way as he himself took the last diploma and flak jacket. "A Genin so powerful and skilled who managed to make it to the finals, and showed Konoha what we are made of. The last promotion to Chunin goes to... Naruto Uzumaki!"

Once again, the crowd erupted into an applause and a wave of cheers as the blond triumphantly walked towards the podium, and was about to get the diploma...

"Or at least, that's why I would have wanted to say," Jiraiya regretfully said as he took the diploma and flak jacket away from Naruto's reach, much to the blonde's confusion.

"What?" Naruto asked, puzzled. The crowd began to murmur.

"You see, Naruto, there's something my advisors told me. Since you're my son... well, some people will think that you getting a promotion might be the result of nepotism, so I'm afraid I can't do that. Guess that you'll have to wait until I step down from being Hokage."

The crowd started to murmur even louder. As for Naruto, he felt his world shattering in a million pieces. His face grimaced in horror, as rage started to fill him. "WHAT!? That can't be-!"

But the blonde's tantrum was interrupted by several flashing lights, accompanied by several clicking noises. When his eyesight returned, he noticed that the ANBU were holding cameras.

"Please tell me you have it!" Jiraiya asked one of the ANBU, barely containing his laughs.

"We do, Hokage-sama. The mission was a success," the ANBU replied in a stoic and professional tone.

"BWAHAHAHAHAHA!" Jiraiya burst into a wild fit of laughter. "You know, when sensei and I came up with this idea yesterday, we didn't imagine it would be so good! Oh boy, if you could see your face... oh wait, you can see the face you made when the pictures are developed! HAHAHAHA!"

"Wait... so this was.. a prank!?" the jinchuriki asked in realization. Naruto's face contorted in rage. He was about to give Jiraiya a piece of his mind when another realization dawned upon him. "Wait a minute! If this was a prank, then this means..."

"That your promotion is real? Sure thing," Jiraiya replied as he handed Naruto the diploma and the flak jacket. "Come on, only an idiot would have deny you a promotion after the display you put on yesterday."

Naruto quickly grabbed the diploma and the flak jacket, and rushed towards Shizune and the twins. The three of them congratulated Naruto on the promotion.

"And that's all! We wish the best of luck to the newly minted Chunin, and hope that your ninja path only grows better! As for those who failed to score a promotion, don't give up! A true ninja is one who has the guts to keep going, no matter how hard it gets! Be sure to train for the next exams!" Jiraiya declared, as both he and his entourage left the podium.

As the crowd dispersed, an ANBU appeared in front of Tenten and Haku before either of the could leave.

"Excuse me," the ANBU, a man wearing a turtle mask, said. "But given the previous display, I assume that the two of you are in a relationship, right?"

"Yes," Haku answered, looking at Tenten, who nodded approvingly.
"Is there a problem?"

"As a matter of fact, there is," the ANBU replied, much to both teens' surprise. "You're a Genin. And she's a Chunin, and thus, your commanding officer."

"Oh," Tenten replied. She immediately realized why the ANBU had stopped them. Since she outranked Haku, the relationship could be seen as problematic.

"All relationships between ninja of different ranks must be approved by the Hokage's Office. Go to the tower, second floor, third door to the right. The person there will inform you further," the ANBU helpfully said.

"Thank you, ANBU-san, we'll do it right now," Tenten replied before she and Haku entered the tower.

Jiraiya had overheard the conversation, and there was no way on Earth that they wouldn't approve a relationship of somebody who was the last bearer of a Bloodline Limit, different ranks or not. Somebody would get fired if he heard it wasn't approved.

"You know, at first I thought that that stunt you did there was kind of cruel..." Tsunade told him, snapping the Toad Sage out of his thoughts.

"You think so?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yeah, but I said 'at first'. Boy, that face he made was hilarious! I want an extra large version of that picture for the living room!" Tsunade asked.

And from the next day onwards, Naruto's incredibly confused and distraught visage would forever decorate the Senju residence.

...

A few hours later, Gates of Konoha

All the ninja from foreign villages were about to leave, and the Konoha ninja they befriended were there to bid them goodbye and a safe return home. It was obvious that many of them would want to stay a bit more, but the life of their duties as ninja wouldn't allow it.

"It was nice to see you again, Gaara," Naruto told his fellow jinchuriki. "And even better to fight you. And the next time we see each other, we will have a rematch!"

"I will be looking forward it," Gaara replied in his usual monotone. "And hopefully, this time nobody will have a handicap over the other."

"You owe me a rematch too, Naruto," Temari piped in. "I didn't like the fact that you defeated me without even using your best moves. Next time, I'll make sure you get to use every trick you have."

"Who knows, maybe by the time we meet again, I have even more tricks you aren't aware of," Naruto replied with a cheeky grin.

"And you won't be the only one," Temari then noticed Shikamaru, who was half-hiding behind Choji. "And don't think I forgot about you! The next time we meet, we're going to finish that match we have pending!"

Shikamaru just sighed in defeat. "Troublesome woman..."

"While I wish we could stay longer, I'm actually eager to get back home," Kankuro mentioned. "Not only do I miss Suna, but father is going to celebrate Gaara's victory at the Finals with a village-wide party."

"Oh man, that sounds so cool! I wish I could go!" Naruto whined.

"We'll make sure you and your friends can come to the next one," Temari added.

"Oh, and be wary of the Akatsuki!" Naruto said, remembering that bit of important information. He raised his voice so Fu and Killer B could also hear him. "If you ever see a guy wearing a black cloak with red clouds, run as fast as you can."

"How about if we make the other guy to run instead?" Kankuro cockily suggested.

"Don't. Their members are very powerful, and pose a danger even for a Kage," Naruto gravely warned. "Dad told me as much."

"You don't have to worry, I will be careful," Gaara assured him.

Meanwhile, Fu was saying his goodbye to the Animal Squad, her closest friends from Konoha.

"I will miss you guys," Fu said as she wrapped the three of them around her arms. "Being here was so fun."

"Hey, it's okay. We'll make sure to visit you from time to time," Kiba reassured. "After all, our villages are allies, and they aren't that far from each other."

"Or maybe you can come to visit us," Tamaki suggested.

"I don't think so," Fu shook her head. "You guys now know that I'm a jinchuriki, and thus, my village's most valuable asset. I just can't leave and come here whenever I want."

"We will find a way then," Shino spoke up. "That isn't a problem with a hard solution to find. For example, we could also write each other to stay in contact."

"That's an awesome idea!" Fu chirped. "But I guess I'll need to learn how to write first..."

There was a moment of an extremely uncomfortable silence, as the Animal squad stared at Fu in disbelief.

"... you... you don't know how to write?" an astonished Kiba asked.

"Pfffffft, of course I do, silly! Hahaha!" Fu laughed as she patted Kiba's shoulder. "I can't believe everybody falls for this kind of stuff! Naruto at least wised up."

"Fu, come on, we need to leave!" Shibuki's voice shouted.

"Guess my time here is up," Fu sadly said as she turned back. But then she turned back at the Konoha Genin, and spotted Karin among the Konoha crowd. "But before I do, there is a couple things I need to do first..."

Fu walked towards Karin. The redhead, still wearing the glasses Fu had broken during their fight - that she futilely tried to fix-, noticed the Taki kunoichi walking towards her, and shot Fu a glare.

"Uh, Karin-chan?" Fu sheepishly asked.

"What do you want?" the redhead huffed.

"Before I leave... I wanted to give you this," Fu then handed Karin a small wrapped box.

A bit puzzled, Karin took the package and unwrapped it. Much to her shock and delight, there was a new pair of glasses.

"Since I broke your other glasses, I thought that I should buy you new ones," Fu said.

"Thank you, but..." Karin put on the new glasses, and her surprise grew wider when she could see perfectly. "Hey, you even got my testing right! How did you...? Wait a minute, you were the one who broke into my house last night, didn't you!?"

When Karin and her mother returned home, they noticed that everything was a mess, as if a robbery had taken place. However, much to their puzzlement, the potential thief didn't steal anything. Now it all made sense.

"Uh... it was for a good cause!" Fu sheepishly replied.

"Hmm... guess that I can let that slip," Karin decided. She then realized of something. "Wait a minute, how did you pay for them? I thought you say you didn't have any money left!"

"I didn't steal them if that's what worries you," Fu clarified. "Shibuki lent me some money. Boy, between this and the bill I racked at Icharaku's, I'll have to work my ass off if I ever want to repay all the debts I made here."

"Thank you for this, I know that glasses aren't exactly cheap," Karin told her. "But don't ever break into my house again like that, got it!?"

"I can do that," Fu replied as she began to walk towards the Animal Squad as well. "Glad you liked my present!"

"You know, that was a really nice thing to do," Tamaki praised.

"Like I said, it was the least I could do," Fu then looked at Shino, and grinned. "Now, for that second thing..."

Much to everybody's shock, Fu grabbed Shino by the back of his head, and planted a huge kiss on his lips. The kiss lasted almost five seconds. When they broke contact, Fu was giggling, and her face had a brief red tint. Shino, however, was frozen in place, and blushed so hard he could give Hinata a rush for her money.

Of course, this didn't went unnoticed by those present, and with Haku and Tenten before, a chorus of coos and "awwwwwws" ensued.

"Good, now people will talk about this out of nowhere kiss instead of my out of nowhere kiss," Tenten thought.

"Alright, now I can leave. See ya!" Fu said as she joined her fellow Taki ninja, and they started to walk out of Konoha.

The Kumo group was also ready to go. Unlike the other two foreign groups, nobody was there to greet them goodbye. At least not until a few seconds before they were about to leave.

"Wait! Karui!" Choji's voice called.

The red haired girl turned around, and raised an eyebrow upon seeing Choji walking towards her. "Hm?"

"Hey... I wanted to tell you that it was nice meeting you... and maybe the next time we see each other, we can also have a rematch?"

Karui smiled. "Sure. You're a great ninja. I'd love to trade blows with you as well in the future."

"Also..." Choji awkwardly said as he handed her a bento box. "I made you some food. You know, for the journey back."

"Really? You cooked the food?" Karui asked.

"... my mom did it," Choji sheepishly admitted. "But I helped her! And it was my idea!"

"Okay, no need to get so defensive, hehe!" Karui chuckled as she inspected the bento box. "Thanks a lot. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Hinata-chan!" T suddenly shouted as she waved at the startled Hyuga, who was talking with Haku at that time.

"She's not into you, T," Karui told her.

"I know," the girl with the braids visibly deflated. "All the hot ones are always taken."

"A vacation well spent, even if it's time to end. But to another exams we will go again, or else I won't stop until I turn my bro insane!" B rapped.

"The next exams are in Kumo, so forget about getting more 'vacations'," A snarled. "Come on everybody, we must make the most of the daytime!"

And thus, all the foreign ninjas left Konoha, ready to go back to their villages and resume their lives and duties there. But this doesn't mean that this is the last time their paths would cross.

...

Later that night, at one of Konoha's best restaurant, there was a large feast in honor of all the Konoha Genin who took part in the exams (they were starting to be known as the "Konoha 15") as well as those who did manage to score a promotion, all paid by the Hokage (something the Akimichi would make sure he'll grow to regret). Besides them, their closest family members and Jonin-sensei were present as well.

There were so many, that they had to use several tables. Some Genin sat alongside their teammates, others with their families. Karin decided to take a seat alongside the Hyuga to stay near Neji, and introduce him to her mother. After a long talk, Neji realized that he and Karin were pretty much a couple, though fortunately the prodigy was okay with that -but they warned him not to tell the redhead that he didn't originally had such intention when he treated her to eat some weeks ago.

Even if the mood was overall happy, some wished their foreign friends could have attended the party. Especially Shino, who had no chance to talk to Fu after that kiss. He had spend the next two hours in a near-comatose state, and when he returned to his senses, the Taki kunoichi was long gone.

Shizune, sharing a table with the three Uchiha, stood up and cleared her throat to draw everybody's attention. The buzz of the simultaneous conversations taking place slowly went down until it disappeared as everybody else grew silent.

"Now that everybody is here, I'd like to say something," the black haired medic began. "Sasuke, I want to congratulate you for becoming Chunin on your first try," everybody applauded, and Sasuke allowed himself to smile, even if it was just a little. "Sakura, Karin, keep working hard and don't give up, and I'm sure that you'll catch up with him in no time."

"We will!" Sakura replied.

"In the meantime, since you're the one with the highest rank, you'll be the new leader of the Medical Squad for the time being, since I won't be your sensei in the near future."

A deafening silence fell upon the restaurant as Shizune's words sunk in. A couple people began to murmur.

"What? Why!?" a disheartened Karin asked.

"Don't you want to be our sensei anymore?" Sakura asked, just as distressed. "Did we do something to upset you?"

Shizune chuckled. She found the girls' reactions adorable, and couldn't wait to see their faces when she finished her explanation. "You see, it's not just that I won't be your sensei, but I'm not even going to be a ninja. I've been diagnosed with a medical condition that will keep me off-duty for the next year."

"What kind of condition?" Sasuke asked, mildly concerned. She looked perfectly healthy to him.

"A wonderful one," Shizune couldn't repress a huge smile before she dropped the news. "I'm going to have a baby!"

The restaurant erupted into cacophony of female squeals and shouts, as everybody tried to congratulate Tsunade's protégé at the same time.

"That's awesome!" Karin squealed.

"Who is the father? It is Shisui?" Sakura asked.

"Yep!" Shisui replied as he stood up alongside his girlfriend. "I mean, that baby is mine, right?"

Shizune frowned, and slapped his shoulder a few times. "How you dare to say such a thing, you dummy! Of course you're the father!"

"Also, we'd like to announce our wedding, which will be in three months time. And everybody here is invited to attend!" Shisui stated.

The announcement was met with another wave of cheers and applause. Shizune and Shisui felt a bit guilty for stealing the newly minted Chunin's thunder, but given that so many people were gathered, they saw it as the perfect opportunity to make the announcement. Still, none of the youngsters seemed to mind. If anything, the party became even happier after that.

After a few hours, well into the night, long after everybody had stopped eating -minus the Akimichi, who still had enough room for a third dessert-, and everybody still awake merely engaged in a talk with people near them. While the minors didn't drink, the adults did, and some of them were already in the process of mentally scarring their children forever with their drunken antics.

And before things could go out of control, a certain blond knew that this was the best opportunity he had for making his move.

"Hinata, can we go outside for a bit?" Naruto asked. "There's something I need to tell you."

Hinata's heart skipped a beat. She was observant enough to notice that whatever he wanted to say, he wanted to tell her and only her.

"I think I'll go talk with Tenten-chan," Haku said. He then shot a knowing smile at Naruto.

"S-Sure, Naruto-kun," Hinata's stutter briefly returned as she stood up and accompanied Naruto outside, to a zone quiet enough for the both of them.

The air was much cooler outside, something both their lungs appreciated. The racket from the inside was reduced to a mere murmur from the outside, something which their ears appreciated as well. They spent a few minutes there, enjoying the silence and calmness of the night and each other's company.

"So..." Hinata began, as she started to twiddle her fingers. "... what d-did you want to tell me?"

Naruto sighed, as he tried to put his ideas in order. He wasn't somebody who beat around the bush, but in this situation he was kind of at loss for words. He was tempted to follow Fu's advice and example, forget about words, and kiss her directly. But his rational part screamed not to do it, and for once, Naruto decided to be cautious.

"You know, Hinata, you've been my best friends for many years..." Naruto began, as he uneasily put a hand behind his neck. "But as of recently... things have been different... a-and I think I have to..."

"Uh, Naruto? I don't understand what are you trying to say," Hinata asked, a bit confused.

Naruto's face morphed into a mask of anger. "ARGH! To hell with subtlety! Hinata, I like you a lot! And I don't mean 'like' as a friend. Well, I did like you as a friend before, but not anymore, and it has been eating me on the inside, because I didn't know if you liked me back, or even if you did if we would work as a couple, or... or... well, you get it."

"You... you like me!?" a stupefied Hinata asked. "Since when?"

"I couldn't tell. Maybe... maybe shortly after we became Genin? Yeah, I think it was around that time," Naruto replied, trying to

remember. "But yeah, now you know how I feel. Sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable or upset or-"

"Naruto-kun," Hinata interrupted as she walked towards him.

"Huh?"

"Did you know that that's exactly how I felt towards you?" Hinata replied as she smiled at him.

"What? You do?" a dumbfounded Naruto asked.

"Yes," Hinata had already closed the distance between them. She was starting to blush. "You are also my best friend, Naruto, and without you... you inspired me, both directly and indirectly, into becoming both a much better person and ninja. I like your determination, your optimism, your desire of self improvement. You gave me somebody to talk to... and to listen to. I wouldn't know when it happened, but I started to feel the same towards you as well. Your good looks didn't hurt either."

This time, it was Naruto who blushed. "So... does that mean that we're boyfriend and girlfriend?" Naruto asked. Hinata giggled a bit, and nodded. "OH YES!" an excited Naruto picked Hinata up by her waist and began to spin. "Not only do I become a Chunin, but I get a girlfriend too! Today the best day ever! And yours too, I hope!"

"Indeed it is!" Hinata giggled.

Naruto placed Hinata back in the ground, and his expression turned a bit awkward again. "So... should we kiss? You know, to... seal the deal?"

Hinata's reply came in the form of her eyes closing, her lips puckering, and her head moving towards Naruto. The blond did likewise, until their lips met in a short, but definitely sweet, kiss. When the kiss broke, they stared at each others' eyes for a few seconds, before breaking into a fit of giggles.

"It was... even better than in my dreams," Hinata swooned.

"Indeed it was. You're an awesome kisser, Hinata-hime, Naruto told her.

Hinata blushed even harder. ""W-What did you call me?"

"Hime. My princess. It's what dad calls mom. And well... given that you're the heiress of a noble clan, that sorta makes you a princess, so I thought it was fitting..." Naruto explained, blushing a bit.

Hinata didn't say anything. She just smiled, and rest her head on Naruto's shoulder, as she softly wrapped her arms around him.

After a few moments, Naruto grinned, broke the embrace, and grabbed her hand. "Come on, we have to tell everybody!"

Hinata laughed as she let Naruto lead her back inside.

"Hey guys, listen, Hinata and I-!"

Naruto's words died on his throat when he saw what was going on in the restaurant. There were several tables turned over, some of them even on fire, there was food smeared everywhere, people running around, fighting, and throwing food at each other, and Tsunade was strangling Kakashi with a bra -presumably her own, given the cup size.

The Chunin couple spent a few seconds watching the scene, completely dumbfounded.

"Uh, Hinata?"

"Y-Yes, Naruto-kun?"

"... Do you want to go back outside?"

"Yes, please."

...

Next Day, Training Ground Nine

Sakura never remembered the last time she woke up so early. Hell, she didn't even have any memory of being up so soon after the sun rose. And combined with the party last night and that she went to bed way later than usual, her body and mind weren't exactly in the best conditions. But hey, nothing that a cup of coffee couldn't fix. Temporarily.

But since she was told that Gai's team started training very early, and she wanted to make the best of the day, she set her alarm clock way two hours earlier than usual. And apparently, she didn't arrive as soon as she expected, as she caught the team's two green clad members doing some stretching after doing some exercises.

"Hello?" Sakura asked the duo. Lee was the first one to notice her.

"Oh, Sakura-san! Your presence made an already great day to be even better!" Lee enthusiastically greeted as he dashed towards her. "Did you come here to train with us?"

"Yes," Sakura couldn't believe that he answered just that.

"Ah, excellent! So good to see another girl who wants to fan her flames of youth!" Gai replied as he walked towards both of them.

This got Sakura's curiosity "Another one? Who?"

Gai smiled brightly. "You'll meet her soon enough. She should finish her warm up just now. Anyway, what can I do for you, Sakura? In which ways do you seek to improve?"

"I'd like to develop my natural strength, stamina and chakra reserves," the pinkette replied.

"Very well, that I can do!" Gai then pulled out a sealing scroll, and unsealed what appeared to be training weights. He handed them to

Sakura. "Here, put on this light weights on your ankles and wrists when you train. This will make the training harder, but the results will be far more impressive."

"These are the light ones?" Sakura incredulously asked as she put on the rather heavy weights. But then again, she had to admit her natural strength was nothing to write home about.

"And here she comes, from completing her twenty laps around the training field!" Gai announced as he turned around.

Sakura turned around as well, and saw an extremely exhausted Hinata dragging herself as badly as she could towards them. She was sweating a waterfall, and her face was completely red (and for once, it wasn't because of Naruto). Once she was closer, Sakura could notice that she was also wearing training weights, the same one as the pinkette.

"We were waiting you, Hinata! How do you feel?" Gai happily asked.

The bluenette collapsed on her knees. "I... I want... I want to die..."

Gai ignored Hinata's answer. "Hinata, meet Sakura! Like you, she decided to join us in our daily training in order to become stronger! Though I believe you two already know each other. Anyway, for the time being, you should take it easy. Lee and I are going to run ten laps around the village before climbing the Hokage Monument with one hand tied behind our backs. Once you rest a little, both you and Sakura run, say, fifty laps around the training field!"

And thus, Gai and his pupil left.

"So... what are you doing here?" Sakura asked. Being a Chunin already, she didn't thought that Hinata would be in need of additional training.

"I came here... to... build speed..." Hinata replied between pants. "Neji-niisan told me... that Gai's training i-is the best for..."

developing strength, speed and... chakra reserves... how about you?"

"Same. My medical knowledge is pretty good, and I learned a lot about genjutsu under your sensei, but my taijutsu and chakra reserves could use some improvement as well," Sakura stated, already feeling tired of carrying the training weights. She rubbed her arms. "You know, this looks like a one way trip to a slow and painful death."

"It is," Hinata agreed.

"But given how much Tenten improved in a single month... well, I think it's worth the effort," Sakura uneasily admitted.

"Well, Neji-niisan and his teammates seem to be doing well, so maybe we will get used to it after some time," Hinata guessed, after recovering some of her breath.

"By the way, I'm surprised to see you here. Given that you managed to become Chunin on your first try. I thought that you'd be good."

Hinata shook her head. "Even if I did manage to become Chunin, I can't shake the feeling that luck played a big part on it. I was unable to master my family's techniques, and instead created sloppy replacements. That's why I am here, so I can be better."

"You call that jutsu you used to beat Tamaki a 'sloppy replacement'? Because it was nothing sort of impressive," Sakura praised.

"Like I said, that jutsu was product of chance, not deliberate training. I do plan on refining it once I master the Heavenly Spin, though," Hinata clarified. She finally stood up.

"By the way, where did you go last night? I saw you leave with Naruto, but then you didn't come back... which given what Kakashi-sensei did, it was probably a good thing," Sakura asked.

Hinata blushed a bit, smiled, and started to twiddle her fingers. "Well, you see, Naruto-kun had something very important to tell me..."

...

Land of Sound, Orochimaru's Main Base

Orochimaru was sitting on a throne above a large pit, where five fighters had been fighting. Not to death, since the Snake Sannin needed all five of them. Four of them laid on the ground, beaten and bruised, while the remaining fifth looked no worse for the wear.

"Bravo, just bravo!" Orochimaru stood up and clapped. "You never fail to impress, Kimimaro-kun."

The winner, a white haired teen, turned at Orochimaru, and bowed before him. "I live only to serve you, Orochimaru-sama."

Orochimaru jumped into the pit, and walked towards his prized champion. Even if he was no longer planning on using his body as a host, Kimimaro still had his uses, as he had defeated Orochimaru's elite guard, the Sound Four.

"How do you feel?" Orochimaru asked.

"Reborn. I've never been better. I don't know what you did but..." Kimimaro flexed his fingers. "It's like I've never been sick before."

Orochimaru grinned. The sight of his smile would have sent chills to any sane person, but Kimimaro merely smiled back. Thanks to the knowledge of the Forbidden Scroll, Orochimaru was able to find a way to restore his strongest fighter to his fullest. Five people needed to die for such thing to happen, but who cared about that? The world is full of unremarkable peasants, but there's only one member of the Kaguya Clan.

And, in fact, he couldn't help but show his former comrades the new powers and abilities he had developed thanks to the scroll Mizuki

had helpfully given him. If only that fool didn't waste so much time trying to uncover the scroll's secrets himself before giving up handing it to Orochimaru, maybe Konoha would have been destroyed by now.

But times matter not when you're immortal.

Besides, Orochimaru's twisted dream was about to come even closer to reality when one of his grunts entered the pit.

"Orochimaru-sama, Mizuki just returned from his mission," the Oto ninja said. "He claims he was successful."

Orochimaru's grin grew even wider. Oh, this day was getting better and better.

"Alright then, it wouldn't be nice to make him wait, don't you think so?" Orochimaru replied, licking his lips. The Oto ninja bowed his head before vanishing, while the Sannin headed out.

A few minutes later, Orochimaru arrived at the chamber a restless Mizuki was waiting. Upon noticing his new boss' presence, the traitor stood to attention. He was carrying a large manila envelope under his arm.

"So, Mizuki-san, I've been informed that your mission was a success," Orochimaru began, as he walked towards him. "Was it difficult?"

"Absolutely not. Those fools were so preoccupied with the Chunin Exams that they wouldn't have noticed me even if I didn't use a disguise," Mizuke handed Orochimaru the envelope. "Besides, the location was isolated from the village. It was exactly where you said it would be."

Orochimaru opened the envelope, and picked its content: a single, ugly mask with the face of a monster.

"Was that the mask you asked for?" Mizuki uneasily asked. There were others rather similar, and he didn't want to imagine his boss' reaction if he grabbed the wrong one.

"This is the mask, indeed," Orochimaru confirmed. Mizuki let out a sigh of relief. "You've done well. Now go rest. You will receive your next assignment soon."

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama!" the former teacher said before vanishing.

Orochimaru looked at the God of Death Mask in his hands in delight. Now the last part of his plan would be complete.

Turns out that delaying the invasion wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Author's Note: Whew! I can't believe that after more than ten chapters, the Chunin Exams Arc is FINALLY over! But what an arc it was!

Naruto and Hinata are finally a couple, yay! And they're also Chunin, double yay! And Haku and Tenten are also a couple, yay! And so are Shino and Fu, yay! And Shizune is pregnant, yay! And Orochimaru has the Shinigami Mask, yay!

... no, wait. I don't think the last part is a reason to celebrate.

Anyway, even if the chapter was shorter than usual, a lot of stuff happened. I hope you guys are happy with both the promotions and the romantic developments. And while I can see some people being a bit miffed of not one but other two couples getting together and sharing their first kiss before Naruto and Hinata did... well, think of it was saving the best for the last, pun intended.

And as I said before, say goodbye to Gaara, Kankuro, Temari, Killer B, Karui and Fu, since they won't appear again until Part II. Boy, of all of them, I'm going to miss Fu the most. She's so

fun to write. I even felt tempted to follow other stories' examples such as "New Chance" or "Uzumaki Tales: Return of the Whirlpool" and have Fu defect Taki and become a Konoha ninja, but I have big plans for her, and remaining a Taki ninja is a must for such plans to happen.

And speaking of "Uzumaki Tales", the scene of Shizune announcing her pregnancy is inspired by a similar scene in that story, but with Kurenai instead. People who read that story surely noticed the similarities.

Once again, thanks to gio8 for betareading this chapter.

I believe that's all. The next chapter will be the beginning of a new arc, which will also close Part I! In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Coming Storm

Author's Note: Some people asked why Gaara wasn't promoted in the last chapter, given that he won the tournament. If you guys didn't notice, all the promotions were for Konoha ninja. He will be promoted, once he gets back to Sun, and the same goes for the other foreign Genin. In fact, I did some stories in which the Hokage gets to decide the promotion of every ninja, not just those from Konoha, which makes absolutely no sense.

Anyway, here's the next chapter, and the beginning of the end of Part I. I know that there's a part that's going to be a bit controversial, but hope the majority of readers agree with me. Anyway, enjoy, and see you at the bottom notes.

Chapter 32:

The Coming Storm

or

Blast from the Past

Land of Sound, Orochimaru's Lair

In a vast, cavernous underground chamber, two young men fought each other with everything they got. The chamber shook with each fist that connected, with every kick that landed, with every jutsu that was cast.

Giant snakes made of stone witnessed the fight that took place between two of the most promising Konoha ninja. One fought with hatred and lies in his heart, the other with the pain of betrayal and steel-hard determination.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke Uchiha breathed a huge fireball at his target, who pulled out a kunai with a blue paper seal and tossed it. Kunai and fireball met midway, and the seal attached to the kunai burst in a watery explosion, putting the Uchiha's attack out, creating a wall of steam.

Coming from the steam, Naruto dashed at Sasuke, his trusty chakra blade in hand, ready to cut his former friend open. Sasuke was quick to unsheathe his own katana, and after infusing it with his own chakra, used it to block the attack. Before Naruto had any time to react, Sasuke delivered a painful kick to Naruto's gut, which pushed him a couple meters backwards.

"Sasuke," Naruto spoke, looking at him with pleading eyes. "It doesn't have to be like this."

Sasuke's eyes flared with anger. "Shut up. You have no idea what you're talking about!" the Uchiha angrily protested.

"I do. I admit that I used to be quite dense back then, but now... now I know the truth. Now I see everything the way it is, and I know the way to fix it. If you only let me..." Naruto continued.

"Let you? LET YOU!?" Sasuke roared. "To let you help the man responsible for the death of my clan!?"

"That's why you need to help me, Sasuke! To make sure that such a tragedy won't happen again!" Naruto protested. "I can't be Hokage and let something like that happen again!"

"You won't be Hokage if you follow your actual path. Only death awaits you," Sasuke grimly reminded him.

"Perhaps. But a Hokage should be willing to die for the greater good," Naruto adopted a fighting stance. "But my death won't come today, Sasuke, nor it will come by your hand."

"We'll see about that," Sasuke replied as he adopted a fighting stance as well.

"We already fought once, I proved to be stronger than you. Even that jutsu with two elements wasn't enough to defeat me. You have no chance of winning against me," Naruto stated, hoping that maybe he could make Sasuke to stand down, but deep down he knew the Uchiha was as stubborn as himself.

"Things change. That jutsu was incomplete, and it's not the case anymore. And this isn't a mere fight for a promotion. There's too much at a stake for me to hold back, even if it ends in your death," Sasuke replied.

Naruto chuckled. "So, you are willing to kill me? It is true what they say about you Uchiha. You'd kill your friends without remorse."

"Do not dare to insult my clan!" Sasuke roared as he charged against Naruto.

Naruto smirked, as he prepared for Sasuke's onslaught. Even if the situation was dire, he was going to enjoy the fight.

...

Konoha, Two Days Earlier

Things were quiet in Konoha after the Chunin Exams. The four newly minted Chunin slipped into their roles nicely. All of them took no time to notice that their new rank carried a lot more responsibilities and workload, something they hadn't quite got used to.

If a Genin wasn't doing a mission, they could do whatever they wanted (any Genin that took their job seriously used at least some of that spare time for training), however, if a Chunin had no current assignments, they were often tasked with patrolling the village, keeping the peace, or guard the gates. And unlike Genin, Chunin sometimes were required to work on weekends as well.

Even then, the four of them were proud of their newly attained rank, and showed that pride by wearing their flak jackets. Sasuke wore it

over his usual clothes, as so did Tenten. Hinata used it as a replacement for her coat, destroyed by Tamaki during their fight in the Finals, while Naruto replaced the upper part of his track suit with an orange short sleeved shirt under the flak jacket.

It was six in the afternoon, and after finishing his patrol duty for the day, Naruto decided to head home. Lucky for him, that day Jiraiya also left the Hokage's office earlier than usual, and as they were doing for the past few days, went to their usual training ground in order to continue developing a new jutsu they were creating.

It all started the day after the Chunin Exams, when Naruto approached Jiraiya and talked him about a new kind training he wanted to undergo...

Two Weeks Earlier

"So, what do you want to do? Do you want something specific for me to teach you?" an interested Jiraiya asked.

"You can bet on it," Naruto had replied. "You see, now that I'm a Chunin, I think I need a new jutsu to reflect my new status, you know? Something way stronger than what I already have."

Jiraiya couldn't help but laugh in return. "Something stronger than the Rasengan? Well, I don't think that there are many Chunin, or even Jonin for that matter, that have something with more packing power than that, haha!"

"I know, but listen to my idea. Hinata-hime, followed by Choji and other of my former classmates, started combining elemental ninjutsu with their clan jutsu. And I thought that maybe I could do the same with the Rasengan?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya looked pensive, before smiling. "You know kid, your father and I had the same idea. Problem is, doing it requires such amount of focus that it is pretty much impossible."

"Impossible just means that it hasn't been tried yet," Naruto sharply replied.

"Oh, we did try, I can tell you that we did try and gave our all, but see," Jiraiya had formed a Rasengan on his hand to better illustrate his point. "It takes quite a lot of focus to create a normal Rasengan. And if we try to infuse it with elemental chakra..." Jiraiya did so, and the Rasengan expanded and began to turn a golden-orange color. However, as it expanded, the Rasengan quickly destabilized and exploded.

"Dad!" Naruto cried.

When the smoke dispelled, Naruto could see that Jiraiya had some minor burns, but he was otherwise fine.

"See what I meant? Keeping a Rasengan stable is hard enough, and if we add the extra difficulty of the elemental chakra..."

"Yeah, I know," Naruto had conceded. "I remember that I took me a while to do the Rasengan one-handed, and needed the help of a clone to pull it off..." it was that moment when a brilliant, but surprisingly simple idea dawned upon the blond. "Hey, why don't you use a clone to help stabilize the elemental chakra?"

Jiraiya opened his mouth ready to shoot down the idea, but words didn't come out. He opened his mouth again, but he couldn't say anything. He remained pensive for quite a few time, until he admitted defeat.

"You know Naruto, there are some times in my life in which I feel like a fool," the Sannin began. "Then there was this time twenty years ago in which somebody made me feel like the biggest fool alive. Well, congratulations, you now made me feel even a bigger fool than that."

Naruto couldn't help but chuckle, and swell his chest with pride. And from that day onwards, both Naruto and Jiraiya had tried to dedicate

an hour or two to create an elemental Rasengan.

Back to the present...

While they used multiple clones in the previous days, this time they only created a single one each. As the original created the Rasengan, the clone began to infuse elemental chakra into it. It appeared that the result would be the same and it would destabilize, but this time, after so many tries, they successfully created an elemental Rasengan.

"Look at that, Naruto, we did it!" Jiraiya cheered in joy.

Both Rasengan had doubled in size. However, Naruto's was bluish white, and had visible air currents spinning around it, while Jiraiya's was golden red, almost like he was holding a miniature sun on his hand.

"Yes!" the blond replied, just as excited, and he readied as if about to fight. "Come on, let's see which one is stronger!"

"Naruto, no," Jiraiya flatly denied. "Mine is fire. Yours is wind. If they clash, yours will make mine even bigger and... well, it might not end up good for you."

"You're no fun," Naruto childishly replied as he canceled the jutsu, with Jiraiya following suit. "Anyway, now I already have a new powerful jutsu worth my rank!"

"Can't help but wonder what would you want to learn once you reach Jonin," Jiraiya commented, and shuddered in terror as he imagined a Naruto trying to create a jutsu the same level as a Tailed Beast Bomb.

"I know, right? We just improved an A-Rank jutsu created by the Fourth of all people. This is going to be something hard to top," Naruto replied as he grew pensive. "I guess he didn't have more jutsu in need of completion, did he?"

"Well, not exactly that needed to be completed, but the knowledge of the Flying Thunder God Jutsu was lost the night he died, since he didn't teach it to anybody," Jiraiya began. "I have Minato's notes and tried to recreate it with them, but I had no luck. Maybe you can try that."

"Alright, a new challenge!" Naruto pumped his fist in the air. "I won't rest until I learn the Flying Thunder God!"

Jiraiya chuckled. Naruto's unbound enthusiasm never failed to both amuse and please him. "Then again, that might be a bit too much for you right now. Let's keep honing your overall skills, fuinjutsu included, before we tackle that beast, alright?"

"Yeah!"

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Uchiha Training Grounds

"Alright Sasuke, let's try it again. Remember, calmness is the key," Itachi instructed his younger brother.

Sasuke nodded, and once again began to channel elemental chakra through his sword. First the blade was coated in flames, followed shortly after blue electric sparks. Once the second element was added, keeping the jutsu active became ten times harder.

"Your chakra control is good enough, you only need to focus," Itachi reminded him.

"I know!" Sasuke snapped.

After a few seconds, the electricity flickered away, leaving only the fire. The youngest Uchiha sighed in defeat and canceled the fire as well.

"Don't feel too bad. The more times you try, the longer you're able to maintain it," Itachi reassured,

Sasuke shook his head. "It's still not good enough. Naruto has no problem maintaining the Rasengan."

"From what Hokage-sama told me, he needed to use clones first before he got the full grasp of it," Itachi reminded. "Maybe that's the solution. Use a clone to add the second element."

Sasuke rejected the idea as well. "I don't want, nor need any crutch. I can do this on my own,"

"While striving for independence is admirable, you shouldn't try to do everything on your own," Itachi advised him. "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. Sometimes it's good to let others help you. Even when said others are mere clones."

"Hmph. I'll do it if I see that there's nothing else I can do on my own," Sasuke replied.

Itachi sighed in defeat. "How I wish Shisui was here. Between the two of us, dealing with you was way easier. But guess that now all the 'fun' is entirely mine."

Since they announced their impending marriage, alongside their future child, Shizune and Shisui spent most of their time looking for homes to move into. At first it appeared that they were going to live on their own away from the brothers, but Shisui convinced Shizune to live all of them together, since that was the way of the ninja clans.

So it was decided that they would buy a plot of land to buy a completely new clan compound that would house every present and future Uchiha. But while the compound was built, the two of them and their child would rent a flat, away from Itachi and Sasuke.

Shisui claimed that, since this baby symbolized the rebirth of the clan, he thought that maybe they could build a new place to live in order to symbolize their new beginnings.

Naturally, the news of Shizune's pregnancy quickly spread once it became public, and left nobody indifferent. Some people wished the "Red Eyed Demons" would disappear forever, and that letting them recover meant giving them another chance to betray the village. Others were more optimistic, and hoped that more Uchiha babies followed, so Konoha could once again have several Sharingan wielders among its ranks.

This made Sasuke realize that, if he wanted to restore the clan, both Itachi and him should marry and produce children. Sasuke always thought that girls were only a needless distraction -not helped by how most of his fan girls usually behaved towards him-, and while never said it out loud, he found Naruto's romantic woes worth laughing. Not so much now that he and Hinata had officially become a couple.

"But then again, there's no girl I could have the kind of relationship Naruto and Hinata had for most of their lives" Sasuke thought.

Sasuke often avoided girls given how much they annoyed him, and only started to deal with them on a regular basis after graduating the Academy. At first, it seemed that Sakura and Karin were trying to see which one could be even more obnoxious and annoying than the other, but as time went by, they started to get better, mostly thanks to Shizune-sensei's influence.

And then, sometime before the Chunin Exam Finals, Sasuke didn't know when or how it happened, but Karin started dating Neji. Sasuke thought that the Hyuga prodigy would have a better taste in women, but hey, he seemed happy -or all the happy his perpetually sour face could reflect- and Sasuke got one less problem to deal with, leaving Sakura as thankfully the only girl vying for his affections.

He had to admit that the pinkette was less of a burden than what he initially had imagined. The girl had natural talent for medical jutsu, and as her training with Kurenai proved, she also had a gift for genjutsu -not as good as an Uchiha, of course, but for a civilian-born

girl that was remarkable-, and was willing to seek help in order to improve the areas she was lacking, such as physical prowess.

The Uchiha was surprised when he realized that he was entertaining the idea that maybe, just maybe, he could give Sakura a chance and see if it worked.

"Sasuke?" Itachi snapped his younger brother out of his thoughts.

"Sorry. I was just thinking," Sasuke replied.

"Mind to tell me what?" Itachi politely asked.

"The future of the clan," was Sasuke's laconic answer.

Itachi couldn't help but smile. "So, already thinking in following Shisui's example? Is there a girl you like?" Itachi thought that getting a girlfriend would benefit his brother immensely.

"It's not that. I was just wondering how it long it would take for the clan to achieve enough numbers," Sasuke wondered.

"Probably very long," Itachi answered matter-o-factly. "But don't worry about that now. Even if we won't live to see it, the clan will live long enough to recover his former glory."

Sasuke nodded, and resumed his training.

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Training Ground Nine

Speaking of said pinkette, she was also doing her own share of training. Even if she already had the idea of training under Gai before Shizune announced her pregnancy and temporary retirement, now it was her only option. Then again, she couldn't help but remember that it was Shizune herself who suggested and encouraged her to do so.

Sakura also wondered what Karin would do now (she wasn't worried about Sasuke since he had his older brother to train him, and in fact, he got more training from Itachi than he did from Shizune) that the team was sensei-less. After her defeat at Fu's hand, the sensible thing would be to find another mentor to help her become stronger.

When she heard the gruesome training the Close Combat Squad underwent, she always thought that it was an exaggeration. It took her a mere day of training to realize that no, nobody exaggerated. Even worse, due to her subpar physical condition, Gai mentioned how he would "go easier than usual" on her, something that didn't evoke hopeful thoughts for the future.

"Come on, Sakura-san, you're doing it fine! Just seventeen more laps!" Lee, who was running alongside her, enthusiastically cheered.

She had to admit that, despite the fact that Gai's training regime would make a hardened Warring States Era veteran cry like a baby, he put a lot of care in building confidence and self esteem of his students, and Sakura was no exception. And when Gai wasn't there, Lee took his place.

"You said seventeen... as if it is nothing!" the pinkette protested between pants.

"Well, you made thirty four laps already, you're more than halfway there!" Lee was always able to see the positive side of everything.

Despite the unending amount of suffering, Sakura also had to admit that Gai's training worked. In a couple weeks, she went from barely doing five laps around the training field with the weights on, to do fifty and not end up crying for the sweet release of death.

"By the way, where is Hinata-san?" Lee asked.

Sakura just shrugged. Unlike the pinkette, the Hyuga heiress didn't come every day. Given that she still had her own sensei, plus

training with her clan, it was understandable that she didn't have the time or the energy to come to train with Gai every day.

Eventually, after what appeared to be an eternity, with her lungs unable to breathe enough air, her muscles completely sore, and her heart working overtime, Sakura finished her lap number fifty, and allowed herself to collapse on the ground.

"See? I told you I could do it," Lee, on the other hand, didn't look any worse for the wear.

"How do you do it, Lee?" Sakura asked between pants. "How can you do all this hellish exercises, and then ask for more?"

The green clad Genin merely shrugged. "I don't know. I guess that I got used to it. But don't worry, Sakura-san, keep working hard and your flames of youth will burn as bright as mine!"

"Yes, but..." Sakura continued. "You said that when you started, your training was even more intense. How were you able to keep going? Weren't you tempted to just toss the towel and go home?"

Lee's usually cheerful demeanor disappeared, and was replaced by a serious, and even solemn expression. "I did, plenty of times. But that's what they wanted me to do."

"They?" Sakura asked, quizzically tilting her head.

"All the people who told me that I couldn't be a ninja because of my... shortcomings," Lee replied, his voice laced with pain, and Sakura immediately understood. "You know, both my parents were ninja who died the night the Nine Tails attacked. They died protecting me, or that's what I was told. So that's why I wanted to follow their path, so I could in turn protect others. That way my parents' sacrifice would extend to more people besides me."

Sakura couldn't help but smile. "That's... really noble of you."

"But that's not all," Lee continued. "You know, besides wanting to honor my parents and proving all the people who discouraged me wrong... there's also another reason for me to push beyond my limits: the one person who did believe in me."

"Gai-sensei?" Sakura tentatively guessed.

"Correct!" Lee grew excited again. "Among all the people who told me I couldn't do it, he told me I could, if I worked hard. So how could I disappoint the only person to ever believe in me when I had nothing to show?"

A lot of people considered Lee one of the strongest ninja of his generation, but that was only after his intense training. Sakura knew that a lot of people, probably herself included, wouldn't have seen any potential in the green clad boy if they had seen him at the beginning of his ninja career. Lee's comically extreme admiration for Gai didn't become as laughable after that.

"Gai-sensei always said you should always encourage people who try to better themselves. That's why, as long as you train with us, I will always cheer for both you and Hinata-san," Lee added.

Sakura smiled softly at him. "Thank you. That... means a lot."

Lee replied with his and Gai's trademark "nice guy" pose. Then, he realized of something, and grew serious.

"Okay, now that we've rested enough, our training has to continue! One thousand sit ups, one thousand pushups, one thousand squats and a fifty kilometer race! Come on go!" Lee cheerfully stated.

Sakura's smile turned into a grimace of hate and horror, as she groaned while she pulled herself up and prepared for the torture disguised as training.

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Hyuga Estate

"Channel your chakra into the paper, and by the way it reacts, we can determine your elemental affinity," Hinata instructed as she handed her little sister a litmus paper.

Hikari's two daughters were in one of the estate's backyards for a special training session. Hanabi wanted to learn elemental manipulation, something she had been promised to do whenever she had some free time. And now it was time to fulfill that promise.

"Got it!" Hanabi cheerfully replied. The paper started to burn, and Hanabi instinctively dropped the burning paper the moment the fire licked her fingers. "Ouch!"

"If the paper burns, then your affinity is fire," Hinata told her.

"Dammit! Now I won't be able to learn the Heavenly Thunderstorm!" Hanabi protested.

"Language," her older sister chided. "No, but you will be able to create your own version of it using fire chakra instead."

"Right, sorry," Hanabi replied. "So... what do I do now?"

Hinata flipped through the pages of the book that was resting on her lap. While the Hyuga Clan library was extensive, most of its books regarding combat focused on taijutsu for obvious reasons, and very few on ninjutsu or genjutsu. And the few who did never covered anything beyond intermediate level. But for what they were trying to do, a beginner's manual would work.

"According to this, your first exercise is to burn a leaf with the force of your chakra," Hinata read from the book. She got up, plucked a leaf from one of the backyard's trees, and handed it to Hanabi.

"Alright!" Hanabi excitedly said as she took the leaf and tried to complete the exercise.

Hinata watched as her little sister tried to burn the leaf, to no avail. As the minutes passed, patience disappeared from her face and was replaced by frustration. Her mouth curved down, and her eyes narrowed. Beads of sweat started to appear on her forehead and temples. And after half an hour trying, she gave up.

"Ugh! This is impossible!" the little girl shouted as she tossed the leaf into the ground.

"Don't get so frustrated. It's not easy the first time," Hinata softly reassured her. "It took both Naruto-kun and I some time to get it down."

Hanabi seethed and went to sit down besides her sister.

"By the way, what did you two have to do instead of burning a leaf?" Hanabi asked.

"Naruto-kun had to cut a leaf in two using his chakra. I had to keep a light-bulb on for five minutes, without overloading it," Hinata replied.

"Ohhhhhhhh... so that's why you kept a light-bulb with you all the time that time those years ago," Hanabi said in realization. "Well, then you did take a lot of time."

"Five minutes was the first part. In the end, I had to kept it on for half an hour," Hinata clarified.

"And what did ninja from the times before light-bulbs do to practice lightning chakra control?" Hanabi asked.

Hinata grew pensive. "That's a good question. Unfortunately, I don't have the answer. Maybe the answer is inside a history book?"

Hanabi didn't reply. She just looked at her feet, as thoughts drifted through her head, until a new question popped in.

"Nee-chan," Hanabi suddenly said, turning at Hinata. "What is being Chunin like?"

"Well..." Hinata began as she recollected her thoughts. "It's a superior rank, and thus it entails superior responsibilities. On the plus side, Chunin don't have to do any D-Rank missions anymore, but on the other hand, we have other duties besides taking missions, such as patrolling the village, guard the gates, and fill the duties of the Military Police."

Turns out that the Uchiha Insurrection had affected the village in more ways than one. There were some people who wished for the Military Police to return, so regular Chunin and Jonin wouldn't have to fulfill their duties, but others weren't so eager, due the Police being so closely related to the Uchiha Clan, and the insurrection.

"No wonder I see so little of you nowadays..." Hanabi said, a little crestfallen.

Hinata smiled. She got up, walked towards her sister, and wrapped her arms around Hanabi's shoulders. "You know that I will always find time to spend with you, Hanabi-chan."

"I know," Hanabi replied, resting her head on Hinata's chest.. "Even if that means spending less time with Naruto-kun?"

Hinata was a bit startled, but her smile didn't waver. She nodded. "Even if it means spending less time with him."

"And... now that he's your boyfriend... is there any difference from when you were just friends?" Hanabi asked.

Hinata grew a bit pensive. "Well... we haven't been dating for that long, so I couldn't tell. We do spend less time together, but that's because of our new ranks. But yes, we do things we didn't do before, such as walking holding hands... or kiss."

"Ew!" Hanabi shuddered. "Gross!"

Hinata giggled at her sister's reaction. "When you grow older, you will change your mind, you'll see."

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Senju Residence

Somebody knocked the door. Eager to see who it was, Kaida rushed to the door. Upon opening it, she saw a bespectacled redhead awkwardly standing there.

"Oh, hi," the white haired girl greeted. "Who are you?"

"My name's Karin. Karin Uzumaki," the redhead said. "Don't you remember me? I used to babysit you not that long ago."

The white haired girl jogged her memory, and after a few seconds, she realized that indeed, the redhead was telling the truth.

"Ah, yes, I do remember you!" Kaida said, smiling eagerly. "Did you come here to play with me again?"

Karin cringed at the memory of the girl playing with her and Sakura with her Wood Release, and suppressed a shiver. "Eh, maybe another time. Is Naruto home?"

Kaida took a deep breath, and turned her head indoors. "NARUTO-NIISAN! SOMEBODY'S ASKING FOR YOU!"

"Wow..." Karin said. "You have a nice pair of lungs."

"Thanks," Kaida smiled at her, as if she considered the magnitude of her yells a proud achievement.

Naruto didn't take long to appear.

"Who's asking for me...? Oh hey, Karin-neechan!" Naruto smiled upon seeing his only known clansman.

"Wait, she's your neechan too?" a confused Kaida asked.

"Yeah, we're from the same clan," Naruto told her.

"Didn't you notice that I have the same last name as him?" Karin pointed out.

"If she's your family, then how she isn't living with us?" Kaida asked.

"Well, that's... complicated. I'll explain you sometime later," Naruto told Kaida, while at the same time realizing that she made a good point.

"Okay then," Kaida said before finally returning inside.

Naruto closed the door behind him. He started to walk, and Karin trailed alongside him. "So, what do you want? You got lucky you caught me on my spare time. I never knew being Chunin could be so insane, hehe!" Naruto chuckled.

"Well, it's that, since Shizune-sensei is no longer available, I have nobody to train with," Karin explained. "I know Sakura is training with Neji-kun's team, and he suggested me to train with them as well, but something so physical isn't what I'm looking for. Plus I don't need to increase my chakra reserves. I'm looking forward improving my ninjutsu and medical jutsu."

"Well, I can help with the ninjutsu part, but I'm not that good with medical jutsu," Naruto admitted.

"I know. I was hoping if you could ask Tsunade-sama to train me outside our regular medical lessons," Karin asked. "After all, she has Uzumaki blood, right? I'm sure that she can help a clansman in need."

"I can ask her. She's always willing to train people who want to learn and improve, but she's kind of busy," Naruto told her.

"Thank you. You'd help me a lot," Karin replied.

"By the way, how are things between you and Neji? I almost didn't believe it when Hinata-hime told me you were dating him. I mean,

you used to drool over Sasuke a lot," Naruto reminded.

"Yeah, I did," Karin admitted, blushing a little, as she rubbed her arm. "Sasuke is pretty cute... but hey, Neji-kun is also pretty cute too, and he's interested in me to boot, so in the end the choice was a no brainer. Sakura can have Sasuke all for herself as far as I'm concerned."

The fact the Karin no longer used the "-kun" honorific with Sasuke didn't go unnoticed by the blond. Then, the two of them started to walk, heading to nowhere in particular.

"You know, I just noticed something," Naruto said.

"And that would be...?" Karin asked, mildly interested.

"That we're cousins who are dating two people who happen to be cousins too," Naruto pointed out.

Karin couldn't help but chuckle. "You're right! Wonder if there's something in our family that make us attracted to Hyugas."

"There may be. Clans are weird like that," Naruto replied. "Anyway, besides training you, we can use this as an opportunity to spend time with each other. As far as I know, we might be the last Uzumaki on Earth, yet we barely speak to each other!"

"I admit that I could have spend a little more time with you instead of futilely chasing Sasuke," Karin stated. "You know, there was a time in which my mom and I dreamed to find a permanent home, hopefully alongside other members of our clan. And now that we found it... maybe I should get to know that family a bit better."

"This reminds me," Naruto began, as he started to think. "I remember that one day you showed up at the Academy alongside Haku and Tamaki, but I never asked you where have you been before you arrived at Konoha..."

"I don't remember much of my childhood before arriving Konoha, but what little I remember..." Karin tried to remind, and she grimaced.
"... it sucked."

"That bad?"

Karin nodded. "We never stayed in the same place for long. My mom said that if people knew who we are and what can we do, a lot of people would try to kidnap us and force to use our abilities for them. My mom always wanted to find more clansmen, and was always trying to look for any other surviving members across these lands."

"Wait, 'surviving'?" Naruto noticed. "Did something happened to our clan?"

"I don't know the whole story..." Karin began. "Mom was born in another village... a village where our Clan originally lived... but the village was destroyed during the Second Ninja War. She somehow managed to escape. Eventually she grew up, fell in love with a man, and had me. Despite keeping her identity a secret from everybody bar my father, somehow somebody learned about her, and tried to kidnap both her and me. My father died protecting us..."

"I'm sorry..." Naruto told her. "You know... my biological parents also died protecting me..."

"Heh, another thing we have in common," Karin chuckled sadly.
"Anyway, one day, when we were having breakfast at an inn at some small town, we heard some ninja talking about this 'Tsunade' woman who had returned to Konoha. The name didn't say anything to me, but the way my mom reacted... it was as if her prayers were answered. After that, we decided to come here and... well, the rest is history."

"Fascinating," Naruto told her. "Boy, I have so many questions! However, what draws my attention the most is this village your mom was from. What can you tell me about it?"

Karin shrugged. "Nothing, really. Mom never talked me about it. I think it's too painful for her to remember, and truth be told, I don't want to make her to. Besides, as for myself, Konoha is my home."

"What about other Uzumaki? Do you think they survived... whatever killed the rest of the clan?"

Karin shook her head. "If there are other members out there, we never met them. Like I told you, the closest thing we found was Tsuande-sama. The fact that there was an actual Uzumaki survivor living in Konoha was something we weren't aware of. Speaking of which, what about you? How did you arrived here?"

"My parents were from Konoha. I think," after what Karin said about the Uzumaki village, he wasn't so sure anymore. "My mom was an Uzumaki, my father a civilian born ninja, that's why I got her last name instead of his. They died the night the Kyubi attacked."

"And you don't know anything more about them?" Karin asked.

"I do but... well, it's kind of an S-Rank secret, so I'd have to kill you if I told you," Naruto awkwardly chuckled after saying this.

"Geez, was your father a Hokage, or what?" Karin asked. "I mean, another one. I know Jiraiya-sama is the current Hokage."

Neji's words about Naruto being close to the Hokage echoed in his mind.

"You know, I'm glad I had this talk with you. Now I know a lot more about my origins... and there's a certain somebody I need to have a chat with," determined, Naruto headed back to his home.

"Hey, wait a minute! What about the training?" Karin asked.

"Oh, that! Yeah, sure, we can train together! And I'll ask mom about giving you an extra course, don't worry about it!" Naruto assured as he walked away.

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Senju Residence

Sitting in the living room, Jiraiya and Tsunade were enjoying the rare opportunity of having the house all for themselves. Shizune was with Shisui looking for a new place to live, Naruto had left after somebody came looking for him, and Kaida and Hagane had left shortly after him to a friend's house. Even if they were tempted to have sex in a place other than their bed, they knew that the kids could be back any moment, so they settled for their usual pastime of sharing a bottle of sake together.

"Boy, I'm so glad that the Chunin Exams are finally over," Jiraiya said in relief, as he gulped his cup of sake in one go. "Next time they will be somebody else's problem."

"Don't remind me," Tsunade sourly replied, as he followed Jiraiya's example with her sake. "I lost so much money... I swear I won't bet again."

Jiraiya chuckled. "Tsunade, we both know that's not true."

A tick appeared on Tsunade's forehead, and she turned angrily at her husband. "What are you implying? That I can't overcome my vices? If you were able to shed all your perverseness away, unbelievable as it is, I can do the same with my gambling!"

"It's not the same situation. In my case it was easy," Jiraiya countered. "Going out to eat suddenly becomes much less appealing when you have the best chef in the world in your house, right?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Tsunade angrily replied.

"Flattery often takes me very far," Jiraiya shot her a very sly grin. "And seriously, you were a gambler since the very first moment I met you. Which is pretty insane, now that I think about. What kind of kid loves to bet so much?"

"Well... Grandfather liked to go to casinos and such, and since he couldn't take me with him, he taught me how to play cards, the roulette and stuff like that whenever we spend time together."

"When you say 'Grandfather', you don't mean Hashirama, don't you?" Jiraiya asked.

"I do mean him," Tsunade raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Jiraiya was taken aback by the revelation. "Well, it's kind of hard imagining the God of Ninja as a gambling addict," Jiraiya then began to chuckle. "And now that I did, way funnier than it sounds!"

Tsunade snorted and punched Jiraiya in the shoulder. "Don't mock my grandfather, understood!? He was a great man."

"Nobody doubts that," Jiraiya tried to suppress his snicker. "But you have to admit it's kind of hard not to find funny that such a legend had those vices. Then again, I wonder if you'd pass gambling to our children."

"I tried, but they suck at it," Tsunade replied, shaking her head. "They're such disappointments."

"Kinda like their mother, don't you think so?" Jiraiya laughed.

Tsunade's scowl deepened and punched Jiraiya in the shoulder again.

"Next time you make fun of me, the punch will be a chakra-enhanced one," Tsunade hissed.

"Come on, don't get mad. If they're anything like you, they'd be awful gamblers but kickass ninjas. Especially with those Bloodline Limits of theirs. You know, wonder if Kaida and Hagane will become Chunin on their first try, just like Naruto did," Jiraiya pondered.

Before Tsunade had any time to answer, they heard the door opening, and somebody coming in. Soon Naruto's frame appeared in

front of them.

"Hey kid, you're back. Who was that who wanted to speak with you? Was it Hinata?" Jiraiya asked.

"No, it was Karin-nee-chan. She wanted some help with her training," Naruto looked at Tsunade. "She also asked if you could give her a more intensive training as well, now that Shizune-nee-chan is no longer her sensei."

"I'll talk with her about it," Tsunade replied. Then she noticed something odd about Naruto. He looked as if something was bothering him. "Something wrong, kid?"

"Well, after that, Karin-nee-chan and I have been talking... about our clan," Naruto said.

A deafening silence fell upon the living room as the two Sannin processed Naruto's words.

"And what did she tell you?" Jiraiya cautiously asked.

"Not much," was Naruto's answer. "Her mom doesn't want to talk about it since it brings her painful memories, so Karin-nee-chan doesn't know much either. And I was wondering... if you guys know something?"

Jiraiya and Tsunade shared a glance, and they moved a bit to the side, and motioned Naruto to sit between them. Naruto did so.

"You never asked us about the Uzumaki Clan, Naruto. What's with the sudden interest?" Tsunade asked.

Naruto shrugged. "I don't know. Guess that talking with Karin-nee-chan peaked my curiosity. And well... since you guys raised me since I was a baby, guess that I never had the need to know about my origins. But now... I do want to know."

"Okay then," Jiraiya nodded. He looked at Tsunade. "Given that you have Uzumaki blood as well, I believe that you might be the best one to tell Naruto about his clan."

"Alright," Tsunade cleared her throat before beginning. "As with most Clans, nobody really knows where the Uzumaki Clan truly came into existence. But we do know quite a few certain things about them: they hail from an island to the east named the Land of Whirlpools, named after the many whirlpools that surrounded the island and acted as a natural defense. Despite having their base there, it wasn't rare to see them in the main continent."

"This is because, as far as recorded history, the Uzumaki and Senju clans were close allies. While there are no proof, many believed both clans shared the same ancestor. Their relationship was so tight, that Grandfather, upon founding the village, wanted the Uzumaki clan to join as well. The Uzumaki declined, opting to join other clans of the Land of Whirlpools and form another village, Uzushio, to defend their country. The relationship between both clans was so tight that Konoha's flak jackets have the Uzumaki Clan symbol, a swirl, as a way to symbolize their ties."

"The Uzumaki Clan were master sealers -that's where your talent for fuinjutsu comes from-, and their alliance was invaluable to Konoha."

"And what happened then? How is that their village doesn't exist anymore?" Naruto asked, antsy to know the fate of the village.

Tsunade began to recollect her memories. "I believe it was the beginning of the Second War. Konoha was fighting in multiple fronts against Suna, Ame and Kumo, while Uzushio was handling the threats coming from the sea, mostly from Kiri."

"Wait a minute, Suna?" Naruto asked, confused. "I thought they were our allies."

"Back in the Second War, they weren't. It wasn't until the Third War when an alliance was made," Jiraiya interceded. "Just like how Ame

weren't our allies either. In fact, we did tell you our epic fight against Hanzo the Salamander, didn't we?"

"Multiple times," Naruto replied.

Tsunade cleared her throat once again before continuing. "Anyway, I won't bother you with the details, but there was a plan to take advantage of the war in order to force one of the enemy villages to give up kageship, and promote Uzushio as one of the Five Great Villages in its place.

"As you know, only the major villages have the right to call their leaders a Kage. It's seen as a symbol of power and prestige. If a minor village did such thing, it would be seen as an insult and the other villages would retaliate."

"Which explains why Orochimaru didn't appoint himself 'otokage' or something like that," Jiraiya intervened once again. "The snake bastard might be an insane sociopath, but he isn't stupid."

"Of the minor villages, Uzushio was among the strongest, despite its low numbers, mostly thanks to the Uzumaki's sealing prowess, and thus had a nice shot of being recognized as a Great Village if one of the other five suffered enough loses. Then, something happened that would change the course of war: due to some kind of dispute, Kumo and Kiri terminated their alliance and declared war on each other.

"Kumo was busy also fighting on multiple fronts against Konoha and Taki, so Kiri saw it as an opportunity, and launched an invasion on the unprotected coast of Lightning Country. And this is where the end of Uzushio began," Tsunade gravely said, much to Naruto's confusion. "Kuninotoko Uzumaki, leader of Uzushiogakure, saw it as an opportunity to accelerate his village's ascension. He proclaimed himself 'Uzukage', and launched an invasion on the Land of Water, taking advantage Kiri and Kumo's situation. Sarutobi-sensei tried by all means to convince him not to do such a stupid thing, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

"Unfortunately, Kuninotoko's audacity was seen as a grave insult to both the Raikage and the Mizukage. It made them to repair their alliance, and together managed to repel the invasion of the Land of Water. But it didn't end there, oh no. Seeing it as a golden chance to acquire Uzushio's secrets of fuinjutsu, they launched a joint invasion on the Land of Whirlpools.

"Most of the village's forces had been decimated in the failed invasion attempt, so Kuninotoko asked help to Konoha. However, Konoha already had its forces spread thin and couldn't spare a single ninja. And thus, Uzushio fell to the might of two of the great villages. Many Uzumaki clansmen died, though some of them managed to flee to the continent. Ironically, this proved to be Kumo and Kiri's undoing, since while they were focused plundering Uzushio, they were pushed back in other fronts, which helped Konoha's achieve victory in the long run.

"However, it was too late for Uzushio. The Uzumaki Clan had been decimated, and their village was razed to the ground. When the war ended, Sarutobi-sensei tried to locate and gather the survivors, but he didn't find any. The only silver lining is that the Uzumaki Clan managed to somehow protect their secrets, and the invaders didn't get anything meaningful out of the invasion, aside from common goods.

"And to this day, only you and that Karin girl, as well as her mother, are the only Uzumaki we have knowledge of. Sad as it is, we have reasons to believe that you three might as well be the last members of the Uzumaki clan," Tsunade finished her tale. "Now that you know the history of your clan, what do you think?"

Naruto remained uncharacteristically silent for a few seconds, before he replied.

"You know... it kind of surprised me that the village leader would make such a stupid move. Was being a Kage so important to him? I mean, yeah, I want to be Hokage, but if being one came at the

expense of other people, especially people from my own village, I wouldn't do it," Naruto said.

"What, did you think that unbridled pride and ambition were an exclusive domain of the Uchiha?" Jiraiya asked. "Any leader can fall prey to the temptations of power and glory. Let this be a lesson if you ever want to lead this village one day."

"I see..." Naruto replied, pensive, until a realization dawned upon him. "Wait, you said that the Old Man was unable to find any survivors. What about my biological mother?"

"Kushina was already here long before Uzushio's fall," Jiraiya mentioned. "You see, besides their talent for fuinjutsu, members of the Uzumaki clan were known for their very long life spans, large chakra pools... and a very potent chakra, which was the only thing that could only contain the Nine Tails.

"The very first jinchuriki of the Kyubi, Mito Uzumaki, was my grandmother, and Hashirama's wife. When her life was close to its end, it was necessary to bring another Uzumaki to keep the Kyubi contained."

It took Naruto no time to make the connection. "Wait a minute! Then that means... that my biological mom was also a jinchuriki!"

"Correct," Tsunade said. "We kept Kushina's status as a Jinchuriki a secret, so that's why most people think the Kyubi appeared out of nowhere and attacked us for no reason."

"You see, the seal that held the Nine-Tails weakened during childbirth. And somehow, that Akatsuki member who spurned the Uchiha into rebelling, managed to learn when and where Kushina was about to give birth. He was successful in his endeavor, and released the Kyubi. Even if Kushina survived the extraction process, I presumed she was too weak to hold the monster a second time, so I guess that's the reason Minato chose to seal it within you instead," Jiraiya finished the explanation.

Another moment of silence. Naruto looked down, his sight darkened.

"You know, I shouldn't feel anything, given that you're talking about people who died when I was a newborn..." Naruto began. "But knowing what happened to my clan... and what happened to my biological parents... it makes me feel... a bit sad."

Tsunade put a comforting hand on Naruto's shoulder. "It's only natural. I would worry if you *didn't* feel anything."

"If you want to talk about it, we're always willing to listen," Jiraiya added, echoing Tsunade's gesture.

"No, it's okay," Naruto told them. "I mean, it was a sad tale, but it would have had more impact if I was on Karin-neechan's shoes, but to me, Konoha had always been my home. But I'm sure that there are more Uzumaki out there hiding. The Old Man didn't find them because, like Karin-neechan and her mom, were always on the move and never trusted anybody." Naruto then turned at Tsunade. "Did you know that you were the reason they came to Konoha?" Naruto asked.

"Yes. The mother, Mariko, asked for me when they arrived. I helped them to set them in, but I didn't have much contact with Mariko after that. Maybe I can drop by and ask her how everything's going," Tsunade mused.

"That would be nice," Naruto told her.

...

Next Day, Undisclosed Location

Black clouds covered the night sky, accentuating the existing darkness. A multitude of corpses wearing Kirigakure's ANBU mask and uniforms were scattered around. The corpses were still fresh, hinting a previous battle not long ago. Rain poured from the sky,

turned the soil into mud, and inundating the air with a smell of wet grass.

However, none of those corpses mattered. Only one did. The only one which belonged to a Konoha ninja. A brown haired girl with purple marks on her cheeks, and a huge, bloody hole in her chest. Said girl was being cradled by a one eyed boy the same age as her.

"This... this is hell..." the boy cried.

Darkness and rain. It was a fitting image for Obito Uchiha, equating the darkness of his heart and the tears pouring from his eyes. He clutched the girl's corpse near him.

"Rin..."

"RIN!"

Obito Uchiha opened his eyes, and saw his hand extended upwards, trying to grab something that wasn't there. He was panting, and his body was drenched in sweat, despite the fact that he had been sleeping for the past hours. Grunting, he sit up, and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

A White Zetsu emerged from the ground.

"Is everything okay, boss? I heard you scream," the White Zetsu worriedly asked.

"It's nothing," was Obito's answer.

"Another nightmare?" the plant being guessed.

Obito didn't reply, but the answer was obvious. There wasn't a single time in which he didn't relive Rin's death. At this rate, he would turn insane, if he wasn't insane already. Even if he didn't have the Sharingan active that night, the image would still be burned into his brain. The Mangekyo Sharingan only made it worse.

"This is why I don't want to sleep," Obito hatefully said.

The White Zetsu tilted his head. "Yes, but your species need sleep. Even if Madara-sama's enhancements removed your need to eat and drink, your brain and body need several hours of rest. While not lacking in imagination, your alternatives to sleeping are... insufficient. And we need you rested for today's operation. Orochimaru and his army already left."

"I see. What time is it?" Obito asked.

"The sun will rise in less than an hour," the creature informed him.

"Then we still have plenty of time until I have to play my part," Obito stated.

...

Outskirts of Konoha, shortly after sunrise

Perched on a tree branch, the Snake Sannin stared at his target, the village of Konoha, with lustful eyes. Soon, the proud village wouldn't be more than a smoking ruin. He had been waiting for this moment for such a long time.

Orochimaru's second in command, Kabuto gracefully landed besides him.

"The army is in position, Orochimaru-sama. We can start when you give the order," the silver haired medic informed.

"Good," Orochimaru replied. "What about the Sound Five?"

"They're in position too. They will infiltrate the village exactly fifteen minutes after the invasion commences, just as you ordered," Kabuto told him.

Orochimaru licked his lips in anticipation. "In that case, then there's no point in waiting any further. I had delayed this long enough

already," the Snake Sanin said as both he and Kabuto jumped from the tree and landed on the grassy ground. He made several hand seals before slamming his hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu: Impure World Resurrection!"

Two wooden coffins emerged from the ground below. Their lids falling on their own, letting their occupants walk free. Said occupants were two men who were way older than they looked. One had long straight black hair, tan skin and was wearing a red armor. The other, almost his complete opposite: very pale skin, short spiky white hair, and wearing a blue armor.

"Hashirama, Tobirama," Orochimaru addressed the resurrected Hokage. "You've been brought here for a very special event: helping me destroy Konoha. Given that you played an instrumental part in its creation, I believe that it's appropriate you play an equally large role in its destruction."

"So this is the reason for you to resurrect us, snake," Hashirama snarled.

"Konoha is a strong village. Even with us as your puppets, you won't destroy it as easily as you think," Tobirama warned.

"Konoha has already suffered its own share of misfortunes. I'm here to merely give it the final blow. And truth be told, even in your weakened state, I don't expect anybody being able to fight any of you as equals, especially given that you're now impossible to kill and have unlimited chakra.," Orochimaru told them in delight.

Hashirama shot Orochimaru a bone-chilling glare, but the Sannin remained impervious. "Mark my words, one way or another, I will make you pay for this!"

"Somehow, I find that just as doubtful," Orochimaru chuckled. "Now go. Pry Konoha's gates open, and secure a passage for my troops to enter the village. Then kill every Konoha citizen that crosses your path, both ninja and civilian, men and women, adults and children.

Spare no one. On second thought, try to spare some if they have a Bloodline Limit."

Unable to resist, the Senju brothers moved towards their target.

"Dammit! There has to be something we can do!" Hashirama cursed as he futilely tried to regain control of his body. "Brother, it was you who created this accursed jutsu! Didn't you put any kind of failsafe in case something like this happened?"

"No. I was unable to complete this jutsu within my lifetime," Tobirama replied. If he was regretful, he didn't look the part. "Our only hopes is that their current ninjas are strong enough to deal with us," the Second grimly said.

The gates of Konoha, still closed, appeared before them, and they stopped. The guards barely had any time to react before Hashirama made several hand seals.

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

...

Omake: Naruto Elseworlds #1

It was a dark and quiet night. The Akatsuki known as Tobi contemplated the village of Konoha, as he was about to start his evil plan.

"Alright, time to start!" Tobi pulled out a red and black pokeball from within his robe. "With this legendary Pokémon I stole, Konoha will be destroyed! Go, Nine Tails!"

Tobi tossed the pokeball, releasing the nine tailed beast, landing with a big crash.

"KURAMA!" The Nine Tails cried.

"Nine Tails, destroy Konoha now!" obi ordered.

"KUR!KURAMA!" The Nine tails growled as he was about to do as ordered.

"Not so fast, villain!" A blond man said as he landed in front of Tobi and his pet. "I, Minato Namikaze, Fourth Gym Leader of Konoha, won't allow you to carry on your nefarious plan! Especially not with my wife's stolen Legendary Pokémon!"

"Oh really? And what do you plan to do about it, huh?" Tobi asked.

"Obviously, I challenge you to a Pokémon battle! Go Gamabunta!" Minato said as he tossed a Pokeball, releasing the giant Toad.

"BUNTA!" Gamabunta croaked.

"The Nine Tails is Fire/Dark, while Gamabunta is Water/Fighting! I have type advantage in two different ways!" Minato boasted.

"Maybe, but the Nine Tails has better stats, befitting a Legendary! Besides, I'm sure your Gamabunta isn't even IV trained!" Tobi angrily replied. "Nine tails, use Flamethrower!"

"KURAMA!" the Nine tails roared before taking a deep breath, and releasing a wave of fire from his mouth.

"Gamabunta, counter with Water Pulse!" Minato ordered.

"GAMABUNTA!" the toad replied as he released a powerful water blast from his mouth, cancelling the fire attack.

"Excellent! Follow with Karate Chop!"

Gamabunta leaped into the air, and was about to smack the Fox with a hand chop. Of course, Tobi wasn't going to have any of it.

"Use Smokescreen!" Tobi ordered.

This time, the Nine Tails released a cloud of smoke from his mouth, blinding Gamabunta, who missed the attack. Tobi smiled under his mask.

"Okay, now let's finish with Tailed Beast B-"

But Tobi was interrupted by a punch to the gut, followed by a kick, which knocked him on his back. Much to his shock, Minato was now besides him, holding the Nine Tails' pokeball.

"Wait a minute, did you just attack a trainer during a Pokémon battle!?" Tobi asked, incredulous.

"I did. What about it?" Minato asked.

"That's against the rules!"

"Screw the rules, I have money!"

"We're parodying Pokémon, not Yugi-Oh, you dumbass!"

"Besides, you're the villain, you don't give a damn about the rules. And now that I have the Nine Tails Pokeball, I can stop it from destroying Konoha," Minato declared.

"Ha, you'd wish! That's a special Uchiha pokeball that can only be used by a single person, namely me!" Tobi retorted.

"Okay then," Minato then dropped the poke ball, and stomped it into pieces. "Now the Nine Tails is no longer under your control!"

"No... but he reverted now to its wild state, and will destroy anything in his sight. Have fun with that," Tobi said before vanishing.

"... shit," Minato cursed. "Anyway, let's not panic, I'm sure I can capture it myself and... SHIT! I'm out of pokeballs" Minato noticed when his hand reached his pocket.

Kushina then appeared, holding baby Naruto in her arms.

"Don't worry, Minato, use this!" Kushina said as she tossed Naruto at her husband. "Newborn babies can be used as pokeballs!"

"Really? How convenient! Okay then, go Naruto, catch the Nine Tails!" Minato said before tossing Naruto at the now free Tailed Beast.

Upon hitting the kyubi, Naruto split in two by his midsection, turning the Legendary beast into pure energy, which was absorbed into the baby. Naruto struggled to contain the beast, but after a few seconds of wobbling Naruto remained still and a spiraling seal appeared on his bellybutton, hinting that he had successfully trapped the beast.

"Yes, we captured the Nine Tails!" Minato cheered, pumping a fist into the air.

"Wait, I remember that using a baby as a pokeball had a negative side effect," Kushina said, as she started to remember. "Oh yeah, the baby's parents will die of a heart attack after the Pokémon has been captured."

Minato stopped cheering. "... oh shi-"

End Omake

Author's Note: Okay, a lot of things to discuss here. First of all, I hope you guys found my second omake funny. I have more ideas for future omakes, both elseword parodies, aleternate endings, and many more.

Now, let's talk about something that took up nearly half the chapter: the Uzumakis. I always wanted to write more Naruto/Karin scenes in which they bond over their blood ties, but I just couldn't find the right moment. Hope those who (rightfully) asked for more Naruto/Karin moments are satisfied with this chapter, and don't worry, it won't be the last time these two have a meaningful conversation.

Now, to address the topic I'm sure it will raise some controversy: my depiction of the Uzumaki Clan's history and demise. Let me tell you something, and tired, TIRED I tell you, of reading fanfics that depict the Uzumaki Clan as these perfect, angelical beings capable of doing no wrong (despite Pain and Karin debunking that notion in canon), while at the same time portraying Konoha as these uncaring jerks who didn't move a finger to save them in time. Also, Uzushio being ruled by an "Uzukage". No, people, NO! There are only FIVE Kages, no more, no less! Get that in your head!

So yeah, to address those personal pet peeves, I decided to have the Uzumakis bringing their doom upon themselves, and show that they're as fallible as other human being (or at the very least, their leader is), and what happens when a leader of a minor village decides to call himself or herself a Kage, while at the same time answering the question of why Konoha didn't help Uzushio in time. I know a lot of people won't agree with this, but I will stand by it.

Anyway, now that's out of the way... yeah, the invasion of Konoha had just begun, and yes, Orochimaru has yet to show all his cards. Like the Chunin Exams, this arc will feature a lot of fights (thought thankfully it won't be as long), plot twists, betrayals, revelations, and the appearance of a certain character I'm sure no one will see coming ;)

While you wait for the next chapter, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Invading Sound

Author's note: Hmmm... the last episode's reception wasn't as good as I expected. Wonder if Orochimaru has something to do with it, since the Land of Sound arc is so far my least reviewed arc as a whole. Anyway, let's hope that the following chapters are better.

Now, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 33:

The Invading Sound

or

The Toad versus the Snake

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

Huge green vines emerged from the ground, and forcefully opened the village's gates open, almost tearing them from its hinges. A couple seconds later, a tide of gray and black-clad ninjas rushed into the village, screaming battle cries, cheers, and in some cases, profanities. And the two resurrected Kage could do nothing but watch powerlessly as the invaders flooded the village.

"At the very least, we'll see how strong the village's ninja got after our demise," Hashirama stated, earning a glare from his younger brother in return. "What? Excuse me for trying to see the bright side of our predicament."

Before a fraternal argument could take place, the force controlling their bodies made them to join the invaders in the destruction of Konoha, and went in different directions.

...

On its own, though large, and even having bypassing the walls, Orochimaru's army wouldn't have a chance of dealing much damage to Konoha. Unfortunately for Konoha, the invaders were also supported by a no small amount of giant snakes, including the Snake Boss, Manda, as well the resurrected Hokage.

Fortunately for the defenders, two of Konoha's strongest Jonin, who were in the middle of one of their allegedly casual competitions before it was time to get to work, witnessed everything and went for the most obvious threat: the giant, rampaging purple snake.

"Alright Kakashi, we can still salvage our competition!" Gai stated as he enthusiastically dashed towards the snake boss.

"Gai, Konoha is being invaded, and you still care about our competitions?" Kakashi asked in disbelief.

"They aren't mutually exclusive! We can see which one is better at defending the village!" Gai suggested as he prepared to attack.
"DYNAMIC ENTRY!"

Gai landed a powerful flying kick on the giant snake's maw. Manda hissed in pain, and he tried to bite or swallow Gai, but Konoha's Green Beast proved to be too fast.

"Let's try to lure it out from the more populated areas and into the training fields," Kakashi noted as he made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

The Copy Ninja breathed a massive fireball, hitting Manda in the eye, leaving a burnt mark. The giant snake hissed again in pain. Forgetting about Gai, the Snake Boss lunged at Kakashi, who nimbly dodged.

"Yes! Come get us, you unyouthful armless lizard!" Gai taunted the snake.

However, despite their success in drawing its attention, Manda refused to follow them whenever they got far from the populated zone.

"There's something wrong. Why it isn't following us?" Gai asked.

"Its chakra seems irregular," Kakashi observed. "It may be under the effect of a genjutsu."

"Don't worry guys, here I come to save the day!" a feminine voice shouted, before Anko appeared between them. She bit her thumb, and made several hand seals, before finally slamming her hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

A giant gray snake appeared before the three ninjas, though not near as large as Manda was. Upon noticing the Snake Boss, Anko's snake disappeared, just like the purplette expected. However, contrary to what she was expecting, Manda did not disappear. The giant snake swung its tail, and tried to crush the three Konoha ninja as if they were bugs. Fortunately, they managed to dodge it in time, but they couldn't prevent a house from being demolished by the snake's attack.

"The hell? Summoned animals disappear if they're summoned by two people at different sides of a conflict!" Anko protested.

"The snake's chakra is irregular. I believe Orochimaru put it under some kind of genjutsu. That would explain why it didn't leave," Kakashi reasoned.

"It would also explain how he finally managed to get the Snake Boss to do his bidding," Anko continued. "From what I know, Orochimaru never earned Manda's respect."

"Then how are we going to get rid of it?" Gai asked, clenching his fists.

"The old fashioned way," Kakashi grimly said. "But I presume that, if we break the genjutsu, the snake will leave on its own. If what you told me is true, then this Manda won't appreciate being mind controlled into doing somebody else's bidding. Gai, do you think you can keep the snake distracted?"

"You only need to ask, Kakashi. Now let's go!" Gai cheered as he dashed towards Manda, followed by Kakashi and Anko.

...

In another part of the town, Yugao and her fellow ANBU were fighting against some of Orochimaru's goons, which were supported by a giant snake. While her comrades deal with the human forces, she would fight the snake.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" two clones of Yugao appeared at each side of the original. They unsheathed their katanas and charged forward, leaving a trail of afterimages. "Dance of the Crescent Moon!"

The giant snake hissed, and lunged at the three of them. Before it could sink its fangs into either the original or the clones, they jumped in different directions, leaving many afterimages that confused the giant snake.

And a single moment of confusion is all Yugao needed. With a swift strike, the ANBU woman and her clones quickly sliced the snake from three different sides. The purple haired woman wouldn't give the giant reptile time to recover, and she charged again. The snake managed to bite a clone, but the original and the remaining clone slashed it again. The snake couldn't take it anymore, and it was forcefully unsummoned.

"Great job, Cat!" a bird masked ANBU praised, while fighting against a couple Oto ninjas.

"Without the summon, these rabble stand no chance against Konoha's ANBU!" Yugao cheered as she joined her partners. "Let's

show them-" Yugao suddenly stopped. A ridiculously powerful chakra had entered her sensory range, and in no time was upon them. The chakra then began to change in a way Yugao knew what was going to happen. She disengaged the Oto ninja was fighting against and jumped into a nearby roof. "EVERYBODY, FLEE!"

"Huh?" a rat masked ANBU asked in confusion. But it was too late.

"Water Release: Water Formation Wall!"

Suddenly, the ninja who didn't heed Yugao's warning, both Konoha and Oto, were washed away by a massive watery torrent. When the torrent disappeared, only corpses remained. Yugao and a couple other ANBU did manage to avoid the deadly attack.

"What... who...?" a bird masked ANBU asked, feeling a mix of horror and confusion.

"I think that's the culprit," Yugao pointed with her sword to a man with white spiky hair, wearing an outdated blue armor.

"No way!" the other ANBU, who was wearing a ferret mask, shouted. "That's... the Second Hokage! It can't be!"

"It can," Tobirama himself answered. "I've been revived by Orochimaru via Impure World Resurrection. I'm nothing but his puppet, and he's using me to destroy the village. Now, you've seen my power. If you value your lives, you should flee."

While the three ANBU were in no small way afraid of having to face a Hokage, they didn't bulge.

"With all due respect, Hokage-sama, that's not going to happen. We swore to protect Konoha from any threat, no matter how big," Yugao declared as she adopted a fighting stance. Her partners did the same.

Tobirama smiled. "I'm glad to hear that, especially from the special corps I founded. Still, it would be wise if you asked for help in dealing with me."

"The village is being attacked. I doubt there are that many ninja not busy right now," Yugao replied.

"So be it then," Tobirama started to make hand seals. "Water Release: Water Severing Wave!"

The Second Hokage released a high pressure water stream from his mouth at the ANBU. The three of them jumped to avoid the attack, but it came with such force and speed that not all of them could, and Ferret was cleanly cut in half, his life ending that moment.

Bird made several hand seals. "Lightning Release: Thousand Thunder Needles!" the Anbu then thrust his hands forward, releasing a barrage of white glowing electric needles.

However, displaying an spectacular skill, Tobirama dodged the attack and dashed at Bird in a zig zag. Bird tried to cut Tobiraba with his tanto, but he only hit an afterimage.

"Sorry," was the last thing Bird heard before the first Hokage appeared from behind and snapped his neck.

Yugao moved to attack from behind, but Tobirama got out of the way before her katana could even touch him. Moving at an imperceptible speed, Tobirama was once again behind his unsuspecting enemy. He drew a kunai and prepared to sink in into the purplette's back.

"You're a brave kunoichi. It's a pity it has to end like this," Tobirama sorrowfully but stoically said before ending Yugao's life.

Suddenly, something unexpected happen. The moment the kunai sank into the kunoichi's flesh, Yugao burst into a murder of crows that began to fly around the deceased Hokage.

"What the...?" the Senju ninja asked, before realizing what was going on. "Oh, I see." He made a hand seal, and after a burst of chakra, the genjutsu was undone.

The world returned back to normal, and in front of him there was the cat-masked ANBU, alongside a new enemy. A young man with dark gray hair and red eyes, eyes Tobirama knew too well.

"Itachi-san, thank goodness you came," Yugao gratefully said.

"This enemy is too much for you," Itachi stated, without a hint of condescension. "I think it's also too much for me. But I believe I stand a better chance against him. You'll be more useful elsewhere."

As much as it pained her to admit it, she conceded that Itachi had a point.

"Alright. Stay safe," was all Yugao said before departing.

"You're a skilled ninja, Uchiha," Tobirama pointed out. "Being able to sneak past my sensory abilities, plus placing me under a genjutsu without my knowledge. But keep in mind that such thing won't work twice."

"It'd be disappointed if it did," Itachi unsheathed his katana. "Shall we begin?"

...

Gai, surrounded by a glowing green aura, landed a punch on Manda's jaw that pushed his head backwards. The snake hissed once again as it tried to eat Gai whole, but the green clad ninja was too fast for him. Kakashi and Anko flanked the giant snake from opposing sides.

"Anko, now!" Kakashi shouted. Anko nodded, and both of them started making hand seals.

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Bullet!"

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Once again, both fire attacks hit the snake in full, Manda cried in pain, and swung his tail wildly in an attempt to fend off his attackers. He missed, but in doing so he destroyed a couple houses and hit several Konoha and Oto ninja fighting each other.

"Dammit, this isn't working!" a frustrated Anko protested.

"Indeed. We're only helping spread the destruction," Kakashi agreed, then he looked at his eternal rival. "Gai, how many Gates have you opened?"

"Four!" was Gai's response.

"I think you should open another one," Kakashi advised.

"Very well then," Gai's green aura glowed more intense as his body got ready to release more chakra. "Gate of Limit: Open!"

However, before Gai had the chance to do so, a huge shadow bloated the sky. Looking upwards, they saw a massive toad wielding an equally massive sword falling from above. The giant toad landed on top Manda. The giant snake hissed in pain once again. Kakashi recognized the toad as Gamabunta, the Toad Boss. Painful memories of his late sensei invaded his mind.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure this scumbag doesn't cause anymore problems!" Gamabunta stated, as he kept Manda trapped under his weight.

"Thanks a lot, Gamabunta-san," Kakashi greeted. "Is not Jiraiya-sama with you?"

The toad shook his head. "He went to face Orochimaru. He summoned me so I'd deal with Manda. "

Anko's eyes opened wide in shock. His hand reached the base of her neck for some reason. "Wait... that traitor is here?"

"Yes, he was witnessed north of here and-wait! Where are you going!?" Gamabunta asked as he saw Anko running. "Jiraiya said he doesn't want anybody to interfere!"

"I don't care what he says! Orochimaru is here, and I'm not going to miss the opportunity to make him pay for all what he did!" an angry Anko replied, not looking back.

"Should we go after her?" Gai asked.

"Better we take care of the giant snake here, don't you think so?" Kakashi pointed out, noticing how Gamabunta was struggling to contain Manda. "Now that it isn't moving so much, it should be much easier. Let's aim for the eyes once again." Kakashi suggested as his hand started to crackle with electricity.

"Alright then!" Gai agreed as he dashed at Manda, or more specifically, his head. "Konoha Hurricane!"

"Lightning Release: Lightning Beast Running Jutsu!"

Kakashi cast a hound made of lightning, still connected to his hand via an electric stream, which despite its name, flew towards Manda's left eye as Gai delivered a powerful kick to the right eye. The giant snake once again hissed in pain.

"AHHHH!AHHHH!... What's going on here!?" the Snake Boss growled, as he awoke from a bad dream, and soon he grew angry as realization of what was happening dawned upon him. "Orochimaru, you bastard! How you dare enslave me like that! Next time he dares to summon me, I'll make sure his last moments are as agonizing as possible!"

And Manda disappeared, leaving a poof of smoke in its place. Kakashi and Gai sighed in relief.

"Well, that takes care of one problem," Kakashi looked at Gamabunta. "Thanks for your help, Gamabunta-san."

"I don't like being summoned without having a couple drinks first, but this time Jiraiya was right when he said it was an emergency," Gamabunta admitted. "Well, I better get going. With Manda gone, I'm afraid that I'd only cause more collateral damage if I tried to help," the Toad Boss stated before disappearing as well.

"What do we do now, Kakashi? Should we follow Anko and make sure she doesn't get in trouble?" Gai asked. "I can't believe I'm going to say this, but her Flames of Youth burn too bright for her own good."

Before Kakashi could answer, a small forest appeared out of nowhere to the east, engulfing multiple houses in the process. While it didn't look like Tenzo's jutsu, both of them could tell it was Wood Release.

"I believe we should check that first. Anko will have to take care of herself," Kakashi suggested. Gai nodded in agreement, and both men headed to the newly formed forest.

...

A group of about nine Oto ninja arrived to a park. The park was mostly populated by young mothers with very small kids, and a lone old man. Upon seeing the attackers, everybody screamed in terror, picked up their kids and tried to run away, but unfortunately the invaders weren't going to have any of that.

"Capture all of them!" the group leader ordered as his subordinates jumped into action. "Orochimaru-sama wants more test subjects to experiment on, and whoever brings more people will get an extra reward! Make sure WE are that group!"

"If I were you, I wouldn't do such a thing," the old man calmly said.

The Oto ninja looked at the audacious man in disbelief for a few seconds, before breaking into laughter.

"Oh boy, look at this old guy, thinking he can order us around!" one of the Oto ninja said.

"Should we take him with us?" another one asked.

"No. Orochimaru-sama doesn't want people above the age of forty, and this guy looks to be twice as that," the leader told them. "Kill him instead."

Two ninjas pulled out a couple kunai each and walked dangerously towards the old man.

"I wouldn't advice doing that either," the elderly man advised.

"And why not, gramps?" one of the Oto ninja said as he came closer.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," the old man then started making hand seals at an almost imperceptible speed. "Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

The Oto ninja were engulfed by a massive wave of fire, and they ceased to exist. After the old man saved the civilians from the remaining Oto ninja, he looked at the village, and sighed.

"It's true what they say that there's no such thing as retirement for us ninja," Sarutobi sadly sighed, before leaving the park.

...

Orochimaru calmly walked the streets of Konoha, admiring the destruction brought by his forces, the fights that were happening left and right, the screams of people dying -regardless of whom they belonged, either friend of foe-, and overall, the feeling that Konoha was close to its end.

From time to time, a Konoha ninja -several at once if they ever had some brain cells left- would identify Orochimaru and tried to attack him. "Tried" being the key word, since the Sannin easily swatted

them aside as if they were flies, and truth be told, the threat they posed to him was pretty much the same.

"This used to be more fun," Orochimaru mused to himself as his snakes strangled an unfortunate Konoha ninja. "Guess that the Sharingan does have a downside after all."

"Wanna see if I'm that easy as those chumps?" a voice behind him said, before the Snake Sannin was hit with a wave of unusually powerful killing intent.

Not worried in the slightest, Orochimaru turned around and saw a masked man carrying an impossibly big sword.

"Zabuza Momochi," Orochimaru recognized the rogue swordsman immediately. "I find it hard to believe the reports that said that you were now working for Konoha. What a shame, to see such a magnificent ninja like yourself being reduced to Jiraiya's lapdog..."

"I'm nobody's lapdog!" Zabuza yelled, increasing his killing intent. "Even if my predicament isn't the best, it's still miles ahead of your fate. I'm sure Jiraiya will accelerate my probation if I give you your head on a silver platter."

Orochimaru chuckled, amused. "You think so?" The Snake Sannin then countered Zabuza's killing intent with a wave of his own, which overpowered the swordsman's, and even made him to flinch. "Are you really aware of what you're going against?"

Still, Zabuza managed to make an admirable job in withstanding the almost inhuman wave of killing intent. He smirked, and slammed his sword into the ground. "You don't become one of the Seven Swordsmen by running away from challenges."

"So be it then," Orochimaru grinned before thrusting one hand forward. "Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Multiple snakes appeared from his sleeve and lunged at Zabuza. The swordsman quickly swung his sword, beheading all of them in one swipe, and charged against Orochimaru as fast as he could, thrusting his sword forward. Orochimaru nimbly stepped aside, let the sword pass, and locked his arms around Zabuza's neck and shoulder.

"That was very amateurish on your part," Orochimaru told him.

"Think so?" Zabuza smirked under his mask.

Suddenly, other two Zabuzas appeared and charged Orochimaru from different directions. The Sannin tossed the Zabuza he was holding against one of the attackers, while he faced the other. He made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Thrusting his arms forward, the Snake Sannin cast a gale-force burst of wind that turned Zabuza, who revealed itself to be a clone, into a puddle of water. The other two Zabuzas wasted no time and attacked from behind, but Orochimaru extended his arms, and snakes came from his sleeves, biting them in the neck, turning them into puddles of water as well.

"Why don't you stop hiding behind your clones and come out to fight me yourself? Or are you a coward?" Orochimaru taunted.

Zabuza jumped from a nearby roof, landing in front of Orochimaru.

"I do not appreciate being called a coward," the -presumably- real Zabuza stated as he grabbed his sword.

Orochimaru ignored Zabuza's wounded pride and chuckled. "Hey, I have an idea. Given that we're both swordsmen, how about if we fight using nothing but swords? I believe it's appropriate."

Zabuza snorted. "You, a swordsman? My bingo book doesn't say anything about that."

"Your bingo book needs an update then. Now behold," Orochimaru opened his mouth wide, and a snake emerged. The snake also opened its jaws, and a sword came from its throat. Orochimaru grabbed the blade, while the snake returned inside the Sannin's body. He twirled his sword, a double-bladed straight one with a golden handle, and shot the Kiri ninja a chilling smile. "So this is my sword. What do you think?"

Zabuza's eyes were wide open. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Which would make his fight against Orochimaru even harder. "I-Is... is that... the Sword of Kusanagi?"

"Correct. I would have been disappointed if you of all people didn't recognize it," Orochimaru replied with slight amusement, as he made a couple of air swings. "Shall we begin?"

Before Zabuza had a chance to answer, Orochimaru was already charging, his sword hungry for flesh and blood. Zabuza managed to snap out of his stupor in time, and parried the initial hit. Sparks flew the moment both weapons clashed. Using his sword's superior size, Zabuza pushed Orochimaru's back and prepared to swing again.

"Too slow!" Orochimaru cackled as he quickly tried to stab Zabuza.

Zabuza, however, was aware of this, and moved his sword so Kusanagi would pass through the hole of the upper side. In another quick movement, he then moved his sword into the opposite direction, leaving Orochimaru's sword locked.

"Very well, Zabuza," Orochimaru praised, his grin never leaving his face. "It would have been a valid tactic if my blade didn't have so many perks."

Kusanagi's blade started to glow with a blue light, and Orochimaru pulled his sword, releasing it while cutting Zabuza's Executioner's

Blade as if it was butter.

"MY SWORD!" a panicked Zabuza shouted.

Orochimaru capitalized on Zabuza's shock, and tried to stab him again. Zabuza noticed, and moved to the side. Unfortunately, he was too slow, and the sword ended up slashing his shoulder.

"Now die!" Orochimaru shouted before lunging at Zabuza once again.

The Kiri swordsman made a hand seal, and suddenly a very thick mist covered the area. The swordsman managed to get away, since Kusanagi only pierced thin air. The Sanin activated his Sharingan in order to see through the mist, but much to his shock and anger, his stolen Bloodline Limit wouldn't be of any help. The mist dispelled itself a few seconds later, but Zabuza was nowhere to be seen.

"And you said you hated being called a coward!? Come back here and face me!" Orochimaru yelled to no one in particular.

"Come now, don't be angry just because a man follows his self-preservation instincts," a voice behind him said. "Besides, I'm sure I can provide a much better challenge."

Orochimaru turned around, and his anger instantly melted, replaced by pure sadistic joy.

"Jiraiya," Orochimaru was grinning widely. "I was hoping that you would come out and play with me a little. By the way, I heard that you somehow married Tsunade-hime. However, I didn't get any invitation to the ceremony. You really hurt my feelings, Jiraiya."

"Feelings? You have those?" the white haired Sannin snarled. "Anyway, when I'm done with you, your feelings won't be the only thing I hurt."

"Ah, I see that time didn't reduce your bravado in one bit. But unfortunately for your ego, you're about to get a reality check. Especially once I show you the surprise I have prepared, specifically for you. You're going to love it," Orochimaru sadistically grinned.

"Unless said surprise is your own head in a spike, don't bother," Jiraiya started to make hand seals. "Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

Jiraiya breathed a huge fireball at Orochimaru, who didn't bother to dodge, letting the fire consume him. However, when the fire died down, all what was left was a melting mud clone. And before the Toad Sage had any time to react, two snakes emerged from below, and wrapped themselves around the Sannin, pinning his arms against his body.

"Once again, you prove it takes very little effort to fool you, Jiraiya," Orochimaru chuckled as he appeared from behind. He made a hand sign, and both snakes sank their teeth into Jiraiya's neck... which then turned into another mud clone. "What?"

"And once again, your arrogance proves to be your undoing," Jiraiya stated from the roof of a nearby building. He then adopted a theatrical pose. "Do you really think I'll let you or anybody fool Jiraiya, Great Toad Sage and Fifth Hokage, in front of the people of the village I rule and protect? Ha! Your head will explode upon witnessing the sheer awesomeness I possess!"

"Oh, I'm so going to enjoy shutting up that big mouth of yours forever... enough playtime! Sharingan!" Orochimaru's stolen Bloodline Limit flared to life, before thrusting both arms upwards. "Many Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

A truly ridiculous amount of snakes emerged from under Orochimaru's sleeves, and lunged at Jiraiya, hissing incessantly and showing their sharp fangs. Jiraiya smirked, and made the same hand seals as before.

"Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

Jiraiya once again let out a fire projectile at the incoming snakes. However, they moved to the sides the last second, successfully avoiding the fiery attack, and leaving Jiraiya vulnerable to attack from the sides. However, Jiraiya did something that neither the snakes nor their evil master were expecting.

The white haired man jumped backwards, and used the fire that was coming from his mouth to propel himself far from the snakes, which failed their attack.

"You can't escape from neither me nor my eyes, Jiraiya!" Orochimaru's voice said from behind. "These eyes can see everything!"

Turning around while in mid air, Jiraiya saw the surreal image of Orochimaru riding a massive amorphous mass formed by hundreds of snakes. Upon seeing their prey, many of the reptiles lunged at him. Unfortunately for them, Jiraiya wasn't Hokage because of his -in his opinion- unbelievably handsome face. He made more hand seals.

"Needle Jizo!"

Jiraiya's hair grew in both length and volume, and became sharp and spiky, while it wrapped itself around the Toad Sage. The snakes were unable to stop in time, and their jaws bit nothing but sharp and hard needles. And unfortunately for them, Jiraiya wasn't done yet.

"Did you see that? And I'm not done yet! Needle Hell!"

This time, Jiraiya shot his hardened needle-like hair in every direction, piercing Orochimaru's snakes, as well as the Snake Sannin himself. However, the pale skinned man was undeterred. Many of his snakes opened their mouths, releasing more snakes, which at the same time vomited even more snakes.

"Do you always need to make fighting you so damn disgusting?" Jiraiya protested, as he grimaced.

To answer that question, Orochimaru opened his mouth, and his really long tongue wrapped around Jiraiya's neck. Orochimaru's own neck then started to stretch as if it was made of rubber, as the black haired Sannin -or better said, his head- lunged at Jiraiya, his mouth wide open, revealing his sharp teeth.

"Oh hell no!" the Toad Sanin decked Orochimaru right in the nose before he could sink his teeth into Jiraiya's neck. Fortunately, it also made Orochimaru remove his tongue from Jiraiya.

"If you reject my kisses, then I hope you prefer my fangs," Orochimaru stated as he pulled the Sword of Kusanagi out of his throat once again.

Orochimaru charged at Jiraiya once again, who did his best to avoid the Snake Sannin's swipes. Jiraiya would have never pegged his ex-teammate as somebody skilled with a sword, but Orochimaru's display was nothing short of impressive. Jiraiya jumped backwards, and made his godson's favorite hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A Jiraiya clone popped besides the original, which was reading a new jutsu.

"Toad Oil Bullet!"

The clone puffed his cheeks, and expelled a stream of dense oil which hit Orochimaru and his many snakes. Meanwhile, the real Jiraiya finished the hand seals of another technique.

"Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

Jiraiya breathed a stream of fire at the oil covered foes, making a flash when the oil ignited. While he could see the snakes writhing in agony as they burned to death, there was an empty husk which barely looked like Orochimaru in his place.

"I know that's it takes more than that to take you down. Come on, where are you...?" Jiraiya wondered as he looked around, waiting for Orochimaru's attack.

A huge snake emerged from behind Jiraiya. The snake opened its mouth, revealing Orochimaru, a sadistic grin on his face and the Kusanagi on his hands. He lunged at Jiraiya, who tried to grab the sword by the blade, but couldn't stop the weapon's momentum, and the blade was embedded into his chest.

"ACK!"

"It's over, Jiraiya. I win," Orochimaru declared.

Jiraiya, however, grinned in return, and he disappeared in a poof of smoke, revealing a large toad in his place, which was firmly gripping Kusanagi.

"Big Ball Rasengan!"

The toad disappeared at the same time its summoner appeared from behind, and the Toad Sage slammed his enhanced Rasengan into Orochimaru's back. When the contained chakra was released, it created such an explosion that send the Snake Sannin spiraling forward, until he crashed against a building.

The attack had left Orochimaru badly wounded and bloodied, with many nasty looking bruises and even some missing body parts. Unfortunately, the damage done didn't mean much as the Snake Sannin regurgitated a new, completely healed body in no time.

"You can't defeat me, Jiraiya. The sooner you accept that, the sooner can this nonsense end," Orochimaru taunted.

"Keep believing that, you traitor. You'll only make my victory all the sweeter," Jiraiya retorted.

Orochimaru chuckled, amused. "Still thinking that you can do anything you want if you just work very hard for it? Always the idealist," Orochimaru shook his head in disapproval. "Just like the old times. You never changed, Jiraiya. Guess that old saying rings true, once a buffoon, always a buffoon."

"A buffoon that has become Hokage, something that you wanted to be so badly," Jiraiya fired back. Orochimaru's smile disappeared. "Oh, did I hit a nerve?"

"Being Hokage was just a means to get my hands on the Forbidden Scroll of Sealing, something that's already in my power as you probably know now," Orochimaru countered, recovering his cool. "So what if you became Hokage? All accomplishments are meaningless in the face of death, which will come for everybody, except for me. And while you may be remembered as a Hokage, I will live forever to see all my ambitions realized."

"Maybe your accomplishments will die with you, but not mine. Do you know why? Because I live for somebody else other than myself," Jiraiya told him.

"So, seeking solace in altruism. Unsurprising, given that's the lie of the weak. Those who live their lives for others is because their own lives are not worth living. Or maybe you couldn't stand the memories of being surrounded by your betters, so you seek the company of those weak enough to need your help and pity?" Orochimaru taunted him, as he licked his lips.

"Oh, I am surrounded by my betters," Jiraiya replied. "It would have taken very little for Minato to surpass me had his life not been cut short. And his son will probably take even less time than him to do so, to say nothing of his little siblings. Yet look at you Orochimaru. No apprentices to call your own, just minions and test subjects. You had apprentices once, but you ended up betraying them. Afraid that they would surpass the oh so mighty genius?"

"And today, one of those apprentices will claim her revenge!" an angry, female voice shouted.

Both Sannin watched Anko landing besides Jiraiya. Her face had a murderous expression, as her hands gripped two kunai tightly.

"Anko-chan? Kukuku, this is surely a surprise," Orochimaru chuckled.

"Let's see if you keep laughing when I flay you alive!" the Snake Mistress threatened.

"Still want a round three? Didn't you learn anything from our fight a few months ago? Even without the Sharingan, you won't stand a chance against me," Orochimaru told her.

"Anko, you need to leave right now! He's right, he's too powerful for you!" Jiraiya agreed, urging the kunoichi to leave.

Orochimaru chuckled. "For once, you said something sensible, Jiraiya."

"No! He needs to die by my hand! I know that he's too much for me alone, but together we can defeat him! Nobody knows him better than me! He taught me almost everything I know!" Anko protested.

"I taught you everything *you* know, Anko. Not everything *I* know," Orochimaru pointed out.

"Anko, please! I can't fight and keep you alive at the same time! You'd only get in the way!" Jiraiya pleaded, but to no avail. "Anko, leave now, this is an order from your Hokage!"

"Sorry, Hokage-sama. You can court-martial me later, but there's nothing you can tell me to make me walk out of this fight," Anko firmly declared.

Jiraiya sighed. He knew there was no way to win this argument. He decided to cut loses. "Alright, you can stay. But you'll act as my

support. Stay behind me, provide me some cover, and attack only when Orochimaru shows an opening. Understood?"

Anko nodded, and took a couple steps back. "Crystal clear, Hokage-sama."

Orochimaru chuckled upon seeing Jiraiya and Anko ready to attack in tandem. "Kukuku... so, who wants to die first?"

...

Konoha Hospital

It didn't take long before dozens of ninjas started carrying their injured companions to the hospital in order to be healed, bringing the news of Orochimaru's attack. Tsunade immediately ordered all the hospital to be guarded. No doubt it would be one of the first places the invading forces would try to occupy or destroy.

"Somebody help us!" a young Konoha Chunin cried as he and his wounded partner dragged themselves into the hospital.

"Bring the wounded to one of the free beds! A medic-nin will treat him when possible!" Tsunade shouted while she healed another ninja.

"We've run out of antibiotics here!" Shizune called.

"Dammit, somebody go fetch more!" the Slug Sannin roared. However, despite all the chaos going around her, her concentration never wavered, and managed to stabilize the wounded ninja, keeping him out of danger. Once she was done, she moved onto another one who, for some reason, had a tree branch impaling his sides. "What the hell? How did you get hurt with a tree branch?"

"It's no normal branch, Tsunade-sama, it was Wood Release," the wounded ninja's partner replied.

Tsunade sighed in frustration. "So Orochimaru finally managed to infuse his troops with Wood Release. This is very bad news." Tsunade gravely stated as she removed the tree branch and started to heal the wound.

"Actually, it wasn't some random minion... it was the First Hokage himself," the second ninja stated.

Tsunade looked at him as if he grew a second head. Then, her face formed a snarl of fury. "I'm not in the mood for these kind of jokes!"

"He... isn't joking..." the ninja Tsunade was healing managed to say, coughing some blood in the process.

"Don't speak!" Tsunade ordered.

"We are not lying, Tsunade-sama, it was him, your grandfather! Hashirama Senju! Orochimaru somehow brought him back to life and made him his puppet!" the first ninja continued.

"Tsunade-sama, we're getting reports about the First and Second Hokage in the battleground!" Shizune called. "Some people think that they're impersonators, but they have abilities that should be impossible to emulate!"

Tsunade remained silent as she worked on closing the wound of her current patient. While she did so, she pondered what to do next. Ideas and possibilities raced through her mind, some of them being considered, others being tossed aside. The moment she managed to stabilize her current patient, she took a decision.

"Shizune, you're now in charge of taking care of the wounded. I need to go," Tsunade solemnly stated.

"WHAT!?! Tsunade-sama, you can't be serious!" the black haired woman screamed.

"I am. If my grandfather and granduncle are out there, I need to see it with my own eyes," Tsunade replied.

"But... but... what about the wounded? This is where you can help the most! We need you here!" Shizune pleaded.

"You'll do fine without me, Shizune. Besides, there's an old saying that says that the best way to heal a wound is to make sure it never happens to begin with. Konoha has very few ninja who can deal with the likes of the First and the Second. I'll make sure they won't wound nor kill more of our comrades," Tsunade explained.

Shizune remained silent for a bit, She looked down, and sighed, seemingly accepting her master's decision. "Fine, but be careful, okay? I want you to live so you can see my kid."

Tsunade smiled. "Don't worry, Shizune. Many people tried to kill me, and none of them succeeded. This time won't be different."

Tsunade stepped out of the hospital, and looked around. It didn't take her to see the massive forest that wasn't there an hour ago. That's where she should go. She had to shut down her inner medic who asked her to tend the many wounded across Konoha, but she had a new duty to fulfill.

A family reunion with her long deceased grandfather.

...

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Water Release: Great Water Wall!"

Itachi breathed a massive fireball at Tobirama, at the same time the Second Hokage created a massive circular wall of water around himself that safely put out Itachi's fire attack. The fact that he made out without using an existing source of water made the act even more impressive.

"I heard about the Second's prowess with water jutsu, but this..." the Uchiha thought, trying to push distressing thoughts out of his mind. *"My experience fighting Shizune will be of little help here."*

"You'll have to do better if you hope to defeat me, Uchiha," Tobirama stated in his nerve-grating neutral and stoic tone. He then made a hand seal, releasing a burst of chakra through his body that undid a genjutsu Itachi had quietly placed upon him before. "And drop the genjutsu. You caught me off guard before, but that won't work a second time."

"Can't blame me for trying," Itachi replied.

"I fought plenty of your kin during the Warring States Era. I seriously hope your clan developed something new," Tobirama stated. Then he started doing hand seals again. "Watch out! Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet!"

This time, Tobirama didn't need to create more water literally out of thin air, and using the water of the previous attack, he made a dragon-shaped water construct that lunged at Itachi with a fiery roar. The Uchiha made a single hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A single clone appeared alongside Itachi, and pushed the original high into the air, avoiding the dragon-shaped torrent (albeit the clone wasn't so lucky). While in mid air, Itachi's Sharingan caught Tobirama leaping at him like a rocket, kunai in hand. Itachi barely had time to parry the attack with his own katana. Itachi pushed the albino Senju back, and returned to the ground.

"You're fast. Even with my Sharingan, I could barely keep track of your movements," Itachi observed.

"My lifetime of experience fighting Uchiha taught me that no matter what your clan says, even the Sharigan has its limits," Tobirama told

him. "Relying on a Bloodline Limit too much, no matter how powerful, will lead to doom."

"And while I agree with that, I believe my eyes will be a necessary tool not only if I want to win, but if I want to come out of this alive," Itachi replied.

Tobirama remained silent for a moment, and stared at Itachi quizzically. "You know, you don't look like most of the Uchiha I met in my time. Your eyes..."

"What about them?" Itachi asked.

"The eyes of the Uchiha often reflect pride and hatred, but yours..." Tobirama narrowed his own eyes. "I can only see... regret."

"Don't we all have things we regret?" Itachi retorted.

"True, but not all of them are of the same magnitude," Tobirama replied. Then he suddenly grew concerned. "Watch out!"

Itachi prepared to defend as Tobirama once again started to make hand seals.

"I'm afraid you're not going to like this. Yin Release: Bringer of Darkness!"

The entire battlefield was engulfed by shadows, leaving Itachi completely blinded.

"I will keep talking so you can pinpoint my position through my voice. I believe you can do that?" Tobirama asked.

"Don't worry. While powerful, I learned how to fight without relying on my eyes," Itachi answered as he tried to locate the Hokage.

"You're one of a kind, Uchiha," Tobirama praised, as he dashed Itachi from behind, in a diagonal angle.

Itachi managed to turn around, and raise his katana. The sound of metal clashing revealed that Tobirama's attack was successfully blocked, but when he tried to counterattack, his sword only stabbed thin air.

"To your right!" Tobirama warned him.

Itachi moved to his left, and could feel the air displaced by the Second's dash, indicating that he dodged the attack. But once again, he found himself unable to retaliate.

"I just can't fight defensively all the time. If I don't attack, I'll end up losing. Come on, calm down and focus on the sound of his steps..." Itachi told himself. His breath slowed down, and he sharpened his ears.

For a few moments, there was silence. Itachi's ears managed to grasp the sound of Tobirama's light steps, but they moved in random directions, clearly in an attempt to disorient him. Then, the attack came...

"Watch out!"

... albeit it didn't come from Tobirama, but from Itachi. The Uchiha managed to locate his foe just when he was going to attack, and Itachi moved faster. In a clean cut, he sliced the Second's right arm, and part of his chest. The darkness was dispelled. But only a very confusing sight awaited the red-eyed man.

Tobirama's wound wasn't bleeding. Not blood, at least. The innards of his body weren't made of flesh and blood, but of ash and dust. But that wasn't as bad as what it came next.

"What the...?" Itachi mumbled.

His Sharingan saw how dust and ashes started to whirl around Tobirama's wound, slowly regenerating it. In a few seconds, Tobirama regenerated the whole arm.

"Those brought back with Impure World Resurrection are immortal. Even if you destroy my body completely, it will be rebuild," the Second Hokage explained.

Itachi's stoic façade didn't break. "Then how I am supposed to defeat you?"

"You need to tear my soul out of this body. Or seal my body so it can't endanger more people. Or find the summoner and make him undo the jutsu," Tobirama explained.

"How if I kill him instead?" Itachi suggested, as he started to pant.

"I wouldn't recommend to do that. Killing the summoner wouldn't send those brought back to the place they belong, and they would keep trying to fulfill their master's last will until they succeed," Tobirama continued explaining, but stopped when he noticed something odd about Itachi. "Are you out of breath already? I swear you aren't older than twenty. If your physical condition is so poor, then you won't last long against me."

Itachi wanted to ask him what was he talking about, but he realized that his opponent was right. His breathing had become much heavier, as if his lungs were burning.

"He's right. It shouldn't feel this tired so soon. What's wrong with me...? I need to end this fast..." The Uchiha thought, now more distressed. "Sealing your body, you said? I have something I believe it may work..."

...

Meanwhile, in another part of the town, two of Konoha's newest Chunin were fighting a group of Oto ninja. Despite being outnumbered, the rookie Chunin had no intention of losing to the invading hordes.

"Earth Release: Earth Sharp Spear!" an Oto officer shot a spike-shaped projectile from his hands at his target.

The missile hit its mark, a blond wearing an orange tracksuit under a green flak jacket, impaling him. However, the blond disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a log behind. The masked ninja opened his eyes wide in shock, and turned around to see where his foe went, but it was too late.

"Too slow!" Naruto mocked as he formed a chakra sphere on his right hand. "Rasengan!"

Upon expanding, the exploding chakra blasted the Oto officer against a nearby building, knocking him out of commission. And with his enemy vanquished, Naruto could now help Hinata deal with the rank-and-file Oto ninja, but as she was about to demonstrate, she didn't need any help.

"Eight Trigrams: Thirty-Two Palms! Two Palms! Four Palms!" the Oto ninja were unable to block Hinata's skilled strikes, and the Hyuga heiress continued her combo. "Eight Palms! Sixteen Palms! Thirty Two Palms!"

Her attack completed, all her enemies were now in no condition to fight.

"Hinata-hime, are you okay?" Naruto asked, as he landed beside her.

Hinata smiled and nodded. "Yes, I'm fine. They weren't as threatening as they look at first sight."

"Then maybe you'll welcome a greater challenge?" a familiar voice asked above them.

They turned around, and saw a glasses-wearing, silver haired ninja with an Oto headband landing in front of them. "You certainly did a

number on my men. But then again, no amount of body modifications can replace genuine skill."

"Kabuto..." Naruto growled upon seeing Orochimaru's right hand man.

"Naruto-kun... do you want to fight him?" Hinata asked, her previous confidence now gone. This man proved to be a challenging opponent when they had the support of Team Asuma. While now, not even their own team was complete.

"Of course! We've gotten much stronger since the last time we fought him! We're Chunin now!" Naruto proudly stated.

Kabuto shook his head disapprovingly. "Such a hothead. Even if you grew stronger, you assumed that I stayed the same. I'll be more than happy to remind you how outclassed you are."

"Less talking, more smacking! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto created a dozen clones that didn't need any verbal command to charge at Kabuto.

"This is going to be fun," Kabuto smiled as he activated his Chakra Scalpels on both hands and engaged the clones in close quarter combat, skillfully cutting them down, and avoiding being hit. Unfortunately for Kabuto, the clones were just a distraction. Unfortunately for his enemies, he was well aware of that.

Hinata dashed at the seemingly distracted Kabuto as stealthy as she could, as she made several hand seals, and leaped at him.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Kabuto smirked and grabbed an attacking Naruto clone by the arm, using it as a human shield against Hinata's attack. The clone instantly poofed, but it wasn't enough to stop Hinata's momentum, and her attack connected with the intended target. Unfortunately for

the Hyuga, the moment she touched the silver haired medic-nin, he disappeared, leaving behind the very same log Naruto used before.

Hinata's Byakugan immediately pinpointed the Oto ninja's position.

"Naruto-kun! He's below you, underground!" the Hyuga cried.

Naruto jumped just in time before Kabuto could grab -and potentially damage- Naruto's ankles. The blond then pulled out a kunai carved with seals.

"Alright, I've been looking forward an opportunity to use this in a real combat!" Naruto channeled his chakra through the special kunai, and it projected a blue blade of pure chakra.

"Oh?.. I must admit, that's an ingenious weapon," Kabuto praised as he dug himself out. "But I'm afraid that it won't be of much help against such a superior opponent."

"We'll see that!" Naruto replied as he charged, chakra sword in hand.

Both ninja engaged in melee combat once again, Naruto dealing powerful blows with his new weapon, and Kabuto parrying them without much effort with his Chakra Scalpels. Once he grew bored, he kicked the blond in the gut, pushing him back.

"You can't defeat me, kids. Even if you somehow managed to overpower me, in the end you'd still lose," Kabuto taunted them.

"Why, because of this poor attempt at an invasion? Konoha has gone through worse in the past," Naruto replied.

Kabuto shook his head. "You're so unaware of what's going on, it's almost laughable. No, what I'm talking about is the real reason for me fighting you here. While you're wasting your time with me, an squad of Orochimaru-sama's elite ninjas is attacking the Academy. They will kidnap your little siblings, and kill the rest. Yes, we know

about their Bloodline Limits. Wood Release, huh? Who would have guessed."

Both Naruto and Hinata paled upon hearing those words, fearing the worst for their respective little siblings.

"You... you lie!" Hinata accused, her voice trembling.

"Yeah! Why would you need to distract me! You said it yourself, I'm not that strong, I'm shouldn't be a threat for those so-called 'elite ninjas'! Besides, what about mom and dad?" Naruto countered, his words coated in rage.

"Orochimaru-sama has been watching you, among others, and has come to the conclusion that you are not to be underestimated. As for the other two Sannin... don't worry, they're distracted for a long time," Kabuto smiled wickedly. "In fact, I believe their mission has already been completed. So, to show you that I'm not lying, I will stop attacking you, and allow you to go to the Academy, so you can see it yourself."

Naruto's eyes turned red, their pupils becoming slitted like a feral beast. "If you did something to them, I swear..."

"Hanabi-chan..." Hinata thought.

"Tick tock, Naruto-kun. The more time you waste with me, the less time you have to rescue your little siblings," Kabuto mocked him.

The jinchuriki decided that Kabuto was right and dashed towards the Academy, followed by Hinata.

"Naruto-kun, even if I'm worried for Hanabi... what if he's lying? What if we're heading to a trap?" Hinata asked.

"I took that into account, but I just can't ignore the possibility," Naruto replied. "Besides, he knew about their Bloodline Limits. I wouldn't put

past somebody like Orochimaru to invade Konoha just to get his slimy hands on my siblings and their power."

"Alright then... but let's be careful!"

Kabuto watched the two Chunin disappear into the distance. He shook his head once again, and laughed.

"Hook, line, and sinker," Kabuto told to no one in particular.

"Children. You're so naive..."

Even if Kabuto's words were true, Naruto was heading straight to a trap after all.

...

Konoha Academy

The moment they took notice of the attack on the village, the teachers, lead by Ebisu, immediately began the evacuation of the Academy.

"Get out in orderly fashion, but don't lag behind!" Ebisu commanded.

"Come on, the bunker is pretty close. Don't panic, you'll be in a safe place in no time," Iruka tried to calm down the frightened children.

Little did they know that, perched on a nearby tree, the Sound Five were watching them.

"Yes, there they are," Kidomaru, the six armed man, stated, while looking through a spyglass. "The white hair is impossible to miss."

"Alright then, you know Orochimaru-sama's orders. Get the kids, but make sure there is an adult left to warn Naruto when he comes," Kimimaro instructed.

The rest nodded, and jumped from the tree, ready to attack.

...

"Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Jiraiya breathed yet another fireball at his former friend, who stopped it by creating a large wall of water. The clash of elements produced a cloud of steam. Between the cloud blocking Orochimaru's Sharingan and the fact that he just defended from an attack, it was Anko's moment to strike.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullet!"

A dragon-shaped fire projectile fired at Orochimaru just after he was done casting the Water Wall. The Sannin merely smirked, and sunk underground.

"Did I get him?" Anko impatiently asked.

When the steam dispelled, there was nothing left.

"I doubt it," Jiraiya warily replied as he looked around. "Stay alert! I can still feel his killing intent..."

"Feel THIS Jiraiya!" Orochimaru shouted as he emerged underground just behind the Toad Sage, as he was about to sink his Sword of Kusanagi into Jiraiya's back.

Jiraiya turned around, but it was too late. There was no way he could move in time to avoid the Snake Sannin's mostly fatal attack.

Fortunately, he didn't need to.

"What!?"

Orochimaru saw shocked how his sword had been parried by a black, metallic staff, being held by the person he hated the most in the whole world.

Even then, Orochimaru couldn't help but smile. "Sarutobi-sensei... you came. Did you come here to die alongside your student?"

Hiruzen Sarutobi, wearing his battle gear and wielding the Adamantine Staff, pushed Orochimaru away from Jiraiya, and adopted a fighting stance.

"No, my former student. I came here to undo the mistake I made a decade ago by letting you go," Hiruzen defiantly replied.

Orochimaru's Sharingan scanned his enemies, as his brain began to formulate possible strategies. But against these odds, he would be forced to use his ace in the hole.

"Look at this. My former sensei, former teammate and former apprentice, fighting together against a common foe," Orochimaru noted. "Too bad not even with your combined forces stand a chance against me."

"You overestimate your Sharingan, Orochimaru. It won't be of much help against the three of us," Jiraiya retorted.

"True. Even with these eyes, the odds are against me. Thankfully, the Sharingan is far from being the only resource I possess to turn the tables in my favor," Orochimaru replied, and started making hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu: Impure World Resurrection!"

"NO!"

Hiruzen's eyes widened in shock and dashed in order to stop Orochimaru from completing the jutsu, but it was too late. The yellow-eyed man slammed his hand into the ground, summoning two wooden coffins. One of the coffin had the kanji of "Fire" above the kanji of "Fourth". The second one had a swirl, the emblem of the long nonexistent Uzushio-gakure.

The coffins opened, and their occupants stepped out of them, revealing their identities. A blond man wearing a white and red robe

over the standard Konoha Jonin uniform, and a woman with long red hair, wearing a green dress over a short sleeved white shirt.

"Look at this, Jiraiya. Do you remember them?" Orochimaru cruelly taunted, as the coffins' occupants stepped out of them.

"Minato... Kushina..." Jiraiya whispered in shock.

"Why the long face, Jiraiya? Aren't you happy to see your former apprentice and his wife? I thought your reaction would be happier one," the Snake Sannin continued his taunt.

"You... how dare you!?" Hiruzen was seething in anger. "How you dare to use that abominable jutsu on the two people who sacrificed the most for this village! Does your evil know no limit, Orochimaru!? I'm ashamed to think that I used to call you my apprentice!"

While Orochimaru enjoyed his sensei's rage-filled reaction, he paid it no mind.

"Now, I believe that the odds are once again in my favor. Minato Namikaze was so powerful, he used to be feared by the rest of the villages in a way no other ninja has been feared. Now it's Konoha's turn to feel that very same dread!"

Author's Note: And thus, the invasion of Konoha begins. And as you can see, Minato is back. Like I said to many of you in the review replies, Orochimaru was simply waiting for the right time to summon him. And before you guys point out that he didn't need the mask to summon Kushina, I already know that. he summoned her for added psychological effect, and because, even if we never saw her fight, it's kind of implied that Kushina is pretty strong.

Also, a bit of warning: as you can see, the story is now focusing mostly on the adult characters, with Naruto and his friends getting little screentime. But don't worry, after a couple

chapters, the focus will go back to the Konoha 15, leading to the flash forward we saw at the beginning of the previous chapter. In the meantime, enjoy the high-level fights of the Sanin, Hiruzen, Itachi, Shisui, and the resurrected Kages.

Speaking of which... I just realized that Jiraiya never fought anybody until this chapter. Man, I didn't realize it took me this long to have the Toad Sage display some of his legendary badasstitude. Hopefully both this chapter and the ones to come will make up for such lateness.

Alright, let's see if this story can break the 1000 reviews mark! If you make it true with your reviews, you would make me really, really, really happy!

Battle of the Hokage

Author's note: Wohoo! Thanks to the phenomenal reception of the latest chapter, we passed the 1000 reviews mark! Thanks to everybody who helped this story be part of the fourth digit reviews club! Shout out to rbear1231, who submitted the review #1000.

Speaking of reviews, I got a lot of reviewers asking how minato could be resurrected since he's supposed to be inside the Shinigami stomach and yadda yadda... well, read the ending of Chapter 31. Orochimaru got his hands on the Shinigami mask, which can be used to release the souls from their imprisonment. I thought that it was clear enough not to merit an explanation. Anyway, now I'm not going to address this issue any further.

Now enjoy the new chapter, and see you at the bottom notes:

Chapter 34:

Battle of the Hokage

or

When Legends Collide

...

The three Konoha ninja facing Orochimaru stared in shock as the occupants of the coffins stepped out of them. There was no mistake; those were Minato and Kushina, looking no different from the time the Kyubi escaped, if they ignored the black eyes and the cracked skin that gave them such a creepy and otherworldly appearance.

"Besides Minato, I also have the Senju brothers, working to destroying Konoha at other parts of the village," Orochimaru grinned again as his Sharingan rested on his former sensei and former teammate. "Now I only need you two to have the whole set."

"... where am I?" a disoriented Minato asked, until he saw Jiraiya. "Sensei? Is that you?"

"You look so old!" Kushina added.

Jiraiya wouldn't have left such remark unanswered, but this was no time for jokes, so he decided to give them a brief summary of the situation. "Yes, it's me. Orochimaru used a forbidden jutsu to bring you back to life. And the reason for why I look so old... is that thirteen years have passed since your death."

The Fourth and his wife weighed on Jiraiya's words, trying to find a sense for what was going on.

"But... how is that I don't remember anything after the Kyubi impaled us?" Kushina asked.

"I have no answer for that," Jiraiya solemnly replied.

"How could you resurrect Minato? He used the Reaper Death Seal to seal the Nine Tails away! His soul shouldn't be available for you to defile!" Hiruzen pointed out.

"Ah, I see you're familiar with this jutsu, sensei. Which shouldn't be surprising, given that it was your own very sensei who developed it," Orochimaru delighted in the irony of the situation. "You could say that thanks to the knowledge of the Forbidden Scroll, I was able to find a way to retrieve Minato's soul."

On one side, both Hiruzen and Jiraiya were thankful that Minato was no longer sealed inside the Reaper's stomach. On the other hand, being a slave to Orochimaru wasn't much better. Then again, there

could be a way to undo the jutsu and give Minato's soul the peace he deserved so much.

Kushina's arm started to twitch. "I can't control my body. It's like... like if somebody else is manipulating it from the inside!"

"Very sharp, my dear Uzumaki. While you might retain your free will, it's useless since I'm the one in control of your actions. You're nothing but my puppets," Orochimaru stated, and then he looked back at his opposition. "You know, I have an idea. Sensei, why don't you fight against me, while Jiraiya fights against Minato? That way, two masters will die at the hands of their respective students!"

"You certainly have to be too confident for your own good if you think you can take me on," Hiruzen replied.

"With these eyes, nothing is impossible," Orochimaru taunted, before deciding that the time for words was over. "Anyway, I'm growing impatient for your death, sensei, so let's start already! Minato, Kushina, kill Jiraiya and Anko-chan, and then aid the rest of my forces in the destruction of Konoha!"

The orders already issued, Orochimaru jumped away, followed by Hiruzen.

"Where do you think you're going? The only master who will die at his student's hands will be you!" Anko wanted to follow her former sensei and her former Hokage, but a red headed kunoichi got in the way and attacked Anko with a pair of kunai. "Hey!"

"Sorry, but my body moves on her own, ya know!" Kushina stated in an apologetic tone. "I'm afraid you won't be able to kill that bastard until you get rid of us first."

"So be it then," Anko replied as she thrust her arm forward. "Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Several snakes shot from Anko's sleeve and lunged at Kushina. The redhead jumped backwards while she made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Kushina blew a powerful gust of wind that pushed both the snakes and Anko backwards, much to the latter's surprise.

"Alright, since neither Orochimaru nor any of his snakes are close, maybe I can call for some help," Anko thought as she bit her finger and made several hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

Anko slammed her palm into the ground, summoning a relatively large green hooded snake.

"Another Snake summoner... yet you fight for Konoha. Are you related to Orochimaru?" Kushina asked.

"Unfortunately, yes," Anko sourly replied. "I used to be his apprentice before the bastard turned me into his guinea pig. I won't rest until he pays for what he did."

With a hand command, the giant cobra nodded and lunged at Kushina. The Uzumaki kunoichi jumped in time to avoid the cobra's maws, and proceeded to do more hand seals.

"Wind Release: Air Bullet!"

Kushina shot from her mouth several projectiles of compressed air against the giant snake. The air bullets made noisy explosions upon hitting the target. While it was hit by the first few, the giant snake was agile enough to dodge the rest, and hit Kushina with its tail, slamming her against a small house. The force of the impact was such that it brought the house down, burying Kushina under a pile of debris and rubble.

"Got you!" Anko started to make hand seals. "Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

Pouring as much chakra as she could, the Snake Mistress breathed a stream of fire shaped like a dragon at the pile of debris. However, much to her shock, Kushina burst out from the pile of burning rubble with some bruises and burns that took no time to regenerate.

"Watch out for my next attack! It can bind your chakra, ya know!" Kushina warned, while still mid air.

The moment she landed, several chains shot from her back, and as if they had a mind of their own, flew towards Anko and her summoned snake. Anko managed to dodge them with no problem, but the snake wasn't so lucky, and the chains wrapped around it. The giant cobra tried to struggle in vain, before vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

"The hell? How did you cancel my summon?" A shocked Anko asked.

"I already told you! The chains bind chakra, and in case of summoned animals, it severs the link created by the Summoning Jutsu, forcing them to go back to where they come from, ya know!" Kushina told her. Her hands started to make hand seals. "Watch out, I'm going to attack again!"

"You're a wind type, right? Good then," Anko smirked as she made hand seals of her own.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

Another fire stream and gust of wind were formed, and clashed against each other. Kushina's wind jutsu increased the power of Anko's fire jutsu, but her wind blew with such force that it stopped the fire from advancing any further, resulting in a stalemate. Stalemate that was about to come to an end when Kushina emerged from the flames, and before Anko had any time to react, she landed a punch at the Snake Mistress' face.

"OW! My nose!" Anko protested, as she grabbed her bleeding nose with one hand.

"Sorry! I'm trying not to hit as hard as I can, but it's kind of difficult, ya know!" Kushina apologized.

As she stood up and readjusted her nose, Anko was tempted to take a look at the other combat happening not far from them, but he knew the moment she took her eyes from Kushina, she would be dead.

"I hope Hokage-sama is having an easier time with your husband," Anko commented.

...

Needless to say, given that Jiraiya was facing one of the most powerful and feared ninjas who ever lived, he wasn't having an easier time.

"SENSEI, WATCH OUT!" Minato shouted, drawing Jiraiya's attention.

The Sannin paled upon seeing six three-pronged kunai on his late student's hands. "SHIT!"

Minato threw the kunai in multiple directions, all of them near Jiraiya, and instantly disappeared. Fortunately, Jiraiya had the perfect counter.

"Needle Jizo!"

Once again, Jiraiya's hair turned into sharp needles, and wrapped around his whole body, just in time to block a punch coming from behind from Minato.

"Nice reflexes, sensei," Minato praised. "Sensei, I notice that Orochimaru's control loosened a bit. I'll try to hold back as much as I can."

Jiraiya nodded. "It seems that Orochimaru want to focus all his attention on Sarutobi-sensei. Good, this might prove a fatal mistake on his part."

"Watch out, here I come again!" Minato warned as he pulled out another three pronged kunai, and vanished again.

Jiraiya pulled out another kunai as well, and managed to successfully parry an incoming slash from Minato after he appeared besides the Sannin. Minato disappeared and reappeared near Jiraiya multiple times in order to attack again. Jiraiya managed to successfully predict and block most of his attacks, but soon he was unable to keep the pace, and Minato was able to land several swipes, before sending him flying with a powerful kick to the chest.

"Urgh..." Jiraiya groaned as he got back on his feet. "And this is you holding back?"

Minato smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, sensei. I'm trying. I really am."

"It's okay. It's not your fault," Jiraiya replied. However, his eyes widened again when he saw Minato quickly retrieving his kunai, and tossing them at Jiraiya again. This time, he made a different approach.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

The white haired Sannin slammed his hand into the ground, erecting a rock wall that successfully stopped the kunai in their tracks, but wouldn't stop Minato in any meaningful way.

"*Now's my chance!*" Jiraiya thought as he made a clone.
"Camouflage Jutsu!"

The real Jiraiya became invisible just before Minato shattered the wall with a Rasengan.

"You could have jumped above it, you know," the Jiraiya clone pointed out.

"My thoughts exactly," Minato agreed. Then, he pulled out a tri-pronged kunai and tossed it at Jiraiya. "Watch out for my next attack!"

The Jiraiya clone dodged the kunai. However, Minato teleported to the kunai the moment it passed the white haired man, and slammed a Rasengan on his back.

"I'm sorry, sensei..." Minato sorrowfully said as he was forced to end his sensei's life...

... only for "Jiraiya" to burst in oil, dunking Minato completely.

"What?"

Jiraiya decloaked behind the confused Minato. There were five small blue flames at the tip of each of his fingertips.

"Sealing Art: Five Elemental Seals!"

The Toad Sage successfully slammed his hand on Minato's back, placing the seal. Minato took no time to notice the seal messing with his chakra completely. He tried to teleport, only to find out he was unable to.

"Well done, sensei," Minato praised. "But I'm afraid that'll only buy you a few seconds before I undo it."

"That's all what I need," Jiraiya replied while making hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Flame Bullet!"

Minato was engulfed by a massive fire projectile, which set on fire the oil drenching his clothes. When the attack receded, only a burning body remained. Jiraiya sighed heavily, and looked at his defiled student with sad eyes.

"Sorry, Minato. I swear that I'll make-"

However, Jiraiya's words were interrupted by something he wasn't expecting. The flames burning Minato's body started to shrink until they disappeared. Ash and dirt began to swirl around his body, restoring it to normal. After a few seconds, Minato looked no worse for the wear, and stood up.

"Damn! This jutsu is way worse than I had expected. Plus with our power, we're causing too much collateral damage. I better do something about it..." Jiraiya thought, before seeing Anko dealing with Kushina. "Anko, get over here!"

Anko said nothing. She tossed a kunai with an explosive note at Kushina before dashing towards the Hokage. Kushina came out of the explosion with only a few wounds that took no time to heal, and landed besides Minato.

"Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!"

The ground below Minato and Kushina's feet turned into a muddy swamp, trapping both of them, as they slowly began to sink.

"Anko, follow me!" Jiraiya shouted as he fled the scene.

"Do you think that will be enough to stop them?" Anko asked.

"Not even close. But it will buy us some time to have a head start," Jiraiya explained as he jumped from one roof to another, heading out of the village.

Minato pulled out one of his tri-pronged kunai and tossed it at Kushina, who grabbed it. Minato teleported to the kunai the moment his wife grabbed it, who then tossed it outside the muddy area, and Minato teleported both of them out of the swamp. As soon as their feet touched solid ground, both of them gave chase to the Hokage and the Snake mistress.

"What is Jiraiya-sama planning?" Kushina asked.

"I don't know. I think that for the time being, he wants to bring the fight out of the village so he can cut loose," Minato guessed.

"But these bodies are immortal. No matter how powerful his jutsu are, he doesn't have the means to permanently kill us, ya know!" Kushina pointed out.

"I'm sure he'll think something. Jiraiya-sensei is a smart and resourceful ninja," Minato replied. Some might call his optimism unrealistic.

"What about you? Can't you think in anything to undo this jutsu?" Kushina asked.

"I'm thinking, but this is way out of my expertise. While I'm no stranger to jutsu that dabbles with life and death, this is something completely new," Minato stated.

"Then let's hope Jiraiya-sama can come up with something. Orochimaru was his pal, after all," Kushina said.

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Konoha Academy

Iruka was thankful that the fights hadn't reached the Academy yet. Hopefully they would have enough time to evacuate the children to the nearest bunker with no incidents. And events would have developed in such way if the perpetrator of the invasion didn't have the Academy as one of his targets.

"Come on, don't panic, and keep going in orderly fashion. In no time, you all will be safe," Iruka reassured the distressed children, while the other two teachers present, Ebisu and Daikoku, also tried to quell the ensuing panic.

Too bad panic was about to become much higher.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

As those words were uttered, a massive stone wall was erected, cutting the path the group of children was following. A fat man with red hair styled in a mohawk landed on the wall. His face showed a smug smirk.

"Sorry, I'm afraid this path is closed right now," the ninja stated.

Four other ninja, wearing similar clothes to the first one, landed behind the group. One of them, who had light blue hair, blue lips, and what appeared to be a hunchback, took a step forward.

"Okay, let's make this short and sweet. We want those two kids with the white hair," the Oto ninja stated, pointing at Hagane and Kaida, who squirmed upon being identified. "Surrender them to us, and nobody gets hurt."

"Do you think we're going to hand you the children of the Hokage like that?" Ebisu replied. There was no point in keeping their heritage hidden, given that there could be no other reason for them being targeted.

"Indeed. These children are under our care, and if you want either of them, you'll have to go through us first," Iruka stated. Despite his bold words, his brain was struggling to come up with a way to repel the attackers. They had blocked all possible escape routes, and having to fight with so many children around would make the task immensely more difficult.

All of the Oto ninja minus the tall one who lacked a shirt smiled wickedly.

"I was hoping you would say that. It makes our job much more fun," the blue haired teen stated as he charged forwards.

"Alright, let the game begin!" a tan teen with six arms stated as he pulled what appeared to be a bow made of some hardened golden

sticky substance from his mouth.

"You pieces of shit have no idea what you're going up against!" the lone girl, a redhead, stated.

"Come on Tayuya, there are kids here," the fat teen protested.

"Shut your fucking mouth, fatass!" Tayuya angrily replied.

"This isn't good!" Iruka panicked as his hands went through hand seals. "Worldly Protective Barrier!"

Multiple circles of seals expanded from Iruka's feet, forming an invisible barrier his enemies crashed against.

"Iruka-sensei, we can help you!" Hagane shouted as he walked towards him.

"Don't move! Stay where you are! This is too dangerous for you!" Iruka chided him.

"But-"

"No buts! I can't fight and protect you at the same time!" Iruka stated.

While the teacher and the Hokage's son continued arguing, the fat teen started to make hand seals of his own.

"Earth Release: Rising Pillar!"

Like the name implied, a pillar of stone emerged from under Iruka's feet, making him lose balance and fall on his back, making him unable to keep his barrier. It was followed by a whistle, and suddenly a golden arrow impaled Iruka, pinning him to the ground.

"Woohoo! One hit kill!" the teen with the six arms cheered.

"IRUKA!" both Ebisu and Daikoku yelled at the same time.

His fear evaporated, Ebisu angrily looked at the attackers, and made a hand seal. "You will pay for that! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two clones appeared at Ebisu's sides.

"You think that impresses us, you fucker?" Tayuya asked.

The two clones charged at the foul-mouthed redhead, pulling a kunai each. On her part, Tayuya pulled a flute, and surprisingly, used it to successfully parry the blows. With a couple of well placed punches, the clones were no more.

However, Tayuya had left herself wide open while fighting the clones, something the shades-wearing teacher was about to capitalize. He made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Bullet!"

Ebisu breathed a massive stream of fire that caught Tayuya completely off guard. The redhead cursed a profanity as the flames engulfed her.

"Alright, one less enemy to care about..." Ebisu thought as he directed his sight towards the remaining enemies before he was brutally kicked in the face, hurling him backwards.

"Don't count me out so soon, you piece of shit!" Tayuya yelled.

"How...?" a disoriented Ebisu mumbled, and he realized that there was a white thread stuck on Tayuya's back, grabbed at the other end by the six armed teen.

"He pulled her out? How can they be so fast?" Ebisu thought in shock.

"Sweet dreams, you fucker!" was the last thing Ebisu heard before Tayuya kicked his head again.

"Did you guys finish already?" the tall, shirtless teen asked.

"Oh, that's rich, coming from somebody who didn't lift a finger to help us!" the guy with the blue hair stated as he tossed the corpse of Daikoku to the ground.

"You didn't look like you needed my help. However, I must remind you that I'm the leader of this operation, and you should address me as such. Your tone won't be tolerated anymore, Sakon," the white haired man stated.

"Whatever you say, Kimimaro- *sama*," Sakon said the suffix in a mocking tone.

"So, shall we grab the brats, or what?" Tayuya asked as she headed towards the children.

Suddenly, there was a white blur, an impact sound, and Tayuya was knocked backwards with an impressive force. Everybody had their mouths agape when they realized what just happened.

"The hell?" the six armed teen asked in shock.

"MY EYE! THAT FUCKING MIDGET GAVE ME A BLACK EYE!" Tayuya yelled as she held her hurt eye with one hand.

"If you touch me or my sister, you're going to regret it!" Hagane defiantly claimed. His body started to glow with a white aura.

"You can't be serious kid; you can't hope to defeat us. Be a good brat and come with us peacefully," Sakon told him as he walked towards him.

Hagane lunged at Sakon, ready to punch him like he did to Tayuya. However, Sakon saw it coming and caught the boy's fist in his hand before twisting it, and wrapped his other arm around the boy's neck, immobilizing him.

'Shit! This guy is much stronger than he looks! And what's with the weird-ass aura?' the blue haired teen thought.

"Let me go, you freak!" Hagane protested as he squirmed.

"Don't worry brother, I'll save you!" Kaida replied as she made several hand seals at a rather slow speed, but she wasn't interrupted. "Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Multiple wooden branches emerged from below the oto ninja, wrapping around them.

"The hell? And that girl can use Wood Release?" Kidomaru asked. "No wonder Orochimaru-sama is so interested in these brats..."

While the others tried to futilely break from the tree branches, Kimimaro remained calm, and grew multiple bone spikes around his body, shattering the wood branches into splinters. Then, fast as lightning, he moved behind Kaida and knocked her out cold with a precise strike to the neck. He repeated the process with Hagane.

"Pathetic. To think you needed my help to deal with these children..." Kimimaro stated. "Come on, we need to get moving."

"Should we finish them off?" Jirobo asked while he pointed to Ebisu and Iruka.

Kimimaro shook his head. "That won't be necessary. Let's continue with the plan."

And thus, the Sound Five left the scene.

...

Not far from there, Orochimaru and his former sensei landed on a clear expanse, surrounded by debris and some corpses of both Konoha and Oto ninja.

"You know, sensei, I'm kind of glad that you managed to survive the Uchiha Insurrection," Orochimaru grinned sadistically. He pointed the Kusanagi blade at him. "That way, I'll get to kill you myself. The icing of the cake of Konoha's destruction!"

"Then I see hunger in your future," Hiruzen replied, as his grip on the Adamantine Staff tightened.

"Said the prey to the predator. But enough talking, your death is long overdue," Orochimaru thrust both arms forward. "Multiple Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Multiple snakes emerged from Orochimaru's sleeves and lunged at Hiruzen like they did with Jiraiya not long ago. Hirzuen merely smirked, and with a deceptively high accuracy and speed, the former Hokage smacked all of the snakes with multiple quick strikes the moment they were any close to him. After he was done, he tossed the staff at Orochimaru.

Orochimaru's Sharingan spun, and the Snake Sannin easily dodged the thrown weapon. However, the moment it passed him, the staff turned back into Enma, the Monkey King, who tried to crush Orochimaru with a double fist slam, which the pale skinned man dodged as well, albeit with a bit more effort.

"You'll need more than a primitive creature to tip the scale in your favor, sensei," Orochimaru taunted.

Angry, Enma bared his fangs. "I'll show you how 'primitive' I can be, you traitor!"

The white ape dashed at Orochimaru, and launched a flurry of punches and kicks the Sannin had little trouble dodging or blocking them, albeit he was forced to admit that the creature had a fair share of physical strength. Tired of dodging, Orochimaru went on the offensive and tried to impale Enma, who gracefully dodged every blow.

"You apes are starting to get on my nerves," Orochimaru darkly stated as he delivered another stabbing swing.

"Look how much I care," the monkey replied as he used one of his feet to grab the Sannin's wrist and pulled him closer, wrapping his

arms around his neck, leaving him immobilized. "Hiruzen, now!"

Calling Sarutobi was unnecessary as the former Hokage was already rushing towards the temporary helpless Orochimaru, ready to sink a kunai into his flesh. However, much to his surprise, four white snakes emerged from his back, tearing his clothes, as they tried to bite Hiruzen, forcing the old man to pull back.

Their initial target out of reach, the snakes attacked Enma, who was forced to release the Snake Sannin, and jumped behind Hiruzen. The Sannin then discarded his ruined clothes, leaving him shirtless. Hiruzen could see that the snakes were seamlessly attached to Orochimaru's back, as if they were additional limbs. He turned around and grinned at his former master.

"Admiring my body modifications, sensei?" Orochimaru asked him. "They're truly a work of art. You can thank the Forbidden Scroll for that. Then again, my current coworkers have very diverse opinions on what constitutes true art."

"'Admire' isn't the word I use, my former apprentice," Hiruzen replied in disgust. "I don't know what would bring somebody to mutilate his own body for the sake of power like you just did."

"Mutilate? Oh, now you're being rude, sensei," Orochimaru shook his head in fake disappointment. "Are you angry to see that there are more ways to become a ninja other than what you preached?"

"Despite the raw talent you possess, you were always prone to take shortcuts," Hiruzen chastised him.

"Aren't shortcuts meant to be taken? If there are two or more possible paths to the intended destination, why is wrong to choose the shorter one?" Orochimaru asked. "Our lives are finite, and wasting time that you could use doing something else is simply stupid. Even somebody like me, who has transcended death, can still see the futility of taking the longest road just for the sake of a moral high ground."

"Not that you cared about morals in any way, Orochimaru. Otherwise, so many innocent people wouldn't have lost their lives in your mad experiments," Hiruzen retorted.

"As any ninja can attest, there's no such thing as innocent people, just people who never had the chance to sin yet. Regardless of what you might want to say, you're no better than me, sensei. After all, how many people have you killed in your long ninja career?" Orochimaru replied.

"I did kill, yes. War is never easy, nor glorious. But the difference between you and me is that I killed enemy ninja who could fight and knew what they were going against when they started their careers, not children or civilians who were unable to defend themselves!" Hiruzen spat back.

"Lacking power doesn't make people more worthy of having their lives spared. Pretty much the opposite. Anyway, enough chit chat, we already delayed your death enough," Orochimaru then started making hand seals. "Five Elemental Release: Massive Elemental Barrage!"

Orochimaru blew a large gust of wind from his mouth, while each of his snakes fired a stream of fire, lightning, water and rocks from their mouths. The five attacks combined into a single blast that encompassed the five elements. Hiruzen's eyes opened wide in shock, but was able to react in time.

"Earth Release: Multiple Earth Dome Jutsu!"

Several layers of domes formed around Hiruzen and Enma just before the multi-elemental blast could hit its intended target. The force of five elements was enough to plow through all the barriers Hiruzen had erected, but in the end, it missed the target. However, Orochimaru didn't look deterred in the slightest.

"You can't escape from my eyes, sensei," Orochimaru mentioned as two of his snakes detached from the main body and dug

underground.

Seconds later, Hiruzen, holding Enma back in staff form, was forced to return back into the surface. The snakes also returned, and merged again with Orochimaru.

"How the hell did he spot us...?" Sarutobi mused.

"Hiruzen, the snake to the left! It has different eyes than the others!" Enma pointed out.

Sarutobi realized that his summon was right. While all the snakes had yellow eyes with slitted pupils, like Orochimaru when his Sharingan wasn't active, one of the snakes had pure white eyes. And most distressing, there were multiple tiny veins around them, which would have been almost impossible to see unless you were looking for them.

"Not only the Sharingan... but also the Byakugan?" Sarutobi asked in shock.

"The human skull only has space for two eyes. But then again, I've always been known for my inventiveness," Orochimaru mocked, as he shrugged. "Don't weep sensei. The previous owner of these Byakugan doesn't need them anymore. Now sensei, the wise thing to do would be to accept defeat, and at least you'd keep your dignity intact. You can't defeat me. You have no idea what I have become."

"On the contrary. I'm very aware of what you've become. I did a long time ago," Sarutobi then adopted a fighting stance.

"So you think you can pose a threat against somebody who wields two of the three greatest doujutsu? And you call me prideful," Orochimaru chuckled as he shook his head.

"I fought against both the Sharingan and Byakugan in the past, and I do know how to deal with them," Sarutobi started to make hand seals. "Yin Release: Bringer of Darkness!"

The whole battleground was covered by shadows, leaving both combatants in the dark. However, since Sarutobi was a sensor, he had some advantage.

"Very ingenious, sensei, but I'm afraid this will be insufficient," Orochimaru taunted, expecting an answer that never came. *"Of course he's not answering. He doesn't want to reveal his position. Too bad for him I have my ways to find sneaky rats who want to play hide and seek,"* Orochimaru thought as his four snakes detached from his back and began to scout the darkened area, using their bodies to sense the ground's vibrations.

After a few seconds, they located their prey.

"You're mine, sensei!" Orochimaru shouted as he dashed at where he thought Sarutobi was, and sunk the Kusanagi blade on his gut, followed by a pained grunt.

The darkness receded, and as the light returned, Orochimaru saw in delight his sword embedded into his sensei's innards, and Hiruzen looking with his eyes open in disbelief. However, Orochimaru realized that there was something wrong: there was no blood leaking from the wound. In fact, upon further inspection, he noticed that the inside of his body wasn't filled with flesh and blood, but paper.

In horror, the Sannin realized that they were explosive tags. He wanted to pull the sword out, but Sarutobi -or better said, a clone made of explosive tags- quickly grabbed Orochimaru before smirking and detonating.

To say that what followed was a massive explosion that sent a tremor several kilometers around would have been an equally massive understatement.

A lesser man would have died instantly. Even Orochimaru's heavily modified body was barely able to come out alive. And Hiruzen would have been able to terminate his treacherous ex-apprentice there and then if it wasn't for his conveniently insidious body replacement

technique, which once again generated a completely new and healthy body, even if it came at a heavy chakra cost.

Sarutobi emerged from underground, amused that he had caught Orochimaru off guard with such a trick, even if it failed to kill him.

"So that's the power of the wielder of two of the three greatest doujutsu?" the former Hokage asked in a mocking tone. "If that's the case, then I'm disappointed."

Orochimaru got up and bared his teeth in a menacing snarl. "You will pay for that," he hissed, his voice dripping even more hate than usual.

Sarutobi adopted a fighting stance. "Here is your chance, Orochimaru. Come and get me if you can."

...

Meanwhile, in a part of Konoha that used to be a residential area, but that was now covered in a deep forest, two of Konoha's best Jonin were about to face one of Orochimaru's aces in the hole, the resurrected First Hokage, perched on a tree branch.

"So it's true. Orochimaru did somehow brought the Hokage back to life," Kakashi said in amazement, upon seeing the First himself from below.

"To fight one of the strongest ninja who ever lived... if the situation wasn't so dire, I would be giddy!" Gai exclaimed.

"You are giddy," Kakashi pointed out.

"So, two new ninja want to face me?" Hashirama asked as he jumped from one branch to another in order to meet his new opponents. "Not to sound arrogant, but I'd recommend you to flee. I don't want to be responsible for any more dead Konoha ninja."

"And I don't think we could be called ourselves Konoha ninja if we abandoned the village in its hour of need," Kakashi retorted.

"Very well! I'm glad to see that you don't lack courage! Now..." Hashirama then looked at Gai, and his eyes were wide open in shock. "YOU!"

Gai was taken aback. "Me...?"

"Yes, you!" Hashirama repeated. "Your haircut! I LIKE IT!"

Gai's face went from confusion to sheer, unadulterated joy. His mouth curved into the widest smile ever seen. It wasn't a cocky or confident smile which was part of his trademark "nice guy" pose, but a smile of pure happiness.

"This has to be a joke..." Kakashi muttered.

"YOU THINK SO!?" Gai loudly replied.

"Of course! It reminds me of my youth!" Hashirama replied as he gave Gai a thumbs up.

"The First Hokage thinks... that my hair is youthful..." Gai repeated in a whisper, as his emotions were too much to handle, and fainted.

A deafening silence followed as both Kakashi and Hashirama tried to process what happened.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I did NOT intend for that to happen?" Hashirama sheepishly said.

"This HAS to be a joke..." Kakashi repeated again, watching incredulously at Gai's unconscious form.

"Watch out!" Hashirama called as he began making hand seals.
"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

A serpentine dragon made of wood emerged from the ground and lunged at Kakashi. The copy ninja jumped back as he made hand seals of his own. "Fire Release: Great Fireball jutsu!"

Kakashi breathed a large fireball through his mask, which burned the wood dragon enough to stop it on its tracks. However, the dragon was merely a distraction to get close to the white haired ninja. Fortunately, Kakashi's Sharingan caught Hashirama trying to sneak from behind, and parried a sword blow with a kunai just in time.

"Nice reflexes," Hashirama mentioned, as he delivered more swipes. "Albeit I suppose that you should thank your Sharingan for them, am I right?"

"While true, I like to think that there's more to me than my Sharingan, Hokage-sama," Kakashi replied as he managed to kick Hashirama in the chest, pushing him backwards.

"You're clearly not an Uchiha. How did you get that Sharingan?" Hashirama asked as he charged once again.

"It was the parting gift of a good friend of mine. One of the best friends I ever had," Kakashi replied, trying to stop Obito's memory from making him lose his cool.

"I see. I used to have an Uchiha friend as well. Things didn't work out so well," Hashirama sorrowfully replied.

"We know about Madara. It's taught at history class at the Academy," Kakashi replied before throwing a smoke bomb, engulfing the area in smoke.

"Wow, I feel so honored to see that I'm mentioned in a history book!" Hashirama genuinely gushed. "And what do those books say about-"

"Lightning Blade!"

The First Hokage saw Kakashi's lightning coated arm bursting through his chest. However, when Kakashi pulled out his arm, he realized that his hand wasn't covered in blood, but wood splinters.

"What the... a Wood Clone?" Kakashi asked.

"Be careful!" the real Hashirama warned from behind. "Wood Release: Great Forest Jutsu!"

More thick wooden roots emerged from below and lunged at Kakashi. The copy nin was barely able to dodge all of them, pick Gai's unconscious body, and find a place to hide.

"Dammit Gai, snap out of it!" Kakashi angrily whispered as he slapped his green clad friend awake.

"Huh... what happened?" Gai mumbled.

"Good, you're awake. We're fighting against a revived Hashirama Senju. He complimented your hair, and you fainted. Care to help me deal with him?" Kakashi said in rapid motion.

Gai immediately was snapped awake, and quickly stood up. "Y-Yes! Sorry about that. It's that... well, a compliment from the First isn't something you expect to get any day."

"I'll be happy if you don't do that again," Kakashi replied. "Here he comes!"

And just as Kakashi said, Hashirama was upon them. "Oh, I see your friend with the nice hair is awake. Hope he's strong, you're going to need all the possible help."

"You bet he is," Kakashi replied then turned to Gai.

"Given the quality of our opponent, I guess that I should skip the warm up," Gai declared, as he crossed his arms in front of his face, before moving both arms back. "Gate of Opening, open! Gate of

Healing, open! Gate of Life, open! Gate of Pain, open! Gate of Limit, open! Gate of View, open!"

As the Gates were released, Gai's body started to emit powerful bursts of chakra, and an intense green aura glowed around his body. His skin turned maroon and his eyes were pure white.

"Watch out Gai, you already used the Gates when fighting Manda, you don't want to push your body beyond its limits," Kakashi warned.

"My body is still far from its limit, my rival, don't worry about that! Let's focus on the enemy at hand instead!" Gai stated as he faced Hashirama.

"Very well then!" an excited Hashirama replied as he began making hand seals. "Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

More wooden roots emerged both from the ground and from the existing trees, aiming at both Konoha ninja. Gai, however, had the perfect answer to that. He dashed at the incoming trees and reared both fists back.

"Morning Peacock!"

Gai began to throw punches at the tree branches at such speed that even Kakashi's Sharingan was having a hard time seeing them. The flurry of punches released multiple fireballs in every direction, setting the forest ablaze. Kakashi knew how to capitalize on that.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Kakashi blew a powerful gust of wind which increased the existing flames, consuming the improvised forest even faster. Hashirama watched the display intently.

"Not bad. Not bad. I wonder if you-" Hashirama's thoughts were interrupted when Gai suddenly appeared in front of him and kicked him upwards.

And somehow, Gai was already waiting for Hashirama up in the sky.

"Morning Peacock!"

This time, the storm of blazing punches landed squarely on Hashirama. The last punch sent Hashirama crashing back to the ground, making a crater upon impact. However, that wasn't the end of the beating.

The sound of a thousand birds chirping filled the air as Kakashi dashed towards the downed Hashirama, his hand crackling with electricity.

'Please let this be the real one and not a clone,' Kakashi thought, still a bit bitter for wasting one of his four Lightning Blades on a mere clone.

Upon seeing Hashirama, he canceled his jutsu in time. The wounds caused by Gai's attacks showed some of the First Hokage's innards, and they weren't made of flesh and blood, but dirt and ashes, much to Kakashi's puzzlement.

"What kind of clone are you?" the copy ninja asked, tilting his head.

"As hard as it is to believe, I'm not a clone," Hashirama replied as he stood up. Ash and dirt began to swirl around his wounds, quickly healing them until he was good as new. "This jutsu will restore my body to full health, no matter the power of the attacks you use to harm me."

"And you're telling us now?" Kakashi asked in disbelief.

"Sorry, I kinda forgot!" Hashirama sheepishly apologized.

"Definitely not how I imagined the God of Ninja," Kakashi thought as he sweat dropped.

"Kakashi, what are we going to do? Should I open more Gates?" Gai asked, panting a bit. The backlash of the Gates was starting to

become evident.

"No. You heard him; the power of our jutsu is irrelevant. Let's try to fight him smart and save our chakra until we find a way to permanently kill him," Kakashi suggested.

"The best course of action would be to find Orochimaru and force him to undo the jutsu," Hashirama suggested. "But I'm afraid that I won't let you go like that."

"In that case, then maybe I can be of assistance," a female voice said as somebody else landed besides Kakashi and Gai.

"Tsunade-sama!" Gai said in surprise.

"Tsunade?" the First repeated in shock. "Tsunade, is that you?"

Tsunade looked at the resurrected form of her beloved grandfather with sad eyes. "Yes. It's me, grandfather. Pity that we won't be able to enjoy this re-encounter as much as we could."

"You grew a lot, Tsunade," Hashirama's eyes then rested on her breasts. "In some ways, much more than I would have preferred."

Tsunade frowned, but decided to ignore that comment. "Unless Orochimaru explicitly ordered you to kill these two in particular, I'm the biggest threat now, so you'll have to fight me," Tsunade stated as she took a step forward, then looked at Kakashi and Gai. "You two, go help somewhere else. Find Orochimaru if you can."

"Yes, Tsunade-sama!" both men said at the same time before leaping away.

"You were barely a Genin when I died," Hashirama mentioned, his voice full of excitement. "I want to know how strong you've gotten over the years, Tsunade."

Tsunade smirked. "I'm sure you won't be disappointed."

...

"First the Nine Tails attack, then my clan's uprising, and now this!" Shisui shouted in frustration as he dispatched an Oto ninja. "Do all villages go through this crap on a regular basis, or is it just us?"

"Look at that, Shisui the Teleporter. Orochimaru-sama will be very happy if I bring him your remaining eye," an Oto ninja stated. Judging by his uniform, he appeared to be an officer.

"Look at that, a random, nameless Oto ninja that's destined to die by my blade just like the fourteen others who tried to pull the same stunt on me," Shisui sarcastically replied. "Can we make this quick? I promised my girlfriend we'd go looking for cribs this afternoon."

"You want it quick? Then so be it," the Oto ninja stated. He then started to grow in size, as well as becoming more muscular. As his clothes ripped apart, Shisui could see that his skin was becoming a brownish gray. An additional pair of arms grew under the first ones. "Now you're going to feel the power of Orochimaru's cursed seal!"

"YOU feel the power of my tanto!" Shisui retorted, suddenly appeared from behind as he slashed the mutated ninja's back, but it didn't produce any wound. In fact, it felt like trying to slash very hard leather. "The hell...?"

The four armed ninja capitalized on Shisui's surprise by giving him a backhanded smack with such force that send the oldest Uchiha flying several meters, until he crashed against a wall.

"Ugghh..." Shisui groaned as he painfully got up, but had no time to wallow in pain as the mutated ninja leaped at him, his upper arms raised ready to deliver a double axe handle. "SHIT!"

Making a hand seal, Shisui Body Flickered away a couple seconds before the four armed Oto ninja smashed the spot, making a loud noise and raising a cloud of dust. When the dust dispelled, the Oto ninja was there, giving Shisui a sharp-toothed evil grin.

"What's up, Uchiha? Can't keep up with me?" the mutated ninja taunted.

Shisui crossed his arms confidently. "Actually, I already won."

The four armed man snarled. "You certainly are confident, one-eyed scum. Let's see what do you say after- hey, what the hell?" Much to the cursed seal ninja's shock, a pit of tar formed at his feet, and he quickly started to sink. He tried to get out, but the more he moved, the faster he sank. "No, NO! Don't let me die! Please, I beg you, save me!" the Oto ninja pleaded as he sank completely before everything turned into darkness.

Little did he know that Shisui had placed him in a genjutsu, and everything that happened did so in his mind. However, the shock was enough to knock him unconscious, and his cursed seal receded.

"Your skin might be impenetrable, but your mind... not so much," Shisui declared, even if his enemy could never hear him.

At that moment, a small crow came down from the sky, and the oldest Uchiha extended an arm so the bird could land on it.

"Shisui-san, my clones are watching over all of Konoha, and I've identified several spots where you could help the most," the crow informed.

Shisui nodded. "Thank you, Kurokaze-sama. Tell me which one is the closest."

"Actually, I believe that there's something else you should do first, Itachi-san is fighting against an enemy that might be too much for him," the crow boss clone told him.

Shisui was taken aback. "WHAT? What kind of enemy is too much for Itachi? Orochimaru himself?"

"This may be hard to believe, but it seems to be Tobirama Senju," Kurokaze replied.

Shisui's confusion grew by the minute. "The Second Hokage? That can't be right."

"But it is," the bird insisted. "And he's not the only one. His brother, Hashirama, is fighting against Konoha as well. Both Hokage are displaying the unique skills they're well known for, albeit at a smaller scale, so I believe they have been brought back to life somehow."

"Damn... this complicates things even further... anyway, take me to Itachi, I can't let him die," Shisui told him.

Kurokaze nodded, and took off again, with Shisui following him from below.

...

Jiraiya and Anko, already out of Konoha, were leaping from one tree branch to another while fleeing from their immortal pursuers. Jiraiya's hands were clapped together, and according to him he was preparing a jutsu that would at the very least, balance the fight a bit more in their favor.

"Hokage-sama, the last of our decoy Shadow Clones have been destroyed," Anko informed the Sannin. "Minato-sama won't take much longer to catch up with us."

"I know, but try not to panic, we have to keep going," Jiraiya replied.

"How much longer until that jutsu of yours is complete?" Anko asked again.

"Not much longer. Stop asking questions and focus. Let's keep going for a little longer, and I'll be able to do it," Jiraiya replied.

They continued moving forwards, with Anko looking backwards from time to time, each time growing more and more antsy. He was now

regretting not listening to Jiraiya when he told her to leave. Not only was she away from the fight with Orochimaru, but now she was trapped in a fight against one of Konoha's most powerful ninja who on top of that was immortal as well.

Anko's eyes grew in horror as she caught sight of a yellow blur moving through the trees, following a red blur not too late afterwards.

"Hokage-sama, is that jutsu ready? They're already here!" Anko called in panic.

"Just a little longer!" Jiraiya replied, as beads of sweat appeared on his temples.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

"SHIT!" Jiraiya cursed.

A multitude of chains emerged from the forest. Jiraiya and Anko managed to dodge all of them, albeit it took Jiraiya more effort since he couldn't use his arms to properly keep the balance. In a blur, Minato appeared in front of him, his hand holding a chakra sphere.

"Sorry, sensei," Minato sorrowfully said before slamming the chakra sphere into Jiraiya "Rasengan!"

However, Jiraiya managed to kick Minato's hand in the last second before the sphere of destruction could touch him. Anko tossed several kunai at him, forcing the Fourth to use his famed Flying Thunder God Jutsu to avoid it. But that action bought Jiraiya the last seconds he needed to complete what he was preparing.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Jiraiya slammed both hands into the ground, creating a huge cloud of smoke. Minato teleported back to the battlefield, appearing besides his wife, and looking at the vanishing cloud of smoke. Minato already knew what his sensei was planning.

"So, you called them, sensei?" Minato asked.

"Yes. Summoning the toad sages take way more time than summoning other toads, hence I had to stall the fight for some time. But now we're ready!" Jiraiya enthusiastically declared.

"Wait a minute, that voice... no, it can't be Minato-chan," a high pitched female voice stated.

When the smoke dispelled, Jiraiya had changed. His nose was bigger and had warts on it, had now a goatee on his chin, and red markings at each side of his face. There were also two small, cloak-wearing toads perched on each of his shoulders.

"So my old eyes aren't deceiving me," the toad on Jiraiya's right shoulder, a green toad with bushy white eyebrows and a white goatee stated in disbelief.

"But... how can this be possible?" the one to the left, a purple and yellow toad with a bulbous head, screeched incredulous.

"Fukasaku-sama, Shima-sama, is good to see you again, even if it's under such circumstances," Minato said in an apologetic tone.

"And I think that's his wife, Kushina-chan too!" Fukasaku pointed out. "But I thought that both of them died the night the Nine Tails attacked!"

"Impure Word Resurrection," was Jiraiya's answer, and both toads understood.

"I hoped that abominable jutsu had died with its creator," Shima screeched.

"We all thought so, but Orochimaru found a way to learn it," Jiraiya replied. "You seem familiar with the jutsu, so you'll probably know that Minato and Kushina are immortal and have unlimited chakra. We need to find some way to incapacitate them."

"You can count on us, Jiraiya-chan," Fukasaku replied.

Jiraiya then looked at Anko. "Anko, same strategy as before. I'll take the brunt of their attacks. You stay back, cover me, and capitalize every opening you see."

Anko nodded. "Understood, Hokage-sama."

All present slipped into battle stances. The real duel of the Hokage was about to begin.

...

Konoha Academy

When Naruto and Hinata arrived to the Academy, their hearts skipped a beat. The image was disheartening: many academy students gathered around the wounded -or even dead- teachers, some of them crying, others trying to comfort each other, while a few discussing what to do.

"Neechan!" Hanabi called upon seeing her sister arrive, and rushed to hug her.

"Hanabi-chan, are you okay?" Hinata asked her sister. Hanabi nodded, but was clearly shaken.

"Please, help Iruka-sensei!" Hanabi asked.

Both Chunin looked at the downed instructor, and saw that there was an arrow impaling him that also pinned him to the ground. Hinata activated her Byakugan, and inspected the wound.

"Alright, the arrow didn't hit any vital spot," Hinata said aloud.

"Naruto-kun, I need you to remove the arrow very slowly. I'll stop the hemorrhage and close the wound."

"Alright," Naruto agreed, and broke in half the arrow so it would be easier to pull Iruka off. "Iruka-sensei, I'm afraid that this is going to

hurt a lot."

"I-It's okay... Naruto..." Iruka replied, before coughing blood.

"Don't talk! You'll waste your energy," Hinata chided him. "Are you ready, Naruto-kun? Okay... start pulling now!"

Naruto followed Hinata's instructions, and in a few minutes, they managed to remove the arrow from Iruka's body, as well as healing his wounds. Naruto also healed the unconscious Ebisu. Sadly, there was nothing they could do for Daikoku.

"Thank you, you two," Iruka stated, as he tried to stand up. "Boy, I'm so glad Tsunade-sama started that medic-nin program, or else I'd be a goner."

"Careful! You're still too weak," Hinata advised, as she helped him stand up.

"Iruka-sensei, where are Kaida and Hagane?" Naruto asked, surprisingly calm.

Iruka looked down, and sighed. "They took them away, Naruto. The ninja who kidnapped them knew about their heritage, and possibly their Bloodline Limits as well. It seems that they were two of Orochimaru's targets."

"I see," Naruto gravely replied. "Do you know what direction they took?" Naruto asked.

"Yes, they headed north," Iruka replied, but he regretted doing so upon realizing why Naruto asked that. "Wait a minute, you're not thinking in going after them, are you!?"

"What the hell am I supposed to do then!?" Naruto snapped at his former teacher. "Let that traitorous bastard turn my siblings into his guinea pigs? I'd die before letting that happen!"

"Naruto, those ninja are very strong. I don't think you'll have a chance against them," Iruka said.

"Maybe not, but I don't have to do it alone," Naruto then made his most used hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Twenty clones appeared besides Naruto. "You three, escort the children to the bunkers, and take Iruka-sensei and Ebisu-sensei to the hospital. Everybody else... gather the rest."

The clones nodded, and left to carry their tasks. Iruka, however, wasn't done.

"Naruto, I can't let you do this! What happened was tragic, but what you want to do is suicide! I forbid you to go after them!" Iruka shouted, before coughing.

"You *forbid* me?" Naruto mockingly asked. "In case you didn't notice, you're no longer my superior. We're both Chunin now. Now you should let my clones carry you to the hospital before your wounds reopen."

Iruka sighed in defeat. "Very well then. There's nothing I can do to convince you to drop this madness. However... be careful out there, Naruto."

"I will," Naruto then looked at Hinata. "Hinata-hime, come on! We have to rescue my siblings!"

"Yes!" Hinata replied.

And both Naruto and Hinata headed north, in pursuit of the Senju twins' kidnappers.

Author's Note: And thus the invasion continues.

The fight between Hiruzen and Orochimaru was my way to make up to all the people who (justifiably) complained that I

made the Third into too much of a wimp during the Uchiha Coup D'etat arc. Hopehe's now as badass as he should be.

Now, this is going to disappoint a lot of people, but better say it now before their hopes grow too much: No, Naruto isn't going to meet Minato and Kushina. The reason for this is that Naruto will be the focus of another plot (you can see what is going to be about) and because I wanted to focus more on Jiraiya's interactions with Minato and Kushina. Naruto did get to meet his parents in canon (in case of Minato, more than once), while Jiraiya never get to meet them again.

However, this doesn't mean that Naruto will never get to meet his parents. I just prefer to leave such event for the future. Remember that he still has their chakra sealed within him alongside the Kyubi ;)

Once again, thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Guess that's all. I hope you're enjoying how the current arc is developing, and while you wait for the next chapter, don't forget to review! Reviews makes me really, really, really happy!

The Hokage's Swan Song

Author's Note: Last wednesday marked a year since I published this story. Time surely flies, doesn't it? I never expected that, when I published this story, it would get such a great reception, or that it would break the 300K word mark as well. I mean, my longest story back then failed to reach such number and took me almost five years to write.

Anyway, enjoy the chapter, and see you at the bottom notes:

Chapter 35:

The Hokage's Swan Song

or

Don't think this is over already

...

In the middle of the forest clearing, the four Konoha ninja stared at each other, waiting for their respective enemies to make the first movement. Eventually, the one to attack first was Minato, who in a display of superhuman speed, dashed towards Jiraiya, ready to gut him open with one of his custom kunai.

Fortunately, besides giving him impressive sensory abilities, Sage Mode also enhanced Jiraiya's reflexes, allowing him to welcome Minato with a well placed kick to the face, which sent the former Hokage rolling backwards. His wife decided to take the initiative.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Multiple chains shot from Kushina's back, and flew at the Toad Sage. Jiraiya smirked, jumped at the chains, and started grabbing all of

them. When the last chain was within his grasp, he pulled with his enhanced strength, sending Kushina flying.

"Anko, now!" Jiraiya called.

Anko nodded, and leaped as well to meet Kushina mid air. She then cast her arms forward.

"Multiple Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Many snakes emerged from both her sleeves, and wrapped tightly around Kushina's body, pinning her arms against her body, as well as immobilizing her legs. The Uzumaki woman fell to the ground with a thud, and struggled to break free from the snake's bind, but it was too great.

"Good, it seems that you found a way to restrain me," Kushina praised Anko. "But I'm afraid such trick won't work on my husband, ya know."

"We'll think something," it was Jiraiya who answered. "No ninja is invincible, and Minato is not an exception."

"I wish I could have your confidence, Hokage-sama," Anko replied, a bit panicky as Minato prepared to attack again.

Once again, Minato pulled out one of his customized kunai -Jiraiya wondered if the Impure World Resurrection provided him an infinite stock- and tossed it high into the air, just above the Hokage and the Special Jonin. Minato then teleported to the flying kunai, grabbed it with one hand while making a hand seal with the other.

"Shadow Clone Kunai Jutsu!"

Minato tossed the kunai downwards, which instantly turned into a dozen.

"Pa!" Jiraiya called.

"On it!" the small ancient toad replied. He took a deep breath, and blew a powerful gust of wind at the incoming kunai, dispersing them in every direction.

Anko decided that it was a good time to take advantage of Fukasaku's jutsu. "Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullet!"

Anko breathed a stream of fire into Fukasaku's wind attack, which turned it into a fiery wave of fire. Unfortunately, Minato vanished before the flames could engulf him.

"Anko, to your right!" Jiraiya warned.

Anko pulled out a kunai and took a defensive swipe, just in time to stop a couple of incoming shuriken. Minato repeated the process multiple times, teleporting to one his marked kunai, pelting Anko and Jiraiya with shuriken, and disappear before they could counterattack. Sometimes, he tossed another of his marked kunai. The two Konoha ninja decided to fight back to back in order to have a better chance blocking his projectiles.

"Dammit! We can't stay like this! If all we do is just defend, he'll end up killing us!" Anko protested.

"Sensei, my marked kunai! Try to take them and toss them away!" Minato advised, while he continued his onslaught.

"I'd like to try, but you won't let me!" Jiraiya replied in frustration.

"Oh, sorry..." Minato sheepishly said.

"Leave that to us, boy!" Shima interjected. She opened her mouth, and used her long tongue to catch one of the kunai in the ground and passed it to Jiraiya who sealed it inside a scroll. Both Fukasaku and Shima repeated the process until there were no kunai left. Jiraiya then burned the scroll to make sure Minato couldn't retrieve them.

"I believe that's the last one, good job!" Minato praised them.
"However, you should be careful now. Since I'm out of kunai, I'll more than likely try to leave a mark in your bodies, and once I do that, the mark won't be able to be removed, so make sure I don't get near you."

"I'll try," Jiraiya dourly replied, as he prepared for Minato's next attack, which didn't take any time to arrive, as he made a single hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Minato created a single clone, and the two of them made a single hand seal each.

"Fire Release: Majestic Hurricane!"

Minato's clone blew a massive tornado, while the original breathed a stream of fire into it, creating a tornado of flames which advanced menacingly towards Jiraiya and Anko. Luckily, Jiraiya was on his way to counter it.

"Earth Release: Multiple Earth Style Walls!"

Several tall and thick stone walls emerged from the ground, getting in the way between the fire storm and the two Konoha ninja.

Jiraiya tried to guess what Minato was going to do "I know Minato. Even if he's out of kunai, he only uses attacks of this scale as a distraction. He'll use it to get close to us and mark us. But thanks to Sage Mode I can sense where he is."

The tornado was enough to plow through the walls, but with each wall it destroyed lost some power, until it was completely dispelled.

"Wait, he's still far from us, where he could be... OH SHIT!" Jiraiya inwardly cursed in realization.

"Sensei, I'm over here!" Minato called, albeit it was too late.

Jiraiya and Anko saw that Minato had teleported where they had left Kushina, and dispelled the summoned snakes, releasing her.

"Of course he would try to save Kushina first," Jiraiya thought, berating himself for not realizing of that. "Even if it's not for love, being supported by an ally is the most logical tactic. Boy, this is going to be a tough fight..."

...

Meanwhile, back at Konoha, Itachi and Tobirama were continuing their duel. Some people saw the fight and wanted to help, but like Jiraiya before him, Itachi told them to go away, since the younger Senju brother was way too powerful for them.

"I think you shouldn't reject their help," Tobirama pointed out as he attacked Itachi with a flurry of kunai swipes.

"I don't do it out of arrogance. Very few ninja here are capable of fighting a Hokage on equal grounds," Itachi replied, as he parried the swipes with his katana, taking a step back each time.

"And you are?" Tobirama asked again. "There's a difference between compassion and condescension. Besides, your breathing is getting worse, and your movements are becoming slower and sloppier as a result, you won't last long against me."

"We'll see about that," Itachi defiantly replied, as he managed to expertly swipe the kunai from Tobirama's hand and kicked him backwards. He dashed towards the Second ready to slice him, but his blade ended up hitting an afterimage.

"Told you not to get overconfident," Tobirama's voice said from behind, as the reanimated Hokage sank a kunai in Itachi's back. But much to the Senju's shock, it shattered when it hit an invisible barrier. "... what?"

A red ghostly ribcage appeared around Itachi, followed by a giant skeletal arm made of pure chakra which tried to grab Tobirama. However, the Hokage reacted in time and dodged the ghostly fingers. A second arm and a skull appeared as well, creating a skeleton, or at least, the upper part of one.

When Tobirama noticed Itachi's eyes, he saw that the tomoes of his sharingan had merged with the pupils creating a pattern of a three-bladed shuriken.

"Mangekyo Sharingan," Tobirama mused aloud. His face frowned in disgust. "Tell me, whom did you have to kill in order to awaken it?"

"With all due respect, Hokage-sama, that's none of your business," Itachi politely but firmly replied, before coughing a bit. "I don't like to resort to this, but I believe I have no other options."

"If you have mastered the Mangekyo Sharingan, combined with your skill in other areas, you weren't boasting when you claimed to be among the few who could fight a Kage on equal grounds," Tobirama admitted. "But make no mistake, yours is far from the first Susanoo I face, and with this body I possess it will be of little help."

"Let's see who's right then," Itachi declared, as flesh started to cover the skeletal chakra construct, giving it a more humanoid appearance.

Tobirama started to make hand seals. "Water Release: Water Formation Wall!

The Second Hokage expelled a massive wall of water from his mouth, ready to crush Itachi and his Susanoo like a Tsunami, but the Uchiha already had a way to counter it.

"Amaterasu!"

A wall of black flames appeared between Itachi and Tobirama, stopping the incoming torrent, since the flames not only couldn't be

doused by water, but they could consume them as if they were fuel, raising a cloud of steam.

"Come, take the bait..." Itachi pleaded as he clutched his chest. His eyes were starting to bleed as well.

Thankfully, as Itachi had hoped, Tobirama used the steam as a cover and leaped above the wall of black flames, heading towards Itachi.

"Valiant effort, but like I told you, in the end, useless," Tobirama said.

"Don't be so soon at claiming victory!" Itachi declared as he was about to play his last card. "Sword of Totsuka!"

A sword made of yellow flames appeared on the right hand of Itachi's Susanoo, and used it to impale Tobirama, who was in mid air, and thus he was unable to dodge the stab.

"Nice hit, but this body can withstand any form of harm, including complete disintegration," Tobirama repeated. Then, he grew confused when the Susanoo grew a second right arm, whose hand was holding a jar. Soon the Second was starting to get pulled into the jar. "What the... what kind of jutsu is this?"

"The Sword of Totsuka will seal inside the jar anything it pierces, no matter how powerful," Itachi explained. "I won't be able to destroy your body, but I can make sure you won't be in a position to do more damage."

"I see," Tobirama smiled as he was being sealed. "Good job defeating me today, Itachi Uchiha. You did Konoha a great service you could feel proud of."

Once Tobirama was completely sealed, Itachi allowed himself to relax. His Susanoo instantly vanished, as his body was completely drained of energy, being replaced by extreme exhaustion and pain. His legs failed to support him, and the Uchiha collapsed into the

ground face first. He could barely move any muscle of his body, and doing so caused him no small amount of pain.

The sound of the nearby battles reminded Itachi that there was still a battle going on around him, and he couldn't take time to rest. But once again, nothing came out of moving. Even if his body deigned to move, his eyes were also hurting like hell, and breathing was nearly impossible. He remained still for several minutes, waiting until somebody found him. Hopefully that somebody would be a Konoha ninja.

"Itachi!"

Itachi tried to turn around to see who called his name. He feared it would be an enemy, but if that was the case he wouldn't have been addressed by his name. Besides, the voice sounded familiar.

The fallen Uchiha felt a pair of hands turning him around, and saw his cousin Shisui staring at him with worried eyes.

"Oh, damn! Look at you! What happened here?" A concerned Shisui asked. With blood pouring from both his mouth and eyes, Itachi didn't look good at all. "Kurokaze-sama told me you were fighting a revived Second Hokage. Where is he?"

"I... I... defeated him..." Itachi managed to reply.

"What? How?" Shisui asked, before shaking his head. "You know what? Forget about it, you can tell me later," Shisui helped Itachi stand up, and had one of Itachi's arms surround his shoulders. "Let's take you to the hospital so Shizune-chan can patch you up."

Shisui made a single hand seal, and the two Uchiha disappeared from there.

...

Orochimaru was grinning widely as he traded blows with his former sensei. The idea that Sarutobi's staff was a living being that felt pain whenever it parried a blow from Kusanagi brought joy to the pale long haired man. However, he suddenly felt something that erased the smile from his lips, and was replaced by shock and incredulity.

"What!?! I can no longer feel Tobirama... !" Orochimaru thought, mildly distressed. *"How? There's no way they could have find a way to permanently kill a reanimated body..."*

Of course, this change of attitude didn't go unnoticed by Sarutobi.

"What's wrong, Orochimaru? Something's not going as you planned?" The formed Hokage sardonically asked.

"No need to panic. Tobirama was the weakest of the reanimated Hokage. As long as Hashirama and Minato are still standing, the invasion can succeed," Orochimaru thought, mostly to calm himself down.

Just in case, the Snake Sannin decided to check how the others were doing. Hashirama was fighting Tsunade - oh, that was too good. Orochimaru wished he could spend more than a second watching his former teammate fighting her beloved grandfather-, and as expected, Minato and Kushina were still fighting Jiraiya and Anko.

However, he realized that, if somebody was able to nullify the Impure World Resurrection once, they could do it again. Better finish this as soon as possible.

"Everything's going just as planned," Orochimaru lied, then he went back to grinning. "Now, to keep going with the plan, let's send you to your grave, okay? Your place in the Memorial Stone is long overdue."

...

Meanwhile, just like how Orochimaru had witnessed, Tsunade was fighting alone against her grandfather. Hashirama summoned several wooden vines that lunged at the Slug Sannin, but they were shattered by a devastating punch.

"Come on grandfather, I know you can do better than this!" Tsunade taunted as she dashed towards the First and tried to kick him.

"I know. However, Orochimaru limited our power, so it's easier for him to keep us under his control," Hashirama explained as she dodged his granddaughter's kick.

Her face didn't reflect it, but Tsunade was grateful for such thing. She was aware of the power of her grandfather, and at full power, he could easily destroy Konoha, or any ninja village, no matter how big or how many ninja they had in their ranks.

"So that's why you haven't entered Sage Mode yet," Tsunade guessed.

"I usually save Sage Mode for the strongest opponents, but I believe that Orochimaru would have wanted me to go all out against Konoha," Hashirama replied. "So don't worry, what you see is what you're going to get."

"Good then," Tsunade bit her thumb and started making hand seals. "Then I should try to use everything I have. Summoning Jutsu!"

Tsunade slammed her hand into the ground, creating a huge cloud of smoke. When the smoke dispelled, Katsuyu the Slug Boss was under Tsunade. She took no time to notice their common enemy.

"Tsunade-sama... is that Hashirama-sama?" Katsuyu asked.

"I'm afraid he is, old friend," Tsunade replied.

"But... but how? Hashirama-sama died during the First Ninja War!" Katsuyu replied, shocked.

"It's too long to explain. Let's say that Orochimaru used his dark arts to bring my grandfather back to life as a puppet of his evil will, and is using him to help his forces destroy Konoha. We have to find a way to send him back where he belongs," Tsunade instructed.

"You can count on me, Tsunade-sama," Katsuyu stated as she charged towards Hashirama. "Acid Spray!"

The giant slug released a wave of yellow corrosive liquid at the reanimated Hokage. Hashirama jumped out of the way, but the acid managed to instantly dissolve all the wood he had summoned prior. Of course, that wasn't nowhere near enough to deter the undead Senju.

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon jutsu!"

A serpentine dragon made of wood emerged from underground, and quickly wrapped itself around the giant slug. Katsuyu struggled a bit, before dividing into multiple smaller clones, which all scattered in multiple directions, with one of the smaller ones attached herself to Tsunade's shoulder.

"I'll heal you from any wound you might get," the small clone replied. "Do you want me to help you, or do you prefer if I help the rest of the Konoha ninja?"

"As much as it pains me to leave my fellow comrades to their own, grandfather is way more dangerous than whatever rabble Orochimaru had gathered, no matter their numbers, so I need you here so we can ensure he doesn't do any more harm to Konoha."

"As you wish, Tsunade-sama," Katsuyu agreed.

Hashirama made a hand seal. "Wood Release: Wood Clone Jutsu!"

Several brown stumps started to grow around Hashirama, and as they grew bigger, they started to take a humanoid form until they

became perfect replicas of the first Hokage, who dashed towards Tsunade.

The Sannin, on her part, started to gather chakra into her right fist, which started to glow with a flaming blue aura, before dashing to meet the wooden clones. She threw her fist against the clone she was the closest.

"Heavenly Fist of Destruction!"

The clone tried to catch Tsunade's punch, but came with such force that it immediately shattered into splinters. The other clones smartly tried to move aside, but Tsunade's attack creating a huge shockwave that also destroyed the ones which were closer, and hurled aside those which were the furthest.

Unopposed, Tsunade charged towards her grandfather, who waited for her in a fighting pose.

"You've become a very powerful kunoichi, Tsuna. I'm really proud of you," Hashirama warmly praised her as he dodged Tsunade's destructive blows.

"Thanks. I tried my best to live up to both you and granduncle. Though my ninja path wasn't as great or glorious as I had imagined," Tsunade sorrowfully replied, not ceasing to deliver blows.

"Every legend has its dark side, Tsuna. The important thing is never let said darkness to consume us. I know what happens when somebody let such thing happen," Hashirama stated in a grave tone. " You lost somebody precious to you, didn't you?"

"Yes," Tsunade replied. "My former fiancé, Dan, and Nawaki-chan... I lost both of them during the Second Ninja War..."

"Nawaki-chan is dead!?" Hashirama asked in shock. The fact that there was a Second Ninja War -and unbeknown to him, even a

Third- was just an afterthought. "I'm... I'm very sorry to hear that. I wish I could have been there to comfort you."

The remaining Hashirama clones tried to ambush Tsunade, but they were body slammed by the reformed Katsuyu.

"It's okay, grandfather. There was a time in which I thought that there was no more in life for me, and I gave up to despair..." Tsunade's sight darkened for a second, before lightening up again, and gave a hint of a sincere smile. "But I was able to move on. I learned to love again... and let others love me."

"Does that mean that you're married?" Hashirama tentatively asked, while making hand seals. "Wood Release: Great Forest Jutsu!"

Hashirama's left arm turned into multiple thick tree branches which tried to wrap themselves around Tsunade. Tsunade repelled the attack with a roundhouse kick, shattering the tree branches.

"Yes," Tsunade replied. "There was this man who always tried to hit on me since we were kids. A huge pervert, but also wonderful man. We have four children. Two biological, and two adopted."

Tsunade surprised herself when she realized that she was thinking of Shizune like a daughter. But given that she raised her since Shizune was just a kid, it wouldn't be that surprising.

"Really? That's wonderful! I'm so happy to see that you have such a wonderful life, Tsuna," Hashirama smiled at her. "That's why you need to try your hardest to stop me. You can't let that snake destroy what me and so many others worked so hard to build and preserve!"

"I will try my hardest. I still can't believe that Orochimaru went so far in his vendetta against Konoha," Tsunade mentioned. "To think that we used to be teammates..."

Hashirama was a bit taken aback by the revelation, but his surprise diminished when he remembered that he went through something

similar in his life.

"Betrayal hurts the most when it comes from somebody we thought as a friend, doesn't it?" Hashirama sadly replied.

"We stopped being friends long time ago, but I was hoping Orochimaru wouldn't think of his former home with such disregard," Tsunade replied.

"From what I heard, many tried to destroy the village, and as I can see, they failed so far. Let's make sure Orochimaru becomes the latest in a long line of failures, shall we?" Hashirama asked.

Tsunade smiled, and nodded. "You can count on that."

...

In another part of the village, Asuma and Kurenai were holding off a group of Oto ninja while a group of civilians were being escorted to a nearby bunker.

"Demonic Illusion: Tree Binding Death!"

The enemy ninja close to Kurenai soon saw trees growing around them, their branches wrapping around their bodies, leaving them completely immobilized. Taking advantage of the state of their enemies, Asuma dashed towards them, while channeling his chakra through his trench knives. Unfortunately, two other enemies stood in his way, parrying his attacks with their kunai before the Sarutobi Jonin could reach their prey.

"Come on, give up, you're outnumbered!" one of the Oto ninja called them.

At that moment, several cloaked figures wearing ANBU masks descended from the roofs of nearby building, landing behind the two Konoha Jonin, which smirked at the attackers.

"What do you say now?" Kurenai taunted them.

However, much to her and Asuma's confusion, the Oto ninja started to chuckle, and looked even more confident than before. The two Jonin grew uncomfortable.

"You're still outnumbered," the same Oto nin haughtily replied.

In that moment, Kurenai turned around to see several of the ANBU tossing kunai and shuriken at the unsuspecting couple.

"WATCH OUT!" Kurenai yelled as two kunai appeared on her hands, and deflected some of the tossed weapons. Unfortunately, some find their mark on her partner's back. "ASUMA!"

"Argh!" the bearded man groaned in pain. "It's okay, it's just a flesh wound!"

"But you have..."

"No time to argue!" Asuma started making hand seals. "Wind Release: Dust Cloud Jutsu!"

Asuma exhaled a powerful stream of dust at the Oto ninja. Some of them were also making hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Several Oto ninja answered Asuma's wind attack with a combined fire jutsu of their own, which even if it was weaker individually, together it managed to overpower the Sarutobi's attack. At the same time, the ANBU charged forward.

"Damn!" Asuma cursed.

Fortunately, his girlfriend had him covered. "Earth Release: Double Earth Style Wall!"

Two walls emerged at each side of the street, cutting both the Oto ninja and the traitorous ANBU from them, blocking both the fire attack, as well as stopping the ANBU from reaching them.

The duo's enemies merely jumped above the walls, but they saw, much to their shock, that Asuma and Kurenai had been replaced by multiple raging beasts, such as monstrous hounds, lions and wolves, making them instinctively step back.

"You idiots! That's just a genjutsu!" an Oto officer chastised upon seeing the trap, and dispelled it. Much to their shock, Asuma and Kurenai were nowhere to be seen.

"Uh, sir... do you want us to look for them?" an Oto grunt asked.

The officer shook his head. "They'll come out sooner or later. Let's continue with the invasion as planned."

Meanwhile, in a dark alley not too far away from there, Kurenai had just removed the kunai and shuriken embedded on Asuma's back, and was patching the wounds with her supplies of her portable med kit.

"What the hell just happened?" Asuma asked in frustration. "Those ANBU..."

"They clearly weren't ANBU. Orochimaru was smart enough to disguise some of his troops as our black ops units in order to ambush unsuspecting Konoha ninja, just like it happened to us," Kurenai reasoned.

"We need to warn others not to trust ANBU, or any masked ninja for that matter," Asuma added.

"I'll check if the area is safe," Kurenai suggested. "Can you move on your own?"

To prove his point, Asuma stood on his feet. "It hurts a little, but like I told you, it's just a flesh wound. I can still going on."

"Alright. But don't force your body too much," Kurenai replied.

Asuma nodded. And as soon as Kurenai left the safety of her spot, an orange blur appeared before her.

"Kurenai-sensei!" Naruto yelled, startled the Jonin a bit. "Thank Kami I found you!"

"Naruto, what are you doing here? And don't shout, enemy ninja are everywhere!" Kurenai replied.

"I'm not the real Naruto, but a clone," the clone explained. "Listen, something really awful happened..."

...

Thanks to Shisui's mastery of the Body Flicker, they managed to not only arrive to the hospital in a few seconds, but also bypass all the fights that were going on all around Konoha. Fortunately, the street where the hospital was in was tightly defended. Obviously, Konoha couldn't left such a vital spot unprotected.

"Hold on a bit, in no time you'll feel like new," Shisui reassured his cousin as they both crossed the hospital doors.

"Somehow... I doubt that..." Itachi replied, coughing more blood.

"I told you not to speak, dammit!" Shisui snapped. "I need a medic right now! Can somebody help us!?"

A pair of medic-nin quickly carried Itachi and placed him on a blanket on the floor, near all the recent wounded ninjas.

"Can you tell us what happened to him?" one of the medic nin, a woman in her late thirties with spiky red hair, asked.

"I think that chakra exhaustion, due using multiple high level jutsu, as well as the Mangekyo Sharingan. I think he might have something respiratory, since he has a hard time breathing," Shisui explained.

"Don't worry, I know what to do," the medic nin replied, and much to Shisui's confusion, she rolled up her sleeve, and placed her forearm near Itachi's mouth. "Bite."

Too tired to protest, Itachi did as he was told. His whole body was covered by a green aura, and all the superficial wounds started to heal. His pain and exhaustion vanished as well, as renovated energy coursed through his body. After a few seconds, Itachi felt much better, albeit he still wasn't in any condition to fight.

"Thank you, medic-san," Itachi said to the woman. "You have an interested ability right there. Are you by any chance related to a Genin named Karin Uzumaki?"

The woman smiled. "Indeed. Karin is my daughter. My name's Mariko Uzumaki. Pleased to finally meet the family of one of my daughter's teammates."

"I'm Shisui Uchiha, and the daredevil here is Itachi," Shisui replied. "Do you believe that this guy went and fought the resurrected second Hokage all on his own?"

"So it's true what they say..." Mariko replied, intrigued. "To think that a man managed to bring somebody back from the death..."

"Shisui!" a female voice he knew too well called his name.

"Hey, Shizune-chan!" Shisui greeted her back.

"What are you two doing here? Are you wounded?" the black haired medic-nin asked, worried.

"I'm fine, Itachi.. not so much. Dumbass went and fought the Second Hokage on his own. How he managed to win is beyond me. Fortunately Mariko here helped him," Shisui explained.

"The Second was also resurrected?" Shizune asked.

"What do you mean 'also'? They brought more people besides Tobirama?" Itachi asked, concerned.

"Yes. From what I heard, Hashirama has been resurrected as well. Tsunade-sama went to fight him. And apparently, Jiraiya-sama is fighting the Fourth and his wife, Kushina," Shizune told them.

"Then I need to go there," Itachi said as he tried to stand up, but Shizune and Shisui pushed him down.

"And where the hell do you think you're going?" Shisui chided his cousin. "You already risked your life once. You're not moving from here."

"Not that he looks like he can move too far," Shizune commented.

"Anyway, Shizune-chan, Mariko-san, Itachi isn't fully healed yet. I believe there's something affecting his lungs, so a medic should check that," Shisui instructed the two medics.

"Y-You don't understand..." Itachi insisted. "Those reanimations are also immortal. I'm the only one who can stop them..."

"That, dear cousin, is where you're wrong," Shisui replied, as he gave a confident smirk. "You already did your part, Itachi, now it's my turn. Shizune-chan, do you know where Tsunade-sama and the First are fighting?"

...

Back in the forest, Jiraiya and Anko continued fighting Minato and Kushina. Despite getting rid of the marked kunai, Minato proved to be quite resourceful by marking random spots in the ground, allowing him to freely teleport to those areas. The two Konoha ninja made sure that the Yellow Flash did not mark any part of their body, and so far, they had been successful.

With Kushina back in action, Jiraiya ordered Anko to deal with her so he could fight his deceased student without distractions.

"Rasengan!"

The two spheres of pure chakra clashed against each other, resulting in a massive explosion that pushed both the Toad Sage and the Yellow Flash backwards.

"My Rasengan should have overpowered his. Why it didn't it?" the Sannin asked in frustration.

"You were unable to infuse enough nature chakra to your attack, Jiraiya-chan, that's why," Fukasaku explained.

"See? This is why we told you to complete your sage training!" Shima protested.

"Dammit, Ma! I was busy raising children, okay? And I'm now Hokage! I don't have a lot of spare time!" Jiraiya snapped back.

"Excuses!" Shima scoffed.

"Can we save the lectures for later!?" Jiraiya shouted while dodging Minato's punches and kicks. "I swear I'll complete my sage training if we get out of here alive!"

"Do you have a plan?" Fukasaku asked.

"Think so. But first I need Minato to stop moving for a bit," Jiraiya replied. "Then I'll bury him with my Swamp of the Underworld. Once buried, the swamp will numb his senses to a point of near unconsciousness."

"Good luck, boy. Minato-chan wasn't known as 'The Yellow Flash' for nothing," Shima replied.

"Again, I have that part covered. Fortunately, Naruto helped me develop a new jutsu that will help me overpower his Rasengan,"

Jiraiya confidently said.

"Sensei, watch out! I'm going after you again!" Minato warned as his hand started to form another Rasengan.

"Don't worry kid, you won't catch me off guard," Jiraiya made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Jiraiya started to form a Rasengan as well, while the clone infused it with elemental chakra, starting to grow in size, and its color changed from white and blue to orange and yellow. Minato watched the display with his eyes wide open.

"Is that...?" the former Hokage asked before vanishing.

Thanks to his sage-acquired sensory abilities, Jiraiya sensed Minato reappearing to his left, and dashing at him.

"Rasengan!"

"Fire Release: Rasengan!"

Both attacks clashed, exploding unto each other upon touching. However, Jiraiya's Rasengan quickly overpowered Minato's. Unfortunately for the white haired man, Minato managed to teleport back to his starting position before the explosion could ever touch him. His face was overjoyed.

"You... you completed the Rasengan! How?" the Fourth cheered in joy.

Jiraiya smirked. "The solution was surprisingly easy: use a Shadow Clone to stabilize the elemental chakra. The fact that neither of us could come up with such simple thing..."

"Yeah, that's-" Minato's expression went from happy to grave in a second. "Sensei... you shouldn't have told me that."

"Huh?" Jiraiya's confusion turned into horror when he saw Minato forming a Shadow Clone, then starting a Rasengan on one hand while the clone infused it with lightning chakra. "Shit!" Jiraiya quickly proceeded to do the same.

"I'm sorry, sensei, but I'm forced to use every bit of knowledge I possess to fulfill Orochimaru's will," Minato sorrowfully stated, as he dispelled his clone, and held the electric Rasengan in one hand.

"And of course, he gets it right the first time," Jiraiya groaned as he rolled his eyes. "Anyway, let's go! Ma, Pa, make sure he doesn't teleport before I can hit him!"

"We'll try our best, boy," Shima replied.

Once again, master and student dashed towards each other, meeting in the middle, with both elemental Rasengan about to clash with each other.

"Fire Release: Rasengan!"

"Lightning Release: Spiraling Thunder Blast Type Zero!"

Once again, when the two attacks met, they exploded in fire and lightning, trying to overcome the other, but none of them appeared to give up. That's it, until the two toads aiding Jiraiya sprung into action.

"Sage Art: Frog Call!"

Both Fukasaku and Shima started to croak loudly, producing loud, annoying sound waves whose effects became immediate.

"I... I can't move!" Minato realized.

Thanks to the pair of toad sages, Jiraiya's Rasengan managed to once again overpower Minato's, but much to his annoyance, the explosion only managed to destroy Minato's right arm, which quickly started to regenerate.

"You know, even in death, you still suck at choosing names," Jiraiya angrily stated.

"Aw, come on sensei, my names aren't that bad, are they?" Minato replied.

"Sorry, it's just... you're proving to be way harder to defeat than I expected. Either I didn't remember you being this strong, or I grew old," Jiraiya wearily replied. "Maybe both."

"Don't give up, sensei," Minato encouraged the Toad Sage. "If you managed to complete the Rasengan, I'm sure you'll be able to win this."

Jiraiya chuckled. "You know, as much as I'd like to take credit for that, it was Naruto who came up with the idea of using a clone. That kid is sure something."

"Naruto?" Kushina, who was fighting Anko, instinctively turned at Jiraiya. With all the commotion going on, both her and her husband had completely forgot about their son. "Jiraiya-sama, how is Naruto, is he okay?"

"Yes, you don't have to worry, Naruto is fine," though with the invasion going on, he wasn't so sure anymore. The thought was indeed distressing. "He's such a strong and resourceful ninja. He looks like a younger version of you, Minato, but personality wise I'd say he's more like Kushina."

"Even if I'd like to see how our son is doing... I don't want him to see us like this," Minato sorrowfully said.

"It may not be the best time, Jiraiya-sama... but can you tell us more about him?" Kushina asked, as she dodged a fire jutsu from Anko.

"Well, what can I say? He's very strong. And determined. There's nothing that can make him go back on his word or actions. Did you

know that he became a Chunin on his first try? And he's just thirteen!" Jiraiya told them.

"That's... hearing that makes me so happy," Minato replied, as he tried to kick Jiraiya, which he easily blocked.

"Hey, Jiraiya-chan, Ma, didn't you notice that Minato-chan's movements are becoming... slower?" Fukasaku noted.

"Whatever you're doing, keep doing it boy!" Shima added, noticing it as well.

"He has lots of friends," Jiraiya continued. "And he's such a caring brother towards his other siblings..."

"What?" Kushina asked in confusion.

"Oh right, you don't know. Tsunade-hime and I married, and have two other children besides Naruto. Three if we count Shizune," Jiraiya told them.

"That's great, sensei. You really deserve her," Minato sincerely congratulated him.

"I always wanted Naruto to have at least a little sibling," Kushina added, as she tried to slowly punch Anko. "What about girls?"

"Ah yes, he recently got a girlfriend too!" Jiraiya remembered. "One of his teammates. Her name is Hinata Hyuga. They make such a cute couple. It may be too soon to say it, but I wouldn't be surprised if they go all the way in the future..."

Then, at that moment, something happened. Minato and Kushina's movements keep getting slower until they stopped completely. Then, two beams of light came from above, illuminating the two reanimated bodies.

"Sensei... thanks a lot for taking care of Naruto in our absence," Minato tearfully said, as his body started to crumble.

"It pained me knowing that we would never be part of his life... or that we could even see him at all," Kushina continued, her body slowly disintegrated as well. "But knowing that he's happy... and that he had people taking care of him... that's all what I needed to know."

Everybody watched stunned how Minato and Kushina slowly vanished. All of them reached the same conclusion, that if a reanimated body found closure, then the jutsu would be unable to keep them attached to the mortal world. Turns out that the Impure World Resurrection wasn't so infallible after all.

"Sensei... now Kushina and I have to go..." Minato continued. "You've made a wonderful job keeping both the village and Naruto safe. Keep up the good work."

"And I hope both you and Tsunade-sama have a long and happy relationship," Kushina added. "I will wait until we can meet the two of you again, but... don't be in a hurry to see us again, ya know!"

And after that, Minato and Kushina's bodies crumbled completely, their souls returning to their rightful place in the pure world, leaving nothing but two piles of dust and ash behind.

"Goodbye, Minato, Kushina," Jiraiya told to no one in particular. A tear fell down his cheek. "You don't need to worry. As long as my heart beats, I will continue protecting both the village and your son."

"We did it! We defeated those reanimations!" Fukasaku cheered.

"Haha, yes! A fitting way to end such an abominable jutsu!" Shima agreed, before noticing Jiraiya's state. "Jiraiya-chan, are you crying?"

Jiraiya wiped out his tears, and chuckled. "Am I? It feels strange... I don't remember the last time these eyes shed tears..."

"Hokage-sama!" Anko's voice drew his attention. The Snake Kunoichi was kneeling besides the piles of ash and dirt that used to

make Minato and Kushina's body. "Take a look at this!"

Jiraiya got closer, and noticed that there were a couple corpses, which appeared to be from random civilians, half buried between the dirt. Their expressions were horrified, as if they saw something unspeakable as they died.

"The Impure World Resurrection requires a sacrifice for each reanimated body," Fukasaku said out loud. "Guess that these poor souls were the victims Orochimaru used to bring Minato-chan and Kushina-chan back to life."

Jiraiya stood up. "Anyway, there's nothing more we can do here. Let's return to Konoha, and make Orochimaru pay for sullyng the memory of my student and his wife... among many, many other transgressions."

Anko grinned sadistically. This time, Orochimaru wouldn't escape her wrath.

...

Tsunade was growing desperate. All her attempts to beat her grandfather had been fruitless. No matter how hard she hit, what kind of jutsu she used, the force that brought Hashirama back to life completely restored his body as if nothing happened to him.

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

More tree branches emerged from the ground, and lunged at Tsunade, either to wrap around her, or to impale her. The blond Sannin tore apart a huge chunk on the ground, and used it as a shield. Then, while holding the chunk, she ran towards Hashirama at a neck-breaking speed until she slammed her grandfather. She repeated the process multiple times, sinking Hashirama a bit with each hit.

"Maybe if I bury you, you will stay down!?" Tsunade shouted.

"Wood Release: Great Forest Jutsu!"

Hashirama's arms turned into a mass of wooden vines that tried to wrap themselves around Tsunade, but the Slug Princess managed to jump back in time. Hashirama then unearthed himself, returned his arms back to normal, and dusted his armor off.

Tsunade stared in frustration, breathing heavily. She wondered how long she could keep going. She was strong and resistant, but unlike her grandfather before her, her energy and chakra reserves weren't infinite.

"Not bad, Tsuna, not bad. Think in a way of incapacitating me instead of defeating me permanently," Hashirama advised.

"I'm trying. I really am," Tsunade scornfully said, but she was running out of patience, and most importantly, chakra. She could never imagine she'd grown to hate her beloved grandfather so much. But deep down, it was Orochimaru she hated, since it was him who started this whole mess to begin with.

"You've been doing fine. You're a strong kunoichi, I'm sure you-" Hashirama was saying before being interrupted.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A rain of fireballs fell upon the first Hokage, who managed to evade them in time. A young man with black hair and a single Sharingan eye landed besides Tsunade.

"Tsunade-sama, are you alright?" Shisui asked.

"Shisui? What are you doing here!?" Tsunade asked, a bit stupefied.

"It isn't obvious? I'm here to help," Shisui replied.

"While I appreciate your thoughts, this enemy is way too powerful for you! You need to leave now!" Tsunade urged him.

"Don't worry, I know exactly what to do to take care of the problem at hand," Shisui replied, as his Sharingan eye took the form of a black shuriken against a red background.

"Mangekyo Sharingan..." Hashirama said to no one in particular.

While Tsunade knew of Shisui's advanced Sharingan, she wasn't aware of the unique power his eye possessed.

"Kotoamatsukami!"

Hashirama stumbled back, as if something smacked him in the head, hard. Except that it felt like he was being smacked from the inside of his skull. Then, he noticed something odd.

"My... my body... I can control it!" Hashirama said in jubilation, as he start to flex his fingers. "I'm free of Orochimaru's control!"

Shisui sighed in relief. "Thank goodness it worked..."

"Shisui... what did you do?" Tsunade asked in confusion.

"My Mangekyo Sharingan isn't like everybody else's. It's special. It has an unique ability called Kotoamatsukami. To explain how it works takes some time, so to simplify it you can say is a very powerful form of mind control. I used it to override Orochimaru's control with my own, but as you can see I decided to give him back his free will," Shisui explained. "It has the downside that it can only be used once every ten years, so I have to be careful when to use it. However, I thought that the situation demanded it."

"You did good, Uchiha-san," Hashirama praised as he walked towards him.

"T-Thank you, Hokage-sama. I do all what's in my power to serve and protect the village," Shisui stammered. It's not every day than a legendary ninja that came from the dead praises you.

"Shisui is one of the best ninja we have," Tsunade added.
"Otherwise, I wouldn't allow him to become my future son in law."

"... son in law?" Hashirama asked in shock. Shisui visibly gulped.
"Are you telling me that an Uchiha... is going to marry a Senju woman?"

"Uh, listen, grandfather, things have changed a lot since your time and-" Tsunade said before being interrupted.

"No, Tsuna, this has nothing to do with being a different time," Hashirama said as he menacingly walked towards Shisui. "There's one thing I must do..."

Shisui braced himself for what the Hokage was going to do. He was now regretting giving him back his free will.

"Welcome to the family!" Hashirama warmly said as he pulled a terrified Shisui into a bear hug. "Boy, if two people from our respective clans fell in love... maybe it would have helped to diffuse the tensions between the Senju and the Uchiha much faster."

"Actually, such thing would had happened, both of them would have been executed by their respective clans for treason," Tsunade pointed out. "I mean, you yourself told me how your friendship with Madara Uchiha went."

"Come on Tsuna... don't be so negative," Hashirama replied. "This is a historical event worthy of the biggest celebrations!"

"Uh, Hokage-sama," Shisui shyly said. "While I'm glad that you approve of my marriage with a Senju woman -even if Shizune-chan isn't a Senju by blood- I think that there are more pressing matters to attend now, like the ongoing invasion."

"You speak the truth, Shisui-san! Let's find that traitor of a snake, and give him what he deserves!" Hashirama declared, before Tsunade, Shisui and himself leaped away.

...

Orochimaru couldn't believe what was happening. First, his connection to Minato and Kushina was severed. Even if the thought was distressing, at least he was still in control of Hashirama, his most powerful reanimation. Of course, that didn't last, as the connection to Hashirama was cut as well. All of his reanimations had been defeated. How was that even possible?

And to make matters worse, Sarutobi smelled Orochimaru's fear and distress, which in turn made him more confident, and thus became more aggressive in his attack.

"Something wrong, Orochimaru? No more grinning?" Sarutobi taunted. "You looked so confident when we started the fight. Where did that confidence go?"

"I'll show you right now!" an angry Orochimaru replied as he cast his arms forward. "Mass Shadow Hidden Snake Hands!"

Many snakes emerged from under Orochimaru's sleeves, and just like it happened with Jiraiya, more snakes emerged from the mouths of the first snakes, and so on, until Orochimaru had summoned a truly ridiculous amount of snakes. The mass of snakes then took the form of a massive snake, with Orochimaru on its mouth, and lunged at the former Hokage.

"DIE, YOU FOSSIL!" Orochimaru shouted from the top of his snake-shaped snake construct.

"Fossil? I was expecting a more creative insult, coming from a man of your intellect," Sarutobi stated as he jumped back while making hand seals. "Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullet!"

The former Hokage breathed a massive wave of fire at the incoming snakes, which crashed against it, filling the air with loud hisses of pain. Sarutobi then noticed that the ground beneath his feet started to shake, and jumped back again just in time to avoid the mass of

snakes, with Orochimaru lodged between them, violently emerging from below.

As Hiruzen kept moving, more and more snakes emerged from below, forcing the former Hokage on the defensive.

"There has to be more snakes here than in the forests of the Land of Fire..." Sarutobi thought. *"Something didn't go according to the plan. Orochimaru is growing desperate, and that makes him even more dangerous."*

Realizing he couldn't run forever, Sarutobi stabbed the Adamantine Staff into the ground, and commanded it to grow larger and thicker, until it became a really tall post Hiruzen could stand on top of. He looked at the ravenous mass of snakes, trying to climb the staff. He then got an idea.

Hiruzen pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it, and tossed it up, while making several hand seals.

"Exploding Kunai Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Upon falling down, the single kunai with the explosive multiplied by several dozen. Upon landing on the ground, Hiruzen activated all the explosive tags simultaneously, creating a chain of explosions that destroyed most of the snakes. Seeing that it was safe to get down, he commanded Enma to turn into its usual size and length.

"Is that all, Orochimaru?" Sarutobi taunted.

The Snake Sannin emerged from underground, casting a murderous glare on his former sensei.

"You talk as if this was nothing, when the truth is you're out of breath already. You can't keep my pace, old man," Orochimaru grinned again. "While I admit you put up a formidable fight, all what you did is rush towards your demise."

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

That moment, multiple wooden roots emerged from below, and wrapped themselves around Orochimaru. It happened so fast and so suddenly that not even his Sharingan was able to foresee it and allow him to react in time.

"It is you whose near his demise, traitor!" Hashirama's voice said as he, Tsunade, and an Uchiha Orochimaru didn't know landed near the Third Hokage.

"What the hell are you doing!?" Orochimaru screamed in shock. "You can't do this! You are supposed to be bound to my will!"

"Not anymore, villain," Hashirama replied, as he crossed his arms, and shot Orochimaru and chilling glare. "I told you I'd find a way to make you pay for this, and I never go back on my word."

Orochimaru tried to break free, but the vines' grip was too hard. He found himself unable to gather and mold chakra properly.

"Don't bother. Those vines have an special poison that it's absorbed through the skin and greatly difficult the use of chakra," Hashirama explained, as he smiled confidently at his prisoner.

"Hashirama-sensei? Is that you? Orochimaru brought you too as well?" Sarutobi asked in shock.

Hashirama narrowed his eyes at the former Hokage, before he opened wide in shock upon realizing who was talking to him. "Saru? Is that you?"

"Yes, sensei, it's me. Despite the situation, it's good to see you again," Sarutobi sincerely said, as his stance relaxed.

"What happened to you? You look so old!" Hashirama exclaimed.

"Well, that's what happens when you get to live as much as I did," Sarutobi chuckled, as he shrugged a bit.

"Wait a minute..." Hashirama said in confusion as his gaze switched back and forth between Tsunade and Sarutobi. "How long have I been dead?"

"I'd say a little less than four decades," Hiruzen replied.

Hashirama looked at Tsunade again. "Wow Tsuna, it's amazing how young you look! Time seems to have no effect on you! What's your secret?"

Shisui cleared his throat. "Um, I believe we should deal with Orochimaru first. There's an invasion going on."

"Plus there are more reanimations as well. Jiraiya and Anko are fighting Minato and Kushina," Hiruzen informed them. "Stopping this accursed jutsu should be the first course of action."

"Ah, yes, very true, you two!" Hashirama replied, before his stare rested on Orochimaru once again. "I know that the caster of the jutsu can cancel it, so do it already!"

"I'd love to, but to do so I need to do several hand seals, and as you can see," Orochimaru struggled again against the vines to make his point. "I can't do it as long as I'm restrained."

Hashirama frowned, and his eyes narrowed in anger at the pale skinned man. "Okay then. But watch your movements carefully. I won't hesitate to end your life if you do something suspicious."

The First Hokage made a hand seal, and the vines released the Snake Sannin

"That's far from my intention," Orochimaru replied as he started making hand seals. "Impure World Resurrection: Release!"

Like it happened before with Minato and Kushina, and beam of light fell upon Hashirama from the sky, and his body started to crumble.

"Well, it's my time to go," Hashirama stated. "Tsunade, Hiruzen, I'm grateful to have the chance of seeing both of you again one last time."

"The feeling is mutual, sensei," Hiruzen replied.

"Say hello to grandmother when you see her on the other side... and tell her that everything's going fine," Tsunade said, as she wiped a falling tear from her cheek.

"I will," Hashirama then turned at the Uchiha. "Shisui-san, you're a great ninja, and will make a fine addition to the Senju Clan. Make my great granddaughter happy, okay?"

"I was planning to, Hokage-sama," Shisui replied with a sincere smile. "Oh, and I almost forgot to tell you but... Tsunade is going to be a grandma."

"Really? That's great!" Hashirama exclaimed, his body almost completely vanished. "I can't wait... to tell Mito-chan..."

And thus, Hashirama, the last standing reanimation, was gone, and his spirit returned to the place it rightfully belongs.

"Alright, now Orochimaru, let's rectify that mistake that I made so long ago," Hiruzen said as he turned at his traitorous student.

But much to his shock, Orochimaru was making more hand seals. He started the moment Hashirama vanished completely, and nobody realized until it was too late.

"Yin Release: Bringer of Darkness!"

In less than two seconds, the whole area was covered by a veil of shadows that blinded all present there. The darkness dispelled shortly afterwards, but Orochimaru was nowhere to be seen.

"Dammit, we let him escape again!" Tsunade shouted in frustration as she stomped her foot on the ground, making a small crater.

"Orochimaru has perfected retreating into an art form," Hiruzen said as he shook his head. "Anyway, a good chunk of his troops are still here. The moment they see their leader has abandoned them, they will flee. Let's make sure that happens as soon as possible."

"Actually, now that the threat of the reanimations has been dealt with, I believe I should return to the hospital. I'll be more useful there than fighting some mooks," Tsunade replied.

"Very well then. Are you with me, Shisui-kun?" Hiruzen asked the Uchiha.

Shisui nodded. "Lead the way, Hokage-sama."

...

Meanwhile, in the forests north of Konoha, the Sound Five were resting under a tree, keeping an eye on their valuable hostages. They've been waiting for quite some time now, and they were starting to grow antsy and bored. Kimimaro, however, remained as cool as ever.

"I think I see him!" Kidomaro, perched at the top of a tree, while looking through a spyglass, shouted to their teammates below. "Yeah, it's him!"

"About fucking time," Tayuya groaned as she started to stretch her limbs.

"Oh shit! He didn't come alone!" Kidomaru added, a bit distressed.

"How many people did he bring?" Sakon asked.

"Ten... twelve... fourteen! Fifteen if we count the Jinchuriki!" Kidomaru asked, as he descended down.

"Boy, I knew we should have tell him to come alone," Jirobo stated, as he crossed his arms.

"If we did that, he'd know we're leading him to a trap," Sakon countered.

"As if the shithead didn't figure already that this is a trap," Tayuya scoffed as she rolled her eyes.

"Enough," Kimimaro quietly but firmly reassessed his authority. "We will proceed with the plan as Orochimaru-sama ordered, regardless of our personal opinion on it, understood?"

"What are we going to do now, then? I wasn't expecting that he'd be able to bring so many people with him," Kidomaru asked.

"How strong do you think they are?" Kimimaro asked.

"Given their age, I'd say they're Genin. A couple of them were wearing those flak jackets, so they have to be Chunin. But given that there was a Chunin Exam here some days ago, I guess that they have to be rookie Chunin," Kidomaru informed.

"It doesn't seem to be something we can't handle. Okay, for the time being, let's carry on with the plan. I'll think of something if something unexpected happens. Jirobo, grab the kids," Kimimaro ordered.

The fattest of the Sound Five did so, and the Oto ninja headed back to their lair.

...

Not far from there, Naruto and his group were getting close. Naruto knew better than to ask an adult for help, given that they'd be busy protecting Konoha. His friends, however, being either Genin or newly minted Chunin, wouldn't be that necessary in the village. Still, he had enough common sense to leave some clones to warn the adults about what was going on.

"They're moving!" Karin warned. The redhead was holding Hashirama's necklace, and used it as a way to track the twins.

"How strong do you think they are, neechan?" Naruto asked.

"I'd say... mid Chunin level, so I think -HOLY SHIT!" Karin cursed out loud.

"What's wrong?" Sasuke asked.

"One of those guys is easily as strong as any of our Jonin-sensei," Karin fearfully stammered. "It's clear that Orochimaru really wants your siblings, niisan."

"But... we triple them in number!" Kiba pointed out. "That has to count for something, right?"

"When the gap of skill and power reaches a certain point, numbers lose their relevancy," Shino countered. "Or you think a hundred ants could defeat you?"

"So that's what we are to them? Ants?" Kiba sourly asked.

"Come on guys, we're strong! Keep the mood up. I'm sure we'll be able to beat them," Tenten said, trying to lift the morale.

"Besides, didn't you hear what Hokage-sama said about us? We're one of the strongest generations of Genin ever born!" Lee stated.

"That doesn't change the fact that most of us are still Genin, and the strongest of the Genin is still no match for the weakest of the Jonin," Neji countered.

"Then again, we can't go back. The children of the Hokage possess some pretty powerful Bloodline Limits. If Orchimaru got his hands on them..." Sakura shuddered as she rubbed her arms. "I don't even want to imagine."

"Listen guys, if you're afraid, you can leave. Despite being your commanding officer, I would never force you to go on a mission like this," Naruto gravely said. "Feel free to go back to the village and help there if you think this is too much for you."

"Who said anything about being afraid?" Sasuke replied, as if taking offense to Naruto's comment. "Even if I was afraid, I couldn't leave. Most of my clan fell prey to the machinations of the Akatsuki, and I won't let such thing to happen again to any other clan or family. And I'm a Chunin too, don't think you're the only one who can issue orders."

For the first time since the invasion began, Naruto smiled. "Thank you, Sasuke. That... means a lot."

"Naruto-kun" Hinata called him, her Byakugan activated. "We're getting close to them!"

Naruto's smile vanished as his body tensed. "Alright, everybody, prepare to battle! Fight like you never did before!"

OMAKE: Jiraiya's Daring Escape

OR: Chapter 32, What Could Have Been

Jiraiya and Orochimaru were about to fight, when the latter snapped his fingers. Four of his ninjas appeared around the two of them, standing in a square formation.,

"You know what to do," Orochimaru cryptically said.

The Sound Four nodded, and formed the Snake seal before clapping their hands together.

"Four Violet Flames Formation!"

With the four ninjas as its corners, a square-shaped force field was erected, trapping the two Sannin inside. The barrier was double layered, protecting the casters from attacks coming from both the inside and the outside.

"Now, Jiraiya, you're trapped here with me," Orochimaru stated, grinning widely. "There's no way for you or anybody else to break this barrier, other than defeating me and wait for the Sound Four to grow tired. But that obviously isn't going to happen."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," Jiraiya confidently replied, as he bit his finger. "I'm sure there's a way to escape this place that you didn't think of."

"And that would be?" Orochimaru asked, amused.

Jiraiya made five hand seals, and slammed his hand into the ground. "THIS! Summoning Jutsu!"

Orochimaru got ready to fight whatever toad Jiraiya had summoned, but much to his bemusement and amusement, the toad was positively tiny.

"Ah Jiraiya, you never fail to make a fool of yourself," Orochimaru chuckled cruelly. "How is that puny toad going to help you?"

Jiraiya whispered something to the small toad, who disappeared on a cloud of smoke.

"You'll see shortly," Jiraiya replied, his confidence unwavering. "As a fellow summoner, I'm sure you're aware of the concept of Reverse Summoning, right?"

The smile disappeared from Orochimaru's face as the implications of Jiraiya's words dawned upon him.

"Who's the fool now?" Jiraiya laughed before disappearing as well, leaving a befuddled Orochimaru behind.

"Uh... boss? Do you still need us to keep the barrier up?" Jirobo uneasily asked.

Author's Note: As you can see, this arc was split in two parts, the first one focused mostly on Jiraiya, Tsunade and the other adults dealing with the invasion, while quietly building up to the second part, starring Naruto and his friends. With the Edo tensei zombies dealt with, Orochimaru defeated, and his army retreating, the first part is now over and thus we now focus back on Naruto and his friends as they try to rescue Hagane and Kaida from the Sound Five.

As you can see, this second half is pretty much going to be the Sasuke Retrieval Arc with Hagane and Kaida replacing Sasuke, and the whole Konoha 15 taking part in the retrieval, instead of just five (then six) people. Including Sasuke. Which is weird, since I don't think there has been a Sasuke Retrieval arc in which Sasuke remains loyal to Konoha.

I'm looking forward this second half of the arc because I will be able to do something Kishimoto failed to do. Give Naruto's friends some much needed spotlight in order to flesh out both their personalities, abilities and growth. So no matter which one of the secondary characters you like, you're for a treat since ALL OF THEM, no exceptions, will get their time to shine.

Meanwhile, I look forward to hear your opinion on the first half of the arc. Especially the fight between Minato, Jiraiya and Kushina (and Anko, I guess). I hope you liked how I ended it.

And thus, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Senju Twins Retrieval, Part I

Author's Note: If you missed Naruto and co. in the previous chapter, fear not, dearest reader, for both he and his friends will return in full force during the second half of the arc, which starts right now!

I was so glad how many reviews the previous chapter got. Let's see if this chapter's reception is just as good. See you at the bottom notes, and enjoy the beginning of the end of Part I:

Chapter 36:

The Senju Twins' Retrieval, Part I

or

Kidnapping a child isn't child's play

...

The fifteen Konoha ninja relentlessly pursued the invaders who had kidnapped Naruto's siblings through the forests of the Land of Fire, heading north. It was obvious that they were heading towards the Land of Sound, where Orochimaru had his main base. For one reason or another, everybody was tense. Not only were they going against ninja much stronger than them, but unlike any other mission they took before, they wouldn't have their Jonin-sensei to protect them.

"We're getting close," Neji informed. For some reason, their pace seemed oddly... relaxed. Maybe they weren't aware that they were being followed. Better for the Konoha ninja, then.

"Hinata-hime, while Neji keeps track of them, you should watch out for traps," Naruto told her.

"I am. Oddly enough, they didn't leave any," Hinata replied.

"Man, those guys are surely confident nobody is following them," Ino commented.

"Abducting them during the invasion was a really clever move. With all the chaos going, it's the perfect cover. If it wasn't for Naruto-kun finding out..." Haku commented.

"Hmm..." Shikamaru interceded.

"What's up Shikamaru?" Ino asked.

"Something doesn't feel right. While kidnapping Naruto's siblings for their Bloodlines is something Orochimaru would do, some things don't make sense," Shikamaru replied. "For starters, Naruto told us that he fought against Kabuto alongside Hinata. Kabuto shouldn't have any trouble dispatching both of them, but not only he did he not do such a thing, but even told Naruto of the twins' kidnapping. And while Naruto arrived too late, the kidnappers left at least an adult ninja alive so he could tell Naruto about it."

"Are you suggesting we're being led to a trap?" Choji asked.

Shikamaru nodded. "I'm afraid so. Remember that Naruto is a Jinchuriki, and Orochimaru is part of the Akatsuki. With this move, he's killing two birds with one stone."

"Then they probably know we're after them," Shino stated. "However, if they wanted to lure Naruto out of the village, a better alternative would have been to use the kids as hostages and force Naruto to come with them peacefully."

"Maybe. Or maybe they guessed that we wouldn't buy their bluff. The twins are too important for Orochimaru, he wouldn't risk harming them," Shikamaru replied.

"Trap or not, given that the alternative is to let him get away with my siblings, we're not going back," Naruto firmly stated. "At least, I'm not going back."

"Still, maybe we should have brought an adult with us..." Tamaki mentioned.

"There's no time! Most of the adults are needed in the village," Naruto replied. "However, some of my clones did warn a couple adults. Our Jonin-sensei should come to help us soon."

"I doubt it will be soon enough..." Tamaki whimpered.

"Oh come on, don't be such a wimp! See, that's why you were passed over for promotion!" Kiba told her.

"Shut up! Remember I made it longer than you did, mutt!" Tamaki retorted. "And it's due to that overconfidence of yours that Karin kicked your ass!"

"Enough," Shino calmly, but firmly, interjected. "This isn't the place nor the moment for petty squabble. If you can't stay focused on the matter at hand, then I recommend you to go back to the village, since you will only be a burden to the rest of us."

"Sorry..." Both Tamaki and Kiba said at the same time.

...

"Did you hear that?" Tayuya asked her teammates. "Those shitheads are getting close. Too close if you ask me."

"Come on, we can beat them! Let's kill them and bring the Jinchuriki to the base alongside these two," Sakon suggested.

"No. We have a plan, and we're going to follow it. Improvisation only leads to disaster," Kimimaro stated.

"Well we're going to have to fight them sooner or later. They will catch us at any moment. I think our head start was too short," Kidomaru stated.

"That has a simple solution. Kidomaru, take Jirobo and try to delay them," Kimimaro ordered.

"Wait, just the two of us?" Kidomaru asked, shocked.

"What's wrong, fucker? Afraid of a bunch of Genin?" Tayuya mocked.

"Kidomaru is right. Even if they're just Genin, they greatly outnumber us," Jirobo added.

"They're focused on rescuing these kids, and thus they won't try to fight you, just try and get past you. As long as you manage to make several of them stay and fight, you will make our job much easier," Kimimaro explained.

"What if the Jinchuriki decides to fight us?" Jirobo asked.

"He won't. If his relationship with his siblings is as close as we think, he will be among the last ones wanting to fight an obvious diversion. Now go," Kimimaro ordered.

"Alright then. Guess that games aren't fun if there isn't a little challenge. Let's go, Jirobo! Meet them headfirst, while I cover you from afar," Kidomaru said.

"Alright," Jirobo replied, before both he and his six-armed teammate headed in the opposite direction, ready to meet the Konoha party.

...

"Two of them left the main group and are heading towards us!" Neji warned.

"Everybody get ready!" Tenten told the rest.

"Karin, how strong are these two? Is the guy with Jonin level strength among them?" Sasuke asked the redhead.

The bespectacled girl shook her head. "Actually, they dispatched the two weakest members."

"If that's the case, they will try to delay us in order to give their teammates a chance to get away," Naruto reasoned. "But like hell that's going to happen."

"Still, you guys shouldn't underestimate them. They might be the weakest members, but each of them is way stronger than any of us. Besides, there's something about their chakra..." Karin shivered a bit. "... that I don't like one bit."

"We should make wise use of our numerical superiority. The least amount of people should stay and deal with them while the rest continue the pursuit," Shikamaru suggested.

"Agreed, but first we should see their abilities first and see which ones are the most appropriate for the task," Hinata added, before tensing up. "Here comes the first one!"

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

A huge wall emerged from the ground, forcing the Konoha ninja to abruptly stop. A man landed on top of the wall. The enemy in question was a tall and bulky man with brown eyes and his orange hair styled in a mohawk, wearing a sleeveless light brown tunic, black pants, and a rope-like purple belt. The hem of the tunic was adorned by an all white Yin-Yang symbol -which technically would make it a Yang-Yang symbol.

"It seems that we have a few rats following us, and we can't have that, can we?" the man asked, shaking his head. "My name is Jirobo, and I shall be your executioner. Pleased to meet you."

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" Naruto roared as he leaped at the man, chakra blade in hand.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata shouted as she tackled her boyfriend mid air.

"What the-?"

Naruto could hear two loud whistles as two golden projectiles passed near him at high speed, almost piercing the blond, before landing on the ground, instinctively making the others stand back.

"Sorry for being so rough, Naruto-kun, but the second one stayed behind and is acting a sniper and I had to act fast," Hinata quickly said.

"I know what's at a stake, but please calm down Naruto-kun, or else you'll end up dead," Haku added as well.

"You'll end up dead nevertheless!" Jirobo stated as he landed on the ground with a loud thud, and started making hand seals before slamming both hands into the ground. "Earth Release Barrier: Earth Prison Dome of Magnificent Nothingness!"

Before anybody had time to react, a huge dome made of rocks formed around the Konoha ninja, trapping them inside.

"There, that's it," Jirobo said in satisfaction. "End of the problem. Now I'll drain their chakra dry, and leave the Jinchruiki within an inch of his life. Although... wonder if I should spare the ones with the Bloodline Limits, like the Uchiha or the Hyuga?"

...

"Okay, stand back, I have this!" Tenten warned as she unfurled a scroll, facing the dome. The weapon mistress unsealed several kunai with explosive tags attached to them, which flew at the dome, making several explosions.

But much to the brown haired Chunin's shock, the walls began to reform, negating the damage her explosions had made.

"The hell? This thing has a healing factor?" Kiba asked in shock.

"So it seems," Shikamaru replied, as he came close to the still reforming wall, in order to get a better look.

"This dome is draining our chakra, and using it to repair itself," Neji mentioned. "We need to get out of here as soon as possible, or else this man will kill us by depleting our chakra pools."

"But if the dome repairs itself..." Ino stated.

"Then we'll need to damage it faster than it repairs itself, YOSH!" Lee replied.

"I believe Lee-san is right," Sakura stated. Like Shikamaru, the pinkette walked close to the walls and began to study them. "Okay, this is an Earth jutsu, right? So a powerful Lightning jutsu should do the trick. Sasuke-kun?"

"Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked as well.

Both the Uchiha and the Hyuga nodded.

"I believe a Thunderbolt should suffice," Sasuke suggested. "Let's aim at the same spot."

Hinata nodded, and both she and Sasuke started to make the same hand seals, albeit Sasuke was a bit faster.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Hinata and Sasuke thrust their hands forward, releasing multiple lightning bolts from their fingertips that quickly started to obliterate the earth dome faster than it could repair itself. In no time, they created a hole large enough for everybody else to get out.

"The hell?" Jirobo asked in shock as the Konoha ninja escaped his dome. "Guess that hoping that there were no Lightning Release users among such a large group was too much to ask."

"Guys, we can't waste any more time! We need to reach Hagane and Kaida NOW!" Naruto urged.

"Indeed. This guy uses Earth Release jutsu, so either Sasuke-san or myself should stay and face him, while everybody else leaves" Hinata suggested.

"Like hell I'm going to let you leave!" Jirobo angrily shouted.

Then, much to everybody's shock, Jirobo lifted a massive, almost building sized chunk of rock from the ground, and chucked it at the Konoha 15.

"Earth Release: Earth Mausoleum Dumpling!"

"Everybody, scatter! Sasuke, let's do it together!" Naruto commanded while he started to prepare a Rasengan.

"I'm way ahead of you," Sasuke replied as he made several hand seals and unsheathed his katana.

The Uzumaki and the Uchiha leaped at the gigantic boulder coming at them and slammed it with their jutsu the moment they met.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

"Rasengan!"

Like it did before, Sasuke's lightning jutsu started to obliterate the large rock, and combined with the Rasengan shattering it as well, the massive boulder was quickly reduced to a multitude of much smaller rocks and dust.

"Impressive," Jirobo conceded. "But you're going to need something more than... than... what the-?"

Jirobo suddenly found himself paralyzed. He looked down and saw that his shadow looked unnaturally dark. And more distressing, a dark tendril connected his shadow with one of the Konoha brats which, judging by his hairstyle, appeared to be a Nara.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu, success," Shikamaru smugly stated, but his expression suddenly grew serious. "Everybody, keep going! I'll deal with this guy!"

"What? Shikamaru, stop playing hero! There's no way you can deal with that guy alone!" Ino protested.

"Yeah, he's too much for you!" Choji agreed.

"Listen, according to Karin, this guy is the weakest, and let's face it, I'm far from being the strongest here. You'd need both numbers and our strongest members to deal with them. I'll make sure he doesn't get in the way. Now go!" Shikamaru said before running away in the opposite direction, forcing Jirobo to follow him.

Naruto made a hand seal, and four clones popped into existence. "You don't have to do this alone, Shikamaru. I'll provide you with all the help I can muster," Naruto said before ordering the clones to trail Shikamaru. "Everybody else, let's go!"

Without wasting a single second, the rest of the Konoha ninja followed Naruto's lead. As they started to advance, golden arrows started to fly towards them.

'Dammit, I forgot about the sniper!' Naruto cursed inwardly as he saw a whistling arrow passing over his shoulder. "Hinata-hime, Neji, can either of you track him?"

"I already got him in my sights, Naruto-kun," Hinata replied.

"Well done. Guess that somebody needs to stay and makes sure that guy doesn't delay us anymore."

They continued pushing forward, with both Hyuga keeping their eyes focused on the six armed man firing arrows at them. However, they were so preoccupied of him that they didn't notice other traps he had laid for them.

"Watch out! There are-!" Neji tried to warn, but a bit too late

"What the hell!?" Sakura asked in shock. Everybody saw that she just run into a massive spider web, getting half her body stuck on it.

Like her, many others accidentally got stuck into other spider webs. Everybody tried to struggle.

"The path ahead is full of those spider webs," Neji informed. "Sorry for not seeing them earlier."

Sakura used a free hand to pull out a kunai and tried to cut the spider web, to no avail.

"How hard is this web?" Sakura complained as she continued trying to cut it.

"The webs are infused with chakra, hence why they are so hard," Hinata said.

Tenten, who was also stuck, got an idea. She pulled a kunai, but infused it with her own chakra as well. This time, the spider web was cut as if it was a thread of silk.

"Guys, channel your chakra through your weapons! It works that way!" Tenten told the others, who proceeded to do as she said - those who had mastered chakra flow, at the very least-.

"My chakra blade works just as fine," Naruto stated as he sliced several spider webs.

"And so does the Gentle Fist," Hinata added, doing the same.

"Okay, who gets to fight this guy?" Naruto asked.

"He's a long ranged fighter who attacks us from afar, presumably hidden. I can pinpoint his location with my Byakugan, and I can break his spider webs with the Gentle Fist. I have the best chances against him out of us," Neji stated.

Tamaki shook her head. "No, you can't stay here. You're one of our strongest fighters, and thus you'll be needed to fight the other guys. I should fight this guy. I can break his spider webs too, and I can use my cats to track and blindside him. I'm not among the strongest either, you can afford going on without me."

"Hey, don't say that!" Kiba protested. "Even if what you said is true, that doesn't mean you should throw your life away going alone against this guy!"

"Aw, do you care about me after all," Tamaki purred. "But don't worry. Remember, cats have nine lives, and I'll doubt this guy will be able to kill me that many times."

"I believe I could assist you as well," Shino stated. "I'm also a long ranged fighter, and thus I can cover you, and my beetles can help you track him."

"Okay then, Tamaki and Shino will face the sniper. Good luck you two!" Naruto said.

"Now, everybody, ready to go? I'll distract him," Shino said before spreading his arms, and two massive swarms of kikai beetles emerged from under his sleeves, creating a living wall that covered Naruto and the rest of the Konoha's ninja.

"The sniper is at two o'clock," Karin stated, while pointing with her finger in that direction.

"Be careful you two! If you don't come back alive, I'll bring you back and kill you myself!" Kiba angrily shouted. Tamaki merely giggled, while Shino simply nodded.

While they felt bad for leaving their friends behind to face enemies much stronger than them, they had to in order to maintain their numbers advantage over the remaining, much stronger, enemies. All what they could do is pray to whatever deity above for their friends to return home safe.

"Hinata-hime, can you see them?" Naruto impatiently asked.

Hinata shook her head. "Not yet. But then again, my range of Byakugan is a bit limited, since I never trained it for long distance searches."

"I can't see them either, but they can't be that far away," Neji added.

"They aren't" Karin chimed in. "I can still sense their foul chakra. While they did increase the distance gap a bit, they don't seem to be moving too fast. If we keep this pace, we will reach them in a few minutes."

"You heard nee-chan! Everybody, don't lag behind!" Naruto told the rest of the group.

"You hear that, Choji? This is why Asuma-sensei was so adamant about building your stamina!" Ino told her rotund teammate, only to realize that he was nowhere to be seen. "Choji? Where the hell did you go?"

"He... he isn't among us..." Hinata stated after briefly scanning the whole group.

"What the hell did he...?" Ino asked, before a realization dawned upon her. "Oh crap. I think I have an idea of where he might be..."

...

Not far away from there, Shikamaru was still forcing Jirobo to follow him away from the others. He reached a clearing in the forest at where he found himself out of breath, and had to stop to rest a bit.

"You must think yourself you're so heroic, don't you string bean?" Jirobo mockingly asked. "Sacrificing yourself so the others don't have to deal with me. But all what you will manage to accomplish is dying pointlessly."

The Shadow Jutsu started to waver and a few seconds later, receded completely, releasing Jirobo.

"Ah, much better," the man with the mohawk said as he began to stretch his arms. "So, ready to fight, dead man walking?"

"You look like the kind of guy of who's all strength and no brain, if you underestimate your opponent like that," Shikamaru retorted. But deep inside, he knew that this enemy was way superior to him, and his brain was already working nonstop to figure out an strategy to beat him.

The four Naruto clones landed behind Jirobo. The large man turned his head to see them, but he didn't appear to consider them a threat.

"And look at that, my reinforcements are here," Shikamaru replied.

"You must be even more naive than I thought if you really believe that a bunch of Shadow Clones is going to make any difference," Jirobo told him.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Well, they aren't going to make the fight any harder for me."

"I think I had enough of your blabbering," Jirobo said darkly as he menacingly advanced towards the young Nara. "It shouldn't take me more than a minute to squash you and go back to the others."

"Okay, first of all, I should let him attack to see the extent of his abilities, so I can think a counter-strategy," Shikamaru thought. "The Clones might be good distractions, or human shields if necessary."

"I'm really hungry. I wonder what your chakra tastes like?" Jirobo asked as he licked his lips. "But then again, such a scrawny kid like you can't have that much."

"He can absorb chakra. Just my luck," Shikamaru inwardly groaned as he took a step back. If he wanted to stay in one piece, he better keep his distance from that man with monstrous physical strength. He made a hand seal. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Once again, Shikamaru's shadow stretched into a thread and dashed towards Jirobo. The orange haired ninja was forced to jump back and try to avoid the shadow tendril, which started to branch out into multiple shadows.

"Naruto, now!" Shikamaru called.

The four Naruto clones rushed at the unsuspecting Jirobo and unleashed a barrage of shuriken on him. The shuriken embedded on his back, making him to cry in pain... before disappearing in a cloud of smoke, leaving a large boulder behind.

"Shit, Body Replacement!" A Naruto Clone cursed.

"Quick, look for the real one!" Another stated.

However, before they could even do anything, Jirobo burst from underground, and in a couple of swift punches, two clones were destroyed. The other two managed to jump back in time, landing besides Shikamaru. Jirobo looked at his enemies and smirked.

"See? I already told you that the clones wouldn't change anything," Jirobo then cracked his knuckles.

Still, the burly man had no time to attack as Shikamaru continued to harass him with his clan jutsu. Meanwhile, the Naruto clones decided to take the opportunity to attack once more.

"Hold on, Shikamaru!" one of the clones said as he began to form a Rasengan, while the other started to infuse it with wind chakra. Once they were done, both clones charged at Jirobo, still dodging the shadow attack.

"What the...?" Jirobo asked upon seeing the clones charging again. *"That sphere of chakra looks dangerous. While I doubt it can hurt me in any way, better not to take any chances."* He thought.

Jirobo made the hand seals of a jutsu he had used once a few hours earlier, before slamming both hands in the ground.

"Earth Release: Rising Pillar!"

A rock pillar emerged from under Jirobo's feet, rising him high into the air. Shikamaru's shadow followed suit, but it stopped midway the stone column.

"Damn! Did I reach the jutsu's limit?" Shikamaru wondered. Due the time of the day, the pillar cast a very small shadow, which would be of little use.

"You won't escape from us!" the Naruto clones shouted as they began to climb the pillar.

Unfortunately for them, that's what Jirobo was expecting, and he jumped back into the ground the moment the clones were halfway there. He then used his incredible strength to lift the pillar from the ground and shake it, sending the two remaining clones back into the ground, before slamming them with the pillar itself.

"And no more clones!" Jirobo stated as he started to lift the pillar as well. "Now you go next, shrimp! Any last words?"

"How about I trapped you again with jutsu'?" Shikamaru retorted. "Albeit then again, I don't think they will be my last."

"What? What do you-" But much to Jirobo's shock, he realized he couldn't move anymore.

"In case you didn't notice," Shikamaru spread his arms, forcing Jirobo to the same, dropping the stone pillar. "When you held that pillar horizontally, it casted a shadow just as long on the ground, which I could use to trap you."

"You asshole!" Jirobo snarled as he struggled from Shikamaru's shadow.

"Now, I know that my jutsu won't keep you in line for long, so let's finish this already," Shikamaru started to make hand seals, which Jirobo was forced to imitate. "Fire Release: Shadow Fire Thread!"

A stream of fire moved through Shikamaru's shadow towards Jirobo, as if it was a trail of oil. However, before the flames were able to engulf the Oto ninja, he was able to break Shikamaru's hold and jump aside.

"What!?" Shikamaru asked in disbelief. The lazy genius then noticed that Jirobo's body was covered in marks shaped like a chain of small triangles.

"I can't believe that a shrimp like you forced me to use the Cursed Seal," Jirobo snarled as he menacingly advanced towards him. "In case you didn't figure it out, I'm much more powerful now, so forget about your ridiculous shadow jutsu having any lasting effect on me now."

"I see," Shikamaru replied as he took a step back. "If that's the case, then I'll have to just crush you with brute force."

Jirobo stopped in his tracks by such outrageous statement. "Brute force? Crush me? YOU!? Bwahahahaha!"

Shikamaru simply smirked. "Who said it was me who was going to crush you?"

"Huh?"

And before Jirobo had any time to react, he was crushed by a gigantic, bandaged hand, producing multiple cracks on the ground, as well as raising a lot of dust.

"Sorry for not coming sooner," Choji stated, panting a bit. "I ran as fast as I could."

Shikamaru felt like chiding Choji for not heeding his advice and returning to help him, but now he was too happy to have one of his teammates back. Jirobo clearly was too much for Shikamaru alone, but between the two of them, maybe they'd have a chance.

"Glad to see you, Choji. Now get ready, this guy is so strong it's not even funny," Shikamaru stated.

Choji's eyebrow arched in confusion. "What do you mean? I just crushed-WHOA!"

Much to Choji's shock, Jirobo managed to lift the Akimichi's enlarged palm with his incredible strength, albeit with some effort, before pushing his hand back, which promptly returned to its normal size.

"So, the shrimp has some fatty reinforcements," Jirobo mentioned as he stared at Choji, who frowned in anger, then back at Shikamaru. "You're only succeeding in delaying the inevitable. And making me mad."

"You aren't exactly the most appropriate to talk about other people's weight, you know," Shikamaru fired back. "Come on Choji, let's go!"

"Right!"

Both Konoha ninja prepared to attack their enemy from two different sides, Shikamaru from afar and Choji in close combat. Of course, Jirobo wasn't going to make things so easy for them. He started to make hand seals, before slamming his hand into the ground.

"Earth Release: Earth Prison Golem!"

A large golem emerged from the ground, making both Choji and Shikamaru to take a step back. Being almost six meters tall, the golem towered menacingly over them. It had long, thick arms that reached all the way to the floor, with its forearms being even larger and thicker. The Oto ninja jumped on the golem's shoulder.

"Let's see what you can do against THIS! You're the first one to be crushed, shrimp!" Jirobo taunted as he commanded his golem to advance.

Shikamaru knew better than to try to use his shadow jutsu on such a massive creature, but thankfully he still had other options. Reaching his ninja tool pouch, Shikamaru grabbed a couple kunai and attached explosive tags on them before tossing them at the golem, embedding themselves into its right arm and right side of the chest. Two explosions shook the ground, almost completely blowing up the golem's right side. Jirobo, however, didn't look any fazed.

"Nice try, but useless," Jirobo stated.

Shikamaru then watched in shock how small pieces of rock and dirt started to fly towards the golem, quickly rebuilding its blown off part until it was completely repaired.

"Good as new! Your pathetic attacks won't do any lasting damage to my golem. Now don't make this any harder than it needs to be, and give up already!" Jirobo angrily snarled.

"There's nothing I'd love more than leave this fight and go home to nap, but sadly, that's not an option," Shikamaru replied.

The stone giant was now upon Shikamaru, and raised one of its arms in order to smash the lazy Nara into pulp. Fortunately, its big size also made it quite slow, and Shikamaru managed to dodge the incoming slam and escape between the golem's legs, running towards Choji.

"I think we'll do better if we stay together instead of attacking from different sides," Shikamaru stated upon reaching his rotund friend, as if to justify that it just wasn't cowardice.

"Do you have a plan?" Choji uneasily asked as he saw the golem stomping its way at them.

"Yeah. Remember what you did against that Kumo girl?" Shikamaru asked. Choji nodded. "It's time for an aerial attack."

Once again, Choji nodded and clapped his hands together. "Reverse Multi-Size Jutsu!"

The world around Choji started to grow as he shrank to the size of a little mouse. Shikamaru carefully picked his friend, and after taking a couple seconds to aim, he tossed Choji in an arc above the golem.

"Whatever you're planning it won't work!" a mildly confused Jirobo stated.

"I wouldn't be so quick to talk down our abilities, you know," Shikamaru stated.

When he was about to pass over Jirobo, he canceled the jutsu, returning to his normal size, and slowed his speed to a halt, falling down like a rock. Of course, Choji wasn't finished yet, and clapped his hands again.

"Multi Size Jutsu!" using his signature jutsu, Choji turned into a giant human sphere. "Human Bullet Tank!"

"Shit!" Jirobo cursed, as he saw the spinning human boulder falling upon him. His golem reacted in time and raised its arms in order to grab the falling Konoha ninja before he could do more damage, but the spinning speed made difficult to keep it contained.

"Get out of the way, you fat ass!" Jirobo was about to punch Choji while he was on his golem's arms, but soon somebody reminded him

that there was another opponent there.

"Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!"

Jirobo saw how an expanding stream of fire flew at him. He barely jumped out of his golem's shoulder before he was roasted by Shikamaru's jutsu. The fire attack however, did hit the golem in the head, knocking it a little, which on its own wouldn't have done any lasting damage, but it made its grip on Choji's to falter for a second, and that second was enough for the Akimichi heir to break free and demolish the giant rock construct with his jutsu.

And much to Jirobo's shock, Choji's momentum didn't slow down either, and the human rolling ball continued his attack unimpeded. The Oto ninja wasn't fast enough to dodge Choji's onslaught, and was forced to tackle him head on. Using his own bare hands, he tried to stop the living rolling sphere of destruction as his golem unsuccessfully tried before. Unfortunately, there was also the matter of the other Konoha ninja.

Speaking of which, Shikamaru was running towards Choji and Jirobo as well as his brain determined which jutsu would be the best to use. Jirobo had shown his ability to break through any shadow binding jutsu Shikamaru had by sheer brute force, so that wasn't an option. A fire jutsu it would be, then.

"Choji, keep him there! I'll finish this right now!" Shikamaru shouted as he began to form seals.

However, before the lazy genius was done, Jirobo let out an inhuman roar and punched Choji with such strength that it sent him flying backwards, until he crashed against a tree. The impact made the Akimichi heir return back to normal.

"CHOJI!" Shikamaru shouted in shock. Turning his head at Jirobo, he saw the Oto ninja had changed again, this time in a more drastic manner: his mohawk had grown into a long spiky mane that reached his shoulders, his skin turned into brownish-reddish color, his eyes

turned yellow with a black sclera, and he had grown warts all over his body. "What the hell are you...?"

"I can't believe you forced me into the second form of the Cursed Seal," Jirobo angrily groaned. "You know how embarrassing it is to use my trump card against such pathetic foes like yourselves!?"

"Yeah, I would have been pretty mad if I had to become so ugly in order to get stronger," Shikamaru couldn't resist to snark at his opponent.

Jirobo chuckled. "Let's see if you are in the mood for comedy once I'm done with you. In this form, I'm ten times as strong as I was before. You two are already dead."

"... troublesome," Shikamaru managed to say.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Shino and Tamaki jumped from one tree branch to another, avoiding the deadly projectiles of the six armed ninja known as Kidomaro. They were following the general direction Karin had told them, and so far the projectiles were coming from there, but the angle changed a little every few seconds, which suggested that he was constantly moving around.

"Tamaki, keep going. We're almost there," Shino told his teammate in his usual calm voice, albeit with a hint of encouragement.

"How can you know? Did you see him?" the brown haired girl asked.

"No, but one of my kikai beetles managed to find and latch onto him. As long as the beetle stays in position, my hive will be able to track him," Shino explained. Then, he pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it. "And this will make sure he comes out in the open."

Shino then threw a kunai with an explosive tag attached to a seemingly random area. Before the explosion occurred, both Konoha Genin heard a loud "SHIT!" and saw somebody coming out from behind a lush tree branch.

"Got him!" Tamaki shouted as she increased her pace. "I'm charging forward, cover me!"

"I'll be right behind you."

Kidomaru looked in expectation as the two Konoha Genin charged at him, like prey walking directly into their predator's lair. The six armed ninja then expelled a spider web net that increased in width as it was being released. Tamaki, however, was unfazed.

"Useless!" she said as her chakra enhanced metal claws easily cut the spider web before trying to slash Kidomaru, who managed to jump back before the girl's blades could ever touch him.

"Hmm, interesting. So you're the one who destroyed all the spider webs I put before..." Kidomaru wondered aloud. "This game might not be as dull as I had originally feared. Alright let's step up the difficulty!"

Kidomaru started to spit more spider webs in rapid succession, with Tamaki frenetically slashing them all as they were coming, taking a step back to give herself more room to breathe. Shino saw this as the perfect chance to attack and spread his hands, releasing a swarm of insects from under each of his sleeves. The angry swarm flew at Kidomaru, letting out a terrifying buzz.

"The hell? Where did those bugs come from?" the six armed man asked in shock as he interrupted his attack on Tamaki and jumped back. Rearing his head back, Kidomaru expelled a much larger spider web that managed to trap most of Shino's insects. "HA! That's what happens when the prey decides to attack their natural predators!"

Then, much to his shock, Shino appeared besides him, a kunai on each hand, and delivered a swing with his right hand, something the six armed man barely managed to dodge. He wasn't as lucky when Shino swung his left arm in flowing motion, leaving an ugly gash on the Oto ninja's shoulder, before jumping back on a higher tree branch.

"The hell? How did he..." Kidomaro thought as he quickly looked at the place where Shino was, and saw the first Shino dissolving into a swarm of bugs. *"So, a clone made of insects. Smart, very smart."*

The real Shino continued his attack, and threw a salvo of shuriken at the Oto ninja, who dodged them. Upon reaching close quarter combat distance, Kidomaru opened his mouth, spitting a spear-shaped stream of his golden fluid at Shino, who moved in time for not to be impaled, but ended up slashing his side.

"Shino!" Tamaki cried as she dashed at the six armed ninja. Her metal claws started to glow with a blue light before bursting into flames. "Burning Cat Claw Dash!"

Kidomaru used a spider web thread to swing to a nearby branch before Tamaki's attack destroyed the one he was in -and himself as well-. The cat kunoichi then grabbed Shino, and both of them jumped down to the floor.

"Shino, are you okay?" a concerned Tamaki asked.

"I will be shortly," Shino replied. His hand, glowing with a green light, covered his wound. "I'm a medic, remember?"

Tamaki sighed in relief. "Yeah, I know. And all the more reason to make sure he doesn't get you. I can't heal you."

She looked up and saw Kidomaru, carefully studying them.

"Coming up with an strategy to deal with these two might not be that easy. Better power up a little," Kidomaro thought as black marks

started to spread through his skin.

"The hell is that?" Tamaki wondered aloud. "Whatever it is, it can't be good for us. Better call some reinforcements," the cat kunoichi decided before biting her thumb and making five hand seals and slamming her palm into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, Tamaki's two cats, Denka and Hina, emerged, ready to aid the young cat kunoichi.

"Denka, Hina, I need your help once more," Tamaki told the ninja cats. "I never faced such a strong enemy in my life, and I can't do it alone."

Hina started to sniff the air. "I smell a foul chakra," the female cat said before locking her eyes onto Kidomaru. "Is he your enemy?"

Tamaki nodded.

"What do you want us to do?" Denka asked.

"Shino and I will take the brunt of the attack. I need you to act as our support. Try to distract him, or attack him when he's busy fighting us," Tamaki told them.

"You can count on us!" both cats said in unison before vanishing.

Tamaki's summoning didn't go unnoticed by Kidomaru, who bit his thumb as well.

"This is a game between the three of us! Calling outside help is cheating! If that's the case then, I'll do the same! Summoning jutsu!" Kidomaru stated before slamming his hand into the tree branch he was standing on.

From a cloud of smoke, a massive spider appeared, with Kidomaru standing on top of it, grinning evilly. Shino involuntarily took a step back.

"If you think you can beat me with numbers, you'll have another thing coming!" Kidomaru stated as his giant spider generated a massive egg sac. The sac then broke, and dozens of spiders the size of small dogs rained upon them.

"THE HELL IS THAT?" Tamaki asked in shock. Still, she wasn't shocked enough to not react. The claws of her gauntlet retracted in order to allow her to do hand seals, which she did as fast as she could. "Fire Release: Blistering Fire cat!"

Pouring as much chakra as she could into the jutsu, Tamaki breathed a massive wave of fire that took the shape of a cat, even letting out a meowing cry, which burned to ashes most of the incoming spiders, with Shino dealing with the few that escaped her fiery attack.

"Good job, Tamaki-san," Shino praised her in his usual cold tone.

"Don't thank me yet, " Tamaki replied, panting. That attack cost her a lot of chakra, and wasn't sure if she could be able to do it again if another rain of spiders came.

Something Kidomaru had the intention to do.

"Not bad, girl, not bad. You're making this game interesting. But let's see how long can you keep doing th-" Kidomaru said before being interrupted by a red blur who slashed his face. "AAAARGH! GET OFF OF MY FACE, YOU PEST!"

At the same time, another blur, this one blue, attacked the spider's vulnerable spot, its face. The large arachnid cried in pain.

"Your cats bought us some precious time. We should attack now that he's distracted," Shino suggested.

Tamaki nodded. "I'll get the spider, you get the guy."

Making a display of cat-like agility and speed, Tamaki climbed a tree until she was higher than the giant spider, and leaped at it, metal claws forward.

"Drill Claw!"

Tamaki started to spin, turning herself into a living drill that pierced the ten legged -oddly enough- giant beast through its head. The arachnid let out a wail of pain, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke before the cat kunoichi could inflict more damage.

On his part, Shino had managed to reach Kidomaru -still fighting with Hina-, and once again released his swarm of kikai beetles.

"Aburame Secret Art: Insect Tornado!"

As the name suggested, the swarm of insects formed a tornado around the unsuspecting Kidomaru while Hina jumped out of danger in the nick of time, as the beetles started to drain the Oto ninja of his chakra. The fight was over.

Or that's what Shino thought, as he couldn't feel the chakra being drained. Apparently, there was something that was blocking his swarm of insects. Ordering them to retreat, he saw that the six armed ninja was covered in what appeared to be a brownish golden armor.

"I see. Your skin can also secrete that quick-hardening fluid, and you used it to create an improvised armor, didn't you?" Shino guessed.

Kidomaru chuckled. "Your deductive skills are almost as good as mine," the six armed man stated, as his armor started to fall off. "My clan's abilities were truly something, but I didn't become as strong as I am until Orochimaru-sama improved me in every way. And given how you little pests are making this game longer than it should be, you're going to see another one of my enhancements."

The black markings on Kidomaru's body started to glow as they spread and covered his whole skin, which turned grayish red. His hair grew longer, a pair of horns grew on his forehead, and his eyes turned yellow with a black sclera. But the biggest change was a third eye that appeared on his forehead.

"Do you know what this means, brats?" Kidomaru asked with a sadistic glee. "This means it's game over for the both of you!"

...

Meanwhile, further to the north, Naruto and his group were still chasing the Oto ninja who had kidnapped Hagane and Kaida. The mood was a bit gloomier since four of their members were forced to leave in order to fight enemies much stronger than them, and naturally, everybody was worried for them.

But worry for others was soon replaced by worry for themselves when they remembered that the three remaining enemies were also the strongest, including the one who was Jonin level. The thought of having to face such a powerful opponent sent chills down their spines. Well, not in Naruto's case. He was determined to save his little siblings, and nobody, not even Orochimaru himself, would stop him from doing so.

"We're closing the gap," Karin informed. "Soon we- oh?"

"What's wrong, Karin?" Sakura asked, worried. When her bespectacled teammate did that, it was never good.

"I felt a presence close to us, but it disappeared. It was very sudden," the redhead stated.

"Yes, there was something. I caught a small burst of smoke through the corner of my Byakugan," Hinata added.

Worry started to spread among the group.

"A trap?" Haku guessed.

Naruto shook his head. "A Shadow Clone. Upon dispelling, Shadow Clones send the information and knowledge they gathered to the original. They probably left one to watch us. Now they know we're close to them, and they will prepare a trap."

"If that's the case, then everybody, stay alert!" Sasuke warned the others as his Sharingan flared to life. "Hinata, Neji we will need your eyes to make sure we're not blindsided."

"Don't worry, Sasuke-san, I've already been watching for potential traps on the way," Hinata reassured him -as well as the whole group-.

...

A little further to the north of the Konoha group, the rest of the Sound Five, with the unconscious Hagane and Kaida carried by Kimimaro, continued their journey. As Kimimaro's shadow clone dispelled upon seeing the Jinchuriki and his allies, new information flooded the Kaguya clan member's brain.

"The Jinchuriki is close once again," Kimimaro told his teammates.

"How many of his friends are still with him?" Sakon asked.

"If my clone is correct, he counted ten of them," Kimimaro calmly replied.

"Ten of them? Still?" Tayuya indignantly asked. "Why the fuck did those pieces of shit let so many pass?"

"Yeah, you'd think Jirobo and Kidomaru would have an easier time dealing with a bunch of weak Genin," Sakon agreed.

"Maybe those Genin aren't as weak as we thought," Kimimaro stated. "However, that doesn't erase the fact that Jirobo and

Kidomaru only managed to get four out of our backs. Sakon, Tayuya, you need to thin them out."

"Fuck yeah, time to crack some skulls," the only female of the Sound Five said in glee as she dashed in the opposite direction, followed by her blue haired teammate.

"Those brats will have a surprise coming," Sakon chuckled.

And thus, Kimimaro was left alone to guard the valuable hostages. While he wasn't afraid of a bunch of young greenhorns, he didn't want to take the chances and risk his hostages being rescued, harmed or fleeing. Orochimaru tasked him with a mission, and he always carried them out to the best of his abilities. Hopefully, Sakon and Tayuya would be able to cut their numbers to a more manageable quantity, one that wouldn't be a threat to the mission.

...

Back in Konoha

The news of Orochimaru's defeat at the hand of the Third Hokage started to slowly spread around Konoha. Many Oto ninja decided that with their leader gone, the best course of action would be to flee. Others were afraid that, if they left based on an unfounded rumor, Orochimaru would have them begging for a merciful death. And others refused to believe such news and continued fighting, despite the fact that Konoha was successfully pushing back the invaders and retaking all the zones the initial assault had taken over.

One of those groups who still want to fight made the mistake of attacking Zabuza, thinking that he wouldn't be much of a threat with a broken sword.

"Come here and see for yourselves if I'm not as dangerous with my sword damaged," the former Kiri ninja taunted them.

What followed was pretty much a massacre. Broken sword or not, Zabuza was one of the deadliest ninja Kiri had produced. Plus thanks to the Executioner's Blade special ability, it wouldn't stay damaged forever.

After slashing two Oto ninja at the same time, Zabuza watched intently how his blade absorbed the spilled blood, and used its iron to slowly rebuild itself. The masked man grinned under his mask.

"So, who wants to volunteer some blood in order to fix my sword?" Zabuza asked the now not so confident Oto ninja. "How about you?"

In less than a second, Zabuza was behind the "volunteer" and impaled him from behind. His sword kept growing as blood was spilled.

Once half the group was killed, the Executioner's Blade was fully repaired. This was enough to shatter the confidence of the remaining ninja, who found their lives more valuable than their loyalty to Orochimaru, and decided to flee.

Zabuza watched in satisfaction as those poor bastards ran away, not even making an attempt to stop them. Not because of pity, but because he liked to leave some people alive to spread word of his bloodshed. And after that humiliation at the hands of Orochimaru, he needed to do something in order to cushion such a hit towards his reputation.

As the former Demon of the Hidden Mist turned around, two ninja landed in front of him, one with gravity defying silver hair, and the other with a ridiculous bowl haircut.

"Zabuza!" Kakashi called upon landing.

"You're late, copycat. This area is clear of pests," Zabuza stated with an air of superiority. "But then again, your assistance will be welcome when I go to face Orochimaru."

"That won't be necessary. I heard news that the Third Hokage defeated him and sent him packing," Gai intervened, in an unusual serious tone. "The resurrected Kage have been dealt with."

"If that's the case, all what's left is to clean the village from the remaining holdovers of Oto ninja," Kakashi suggested.

"Kakashi!" a female voice called him from above.

The three Jonin looked up and saw Kurenai, followed by Asuma, as they jumped from a nearby roof and landed in front of them.

"Kurenai? Everything okay?" Kakashi asked, noticing the red eyed woman's distress.

"Kakashi, I need you right now!" Kurenai stated.

Zabuza snorted. "I didn't imagine that your boyfriend was doing such a lousy job pleasuring you."

Both Kurenai and Asuma shot the former Kiri ninja murderous glares before the genjutsu mistress turned back at Kakashi.

"Kakashi, we need your tracking dogs. Something terrible has happened," Kurenai urged.

"We ran into a clone of Naruto," Asuma continued, not waiting for the rest to ask what was going on. "Turns out Orochimaru used the chaos of the invasion as a cover to sneak in an elite squad to kidnap the Hokage's children."

"WHAT!?" Kakashi and Gai asked in unison.

"That's not the worst part," Kurenai spoke again, making the others wonder what could be even worse. "The clone told us the original Naruto had gathered his friends and went to pursue the kidnappers themselves. Those kids don't know what they're going against! We need to help them!"

"Fortunately, we won't be as needed now, given that a good chunk of the invaders have already been repelled," Asuma continued.

"If that's the case, then there's no time to waste," Kakashi poked his thumb with a kunai and made several hand seals before slamming his hand into the floor. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, eight dogs of different races and sizes appeared. All of them were wearing Konoha forehead protectors, as well as other pieces of cloth.

"What can we do for you, Kakashi?" one of the dogs, a pug, asked his master.

"We are going to need your help in finding out our Genin students. Time is the of essence," Kakashi urged.

Author's Note: Let's start the arc with Shikamaru, Choji, Shino and Tamaki. While Choji fighting Jirobo was done in canon, here I also wanted to showcase his friendship with Shikamaru a bit more. Still, the fight is a bit different from what it was in canon, given that I gave Jirobo a couple more abilities he didn't have before (albeit the Golem one is based on an anime filler episode).

I also liked that this episode not only allowed me to show more stuff of Shino that wasn't related to Fu (I was afraid he was too much of a Satellite Love Interest back then) but also showcase that he is a medic nin, something I'm sure many readers have forgotten (albeit not without reason, given that he didn't do anything medical related so far).

Well, not much more to say anymore, other than the rescue arc will continue in two weeks, showing the resolution of the fights started here, as well as other two members of the Sound Five fighting the Konoha 15.

Thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Senju Twins Retrieval, Part II

Author's Note: Well, I'm glad to see that putting the spotlight on some of the less loved secondary characters (and Shikamaru) was better received than I initially feared. This chapter, which is way longer than usual, will continue the trend, and have other secondary characters facing the Sound Four.

Anyway, enjoy.

Chapter 37:

Senju Twins Retrieval, Part II

or

Brawl in the Forest

...

While Shikamaru guessed that "ten times as strong I was before" was probably an exaggeration to describe Jirobo's physical capabilities in his second Cursed Seal stage, it was more than enough to beat both of them to a pulp.

Choji had tried to engage Jirobo in hand to hand combat, but the older teen easily overpowered the Akimichi ninja. Choji this time decided to use his trusty clan jutsu.

"Multi Size Jutsu!" Choji swelled up into a human boulder and started to spin towards Jirobo, catching fire at the same time. "Fire Release: Flaming Human Bullet Tank!"

Jirobo, on his part, wasn't impressed.

"Pathetic!" the mutated ninja shouted as he kicked Choji, brutally knocking him backwards, forcing him to revert back to normal.

Jirobo turned around and saw that Shikamaru had caught him with his shadow jutsu, but he didn't look fazed in the slightest. Without making any visible effort, he managed to break through the jutsu.

"WHOA!" Shikamaru said in shock, as the Jirobo's breaking his jutsu made him recoil.

"Why are you surprised?" Jirobo asked as he smiled maliciously. "The first stage of the cursed seal already allowed me to overpower that annoying shadow jutsu of yours. In this stage... well, I don't even need to try. As weak as the both of you are, everything you do is completely useless against me."

"Keep underestimating us. It will make our job easier," Shikamaru countered, but deep down, he knew there was some truth to Jirobo's insults. *"Dammit, there's nothing that we can throw at this guy that he doesn't shake off as if it was nothing. Come on Shikamaru, think! There has to be a way to defeat-"*

"Shikamaru," Choji snapped the Nara out of his thoughts. "I'm going to use it."

"It? What do you mean...?" Shikamaru trailed off, before realizing what Choji was planning to do. "What!? No! If you do that, you might die!"

"And if I don't, both of us will die," Choji replied. He took out a soldier pill from his ninja tool pouch and swallowed it. "My calorie control improved a lot during the training I did with dad for the Chunin Exam Finals, I can do this!"

Choji started to glow with a blue light as he started to gather chakra.

Jirobo remained amused. "I don't know what you plan to do, but whatever it is, it won't work," he then let out a fake yawn. "Let's see if

you can entertain me at least. I'm getting bored."

"You've been saying that non-stop, yet you failed to kill any of us so far," Shikamaru fired back.

Jirobo's smile vanished, and his face frowned. "You know what? I think you're right. Playtime's over! You go first!"

The Oto ninja moved unusually fast for somebody his size, and in less than two seconds he was already in melee range, fist raised ready to beat the Nara into a pulp.

"DIE!"

Shikamaru heard a loud crashing noise. However, the noise wasn't made by Jirobo's fist clashing against his body, but something that punched Jirobo with such force that he was sent flying against a tree.

"... Choji?" Shikamaru asked the boy in front of him.

Choji's most defining feature, his heavysset body, was now much thinner, making him pretty much unrecognizable. Two large chakra wings shaped like the wings of a butterfly had grown on his back.

"Alright, you fat ass, ready for the beating of your life?" Choji taunted Jirobo.

The Oto ninja groaned as he pulled himself up. He then flexed his arms to rid them of any numbness.

"Oh, you're in for it, lard ball," Jirobo angrily snarled as he charged at Choji.

"Come on Shikamaru, let's go!" Choji shouted as he charged.

"Alright, then," the lazy genius replied as he followed him making hand seals. "I'll try to create an opening for you! Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Shikamaru breathed a volley of small fireballs from his mouth at Jirobo, who was also making hand seals.

"Earth Release: Hiding Like a Mole Jutsu!"

Jirobo dug deep underground, and the barrage of fireballs harmlessly passed above him. However, he was soon going to find out that he wouldn't be safe underground. With the help of his chakra wings, Choji leaped high into the air. He raised his right fist, which started to burn with a blue flame, before inevitably coming down.

"Butterfly Bullet Bombing!"

Shikamaru made sure to be at a safe distance from the epicenter of the earthquake Choji created upon landing, shattering the land below him in a multitude of stones and pebbles, and most importantly, throwing Jirobo out of his underground hiding spot.

"WHAT!?" Jirobo asked incredulously as he was sent flying up.

"Now's my chance!" Shikamaru exclaimed as he grabbed a handful of kunai from his tool pouch and tossed them at the airborne Jirobo. While his toss was far from perfect, half of them embedded on the mutated ninja's skin.

"AAARRGH!" Jirobo screamed in pain. "You... you! I will devour both of you!" He screamed as he, blinded by fury, charged at the Konoha duo, not even bothering to remove the kunai from his body.

"Will you stop with the taunts already? It's getting tiresome," Shikamaru groaned.

"I think you're trying to bite more than you chew!" Choji replied, as he charged as well.

Both ninja met in the middle, greeting each other with a brutal punch to the face. However, Choji's punch packed way more power, and

sent Jirobo flying back again, and the resulting shockwave raised a gust of wind in every direction.

"How about that!?" Choji taunted. He raised his fist again, which burned with a blue chakra fire once more.

After getting a taste of Choji's superhuman strength in Butterfly Mode, Jirobo knew that not even with the level two Cursed Seal, he could win this fight.

"How... how these twerps are so strong? Especially the fat one! How did his punches get so strong so suddenly? Is that state of his... is he stronger than Orochimaru-sama's power? No, that can't be possible!" the image of Choji menacingly getting closer made his survival instincts to overcome any rational thought, casting aside the mystery of Choji's power, and was replaced by one thing, to run away. But the moment he tried to run, he found his legs wouldn't move. "What?"

"Sorry, but you're not going anywhere," Shikamaru stated, his hands locked into a hand seal, and his shadow connected with Jirobo's. "While it's true that your previous strength was enough to overpower my jutsu, I'm sure you won't be feeling so hot after that beating."

"No... no!" Jirobo screamed as he futilely tried to break Shikamaru's jutsu, but the Nara's words rang true. Those latest attacks he received did a number on him, and even the cursed seal had its limits.

"Now prepare to experience... the power of the Akimichi Clan!" Choji shouted as he charged at Jirobo with his fist raised.

"No, wait! Can't we just calm down? There's no need to-"

"Butterfly Bullet Bomb!"

Unable to run away, or even try to block the attack, Jirobo saw himself at the receiving end of Choji's strongest punch he ever threw.

The force of the impact shot him back like a rocket, crashing against a mighty oak, and the Oto ninja was no more.

Choji heavily panted as his chakra wings faded. Shikamaru walked to him and patted him on the back.

"You did it, Choji. You beat that animal," the Nara congratulated him.

"Well, it was... a team effort..." Choji weakly said before losing consciousness and dropping face first onto the ground.

"Choji!?" CHOJI!"

...

"Congratulations brats, you're now going to play in hardcore difficulty," Kidomaru grinned in a way that accentuated his current inhumanity. "Who wants to die first?"

"How about you?" Tamaki retorted as she dashed towards the six armed mutated ninja, her claws glowing with a blue light. "Cross Flash!"

Kidomaru jumped backwards, even if at a lower speed than Tamaki's. He expelled his golden spider fluid, which took the shape of two long kunai before hardening, and used them to parry the cat kunoichi's attack. He then used his extra arms to hold Tamaki in place, and tried to sink his improvised kunai into her flesh, but the brown haired girl expertly broke the hold with a double kick to the Oto ninja's chest, which also helped to push herself backwards.

As he did before, Shino saw this moment as the perfect chance to make his move. He recalled his kikai beetles around him.

"This is going to cost me a lot of chakra, but I don't think I have much choice," Shino thought with some regret, as he made the required hand seals.. "Aburame Secret Art: Giant Beetle Growth!"

The jutsu produced multiple smoke explosions in the swarms of beetles, but when the smoke dispelled, both Kidomaru and Tamaki saw in shock that some of the Aburame's insects suddenly grew to the size of Tamaki's cats. Said kunoichi cringed upon seeing the six legged beasts appear.

"Ew!"

With a mere hand command, Shino directed the squad of ten giant insects towards Kidomaru, who was shocked at first but quickly regained his cool. Jumping backwards, Kidomaru spat once again a rather large spider web to trap Shino's giant insects, but said web was torn apart by several chakra-infused shuriken threw by Tamaki.

"Shit!" the six armed man yelled.

Kidomaru managed to punch and kick back the first few of the insects that came close to him, but did not notice one of them sneaking from below, and sank its pincers into his leg.

"AAAAAAARGGH!" Kidomaru yelled in pain, making his focus waver for a moment, a moment that was more than enough for the rest of the beetles to sink their pincers into his flesh.

Shino jumped in front of the six armed man, overwhelmed by the giant insects.

"It's over. Those beetles will drain your chakra until there's nothing left," Shino calmly announced.

Kidomaru growled in anger, but then his mouth curved into yet another inhuman smirk, one that sent chills to both Konoha ninja. "Oh that's so good, thinking you already defeated me. Well... THINK AGAIN!"

He opened his mouth, releasing more golden spider fluid, shaped like a long spear, taking Shino by surprise. The Aburame Genin tried

to move, but he didn't react fast enough and the improvised spear pierced his belly.

"SHINO!" Tamaki yelled upon seeing the scene.

Kidomaru smiled upon seeing Shino's body falling face first to the ground, and at the same time, the beetles loosened his hold on him and stopped sucking his chakra, as if feeling their master's predicament. This allowed Kidomaru to easily get them off of his body. Standing up, he turned back and saw Tamaki shooting him a murderous glare.

"See? This is what happens when you play such a dangerous game like this one. You get hurt. Badly," Kidomaru chuckled. "Don't worry, you're going to join him now."

"Denka, Hina, with me! Let's tear him to shreds!" Tamaki shouted.

Both cats appeared at her mistress' side, and the three of them charged at the Oto ninja. Kidomaru once again expelled more golden spider fluid, this time in the shape of several curved blades, one for each of his hands. The six armed man grinned wildly, and engaged Tamaki and her cats in a brutal melee fight.

Like she usually did, Tamaki was the one openly fighting, while her cats awaited for the chance to attack whenever the enemy showed an opening.

But thanks to his six arms, no such a thing happened. The guy was monster, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, since he could attack and keep a defensive position at the same time, making fighting him incredibly tedious.

"Given your choice of weapons, you're a melee type, aren't you?" Kidomaru asked as he casually blocked all of Tamaki's swipes. "I'm more of a ranged specialist, but as you can see, I'm pretty good at hand to hand combat too."

"Let me guess, three times as good as I am?" Tamaki asked, hinting at the predictable pun.

"Three? Oh boy, you're certainly full of yourself. The number of my arms is irrelevant to the gap between us," Kidomaru retorted. "Now die!"

The six armed ninja opened his mouth, firing multiple spikes made of the hardened golden spider fluid. This time, it was Tamaki's turn to jump back, as she swiped them away with her bladed gauntlets. Kidomaru lunging at her shortly afterwards didn't go unnoticed, and the kunoichi retracted the blades back, and made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Blistering Fire cat!"

Tamaki exhaled a stream of fire that quickly took the shape of a large and ferocious cat that dashed towards Kidomaru, leaving a trail of fire with each step.. Kidomaru, however, easily dodged it by jumping sideways.

"You'll have to do bet-"

"Drill Claw!"

The next thing he saw, Tamaki had turned into a spinning missile that was flying at him. Caught in mid air, Kidomaru couldn't move again to dodge Tamaki's attack, but unfortunately for her, he was a man of resources, and expelled a spider web thread to a tree branch above him to avoid being torn to shreds.

Kidomaru smirked arrogantly. "That was a close one. But like I said, you'll have to do bet-"

"MEOWWW!"

A pair of cats appeared out of nowhere, with one of them biting one of his arms and the other latched itself to his face and started to

viciously slash and bite it.

"AAAARRRGHHH!" Kidomaru yelled as he forcefully removed Hina from his face, and angrily tossed the female cat against a tree, followed by savagely punching Denka in the head, forcing the male cat to stop biting his arm.

"Denka! Hina!" Tamaki cried from below.

"S-Sorry, Tamaki-chan... but I don't think we can keep going..." Denka weakly said as he and her sister disappeared, leaving a cloud of smoke behind.

"It's okay, you did a great job," Tamaki whispered to herself, before looking at Kidomaru with defiant eyes. "You'll pay for all the people and animals you hurt today!"

Kidomaru chuckled once again. He created two swords out of the golden spider fluid. "I'd like to see you try."

Without uttering any more words, Tamaki quickly climbed the tree Kidomaru was perched on, and engaged him once again in melee combat. However, once again she found that Kidomaru was the superior opponent, and in no time he kicked her back into the ground.

"Now die already! This game is no longer fun!"

Kidomaru opened his mouth, once again releasing a barrage of golden blades at the downed cat ninja in a wide angle.

"Death Steel Ring!"

Tamaki started to spin with her bladed hands extended, successfully deflecting most of the raining projectiles, but she was unable to stop all of them, and some ended up embedded in her body, forcing her to stop.

"And game over for you," Kidomaru laughed as he was jumped down, ready to impale Tamaki with his improvised swords. Tamaki closed her eyes and feared for the worst. "DIE!"

"Aburame Secret Art: Giant Beetle Growth!"

"What?"

Kidomaru didn't have time to react before he was swarmed by a dozen of giant beetles, making him unceremoniously drop into the ground face first as the hungry insects began to prey on his chakra.

"Shino!" Tamaki squealed in joy. "You're okay!"

"For the given value of the word 'okay'," he punctualized. "But yes, I'm no longer close to death anymore."

Kidomaru looked at the Aburame with hate and incredulity in his three eyes. "W-What? HOW!? I killed you!"

"You thought you killed me," Shino replied. "The wound you inflicted on me would have been fatal unless treated immediately. Fortunately, I've been trained in the medical arts by the greatest medic-nin the world has ever seen, and Tamaki bought me all the time I needed to recover. Now I can return to the battle, and end it once for all. And trust me, you won't catch me off guard a second time."

"No... no! This... aaarrrgghh!"

"I can't look..." Tamaki whined as he averted her gaze as Kidomaru was slowly devoured by Shino's enlarged bugs.

Shino, on the other hand, wasn't going to make the same mistake his opponent did, and wouldn't take his eyes off the Oto ninja until he was one hundred percent sure he would be dead. And that moment didn't take too long to arrive.

"Tamaki, sit down. I need to treat those wounds on your body before they get worse," Shino instructed his teammate.

"Don't. You've lost a lot of chakra. I think I can go a bit longer until we can find some help," Tamaki replied.

Shino shook his head. "I won't allow that by any means. Don't worry about my chakra reserves, my beetles can give me some of theirs if I need them. Now sit down, don't move, and let me work on your wounds."

Not having any energy left to argue, Tamaki sighed and complied. As Shino removed the makeshift kunai from her body and healed the wound, she wondered if the others would have rescued the Hokage's children by now.

She also thought about Kiba, and prayed that he wouldn't do anything stupid given that neither Shino nor she would be there to cover his back.

...

By the time Jiraiya and Anko returned to Konoha, they saw that much to their surprise, the battle had died down considerably, and most of the efforts were focused on capturing or driving away the remaining Oto ninja still attacking.

"You know, I had the feeling that we missed a lot when we were out," Jiraiya mentioned as he looked around.

"Actually, I think it's everybody else who missed on what we did," Anko replied, before her impatience kicked in. "Alright, where is Orochimaru? There's no way he can escape from us now!"

"Hokage-sama!" a new voice said. A small group of ANBU, lead by a cat-masked purple haired woman -whom Jiraiya knew was Yugao Uzuki- landed in front of the white haired man. "Thank Kami you've returned!"

"What is the situation here?" Jiraiya asked her.

"Two of the reanimations have been dealt with," Yugao informed, and Jiraiya visibly sighed upon hearing the news.

"If that's the case, then all of Orochimaru's reanimations have been neutralized, since Anko and myself just dealt with Minato and Kushina," Jiraiya explained. The ANBU remained impassible, but on the inside, they were just as relieved. "Any news on Orochimaru?"

"We've got reports that Sarutobi-sama, helped by Tsunade-sama and Shisui Uchiha managed to defeat the traitor," Yugao explained, eliciting a smile on Jiraiya and a frown on Anko, being deprived of her chance of revenge once again. "Unfortunately, Orochimaru evaded capture. We don't know his location, but it's safe to assume that he's no longer in the village."

Jiraiya's smile disappeared, and let out a heavy sigh. "Despite his ego, Orochimaru was always a sneaky bastard, and wouldn't come here without a escape plan. Undoubtedly, it won't be long until he shows his visage again. What about the rest of his forces?"

"Most of them are withdrawing, albeit a few holdouts in the core of the village remains," Yugao informed him.

"Good to hear. Well, let's help our forces take out the trash, alright?" Jiraiya suggested.

Everybody nodded.

"Lead the way, Hokage-sama."

Jiraiya leapt towards downtown Konoha, followed by Anko and the small squad of ANBU.

...

Meanwhile, further to the north, Naruto and the rest of his friends continued the pursuit of his little siblings' kidnapping.

"Two of them left the group!" Karin warned everybody.

"Which ones?" Sasuke asked.

"The weakest ones. The strongest guy -and presumable the leader- is still carrying Hagane and Kaida. Guess that he wants to personally make sure that they arrive to wherever Orochimaru has his lair."

"Alright, everybody, stay alert! These two are surely even stronger than the other two, who were already way stronger than any of us individually!" Naruto told the others.

Everybody mentally prepared to fight, and some of them, such as Naruto, Tenten and Haku, got some weapons ready. However, they were met by something none of them were expecting.

"Hey are you... hearing that?" Kiba asked. Akamaru barked in agreement.

"I believe so," Sakura replied. "It sounds like... a flute?"

Suddenly, all of them lost all sense of balance, tripping when tried to find a footing on a tree branch, and fell to the grassy ground below. They tried to stand up, and suddenly felt very dizzy.

"Wha... what's going on?" Lee slurred as he tried to get up.

Suddenly, ropes appeared out of nowhere, wrapping around their limbs and pulling them in different directions, leaving them completely immobilized.

"What the hell is this?" Tenten asked, and much to her horror, she saw how her arms started to melt off. "AAAAAAAAAAHHHH! MY ARMS!"

"It's... it's a genjutsu!" Sakura told the others. "Quickly, try to break it!"

The knowledge that they have been trapped in a genjutsu was of little help, given that they were pretty much unable to break it.

"Dammit... this genjutsu are almost like those from Kurenai-sensei!" Haku thought as he tried to break the morbid illusion. *"Come on, you can do it, Kurenai-sensei taught you how..."*

Meanwhile, close to them, perched on a tree branch, Sakon was stalking the helpless Konoha ninja from afar, smiling deviously.

"Look at them, unable to resist Tayuya's music," Sakon chuckled to himself. "We should have gone ourselves from the get go instead of sending the other two idiots first. Anyway," Sakon then pulled a pair of kunai. "Let the culling begin!"

The blue haired teen leaped from his hiding place, and locked onto his first target, Sasuke Uchiha, whom he had deemed the biggest threat. He couldn't help but widely smile in anticipation at the thought of his first kill of the day...

"SHANNARO!"

Suddenly, a pink haired girl appeared in his field of vision, and the next second he found himself at the receiving end of an incredibly powerful punch that sent him flying backwards, forcing him to drop his kunai, until a tree painfully stopped him.

"The... the hell?" Sakon asked in pain, as he got up. "How were you able to break Tayuya's genjutsu, you brat?"

"Turns out, I'm a very proficient in genjutsu myself," Sakura replied as she shook her hand she used to punch him. "Including how to dispel them."

"Oh well, big deal. You won't be able to release the others if you're busy fighting me. And if you fight me, it won't take long until your pitiful life comes to an end," Sakon stated. "Get ready!"

Sakura didn't expect the blue haired teen to be so fast, but nonetheless she was able to react in time and block an incoming punch. However, she had a much harder time blocking the next barrage of rapid fire punches.

"Dammit, this guy's taijutsu is as good as Lee's!" Sakura distressingly thought as she tried to block the barrage of hits. "Even if I can surpass his physical strength with Tsunade-sama's chakra enhanced strength, it won't be of any help if I can't land a single hit! Wait a minute... I got it!"

Sakon continued his onslaught, while Sakura keep parrying and blocking them as well as she could, not making any attempts at attacking.

"See how hopelessly outclassed you're against me?" Sakon taunted. "Now DIE!"

Pouring as much strength as he could into his next punch, he sank his fist into Sakura's stomach. The pinkette bent over forwards as her mouth and eyes opened wide... before exploding into a burst of cherry blossoms.

"What the hell!?" Sakon asked in shock, before he realized. "Dammit, she used a genjutsu!"

Fortunately, the Oto ninja was able to snap out of it pretty easily, however, the seconds he spent entranced gave Sakura more than enough time to counterattack, and after breaking the genjutsu, the first thing he saw was a very angry Sakura charging at him, her first raised and ready to turn him into a bloody pulp.

"Shit!"

Sakon managed to jump in time, and Sakura's fist ended up hitting the ground, instantly creating a rather large crater, and making the ground around a kilometer shake as if there was an earthquake.

"Shit, that bitch is way stronger than I am? How? She doesn't have any muscle!" Sakon thought in anger upon seeing the power of the pinkette's fists. *"I can't let her-"*

"Passing Fang!"

Sakon's thoughts were interrupted by a living tornado flying at him. Once again, the Oto ninja's agility and speed saved him from a nasty injury by gracefully dodging the sneak attack. The tornado then turned into a Konoha ninja wearing a gray hooded coat.

"Kiba!" Sakura called, happy to have some reinforcements.

"The hell? You're a genjutsu master too or what?" Sakon asked.

Sakura also wanted to know. Kiba wasn't exactly proficient with genjutsu, not even at breaking them.

"If you fall under a genjutsu, you need a partner to disrupt your chakra network in order to snap out of it," he then pulled his hood back revealing a happy looking white furred dog. "Meet my partner, Akamaru!"

"Arf!" Akamaru happily barked.

"Your goddamn dog was able to resist Tayuya's genjutsu!?" Sakon asked in shock.

"Dogs have different chakra networks from humans, and given that most genjutsu are meant for humans, dogs are immune to most of them," Kiba stated. He started to smell the air. "Now, if my nose doesn't fool me -and it never does- she's about one hundred meters to the northwest, am I right?"

"Release!"

Another of the Konoha ninja was also awake.

"Finally. It took me some effort, but Kurenai-sensei's training paid off!" Haku happily said as he regained the control of his body.

"Another one!? You're supposed to be Genin! No Genin should be able to break a genjutsu this complex!" Sakon protested, letting out his frustration.

"Correction, we're Konoha Genin. We're far tougher than the average," Kiba cockily proclaimed.

"Kiba, if you found where the genjutsu caster is, you should go and try to stop her," Sakura told him. Kiba nodded, and leapt away.

"Haku, release the others! I'll keep this guy busy while you do it!"

"Understood!" Haku stated as he began to disrupt Tenten's chakra network.

Sakura then started to make hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Sakura's cheeks puffed, and then exhaled a stream of water at the shocked blue haired Oto ninja, who managed to dodge it by jumping to a nearby tree.

" These brats are way stronger than they look. No wonder why Jirobo and Kidomaru only managed to delay four between the two of them. Then again, if they used the cursed seal they should be able to kill them easily, and thus come back to help us. Why the hell aren't they here yet?" Sakon thought.

"Get over here, you coward!" Sakura shouted, shaking her fist.

"Where was that bravado from a few minutes ago?"

In no time, all of the Konoha Genin were already released from the musical genjutsu. In fact, the music had stopped altogether, meaning that Kiba managed to interrupt it.

"Is everybody okay?" Naruto asked.

"Define, 'okay'," Karin groaned as she rubbed her temples.

"I'm good to continue," Sasuke stated.

"The same goes for me," Lee added, followed by everybody else stating the same intention.

"Two more of those guys are here. Sakura is engaging one, while Kiba is fighting the other. Two of us should stay here to help them, while the rest go and face their leader," Naruto stated.

"I think I'll stay and make sure forehead girl doesn't get killed," Ino stated. "Besides... is no secret that I'm not among the strongest of us present. Besides, you still have two medic-nin in the group."

"I'm going to stay as well. Kiba has none of his teammates, and he'll need somebody to cover his back," Neji stated.

Karin walked towards Neji and grabbed his hand. "Be careful, Neji-kun. If you don't come back, I will break up with you!."

Neji gave her a hint of a smile. "Don't worry, I will be fine."

"Very well then. Good luck and stay alive. The rest of us... go!" Naruto called.

Everybody nodded, and they resumed the pursuit, lead by the blond Chunin.

"No!" Sakon screamed as he noticed Naruto and the others slipping away. He disengaged Sakura and tried to stop them, but a rain of shuriken forced him to cut his chase short.

"Sorry, but you aren't leaving so soon, not before playing with us first," Ino stated in a rather smug tone as she adopted a fighting stance. "Ready, billboard brow?"

Sakura smiled. "Whenever you are, Ino-pig."

...

The sound of the flute became much clearer as Kiba advanced towards the genjutsu caster. Akamaru was resting on his head, constantly biting his ear in order to create a source of pain that would prevent the Inuzuka runt from relapsing into the genjutsu.

"I think you're enjoying this too much," Kiba told Akamaru. The dog merely growled as he intensified the pressure of his bite.

A few seconds later, he saw a flicker of red hair, and could see a red haired girl, maybe a couple years older than him, playing the flute. Kiba reached for his tool pouch and pulled a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it.

"Concert's over!" Kiba stated as he tossed the kunai at Tayuya's feet.

The redhead kunoichi was forced to stop playing the flute and jump as far away as possible in order to avoid the incoming explosion.

"Beast Mimicry Art: Four Legs Jutsu!"

Kiba emerged from the cloud of smoke and dust raised by the explosion, running on all fours at an insane speed, and lunged at Tayuya. The Oto kunoichi once again jumped back, but she wasn't fast enough, and Kiba managed to scratch her in the face.

"You son of a bitch!" Tayuya cursed as she covered her wounded cheek with one of her hands.

Kiba ignored her insults, and smirked at her confidently. "Just like I expected. Since you're a genjutsu specialist, you aren't that good in hand to hand combat."

"Why don't you come here and test your theory, you piece of shit!" Tayuya angrily retorted.

"Oh, I plan to," Kiba stated as he took a four legged stance once more.

"How the hell did you brat managed to break my genjutsu?!" Tayuya asked before she noticed Kiba's bloodied ear. "You must think you're so clever, don't you?"

"I'm going to admit that this is the first time somebody called me clever," Kiba replied. "Yeah, I admit that I'm not that bright. But guess what? I don't need brains to be very good at what I do!"

Kiba lunged forwards, ready to tear Tayuya to shreds with his wild and feral taijutsu style. This time, rather than trying to dodge, the Oto kunoichi decided to fight him. She replaced her flute with a couple of kunai and engaged the Inuzuka in melee combat.

Despite her valiant efforts, Kiba was right. Tayuya was a ranged specialist, and hand to hand combat wasn't her forte -in her base form, at least, but her pride didn't allow her to activate her cursed seal so soon against an enemy she deemed unworthy-, and Kiba soon became the superior fighter. And to add salt to the wound, Kiba had still one more asset Tayuya wasn't taking into account.

"Arf!"

Akamaru jumped from Kiba's head, and sank his small but sharp teeth in Tayuya's arm.

"GET THE HELL OFF ME, YOU FUCKING BITCH!"

"Passing Fang!"

Thanks to that moment of distraction, Kiba was able to nail the redhead with his signature jutsu, knocking her from the tree branch she was perched in, and fell to the ground with a loud thud. Looking down, he saw Tayuya getting up.

"By the way, Akamaru is male!" Kiba shouted down, with his dog barking in agreement.

"I DON'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT WHAT YOUR FUCKING PEST OF A PET HAS BETWEEN THE LEGS!" the redhead shouted back.

Then, much to Tayuya's anger, another Konoha ninja appeared, landing besides Kiba. He had long brown hair and clear, light gray eyes. He appeared to be a Hyuga.

"Kiba," the Hyuga stated in his usual calm demeanor. "I came here to help you defeat this foe."

Kiba smirked at the Hyuga prodigy. "Thanks, but I'm almost done here. This chick can barely fight against somebody able to resist genjutsu. Then again, you can watch me how I defeat this very unworthy opponent."

Kiba's words made Tayuya froth with rage. Not only was he tossing her around like a ragdoll, but he even boasted about it for further humiliation. Black marks started to spread around her body, as her desire to make Kiba eat his words burned her from the inside.

"You think you saw the best of me, you piece of shit?" Tayuya angrily shouted. "Well, let me tell you you've seen nothing yet!"

She bit her thumb and made five hand seals before slamming her hand into the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, three large ogre like creatures appeared. One had long hair that covered its face, was fully clothed, and was carrying a threatening looking steel club. The second was much bulkier, wore no shirt, and had its eyes and wrists bandaged. Under the wrist bandages there were a pair of claw-like blades. The last one was completely bandaged from head to toe, leaving only its mouth visible, and strangely enough, had no arms. The three of them had the same rope-like purple belt around their waists.

"She may not be much of a fighter, but apparently she can summon somebody who can do the fighting for her," Neji observed.

"... Shit," Kiba cursed, realizing that the tables were about to be turned.

"Stay calm. They're just summons. If we can get past them, beating the woman won't be that hard," Neji reminded him.

"Yeah. I was saving this for later, but better not go half-assed on her," Kiba then pulled out something out of his ninja tool pouch, which appeared to be a soldier pill. "Akamaru!"

Kiba tossed the pill at the little dog, who ate it in one bite. The effect was instant, and the dog's normally white fur started to dye red. While impassible on the outside, Neji was rather surprised.

"I had no idea your dog could do that," Neji commented, as his Byakugan allowed him to see all the changes Akamaru was going through, besides the visible one.

Kiba smiled in pride. "Of course. Inuzuka dogs aren't just pets. They're our partners for a reason."

Meanwhile, back on the ground, black marks started to spread around Tayuya as she pulled out her flute once again.

"Get ready, you pieces of trash, you have no idea what's coming for you!" Tayuya yelled as she started to play the flute once again.

At the sound of the flute, the three summoned giants leaped at the two Konoha Genin.

"Here they come! Get ready!" Kiba shouted as he and Neji prepared for the incoming fight.

...

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Large rocks started rise from the ground around Sakura before being chunked at the Oto ninja, who quickly dodged them, before reaching the pinkette in hand to hand combat.

"Multiple Connected Fists!"

Sakura was about to block the incoming fist, but she swore she saw several afterimages of other fists around it, and indeed, she felt several strong hits despite successfully blocking the attack, which knocked her backwards a few meters.

"What the hell?" Sakon asked, shaking his hand in pain. "It's like your skin is made of metal."

Sakura got up and smiled confidently at the blue haired ninja. Her skin then turned grayish brown, while her pink hair turned metallic silver.

"You're not that far off," Sakura replied. "You're mostly a physical fighter, right? Then you won't be able to cause me much harm."

"The Iron Skin jutsu. Good work, forehead," Ino mentally praised her fellow Konoha kunoichi.

"Even with the Iron Skin jutsu, those punches hurt. This guy is way stronger than he looks. I'll have to keep him fighting me, or else he'll snap Ino in two," Sakura thought, as she carefully eyed her opponent. "Let's go!"

With her skin-tight armor active, Sakura dashed at Sakon, who welcomed her with a sadistic smile. This time, the Oto ninja played defensively, blocking Sakura's attacks, maybe waiting for an opening to counterattack or even waiting for her to get tired.

"That would have been a valid tactic back then, but after training with Gai-sensei, there's no way this punk can hope to exhaust me," Sakura thought in mild satisfaction.

After pushing Sakura back a bit, Sakon started to rapidly spin.

"Multiple Connected Whirlwind!"

Sakon's spinning created a tornado around himself that hurled Sakura backwards, albeit it didn't cause too much damage.

"Weird. I swear I saw him sprouting multiple legs," Sakura thought as she pulled herself back.

Meanwhile, Ino had sneaked behind the blue haired ninja and was ready to make her move. She made a single hand seal.

"Mental Scourge Jutsu!"

"AAAAAGGGHH!" Sakon yelled, as he instinctively grabbed his head with his hands, finding himself victim of a brief but powerful migraine. "You bitch!"

"Liked that?" Ino smugly asked. "That jutsu will cause you a huge headache if you try to gather and mold chakra. Even if you're a melee type, I prefer for you not to have a ranged option."

"I see. You're the ranged specialist, while your little friend here is the frontline fighter, am I right?" Sakon asked, looking back and forth between the two girls. "So that means that I should get rid of you first!"

Sakon dashed at Ino, evading Sakura's attempt to block him. On her part, Ino reached on her ninja tool pouch, and pulled something Sakon was unable to see, before tossing it at the ground, creating a cloud of smoke.

"Dammit!" Sakon cursed. ""Multiple Connected Whirlwind!"

The tornado the Oto ninja generated managed to easily dispel the smoke created by the smoke bomb, but much to his chagrin, Ino used that time to keep some distance from him, as well to make several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Ino shot a stream of water from her mouth at the blue haired ninja, who managed to dodge it. However, in doing so, he was left wide open for Sakura to attack from behind.

"*Gotcha!*" the pinkette thought, ready to reduce the Oto ninja to pulp.

However, much to her surprise and confusion, a leg protruded from his back, kicking Sakura back with considerable force.

"The hell was that?" Ino asked, just as shocked.

"Good to see that I wasn't the only one who saw that," Sakura added, as she stood up.

"Trying to attack from behind, huh? Smart, but useless against somebody like me, you can say that I have..." Sakon began as, much to Sakura and Ino's horror, a second head grew besides the first one.

"... eyes on my back," the other head finished.

"Girls, meet my twin brother, Ukon," Sakon stated. "As you can see, we're pretty close, hehe."

"EWWWWW!" Both Sakura and Ino squirmed in disgust.

"You're not the first one who react in such a way," Sakon laughed. "Sorry brother, I think they find you too repulsive."

"No double date for us, it seems. Oh well, that's life. Anyway, let's not play around," Ukon stated as black marks started to spread around his body. The marks began to glow as well, spreading through the rest of his body, turning his skin red, his eyes yellow with black sclera, and growing a horn on his forehead.

"Level two already? I wanted to have some fun before finishing them off," Sakon whined.

"We're on an important mission, and I want to go back to sleep. Besides, I doubt we'll get a good fight out of these two bimbos," Ukon replied.

"Who the hell are you calling a bimbo!?" Ino angrily asked.

Ignoring Ino, Sakon did as his brother asked, and activated his cursed seal to its level two stage, undergoing an identical transformation, before finally separating into different bodies.

"Now you won't be able to blindside us," Sakon stated, smiling evilly at the two Konoha Genin, who looked at his newly sharp and inhuman teeth with a mixture of disgust and horror.

"Two versus two. Now this is what you'd call a fair fight, don't you think?" Ukon added

"They may be two, but now that they're separated, they won't be able to use multiple limbs at the same time again," Sakura warned Ino. "Alright, I'll try to have the two of them focused on me. Stay behind and cover me."

"Who died and made you leader?" Ino replied. Upon seeing Sakura's glare, she relented. "Alright, I'll do what you say."

Sakura made a hand seal. "Earth Release: Earth Clone Jutsu!"

Three masses of dirt and rock emerged from the ground and took the shape and color of Sakura Haruno.

"Okay, between me and my clones, we should be able to fight them on even grounds. Earth Clones take more than a single hit to destroy, and with all this earth, they don't take much chakra to form. Still, I better not expend much or else I won't be able to keep the Iron Skin active," Sakura thought, as she prepared to fight.

Sakon and Ukon shot like rockets against two of the Sakura clones, which were immediately shattered by two deceptively strong

punches. The third clone reacted in time, and delivered a flying kick to Ukon before he could recover, while the original Sakura dashed towards Sakon, fist raised and glowing with Chakra.

"Cherry Blossom Strike!"

Sakon managed to vanish the last second before Sakura's fist hit the ground, creating another crater, and sending multiple rocks and pebbles up into the air. Upon missing, she looked around to see where did he go.

"Where is he?" Sakura impatiently asked.

Ino let out a scream. When Sakura looked at her, the blonde looked absolutely horrified at her, as if she had seen a nightmarish monster.

"Ino? What's wrong? Are you...?" the pinkette asked.

"Oh, that reaction is pretty normal the first time somebody sees this," Sakon stated besides her.

Turning her head, Sakura understood Ino's horror, and saw that Sakon had fused his body to hers. Sakura let out another scream of horror as well.

"Thanks to Orochimaru-sama's cursed seal, Ukon and I can use our Bloodline Limit to fuse with another person, almost in an instant. Now," Sakon proceeded to immobilize Sakura by forcing her to hold one of her arms with the other one. "Ukon, this one's done with, take care of the blonde!"

"Got it!" the other brother replied, having just destroyed Sakura's remaining clone.

Ino managed to snap to her senses and prepared for the incoming attack, slipping into a fighting stance. Ukon pulled out a kunai and dashed at her with a crazed smile.

"NOW DIE!"

Everything happened way too fast for Ino to see, and before she realized, Ukon had already slashed her torso...

"INO!" Sakura screamed in horror...

... as the blonde disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a log behind, which snapped in two a second after appearing.

"The hell?" Ukon asked.

Sakon started to laugh. "Oh boy, I can't believe she got you with such a basic trick, brother..."

"Mind Transfer Jutsu!"

Sakon was suddenly silenced, as a thud was heard from behind the merged ninja. Turning around, Sakura saw Ino's unconscious body in the ground. She then looked at the Oto ninja merged with her.

"Ino?" the pinkette tentatively asked.

As if to answer her question, Sakon slowly began to separate from Sakura, much to the latter's relief.

"Thank you. I owe you one," Sakura told the blond, now possessing the Oto ninja.

"Sakon, what the hell are you doing?" Ukon asked, upon seeing his brother standing side by side with the enemy. He then realized what was going on. "Oh, I see, you're from that clan of psychics and body snatchers, right?"

"Body snatchers? Oh, that's rich, coming from you!" Ino-as-Sakon retorted. "Sakura, pull out a few smoke bombs!"

"Huh? What do you plan to...?" Sakura asked.

"Just do as I say, dammit!" Ino snapped.

Sakon's deep voice made Ino sound way scarier than she thought, which made Sakura to comply her request all the faster.

"I don't know what you plan to do, but you're releasing my brother, NOW!" Ukon shouted as he dashed at the Konoha duo.

"Sakura, now!" Ino shouted.

Sakura nodded and tossed the smoke bombs, creating a huge cloud of smoke in an instant, forcing Ukon to stop in his tracks and giving the two girls enough cover to sneak out, and take cover behind a large tree.

"Sakura, I'm going to undo the jutsu. The instant I return to my original body, punch this creep with all your might. I'll try to help you against the other," Ino whispered to her as she pulled out a kunai from Sakon's pouch.

Sakura was having a bad feeling about that. "What do you mean, 'try'?"

The answer came in the form of Ino stabbing the kunai into Sakon's gut, much to Sakura's shock and horror.

"Ino, what are you doing!? Your body takes the same wounds as the body you possess!" Sakura shouted, visibly shaken.

"I know! That's why I have to return to my own body and heal myself as best as I can! Now give this asshole the whooping he deserves!" Ino weakly protested as she made a hand seal.

"Ino..." Sakura whispered in awe. Her expression became more determined as her fingers curled into a fist. "You can count on me!"

Ino smiled. She meant it to be a genuine smile, but her current body made her look unbelievably creepy. "Release!"

Sakon had no time to process what had happened before a fist smashed against his face, hurling him backwards several meters,

until he crashed against a tree, knocking him unconscious. Sakura guessed that given how much blood he was going to lose thanks to the wound inflicted by Ino, the blue haired Oto ninja would never wake up again.

...

Ino woke up within her body. Despite only a few seconds having passed before making that wound and her returning to her body, she had lost quite more blood than she had expected. Still, she wasn't going to let herself being carried away by panic, that wouldn't help. She was trained by one of the Legendary Sannin, and she was going to make her proud. She placed both hands on the wound.

"Mystical Palm Jutsu."

Her hands glowed with a green light as some of the blood returned back to her body, the wound started to slowly close. She wanted to finish it as soon as possible so she could go back and help Sakura, but rushing things wouldn't be of any help.

"I have to trust Sakura is strong enough to keep that creep at bay until I can rejoin her," Ino told herself as she carefully healed her wound. "And even then... in my current state, don't think I'm going to be of much help. Oh well, at least I took one of those guys out. Come on forehead, I'm sure you can match me."

...

Following Sakura's previous shouts, Ukon managed to find where his possessed brother and Sakura had gone. And he managed to find them just when Sakura shattered Sakon's skull with a brutal and well placed punch to the face.

"SAKON!"

Sakura turned around to see the other Oto ninja's face, contorted by rage and hatred.

"YOU! YOU KILLED SAKON!" Ukon screamed at her.

Sakura had the urge to mention that technically Sakon was still alive, but will die of blood loss in a few minutes if he wasn't properly treated, which wasn't going to happen. However, she knew that pointing that out wouldn't be of any help, so she merely slipped into a battle stance yet again.

"Yeah, he's dead. That's what happens when you mess with Konoha. Do you want me to send you to the place he is now?" Sakura asked, trying to sound intimidating, but knew she failed in doing so. In fact, she only succeeded in making her enemy's anger even greater.

"You think you're so clever, right bitch!?" Ukon turned into a blue and red blur as he dashed towards Sakura. "I'LL CUT YOUR TONGUE AND FORCE YOU TO EAT IT!"

The moment Ukon's fist connected with Sakura's face, the pinkette vanished, leaving a trail of cherry petals behind. Despite his anger, Ukon was still sane enough to recognize and dispel the genjutsu, and with a quick burst of chakra, the illusion was broken.

Perched on a tree above him, Sakura pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached and tossed it at Ukon. The Oto ninja noticed and managed to jump in time not only avoiding the explosion, but using it to catapult himself upwards and leap against Sakura.

"DIE ALREADY!" he yelled as he fell upon her.

"Crap!"

Sakura raised her arms in the form of an X to protect herself from the incoming hit. Ukon's punch had so much force behind it that it not only knocked Sakura back into the ground, but it managed to shatter the skin-tight metal layer protecting her body.

"Oh dammit! I thought that my Iron Skin jutsu was impenetrable!"
Sakura thought in horror. Seeing that it wasn't going to be of much

help, she deactivated the jutsu in order to avoid needlessly consuming chakra.

Ukon didn't give Sakura any time to breathe, as he was over her in less than two seconds. Sakura hurried to stand up and block the incoming storm of strong and painful kicks and punches, until her defense failed, and Ukon covered her body in nasty bruises before giving her a painful kick to the stomach that knocked her on her back.

"On second thought... I'm not going to kill you just yet, no," Ukon said as he slowly advanced towards Sakura's fallen form. "Sakon's killer deserves more than a quick death. I don't care about the mission anymore. I'll take all the time necessary to drive you mad with pain!"

Ukon angrily pulled Sakura up by her long mane of pink hair, forcing her to meet him eye to eye. He snarled angrily at her. "Something else to say?"

As quickly as she could, Sakura made a hand seal.

"Poison Mist!"

Being so close to her, Ukon couldn't react in time and was enveloped by a purple cloud of toxic fumes, which he naturally inhaled. He stepped out of the cloud, coughing, and fell on his knees.

"You... you bitch!" Ukon cursed between coughs.

"Be happy. With the amount of gas you inhaled, you'll be seeing your brother in a few minutes," Sakura then started to walk towards him, her fist glowing with a blue fire. "But you know what? I'm going to speed things up just to be safe."

Sakura's chakra-enhance fist struck the defenseless Ukon in the torso, shattering multiple bones and reducing many of his internal organs to chunky salsa, ending his life in an instant.

"I... I did it..." Sakura tiredly said to herself, as she fell on her knees.

...

After completely healing herself, Ino went to find Sakura, something that wasn't hard to do thanks to her sensory abilities. Even if they weren't as strong as Karin's, they were quite acute. In no time she pinpointed Sakura's chakra signature, but for some reason, it was the only human chakra she could perceive.

"Can those guys mask their presence from sensors?" Ino asked aloud.

The answer came when she found the pinkette lying near the ravaged body of the ninja once known as Ukon.

"Sakura!" Ino shouted in panic.

She ran to her and quickly began to apply her medical ninjutsu on her former friend. She could tell that besides all those ugly bruises and bloodied wounds, she had a couple broken bones that would need more specialized treatment.

Much to the blonde's relief, Sakura's eyes started to blink.

"Uh... Ino?" Sakura weakly groaned.

"Don't move, forehead. I'm trying to heal you," Ino replied in a cold, neutral tone.

"Are you okay...?" the pinkette asked.

"I'm the one who should ask that, not you!" Ino retorted. "Now stay still while I heal you."

"Ino..."

"What did I just tell you!?" the blonde angrily asked.

"Thank you... if you didn't take that other guy out... I don't think I could have... defeated this one..." Sakura told her, before coughing a bit.

Ino found herself smiling at her former friend. "Somebody had to."

"You could have let me," Sakura replied.

Ino shook her head. "No, it had to be me. I couldn't make you take such a huge risk."

"Don't patronize me... I'm a medic too... and a better one than you are..." Sakura replied.

Ino didn't retort with an acid quip as Sakura expected, and much to her surprise, Ino nodded. "Yes, you're right, but like I told you, I couldn't let you do it. Not after the way I treated you. And I'm very sorry..."

"Ino..."

"No, let me finish," Ino interrupted as a single tear ran through her cheek. "I'm sorry for how harsh I was on you, for still hating Sasuke, as if he was responsible for what happened to my father, as well as being so eager to end our friendship when we had a crush on the same boy. Will you... will you forgive me?"

"Only if you forgive me too," Sakura weakly replied. "I didn't fight for our friendship as much as I should have. But I don't think things can go... the way they were before..."

"Don't say that," Ino replied. "Maybe not now, but in the future... well, this is a start, isn't it? Maybe in due time, we can salvage what we used to have."

"When did you become such an optimist?" Sakura asked.

"People change, Forehead. People change."

...

Meanwhile, not far from there, as Tayuya played the flute once again, Neji, Kiba and Akamaru were fighting Tayuya's summoned ogres, which she called Doki. These new adversaries would prove themselves to be quite stronger than they already looked.

"Passing Fang!"

After turning into a human drill, Kiba flew at the ogre with the metal kanabo, who used it to painfully smack Kiba with it, stopping the attack on his tracks and tossing him into the ground.

"AW!" Kiba shouted. Akamaru whined as he rushed to check his master. "Don't worry buddy, I'm still okay..." the Inuzuka replied as he rubbed his pained skull. His vision was shadowed by another one of the ogres, the one with the wrist places, leaping down at him. "Oh shit!"

"Vacuum Palm!"

A vacuum shell blasted the ogre away, giving the Inuzuka and his dog a chance to get out of harm's way.

"Thanks. I think I owe you one," Kiba told Neji, sounding between thankful and bitter, since he didn't enjoy the idea of having to be saved. Even then, he knew it was no time to indulge into petty pride.

"The girl might not be much of a hand to hand fighter, but these monstrosities more than make up for it," Neji observed. "We should step up our game. Try to distract those things, and I'll see if I can get a good hit on the girl."

Kiba nodded and made a hand seal. "Man Beast Clone!" Akamaru turned into a clone of Kiba. "Come on Akamaru, let's go!"

Human and dog-turned-human charged against the Doki that had smacked Kiba the time before. He guessed that if he was able to

disarm him, he wouldn't be such a big threat, before he heard Kakashi's voice in his head reminding him not to underestimate his enemies. Especially now, since this wasn't a controlled competition, but a life or death situation.

"Man, I didn't realize until now how dire the situation is," Kiba bitterly thought as he recalled the mission to Taki that took a turn for the worst. "Wonder what would have happened that time if Kakashi-sensei wasn't there for us... well, he won't save us now, that's pretty much for sure. Still, I think we got strong enough not to need any more saving!"

The Doki also rushed towards Kiba, kanabo raised above his head. He could also smell another one coming at them.

"Passing Fang!"

Once again, Kiba started to spin like a drill as he flew towards the armed giant, who lowered his weapon as he did before. Something Kiba was already counting on.

"Akamaru, now!"

Akamaru used Passing Fang as well, though his was aimed at the giant's hand. The attack connected, and the kanabo smash successfully interrupted just as Kiba's attack hit the ogre in the chest, who let out a roar of pain as he was knocked backwards. Kiba stopped spinning as he landed on a tree branch.

"Akamaru, the other one!" Kiba warned.

Heeding his master's warning, Akamaru joined him and both of them faced the ogre with the blades attached to the wrists. They were about to clash... when the ogre managed to dodge their assault and rush past them.

"What the hell? Oh, crap, Neji!" Kiba cursed as he and Akamaru turned around and chased the monster.

Meanwhile, Neji took the opportunity to dash towards Tayuya, but his Byakugan spotted the third Doki rushing to cut his chase short, and knew he wouldn't be able to reach her in time. However, that would allow him to strike first, and would make sure such hit to be devastating.

"Mountain Crusher!"

The moment the Doki landed in front of Neji, the Hyuga prodigy connected his palm with the monster's chest, and sent a powerful wave of chakra that sent him flying as if Neji just swatted a fly.

"Got you," Neji declared as he moved to attack Tayuya.

But much to the Hyuga's confusion, Tayuya didn't look worried at all. According to his father, if an enemy feels confident, it is for two reasons: they're way over their head, or they know something you don't that gives them a meaningful advantage. Neji had the feeling it was because of the latter reason.

And just as he suspected, his Byakugan caught the remaining two Doki attempting to ambush him from behind, attacking him from different angles. Neji stopped his charge and started to spin on the spot.

"Heavenly Spin!"

The monsters attacked Neji a second after he activated the Hyuga's ultimate defense, which made honor to such name, and violently pushed the Doki backwards. However, while Neji was defending himself from the ambush, Tayuya jumped back several times, placing some distance between her melee-specialized enemies.

"Alright you retards, you're starting to get on my nerves, so get ready for this very special melody of mine!" Tayuya shouted. "Nobody who ever heard it lived to tell the tale!"

Tayuya started to play the flute again, and the Doki's battle stance relaxed. They turned their head upwards, and opened their sewn mouths. And from their mouths, giant spectral worms appeared as if they were beasts leaving their lairs. The spectral worms had multiple mouths full of sharp teeth around their body.

"What the hell is that!?" Kiba asked, rather perplexed.

"I don't know, they seem made of chakra, but it doesn't look like anything I've ever seen," Neji replied as he inspected the spectral worms with his Byakugan. "They appear to be unstable. Either way, we shouldn't let them touch us."

"Very smart, you shithead. Now let's see if you're fast enough not to get caught by them!" Tayuya yelled as she resumed her melody.

The Doki jumped towards the Konoha ninja, and the spectral worms coming from their mouths lunged at them.

"Watch out!" Neji shouted.

Everybody jumped aside, but one of those worms managed to bite Kiba's arm. Kiba could see how part of his chakra was being drained into the monster. Not his whole chakra, just the physical part of it.

"Damn!" Kiba yelled as he instinctively held his arm. It felt numb and tired, as if he used that arm for a long time without rest.

Seeing Neji hiding inside a small cave under a large tree branch, Kiba followed suit, alongside Akamaru, who turned back into a dog. Fortunately, their hiding spot was big enough for the three of them.

"Told you not to let that thing touch you," Neji chided Kiba.

"You don't have to tell me twice," the Inuzuka replied as he nursed his affected arm. "Those things are way more dangerous now than when they used physical attacks. Any plans on what to do?"

"Like I said before, the summoner is the key. If we manage to reach her, her beasts won't be an issue," Neji told Kiba.

Kiba frowned, unconvinced. "Yeah, that sounds so good and all that, but getting to her proved to be nearly impossible before, and now she made it even harder:"

Neji looked pensive, as his brain studied all the facts and possibilities until he found a possible solution. "She uses the music of her flute to control her summons, right?"

"So it seems," Kiba replied.

"So if we manage to nullify the music, those monsters would become inert, and thus no threat to us," Neji continued.

"Yeah, I think that was pretty clear," Kiba agreed, before frowning once again. "What's not clear though, is how are we going to stop that music. Getting near her is pretty much impossible, as we both just saw."

"There's usually more than one way to solve a problem, and I doubt this situation is an exception," Neji cryptically replied. Kiba raised an eyebrow. "If we can't stop her from playing her flute, then maybe we can generate a sound loud enough to counter it."

Kiba pondered the Hyuga prodigy's words, and couldn't find any fault in his reasoning. "Now that's... something that could work. But what can we do to create that much noise?"

Akamaru barked something. Kiba looked at his dog, a bit taken aback.

"That jutsu? Are you sure you're ready?" Kiba asked Akamaru, who barked affirmatively.

"What did he say?" Neji asked.

"Well, we... have something that may work," Kiba began, sounding unsure. "There're three problems. The first one is that we haven't completely mastered that jutsu yet. The second is that we need some time and space to get ready, and lastly, we aren't sure if we'd be able to make enough noise to cancel the music."

Neji took a second to ponder his current partner's words. "How much time would you need?"

Kiba had to think the answer for a second. "About five to ten seconds, I'd say."

"Okay. I'll buy you that time," Neji stated as he was about to step out of their hiding place.

"Whoa! Wait a second! What are you going to do?" Kiba asked as he grabbed Neji by his forearm.

"Buy you some time, as I just said right now. You two get ready," Neji stated before shaking Kiba's grip and dashing into the forest.

"Aw man, this nutcase is going to get us killed," Kiba groaned. Akamaru whined something, before the two of them left the relative safety of their hiding spot.

...

Neji didn't shout "over here, bet you can't catch me!", since that would be a dead ringer for their true intentions, but was obvious enough to draw the attention of the monsters, who leaped at him as the spectral worms opened their toothy mouths in anticipation.

"Good, the three of them are following me," Neji thought in satisfaction. But said satisfaction was short lived as the summons started to get dangerously close to him. Neji turned back and leaped backwards while thrusting his open palm at his closet enemy.

"Vacuum Palm!"

The vacuum shell successfully damaged one of the spectral worms, however, it only took a couple seconds to reform.

"Come on, Kiba, I bought you more than ten seconds, you should be ready by now!"

...

Fortunately, Neji's risky actions weren't in vain, as they allowed the Inuzuka Genin and his canine partner to prepare their jutsu. Kiba was hunched over, with Akamaru standing on his back.

"Okay buddy, are you ready?" Kiba asked, and Akamaru barked affirmatively. "Alright then, let's go! Human Beast Combination Transformation: Double Headed Wolf!"

The jutsu produced a cloud of smoke, and when it dispelled, instead of Kiba and Akamaru was a huge, white furred two headed wolf.

"Alright, so far so good. Now, the second part, the Thundering Roar!" Kiba mentally told Akamaru.

The two heads gathered chakra on their respective throats, before releasing a deafening roar each, making birds to fly away and small animals to flee in every direction. And most importantly, during a few seconds, it managed to drown the sound of Tayuya's flute, leaving her Doki immobile and harmless.

...

"Good job, Kiba, you did it," Neji whispered to himself. "Now it's time to finish this!"

Neji jumped at the three immobile ogres and got into the Gentle Fist fighting stance. He only had a few seconds until they started to move again.

"Eight Trigrams: One Hundred Twenty Eight Palms!" Fast as lightning, Neji started to move and hit each of Tayuya's summons

before moving onto the next. "Two strikes! Four Strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! Thirty Two Strikes! Sixty Four Strikes! ONE HUNDRED TWENTY EIGHT STRIKES!"

The attack left Neji exhausted, but it fulfilled its purpose. With little to no chakra left, the Doki were forcefully unsummoned.

"Now that that's out of the way, we should take care of the woman."

...

Tayuya needed to take a moment to understand what just happened. One moment, the forest was shook by an incredibly loud roar, as if coming from a gigantic beast. Then, when the roar died down a few seconds later, her Doki had been unsummoned.

"It's over," Neji said as he landed behind her. Tayuya turned around and growled. "There's no way you can defeat me."

Tayuya's angry mask morphed into a confident smirk. "You think so?"

Then, much to Neji's shock, the black marks on her skin started to glow as if they were on fire and spread all over her body, turning it reddish brown. Her hair grew longer and paler, and her eyes turned yellow with black sclera. But her more prominent change were the twisted horns that grew around her head, giving her a demonic appearance.

Still, the external changes were nothing comparing to how her chakra network changed. Thanks to his Byakugan, Neji could see how a second kind of chakra, which so far remained contained by Tayuya's own, overtook the girl's chakra network.

"Let's see if you're so confident after this, you piece of shit!" Tayuya growled as she lunged at Neji.

It took very few time for the Hyuga to realize that the transformation increased the girl's physical strength quite a lot, and combined with

Neji's own exhaustion, made the combat difficult to him. Still, he knew that he could win.

"Eight Trigrams, Thirty Two Palms!" Neji moved to deliver the first two strikes of the Gentle Fist Style's second most basic combo.

"Like hell I'm going to let you do that!" Tayuya exclaimed as she delivered a painful kick at Neji's stomach, knocking him on his back, interrupting the combo. "You think that because you destroyed my summons, you already won? Well, shithead, I have some news for you!"

Tayuya jumped into the air towards Neji, ready to stomp his head into the ground. However, much to her shock, she was attacked by a vicious two headed beast while she was in mid air. With one claw swipe, Tayuya was sent flying backwards.

Neji got back on his feet and took a second to examine the creature that just saved him.

"Kiba?" He asked. The two headed canine just looked at him, but Neji could see that his guess was true.

"Ugh..." Tayuya groaned as she painfully got up. *"Where did that fucking monster come from? Well, it's obvious it's on the same side as the pale eyed brat. There's no way I can defeat those two. Even if Orochimaru-sama might punish me, if I stay here any longer, I'll die for sure."*

The two headed wolf lunged once again at Tayuya. However, the moment he hit her, she disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a long behind.

"The enemy is retreating," Neji informed Kiba, who looked at him, as if asking something. "No, we shouldn't chase her. We better go and help our friends."

The two headed wolf split into Kiba and Akamaru.

"Alright then. Let's see if I can catch the scent of any of them," Kiba replied.

Neji nodded, and the two of them moved to regroup with the others.

...

Meanwhile, further to the north, Kimimaro continued his trip to the Land of Sound alone, carrying his two hostages, still unconscious. One of the Shadow Clones that he left behind had dispelled, providing him with updated intel on his pursuers.

Seven Konoha ninja remained, the four Chunin still among them. Kimimaro pondered if he could take on all of them, knock the Jinchuriki out and complete the mission without the need to use the trap they were leading him to.

However, soon the decision would be out of his hands. Carrying those two children was slowing him down, enabling his pursuers to catch him. Oh well. It's not that the idea of a fight displeased him that much. He never had the chance of going all out since Orochimaru had healed him of his disease.

Soon, those kids would realize that they bit way more than they could chew.

Author's Note: Whew, that was a long and action heavy chapter, wasn't it? Hope it didn't prove too exhausting.

Before anyone asks, yes, Tayuya is alive, and she will show up again in the future (I want Orochimaru to have more named lackeys besides Kabuto). I didn't like the other three as much as not to kill them.

I like this chapter in that I finally managed to give some of the Genin a much deserved victory (and before you mention Tamaki, remember that her victory at the Prelims was

undeserved, since her opponent pretended to lose). Some characters in canon, such as Hinata or Tenten, went through the whole run of the manga without achieving a single victory. I don't plan to make that mistake here.

I mean, who would have thought of Sakura and Ino fighting AND WINNING against Sakon and Ukon? Hopefully I made it believable, given how much the two of them improved over the course of the story, especially Sakura.

As for Choji, yeah, I removed those three colored pills because, well, I didn't like them because they came out of nowhere, and were never mentioned again after being used that one time.

Anyway, next chapter, Naruto and all six of his remaining friends versus Kimimaro! Will they be enough to defeat Orochimaru's strongest minion at the top of his game? Or are the twins doomed?

Once again, thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Meanwhile, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Senju Twins Retrieval, Part III

Author's Note: Many reviewers asked if Hagane is going to get Wood Release. The answer is no. As I already hinted, his Bloodline Limit has to do with gathering Nature Chakra, similar to Juugo. I did this because I didn't want both children with the same power.

Now, enjoy the new chapter, and see you at the bottom:

Chapter 38:

Senju Twins Rescue Part III

or

The Maw of the Beast

...

Choji started to open his eyes as consciousness slowly returned to him. The feeling of extreme weakness that made him black out was being replaced by a more comfortable sensation as his energy slowly, but surely, returned to his body. There was an audible sigh.

"Thanks Kami, he's waking up," Shikamaru's voice said.

Choji tried to stand up, but a small pair of hands held him in place.

"Don't move!" Tamaki's voice stated.

"Don't worry, I'm almost done here. Thankfully your wounds weren't too severe. But we need to do something about your exhaustion," somebody he recognized as Shino stated.

True to the Aburame's words, he only took a couple more minutes to heal Choji, prompting Tamaki to release him. She then handed him something he recognized as a ration bar.

"Here, eat," Tamaki told him. "Shikamaru said that you need to recover your lost calories, Sorry I don't have anything better."

However, Choji wasn't in the mood to reject anything, and welcomed the bar with open arms.

"It's okay, thanks a lot," Choji replied, as he started to eat the bar.

"It's a good thing you found us, or else Choji would be a goner," Shikamaru mentioned, not hiding his immense relief.

"How did you find us, by the way?" Choji asked.

"I had one of my beetles latched onto each one of you. Said beetles can release a specific pheromone impossible to smell except to others of its kind. That way I'm able to track all of you," Shino explained.

Both Shikamaru and Choji had to resist the urge to look their bodies for the aforementioned bug.

"So, I'm guessing that you got to fight other of those Oto ninja, and given that you're here, you won, right?" Shikamaru asked.

Tamaki nodded affirmatively. "Yeah, albeit barely. And they said the two we fought were the weakest. I can't even think what the others are up against," Tamaki wondered aloud, as she looked into the distance. "Wonder if Kiba is okay..."

"Should we go and try to help the others?" Shikamaru asked.

Shino shook his head. "That would be mostly unwise. We just spent most of our energy fighting, some, like Choji, to the point of collapse. Far from being of any help, we'd be a burden."

"Troublesome..." Shikamaru sighed.

The Aburame then perked up. "Somebody's coming."

Everybody minus Choji shot up, pulled out their weapons, and slipped into a fighting stance.

"It seems that if we don't go to the fights, the fight will come to us," Tamaki complained, as she inwardly prayed for this new enemy not to be too tough.

However, the tension was immediately defused, and replaced by relief, when the would-be enemies turn out to be Kakashi and Gai, being led by Pakkun.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Tamaki squealed in joy as she rushed to meet him.

"Thank goodness. Reinforcements at last," Shikamaru said, as he allowed himself to drop on his butt. "Strong reinforcements, might I add."

Gai asked the most obvious, yet fitting question that the situation demanded. "What happened here?"

"We already know about the Hokage's children's abduction. Naruto told Kurenai through a Shadow Clone, and she told us," Kakashi interjected, so they wouldn't have to start from the beginning.

"The kidnappers are a group of five Oto ninja. Some of them stayed behind in order to delay us. Choji and I fought one, while Shino and Tamaki defeated another, meaning that so far, only three remain," Shikamaru quickly explained.

"However, the two we defeated were the weakest members of that squad. Our partners will have a much harder time against them than we did," Shino added.

"Kakashi-sensei, Kiba is still out there! You need to find him and help him!" Tamaki pleaded.

"I smell both him and Akamaru," Pakkun mentioned. "He's not far away from here."

"In that case, there's no time to waste. Gai, can you take care of these four?" the Copy Ninja asked.

Gai would have preferred to check on his students, but this was a more pressing responsibility. Kakashi and the others would have to take care of them. He gave Kakashi his trademark "nice guy" pose.

"You can count on that, Kakashi! I'll make sure they return to the village safe and sound!" Gai energetically declared.

"The village? It is safe to return?" Shino asked.

"Indeed! The unyouthful invaders have been successfully repelled, once again proving that nothing can topple Konoha's steel-hard resolve!"

"... uh, can we go back now?" Shikamaru awkwardly asked.

...

Meanwhile, Naruto and his remaining friends continued the chase. Even if their numbers have been reduced to less than half of how many they started this impromptu rescue mission, seven was more than enough to deal with the last remaining kidnapper, no matter how strong he was.

Or at least, that's what Naruto liked to think. The scenario in which he failed to save his siblings was something he didn't dare to even think.

"Naruto-kun," Hinata called, almost in a whisper. When Naruto looked at her, she shot him a caring smile. "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Naruto smiled back at her. He was so grateful to have somebody like her at his side in such a dire moment. Yes, he needed to stay

positive. He then looked at Karin.

"Nee-chan, how far until we reach that scumbag?" Naruto asked.

"Not far. He's moving slower than us. We'll catch him in no time," Karin announced.

"We better get ready, then," Sasuke stated, as his hand instinctively reached the handle of his katana.

"Wait!" Karin suddenly said, startling the other six.

"Something wrong?" Haku asked.

"The man stopped! I think he's done running and plans to fight all of us!" Karin informed.

"This is a golden opportunity," Tenten interjected. "Naruto, when we fight the guy, you go and rescue your siblings. Then run back to Konoha. We'll cover you as long as we can."

"That's a sound plan. Even if he can do clones of any kind, there's no way he can fight on multiple fronts," Naruto replied.

"Wait!" Karin called again. "I'm sensing somebody else! He's in front of the kidnapper. It seems as if they're talking."

"We must assume this new ninja is an enemy if the two of them didn't engage in battle," Hinata stated. As she came closer, her Byakugan finally spotted Kimimaro, and the mysterious man he was talking to. She gasped.

"Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked, mildly concerned.

...

Kimimaro had stepped out of the dense forest, and landed in a green, clear expanse with few trees and a large lake, when he was stopped in his tracks when a man appeared before him. The

newcomer also had white hair like Kimimaro, and unlike Kimimaro, he was spotting an incredibly smug smile on his face. He guessed the man was an ally, given that he was wearing the Otogakure standard uniform, but then again that could be a trick from the enemy.

"Hey there, going somewhere?" the stranger asked.

"Who are you?" Kimimaro asked, not lowering his guard for a minute.

"A friend, if you can't tell by the clothes," the man replied, apparently finding Kimimaro's lack of trust amusing. "Name's Mizuki, by the way. Orochimaru-sama left me here in case you guys were in trouble. And given that you lost your whole squad, it seems that you are."

"And you came here to help me?" the shirtless man asked.

"It should be obvious, isn't it?" Mizuki replied, as he walked over, tensing up the Kaguya clan member. "Relax, like I said, I'm a friend. Listen, there's not much time. I know you're way stronger than I am, so you must stay here and fight your pursuers. I'll take the children to the base. Then you take the Jinchuriki once you kill the others."

"How I know that you're telling the truth?" Kimimaro asked.

"You don't know. But you don't have much of a choice now," Mizuki replied, looking at something behind the Sound Five leader.

Not lowering his guard, Kimimaro turned around, and saw Naruto and his six remaining friends landing a few meters in front of him.

"Mizuki-sensei?" Tenten asked in surprise.

"He isn't your sensei anymore. He's with Orochimaru now. Did I tell you when my team fought against him in the Land of Sound?" Haku reminded his girlfriend.

"You did, but the idea of one of our teachers being a traitor was a bit hard to digest," Tenten replied.

"I doubt you'd be able to fight so many ninja, even if they're children, and keep them from taking the hostages back, don't you?" Mizuki asked.

Kimimaro hated to admit it, but he had no choice. He handed the children to Mizuki.

"If you screw the mission, I'll personally kill you," the white hair young man threatened in a rather cold and emotionless tone.

Mizuki replied with an unnerving chuckle. "I'm sure we won't have to get to such point."

Mizuki took the still unconscious children, and leaped away.

"NO!" Naruto yelled as he charged at the fleeing Mizuki. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

An army of Narutos came to life, but that wouldn't be enough. Kimimaro then slammed his hands in the ground.

"Dance of the Seedling Fern!"

A barrier of spiky bones emerged from the ground, impaling -and dispelling- most of the Naruto clones. Thankfully the real one was able to stop in time.

"Get out of the way!" Naruto angrily shouted.

Kimimaro remained impassible. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"NOW!" Naruto bellowed. His eyes turned red with slitted pupils. His cheek marks became bolder, as his teeth and nails grew sharper. A red aura started to appear around him.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

While Naruto charged against Kimimaro, Sasuke used the opportunity to summon a small hawk.

"Quickly, follow that man that's carrying two children!" Sasuke ordered the small bird.

The hawk cawed affirmatively, and took off. Kimimaro raised his head to look at the speeding bird. Sasuke started to sweat.

"If he destroys my summon, then we won't have a way to track where did Mizuki go!" Sasuke distressingly thought.

But much to his relief, Kimimaro ignored the bird, and looked at the seven Konoha ninja once again. Naruto shared that same relief. He looked at Sasuke and shot him a grateful smile.

"Good one, Sasuke," Naruto thanked him.

Sasuke just smirked at him in return, before turning his gaze back at the present threat.

"You were fifteen at the beginning, yet seven of you still remain. The strongest seven, I presume," Kimimaro began. "My teammates did a poor job at whittling down your numbers. But it doesn't matter anymore. Your path ends here."

"Listen, we still can salvage this," Tenten said. "The moment he is distracted, Naruto and a couple others should leave and follow Mizuki."

"Very well. I will go first, and test the strength of our opponent," Lee suggested.

"Alright, but take your weights off first. According to Karin, this opponent is near as strong as our Jonin-sensei," Tenten told him.

"But Gai-sensei told me to-" Lee attempted to protest.

"Gai-sensei's not here, and in his absence, I'm your direct superior. So take off your weights, that's an order," Tenten sternly stated.

Lee decided to obey, and did what he was asked to. He removed the weights under his leg warmers, and held them on each hand with their arms spread. Then, he dropped the training tools, falling into the ground with a deafening noise, leaving two craters at his sides. Everybody looked at the weights in shock.

"Lee, what kind of self-imposed handicap did you have when we fought?" Haku thought, doing a better job masking his shock than everybody else.

Kimimaro wasn't impressed, though. He slipped into a combat stance, ready to take whatever the Konoha ninja threw at him. Which happened to be a flying kick.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

The shirtless teen managed to block Lee's admittedly powerful flying kick without much difficulty, and push the green clad ninja backwards. However, other two Konoha ninjas attacked while he was doing that.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Sasuke breathed a huge fireball at Kimimaro while Hinata cast a storm of lightning from her fingertips. The Oto ninja jumped out of the way before he could be hit, and aimed his hands at both Uchiha and Hyuga.

"Ten Finger Drilling Bullets!"

A bone bullet was fired from each of his fingers, five flying towards Sasuke and the other five towards Hinata. The former used his

Sharingan to dodge -if barely-, the attack, while the latter thrust both palms forward.

"Vacuum Palm Wall!"

Hinata released massive vacuum shell that crashed against the bullets, but it failed to stop their momentum, and the bone projectiles embedded on Hinata's chest.

"HINATA!" Naruto yelled in shock.

But much to his relief, Hinata disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a shattered log behind.

"Shit, Karin-neechan wasn't exaggerating when he said this guy is strong. If we aren't careful, this freak might kill us all!" Naruto distressingly thought.

"I had heard so much about your clans, Uchiha and Hyuga," Kimimaro began. "But if you're the best your clans can offer, then Konoha had even less of a future than I had imagined."

Lee suddenly appeared from behind, and delivered a quick kick to Kimimaro's head, throwing him sideways. The Kaguya managed to regain balance and land on his feet, though.

"Not bad, but insufficient," Kimimaro replied, as spiky bones began to grow over all of his body. "Dance of the Larch!"

Kimimaro's body fired the bone spikes in multiple directions, many of them flying right towards the Konoha ninja. Karin and Haku were quick to react and defend.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

"Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

Two walls, one made of solid rock, the other of deceptively hard ice, appeared between Kimimaro and the Konoha ninja. The bone

missiles managed to pierce both walls, but they lost enough momentum to be safely deflected with mere kunai.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

From behind the destroyed walls, an army of blonds appeared and charged at the white haired teen, letting out cries of rage. Once again, Kimimaro remained impassible.

"Dance of the Camellia."

A pair of bone swords grew from each of Kimimaro's palms, detaching from his hands once they were complete, and rushed to meet the orange clad army. And, despite their sheer numbers, the Naruto clones were overwhelmed by the speed, endurance and skill of the white haired teen, who massacred the clones before either of them had a chance to lay a finger on him.

"Shit, this guy is way too strong!" Naruto thought as he felt his clones disappearing en masse.

While Kimimaro was distracted fighting the clones, Tenten saw a golden opportunity to attack, and leaped above the brawl while unfurling one of her scrolls.

"Naruto, get the real you out of the way!" Tenten warned while she prepared her attack. "Manipulated Tools: Rain of Steel!"

The scroll unsealed a multitude of kunai and shuriken at a fast pace, casting a rain of metal over the battlefield. However, the attack was of little help, as it mostly destroyed the Naruto clones, while Kimimaro easily deflected the weapons aimed at him with his improvised swords while he moved backwards.

"Tenten!" Naruto angrily shouted at the brown haired girl.

Tenten smiled sheepishly. "Sorry!"

Haku moved to attack. If Kimimaro managed to deflect everything they threw at him, then they needed to use something that would be impossible to deflect. He made several hand seals.

"Ice Release: Winter Breath!"

From his mouth Haku released an extremely cold wind that froze everything it touched. Kimimaro couldn't react in time, and he was engulfed by the dense blue mist, encasing him in a block of ice.

"Yay! Good one, Haku!" Naruto cheered.

Then, much to everybody's surprise, Kimimaro disappeared, leaving a log inside the block of ice.

"Everyone, he's underground! Watch out!" Hinata warned the others.

As soon as the warning left her lips, multiple bone spikes started to sprout from the ground. The Konoha ninja moved as fast as they could in order to avoid them, but the more bones appeared, the less space they had to move.

"Hinata-hime, where is he?" Naruto asked as he dodged the incoming spikes.

"Fifteen steps to the front and seven to the left!" was Hinata's response.

Naruto created a single Shadow Clone, which he used to help himself leap into the air as high as he could. While on air, he extended his hand, and made sure to fall in the spot Hinata had told him.

"Rasengan!"

The sphere of chakra released its energy into the ground, creating a massive crater, as well as cracking the ground in multiple directions. The attack had the intended effect, and Kimimaro was forced to

leave his underground hiding spot. Sasuke appeared from behind, katana unsheathed.

"Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Kimimaro barely had time to grow several spikes on his back which successfully blocked the fiery blade. He counterattacked by growing them even longer, forcing Sasuke to put some distance between the two of them.

"I admit you're strong. And your numbers make me fighting you quite more difficult than it should be," Kimimaro confessed. "But you should also know that I'm only using a fraction of my real power."

"Then why not go all out and finish us already?" Sasuke tentatively asked.

"While I admit you're strong, you're not strong enough to be deserving of my best moves," Kimimaro retorted, causing Sasuke to snarl. "But keep trying, and I might reward you with the strength of my full power."

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Before Kimimaro could react, many chains wrapped around his body. He wasn't perturbed, as mere chains couldn't be able to hold him back. However, the moment he tried to use his trusty Bloodline Limit, he found himself unable to gather chakra.

"What?"

"Ha! Reward that!" Karin shouted in a taunting tone. Kimimaro could see that the chains were coming from the girl's back.

While Kimimaro was being held, Haku made more hand seals.

"Ice Release: Ice Prison Jutsu!"

The chained Kaguya was encased in a large block of ice.

"Haha, yes, we got him! Good work you two!" Naruto congratulated both Karin and Haku.

"Well, we couldn't have done it if you didn't-oh shit!" Karin suddenly shouted.

"What's going on?" Sasuke asked, mildly alarmed.

"The guy's chakra level is rising!" Karin warned. "He will break out of the ice and my chains at any moment!"

"What!?" Tenten asked in shock. "How's that possible?"

"She's right! There's a foul chakra that's empowering his chakra network!" Hinata added.

"Guys, you need to go, now!" Tenten urged the others. "I'll stay here and help Haku and Karin hold this guy down!"

"But you can't do that! This opponent is way stronger than any other foe we ever faced!" Lee protested.

"We'll be fine. Naruto-kun will need you far more than we will," Haku reassured. "Now go, time is of essence!"

Without some hesitation, Naruto, Hinata, Sasuke and Lee left their three comrades to deal with the insanely strong Kaguya member.

"Alright, but don't you dare to get killed by this guy, you hear me!?" Naruto asked before leaving.

Karin smiled. "Don't worry, nii-san. I'm not planning to die today, and I don't think these two do either."

"Let's head up north, that's where their hideout must be!" Sasuke stated as he started to move, followed by the other three. "My hawk should have located its exact position by now!"

"Alright, let's go! Sasuke, Lee, follow my and Hinata's lead, we've been here before and know which path to take," Naruto suggested.

The others nodded and resumed their pursuit, not without having a lingering feeling of guilt about leaving their other three friends behind against such a powerful enemy.

And, indeed, after a few seconds, there was a burst of a very potent chakra that shattered Haku's ice block and Karin's chakra chains. Kimimaro stood there, with his stoic expression unchanged, looking at the three Konoha ninja with his dull eyes. There were black marks spreading over his body.

"Congratulations. Very few people push me to the extent of being forced to use the cursed seal," Kimimaro stated. "It will be of some consolation to know that at least you accomplished something before dying."

...

"Can you walk?" Ino asked.

"Yeah, I feel a bit better now," Sakura replied, as she weakly got back on her feet. "So, we beat those guys, what do we do now? Should we help the others?"

Ino scoffed. "Honestly, it's us the ones who need to be helped. I still can't believe that we beat those creepy twins."

As much as Sakura wanted to help the others, Ino had a point. In their current state, they would be of little help.

"How do you think the others did?" Ino asked, a bit insecurely. "I mean, I have faith in them, but we should have seen them already if they won their fights..."

"Well, we won, and we can barely move. Maybe the others are in a similar predicament," Sakura replied. "Besides, we didn't see those

Oto ninja either."

Suddenly, that moment, there was a rustling in a nearby bush. Sakura and Ino tensed up, and adopted fighting stances.

"Sakura, if it's one of those Oto ninja, I swear I'm going to-"

"Arf!"

Ino was interrupted upon seeing Akamaru's small form running towards her. The little dog started to run in circles around the two girls, letting out happy barks. Soon, he was joined by Kiba, Neji, Asuma and Kurenai.

"Look, here they are," Kiba mentioned. "Good job finding them, Akamaru!"

"Arf!" the doggie happily barked as he returned to his master's side.

"Asuma-sensei!" Ino squealed in joy, and rushed to hug him. "Oh, I'm so glad that you're here..."

"I'm happy to see you in one piece as well," Asuma commented, taking a look at his student. "It seems that you two got roughed up a bit."

"That's putting it lightly," Sakura sourly added.

"What about Shikamaru and Choji? Are they alive?" Ino worriedly asked.

"Yes, they're fine. One of Kakashi's dogs told us that Kakashi and Gai found them, alongside Shino and Tamaki," Kurenai was the one who replied. "What about the others?"

"They resumed the chase of the kidnappers. Well, kidnapper, only the squad leader remains," Ino told them. "Even if he might be the strongest of the group, there's no way they can defeat the rest of our friends, especially since Naruto and Sasuke were among them."

Seeing the two Jonin there made Sakura realize of something. "Hey, what about the village? Did we beat the invaders?" The pinkette asked.

"Yes, the invasion is no longer a problem. Orochimaru and his flunkies had been successfully repelled," Asuma told them, making everybody unaware of the news sigh in relief.

"Maybe this day won't turn so bad after all..." Sakura replied.

"We'd better not celebrate in advance. The children of the Hokage haven't been rescued yet," Kurenai reminded everybody. "Kiba, Neji, take Ino and Sakura back to the village. Asuma and I will try to catch Naruto and the others."

"Understood," Neji agreed with a head nod, as he and the other three Genin turned back to the village, while the two Jonin went into the opposite direction.

As they moved to the north, Asuma noticed that Kurenai was becoming more and more tense by the minute. The fact that they hadn't found none of her students was probably eating her from the inside.

"I'm sure they will be fine," Asuma stated, drawing his girlfriend's attention. "Your students are way stronger than mine, and mine managed to come out of their fights alive."

"I try to think that, but you can never be too certain," Kurenai replied. "Not helped since the three of them, specially Naruto, have something that makes them desirable prey for scum of the earth like Orochimaru."

"Well, Orochimaru was in Konoha. Hokage-sama fought and defeated him. He won't be a threat to Naruto nor the others anytime soon," Asuma reassured her.

"Actually, that might not be the case. I think there's something more to this invasion than what it looks like." Kurenai replied. Asuma raised an eyebrow.

"Well, yes. He planned to use the invasion as a cover to kidnap the Hokage's children. So even if the invasion failed, he'd still get something out of it," Asuma replied.

"Yes, but remember what Naruto told us. Kabuto could have easily defeated and took him away, yet he told him about what happened to his siblings."

Asuma was starting to realize the implication of Kurenai's words. "Because he knew he'd do anything to get them back..."

"... including going out of the village, where he would be vulnerable and easy to capture while most of the adults are busy dealing with the invasion," Kurenai finished.

Now Asuma understood Kurenai's worries much better, since they went far beyond merely caring for her students.

"Fortunately, there still might be some time to stop such thing from happening," Kurenai stated.

Asuma nodded, and the two of them increased their pace.

...

"Wait a minute," Haku said, as if remembering something. "Those abilities... I knew I heard about them. You're a Kaguya Clan member, right?"

"Yes. It seems my clan's reputation is known even in countries beyond the Land of Water," Kimimaro confirmed.

"I thought all your clan went extinct when they launched that nonsensical campaign against the rest of the nation," Haku commented.

"True. But as you can see, at least one of them made out of that catastrophe alive," the white haired teen replied. "The same could be said about you, Yuki. Orochimaru-sama thought your clan fell prey to the Bloodline Purges, but it isn't the case."

"I would have died with the rest of my clan if it wasn't for the actions of a certain man," Haku replied.

"In that case, then we are alike. It was Orochimaru-sama who saved me from a certain doom and gave me a purpose. Now, to show him my gratitude, I serve and help him in every way I can. And he will be very happy when I bring him the last bearer of the Ice Release," Kimimaro then glanced at Karin, who tensed up upon being noticed. "And you... that red hair, and that jutsu... you're an Uzumaki, right? Orochimaru-sama also expressed interest in getting his hands in one of your kind."

The three Konoha ninja found his words sickening. While other Oto ninja would do that to seek a reward from the Snake Sannin, it seemed that Kimimaro did it just to make his master happy, something they had trouble deciding if it was worse or not.

Kimimaro finally looked at Tenten. "You, on the other hand, appear to be completely unremarkable. Your death won't be a big loss."

Haku nostrils flared in anger and was about to reply, but his girlfriend was quicker.

"How about if I show you how 'unremarkable' I can be?" the bun haired girl taunted, before crossing her arms in front of her face. "Gate of Opening: Open!"

Powerful surges of chakra coursed Tenten's body as she was enveloped by a glowing green aura. She then unfurled a small storage scroll and unsealed a couple of broadswords.

"Alright, I'll face this guy in close combat. Karin, Haku, you two cover me from behind with ninjutsu," Tenten stated.

Both Genin nodded affirmatively as they prepared to fight.

Tenten disappeared in a green blur, and reappeared behind the Oto ninja, ready to strike him down. Kimimaro, though, was already expecting this.

"Dance of the Willow."

Multiple bone spikes grew from Kimimaro's back, parrying Tenten's blows, and forcing the kunoichi back. Karin and Haku took the opportunity to attack.

"Adamantine Sealing Chain!"

"Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!"

Haku formed a spear of ice which flew at Kimimaro, while Karin shot a chakra chain from the palm of her hand.

"Dance of the Camellia."

Two more bone swords grew from Kimimaro's hands, and used them to parry the attacks from Haku and Karin. He then turned back and engaged Tenten in a duel of sword fighting.

Despite his lithe appearance, Kimimaro had a lot of strength, albeit the brown haired kunoichi guessed that those black marks around his body had something to do with it. She jumped backwards in order to have some room for her next move. She spread her arms horizontally, and started to spin.

"Raging Blade-storm!"

In a few seconds, Tenten turned into a razor sharp tornado, menacingly moving towards Kimimaro. The Oto ninja tried to block her attack with his improvised swords, but he underestimated the strength of the kunoichi's attack, and his bone swords were blown out of his hands, and even got a few cuts on his chest before jumping back.

"Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Multiple Karins and Hakus appeared around the original, spread in a semicircle around Kimimaro, and started to pelt the last Kaguya with senbon and kunai. Kimimaro merely grew more bones on his back and shoulders which managed to block the incoming projectiles.

Forgetting about Tenten, Kimimaro dashed towards the clones, generated two more bone swords, and started to skewer them with little effort.

"I think I should take care of your first," Kimimaro stated as he impaled a Haku clone, turning back into water. "You two are ranged specialists, plus I'm sure one of you is also a medic-nin. Don't worry, I won't hurt you much."

After destroying the last Karin clone, he moved to incapacitate the real redhead, who prepared to deliver an hilariously telegraphed kick. Kimimaro proceeded to block her kick, and then knock her unconscious.

However, Karin's kick packed far more force than her small form suggested, almost like being kicked by a large beast. Coupled with how little strength he mustered to block the attack, Karin's savage kick sent him into the air, spinning rapidly, before falling with a loud thud.

"Too bad I'm going to hurt you as much as I can, you creep!" Karin retorted, as she shook her fist at him in anger.

"How... how is that girl so strong?" Kimimaro asked as he slowly got back on his feet. "That looked like Tsunade's famed Chakra-Enhanced Strength, but there's no way that little girl could have been able to master it..."

"Nice hit," Haku praised the Uzumaki. "But now that he got a measure of your real strength, you won't hit him as easily."

Tenten landed near the two of them. Her green aura was no longer active, meaning that the power boost from the Gates had run its course.

"It seems that if we ever hope to harm this guy, frontal attacks are not a valid option. But we can do some damage by catching him off guard," Tenten told the Genin.

"Do you have any idea, Tenten-chan?" Haku asked.

Tenten smiled confidently, and nodded. "Haku, cover the whole zone with mist. Karin, use your sensing abilities to track him down. Let's stick together, and attack at the same time when the right time comes."

The two Genin nodded, and Haku made a hand seal.

"Hiding in the Mist Jutsu!"

A dense mist started to cover the area in a wide range, blinding all who were caught inside.

Kimimaro remained unimpressed at his enemies' new strategy.

"I can't help but admire your tenacity and inventiveness in the face of a superior foe," Kimimaro stated, as he looked around. "But in the end, the result will be the same."

'Yeah, keep talking you overconfident dumbass, that way you'll make my job even easier,' Karin thought as she silently lead her teammates where Kimimaro was.

"Because, even if I can't see you, all I have to do is use a jutsu with a wide area of effect to ensure you're hit," Kimimaro stated, sending chills down the spines of the Konoha ninja. "Dance of the Seedling Fern!"

The ground started to shake, and bone spikes started to burst from below. The Konoha trio aborted their offensive and ran away in different directions, trying to avoid being skewered by the sharp and hard bone spikes. Karin managed to do several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Moving Core!"

A square shaped platform was elevated above the ground, wide enough for the three of them to stand. The bones kept popping from underground, but they didn't appear on the platform. However, they were so focused on the bones that they weren't paying attention to Kimimaro, who leaped towards them.

"Die."

Kimimaro delivered Tenten a kick to the stomach which knocked her out of the risen platform, and would have fallen to her death if it wasn't for Karin's timely reaction.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Multiple chains emerged from Karin's back, and all of them wrapped themselves around Tenten's waist, successfully breaking her fall, albeit Karin was almost dragged down.

"Thanks!" Tenten said from below, as she eyed the nasty looking spikes.

"Hang on there!" Karin replied.

While this happened, Haku created a sword made of ice and faced Kimimaro in hand to hand combat. This proved to be an abysmal decision -if unavoidable, given the circumstances- as not only was Haku a poor melee fighter, while his opponent was a skilled one, but Kimimaro's bone swords easily destroyed Haku's ice blade.

"Your gift is wasted on such an unskilled individual," Kimimaro flatly stated as he delivered another brutal kick to the Ice Ninja's chest,

sending him flying.

"Haku!" Karin cried. Her first instinct was to help him, but she couldn't do it while carrying Tenten.

While he was mid air, Haku made one last attempt to save his life and made several hand seals. Hopefully he would be fast enough.

"Ice Release: Demonic Mirror Ice Crystals!"

An ice mirror appeared under Haku, and he was absorbed into it. Another mirror appeared at the edge of the field of bones, allowing Haku to land in a safe zone. Or at least, what he thought it was a safe zone.

"Impressive. You're resourceful indeed," Kimimaro's voice said from behind.

Haku turned around, and saw the white haired teen emerging from one of the spike bones in the ground.

"He can use his bones to travel, like I do with the ice mirrors?" A surprised Haku thought, taking several step backwards.

A bone blade grew on Kimimaro's palm.

"Now," Kimimaro advanced menacingly towards Haku. "I'll make sure you're properly incapacitated. Don't worry, I won't kill you. However, this won't be pleasant."

In such short distance, Haku knew that there was nothing he could do to defend himself. Tenten and Karin wouldn't arrive in time to help him, and even if they did, they would only delay the inevitable. This ninja was way too strong.

"Dance of the Camellia!"

The bone blade lunged at him. Haku involuntarily closed his eyes, waiting for the stab.

CLANG!

A metallic noise was something he wasn't expecting to hear. He opened his eyes, and saw a figure of a large man standing between him and Kimimaro. Said man was carrying a massive broadsword.

"Lay a finger on that kid, and I'll put you through so much pain that you'd consider hell a paradise," the man threatened, as he released untold amounts of killing intent.

"Zabuza-sama!" Haku cried in joy.

Zabuza was able to kick Kimimaro backwards, who was still a bit stupefied over the newcomer's arrival. Karin and Tenten landed behind him.

"Oh thank goodness, some help at last!" Karin squealed, just as happy as Haku.

"You did a good job keeping this guy at bay brats, but you're no longer needed. From now on, I'll take care of this," Zabuza stated as he slammed his sword into the ground.

"Are you sure, Zabuza-sama? This ninja's strength is unlike anything I've seen before. You may need our help," Haku objected.

"I'm sure. It will be easier to fight without having you brats getting in the way. Even then, I'm not much of a team fighter," Zabuza replied. "Now take those girls and go."

"As you say, Zabuza-sama," Haku agreed, before running towards Tenten and Karin.

"If you think I'm going to let you go..." Kimimaro stated as he moved to intercept the fleeing Haku. However, it was the Kaguya who was intercepted, being forced to jump backwards to avoid a swing from Zabuza's blade.

"I AM your opponent, in case I didn't make that clear," the former Demon of the Mist snarled. "You don't have time to waste on such distractions."

Haku reached Tenten and Karin, and the three of them left the scene, while Kimimaro had to watch, powerless to stop them.

"I let all of them get past me. Sorry Orochimaru-sama, I failed you. I hope my failure doesn't compromise the plan as a whole," the last Kaguya sorrowfully thought. He then turned at Zabuza, and looked at him in subdued anger. "You will pay for that."

Zabuza snorted at the threat. "Somehow, I find that doubtful."

"I think I know you. You're Zabuza Momochi, the Swordsman of Kiri currently working for Konoha," Kimimaro observed.

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "I see you made your homework. Not that it will be of any help in the end, kid."

"Your profile of our Bingo Book states that you lack any kind of Bloodline Limit, hence Orochimaru won't have any use for you," Kimimaro flatly stated, then he eyed the Executioner's Sword. "Your sword, on the other hand, is something he'll appreciate."

"You want my sword?" Zabuza asked, before letting out a short laugh. "I'd say that you'll have to pry it from my cold, dead fingers, but trust me, we won't reach such situation."

"I see you like to boast a lot. Let's see if you can back those boasts up with actual power," Kimimaro stated as he dashed towards Zabuza.

...

Meanwhile, to the north, the rescuers' group, now reduced to less than a third of its original number, continued their way through a route that was familiar to half of its members.

"As expected, the kidnappers are heading to the Land of Sound," Naruto observed. "Where Orochimaru has his main base."

"Do you know where it is?" Sasuke asked. That would make things easier.

"No," it was Hinata who replied. "We fought against his forces here, but were unable to track where they came from."

"Itachi was part of the investigation team sent here after your mission in order to locate the base, but he was unsuccessful," Sasuke commented.

"Then... are we going to find something a team of elite ninja failed to?" Lee asked, a bit worried.

"Thankfully my hawk should have been able to do that by now," Sasuke replied. "Besides, I have the feeling that they want us to find their base. Or at least, they want Naruto."

"I was already aware that this could be a trap," Naruto replied, knowing what Sasuke was implying. "But what else could have I done? Most of the adults were busy defending Konoha. It had to be us. Or at least, me."

"Don't worry, Naruto-kun, you won't have to do this alone! You can always count on me to lend you a hand, and I'm sure that I speak for Hinata-san and Sasuke-san as well!" Lee energetically declared.

Naruto couldn't help but smile a little.

"The Valley of the End is ahead. We're getting close," Hinata told the others.

The foursome entered the valley, half of them for the first time, and the other half for the second. While it didn't make much of an impression on Hinata and Lee, it made Sasuke feel uneasy. Even if

he was an enemy of Konoha, this was the place where the greatest of the Uchiha had fallen.

Sasuke was aware of his clan's history. While official history books depicted Madara as a power hungry monster that took badly being passed for the title of Hokage in favor of Hashirama, Sasuke knew that the truth was a bit more complex.

In the years leading to his defection, and subsequent attacks on the village, Madara was growing paranoid and disillusioned with both Konoha and the Senju Clan that ruled it. He even tried to stir the Uchiha into throwing a coup d'état back then, but none of his clansmen listened to him, waving off his warnings about the clan's dark future as the ravings of a madman.

It was tragic that eventually, the descendants of those Uchiha decided to follow Madara's posthumous advice. Then again, given the results, it was a good thing that the coup didn't happen earlier. Since Konoha was in its beginning stages, a civil war so soon would have torn the village apart.

"Is this the fate of the Uchiha?" Sasuke asked himself. "To be consumed by hatred and lust for power that will lead us to our damnation?"

Itachi and Shisui always talked about rebuilding the clan better than it ever was, without repeating the mistakes of the past. Even if it was a grim thought, the youngest Uchiha wondered if they were fighting against a force far beyond any human, no matter their power.

"Ugh!"

Sasuke was snapped of his thoughts by Naruto groaning, and clutching his stomach in pain.

"Naruto-kun! What happened? Are you okay?" a worried Hinata asked as she rushed to his side.

"It's the Nine Tails," Naruto replied, breathing heavily. "He hates this place. He hates it a lot."

"In that case, let's move faster," Sasuke suggested. "The last thing we need is the Kyubi going out of control."

Fortunately, the Valley was small, and soon they were out of it and into the Land of Sound. Naruto felt the Kyubi growing more relaxed as they left the place away.

"What's with you and that place, you fur ball?" Naruto mentally asked the Kyubi. However, he was met with silence.

"Look!" Hinata said, pointing upwards. "Up there!"

Everyone could see Sasuke's hawk flying in circles over a point far to the northwest from their position.

"The hawk has located the base," the Uchiha announced.

"In that case, we need to get there as soon as possible! Kami knows what those assholes will do to my siblings!" Naruto urged, growing more antsy and restless.

"Don't worry, Naruto-kun, we'll be there before they can harm them in any way," Hinata reassured her boyfriend.

While Naruto and Hinata were focused on rescuing the Senju twins, Sasuke couldn't help but wonder what kind of enemy was waiting for them at Orochimaru's hideout. Given that the leader of the kidnappers', that guy with the killing bones, was so insanely strong, he shivered upon having to fight against somebody even stronger.

He pushed those thoughts aside, realizing that letting fear consume him would be an ill advised course of action.

...

Undisclosed Location

Raindrops fell upon Obito as he clutched Rin's inert body close to him.

"This... this is hell..." the boy cried.

Darkness and rain. It was a fitting image for Obito Uchiha, equating the darkness of his heart and the tears pouring from his eyes. He clutched the girl's corpse near him.

"Rin... Rin!"

"Er... it might not be my place to tell," Guruguru, the imperfect Zetsu temporarily fused to his body, mentioned, startling the young Uchiha a bit. "But there's a chance that you might see Rin again."

Obito stopped crying, and perked up his head.

"Really?" he asked, his voice dripping with desperation.

Just like Guruguru had expected.

"Yes, we can do something to make sure you see Rin again," Guruguru continued.

"What is it!? Come on, there's no time to waste!" Obito desperately pleaded.

"It's not that easy," Guruguru replied, much to Obito's dismay. "It's a long and hard procedure, that demands a lot of effort and resources. If we are to do this, it has to be under one condition."

"Whatever! I'll do anything!" Obito cried.

"You must become a servant of Madara-sama, and do absolutely everything he says. There's no other way," Guruguru stated.

"Yes! Yes!" I'll do anything he wants! But please, help me save Rin!" Obito pleaded.

If Guruguru had a mouth, he would have smirked. Oh, Madara was going to be so pleased with this development.

"Alright then, listen closely, this is what we need to do first..."

...

"Boss?"

Obito was a bit startled as Zetsu, who had emerged near him, called his name.

"Y-Yes?" he absentmindedly asked.

"The Hokage's children are here," Black Zetsu announced.

"What should we do with them?" the White half asked.

"Leave them in one of the base's cells. We'll deal with them later," Obito replied with a dismissive hand wave. "What about the jinchuriki?"

"He's on his way here. From what we could see, they managed to find the location of this lair," the White half answered.

"He will be here shortly," Black Zetsu added.

Obito smirked. "Good, we won't have to leave an obvious trail of breadcrumbs in order to lure him here," the Uchiha then put on his new mask, an orange one with an spiraling pattern. "In that case, let's prepare him the welcome he truly deserves."

Author's Note: Of course, none of the Konoha 15 are still on an appropriate level to defeat a healthy Kimimaro, so here comes Zabuza to save the day. I'm sure you'll enjoy their duel.

So, we're getting close to the end of Part I, people! Just three more chapters besides this one to go! (which I have already

written, by the way ;)) However, I should tell you that this story won't go into the Shippuden time frame after that. There will be one more arc (that I've been dying to write) that will take place between Parts I and II before we dive into Shippuden. It's an event that sadly took place offscreen in the original manga, but I think it deserves to be properly told.

Also, you guys really don't want to miss next chapter, since you'll finally see what made Naruto and Sasuke fight each other, this time for real.

Meanwhile, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Senju Twins Retrieval, Part IV

Author's Note: First of all, shout out to FireSharingan359, the first author who took on my "Shattered Team 7" challenge. Be sure to read his story "A Fool's Dedication", and leave a review to give him your support. You can find a link to his story in both my profile and favorites.

Also... it's finally here. You wanted to know how Naruto and Sasuke ended up being enemies, and this chapter has the answer. I hope you find said answer, as well as the rest of the developments that take place enjoyable. And like usual, see you at the bottom notes. Now enjoy:

Chapter 39:

Senju Twins Rescue Part IV

or

The Curtain Falls

...

Zabuza never thought that, during his stay in the Land of Fire, he'd run into and fight a fellow native of the Land of Water. The fact that he was from a clan believed to be extinct -albeit, for once, not due to the infamous Bloodline Purges- only added to his surprise, which he managed to keep carefully hidden thanks to his mental training.

But then again, if six years ago somebody told him that he'd be working for Konoha, he'd laugh in that person's face. Fate is indeed a fickle mistress.

"Let me guess, is that Orochimaru forcing you to work for him?"
Zabuza asked.

Kimimaro visibly frowned, offended at such suggestion. "I serve Orochimaru-sama willingly. He gave my life a purpose, and I work for him in order to repay him. Unlike you, I'm not a slave."

The fact that he sounded a lot like Haku made Zabuza feel oddly uncomfortable.

"I'm not a slave either. This is just a temp job," Zabuza replied, trying to save face.

Kimimaro smirked a little, clearly amused. "Sure. Keep telling yourself that. Anyway, not that it's going to matter, given that you're going to meet your end here."

This time, it was Zabuza who smirked. "Do you really think that you can take on a Swordsman of the Hidden Mist, brat? You're strong, but you're way over your head."

"If that's the case, then let's check which one of the two is actually wrong," Kimimaro replied, as bone blades started to grow over several parts of his body. "Dance of the Willow!"

The Kaguya charged at Zabuza, who raised his sword defensively. Upon reaching hand to hand combat, Kimimaro launched an onslaught of swipes with his bone blades, as well as the occasional punch and kick, forcing Zabuza into the defensive. Still, that didn't last long, since Zabuza managed to jump back a bit, putting enough distance between himself and Kimimaro's attack, but still close enough for his Executioner's Blade to reach the white haired ninja.

Now, it was Kimimaro on the defensive as he parried and dodged Zabuza's vicious attacks. Despite the sword looked -and was- rather heavy, on Zabuza's hand it appeared as if it was made of light plastic. Still, the last Kaguya could feel all the weight of the massive sword whenever the parried one of its brutal blows.

"Still think you measure up to me?" Zabuza cockily asked, as he readied another sword slam.

This time, instead of parrying, Kimimaro gracefully moved sideways, and taking advantage of Zabuza's precarious position, he dashed towards him and sunk one of his bone blades on Zabuza's side. His makeshift weapon managed to pierce the Jonin's flak jacket as if it was made of wet paper.

"I think I'm way better than you," Kimimaro retorted, violently pulling out the blade from Zabuza's flesh.

But much to his shock, blood didn't come out of Zabuza's grievous wound, but water. Zabuza then smirked under his mask, before he turned into a puddle of water.

"A clone...?" Kimimaro lamely asked. "I've been fighting a clone the whole time?"

"Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

A massive dragon-shaped water construct blocked the sun above the Oto ninja. It let out a distorted roar, before coming down at him. Kimimaro expertly jumped backwards dodging the lunge, but the dragon then exploded into a shapeless torrent of water rushing at him. Kimimaro continued running and dodging the water as good as he could..

A loud whirring sound alerted Kimimaro of the giant spinning sword flying at him like a deadly disc. At that speed, blocking it would be suicide, so he opted for dodging it. The blade passed besides him harmlessly, but that moment, Zabuza suddenly burst out of the water torrent, grabbed his sword and viciously assaulted Kimimaro.

"Water Release: Tsunami Sword!"

All of the water of Zabuza's previous jutsu started to gather around his Executioner's Blade, forming massive, thick watery cover. The swordsman then slammed his sword forward, releasing all that water once again in the form of a destructive giant wave, albeit this time it was focused in a single direction.

Kimimaro was unable to dodge it, and he was dragged away by the gigantic wall of water, before it slammed him down against the ground.

"Say, what do you think about my abilities now, brat?" an amused Zabuza asked as he calmly walked towards the downed Kimimaro, dragging his sword, leaving a shallow furrow behind. "Still think you can kill me and take my sword for that sick master of yours?"

Kimimaro didn't reply, and ignored Zabuza as he slowly started to get back on his feet.

"You can still move?" Zabuza asked, genuinely surprised. "Wow. Most people would have most of their bones broken after such a hit."

"If you aim to break my bones," Kimimaro slowly said. "Then you're doing a fool's errand. My bones I'm unbreakable."

"Not all that surprising, given your abilities," Zabuza conceded. "However, just because your bones are unbreakable, doesn't mean that the rest of you are. The human body has plenty of spots that guarantee an instant kill."

"I admit that you're way stronger than I had guessed," Kimimaro replied. "But you're not strong enough to defeat me. I'll make sure to enjoy this. An opponent that forces me to go all out is something I don't see every day."

Kimimaro's marks around his body started to glow as if they were made of fire, and they started to spread to the rest of his skin. His skin went from pale white to grayish brown. His hair grew longer, and huge bone spikes started to grow across his back. He also grew a large bone spiked tail, which gave him a somewhat reptilian appearance. His eyes turned yellow with black sclera, and two curved black marking appeared under his eye.

"Behold the full power of Orochimaru-sama's Cursed Seal of Earth, one of his two most powerful cursed seals, only given to the best of

his servants," Kimimaro announced, as he spread his arms.

Zabuza frowned in disgust. "You disappoint me, brat. You are strong, very strong for your age. Yet instead of becoming more powerful on your own, you borrow power from others. I'm afraid to say you've already lost."

"Your logic is flawed. Power is still power, no matter where it comes from," Kimimaro retorted. "I exist to carry out Orochimaru-sama's will, and I'll use any tool that makes that job possible."

Zabuza smirked. "Of course, somebody whose entire purpose in life is to serve another would think that. Let me show you then the power of the future Mizukage!"

Zabuza and Kimimaro rushed towards each other, ready to go all out, and show who's truly the strongest.

...

Much further to the north, in the Land of Sound, Naruto, Hinata, Sasuke and Lee were deep into enemy territory, jumping from one tree to another, until they saw an expanse a few hundred meters in their general direction. Coming out of the forest into the vast green expanse, the four ninja noticed what appeared to be a small town not far from their position.

A town that was rather familiar to half of the group members.

"Hey, Naruto-kun, isn't that...?" Hinata asked.

"Sawa Town? Yeah, I believe so," Naruto replied before Hinata could finish her question.

"You know that place?" Lee asked.

Hinata nodded. "It was our first C-Rank mission. We had to protect that town from bandits. However, turns out said bandits worked for

Orochimaru, and soon we found ourselves fighting something far greater than we could deal with."

"Kinda like now, if you think about it," Naruto sourly added.

"However... the town appears to be deserted," Sasuke noted, as he looked around.

"It is. The town was the last remnant of the old Land of the Rice Fields," Hinata continued her explanation. "We were forced to evacuate their villagers and escort them to the Land of Fire before Orochimaru's forces could attack."

"We barely made it out of there in one piece. Even with the Tactical Squad's help, if we took a little longer to reach the border and meet Konoha's reinforcements..." Naruto shuddered upon recalling that memory. "I don't want to imagine what could have happened."

"Yet here we are, diving into enemy territory, with no chances of reinforcements," Lee observed. Albeit he sounded as his usual excited self, as opposed to somebody more prone to worry.

"All of Orochimaru's forces are fighting in Konoha. Honestly, I doubt we'll face that much resistance," Naruto replied.

"Still, it would be wise to be prepared. I'm sure that Orochimaru left somebody to guard your siblings once they're delivered to his lair," Hinata wisely told him.

"Whoever are the poor bastards who were tasked with such job, I'll make them regret accepting it," Naruto darkly replied.

When they reached the town, the group took a couple seconds to take a look at it. The town didn't look any different to Naruto and Hinata than when they were there for the first time, even if some signs of being abandoned for some time were present. The silence of the zone did nothing but contribute to the already eerie atmosphere.

"Hinata," Sasuke called her. "Some of Orochimaru's men could use this place as a base, or at least a place to rest."

Despite the statement tone, Hinata caught the implicit question, and shook her head in negation.

"With the exception of some small animals, the town is completely deserted," the Hyuga heiress replied. "Either that, or Orochimaru's men found a way to fool the Byakugan."

Despite the probabilities of such thing happening, it was still a distressing thought for the young Hyuga, as well as for pretty much her whole clan.

Sasuke's hawk was still flying in circles above what appeared to be a thick forest zone. Of course, Orochimaru's lair would take advantage of that in order to remain hidden. They had thought that maybe Orochimaru could have occupied the capital. Thankfully it wasn't the case, since such city was located much farther.

The return to the forest was a welcomed change, mostly since they could now leap from one branch to another and increase their travel speed significantly. And even if the lush trees covered the skies almost completely, preventing the Konoha ninja from seeing the hawk, they knew in which direction the bird was. Plus only the boys had this problem, as Hinata could still see the bird.

Unfortunately for Hinata, her earliest fears were about to come true. While so far it was impossible for an actual person to become invisible to the Byakugan, it was possible to make seals that would hide certain objects from its gaze -something Jiraiya had already did many years in the past, but kept it a secret-. Such as explosive tags. And unbeknown to them, they entered a zone that was covered in them, with added seals to make them pretty much undetectable.

The zone was also covered in pressure seals connected to the explosives, and the moment Naruto unwittingly stepped on one of them, the group was surrounded, and almost engulfed, by deafening

explosions. Naruto and Sasuke, who were heading the group, where launched high into the air in the direction they were heading, while Hinata and Lee were hurled backwards. A mighty tree painfully stopped them.

Even if the hit blurred her vision a bit, Hinata's Byakugan spotted four figures entering the scene. And adult, and three young teens. Four people she had already met once, one of them multiple times in Konoha.

"Well, well, look who's back in our turf," a muffled male voice stated.

"It seems that they didn't learn their lesson the first time," a haughty female voice added.

"Then let's make sure there won't be a 'next time'," another clearer, male voice said.

The Sound Genin Hinata and her team had fought during their first C-Rank mission was before her and Lee. Mizuki was standing behind them, smirking evilly at the two Konoha ninja. Behind them, there was a barrier of rocks and felled trees formed by the explosion, with Naruto and Sasuke at the other side.

"HINATA! LEE!" Naruto yelled.

"I'm okay!" Hinata shouted back, even if in reality the explosion had left her a bit shaken. "Continue with the mission! Save your siblings!"

"We will be okay!" Lee added, sounding as positive as ever.

After a few moments of hesitation, the two male Konoha Chunin decided to continue on their own, leaving Hinata and Lee alone with this new threat.

"So sweet, offering to stay behind so the Jinchuriki can save those brats. So Konoha of you," Mizuki said in a mocking tone. He then

slipped into a battle stance as he grabbed the Fuma Shuriken from his back. "Too bad it won't do you any good!"

"Mizuki-sensei?" Lee asked in shock.

The white haired ninja looked at Lee, and raised an eyebrow. "Do I know you? Wait, were you one of my students? Oh well, it doesn't matter."

"So it's true that you defected to Orochimaru's side," Lee continued. "Your flames of youth had to be barely embers to do such a despicable action."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a traitor and all that, can we skip that part this time? It becomes tiresome after a while," Mizuki flatly replied as he rolled his eyes.

The Sound Genin prepared to attack.

"Hinata, you're the Chunin. What do we do?" Lee asked, looking at the bluenette from the corner of his eye.

It was rather jarring for Hinata to realize that she was in command now, even if they were just two of them. But still, Lee had a point. She was the Chunin, and thus she had to lead them to victory. She ran multiple scenarios through her mind, until she found one with the highest chances of success. Unfortunately, it forced her to make a decision that could haunt her for the rest of her life if things didn't turn out as planned.

"Lee-san, I want you to fight Mizuki. I'll deal with these three," Hinata whispered him.

Lee turned at her incredulous, but ready to comply if necessary. "Are you sure? Mizuki used to be a Chunin back in Konoha, and I'm still a Genin."

"I know you're unsure, but I need you to keep distracted while I deal with the others. I already fought against them before, and know what I have to do to defeat them," Hinata insisted.

Fortunately, Lee nodded. "Very well then, I'll do as you say!"

The green clad ninja dashed towards the group of enemies. Zaku cast his palms forward.

"Decapitating Air Waves!"

The spiky haired Oto Genin shot two powerful streams of pressured air and sound waves through the orifices in his palms at Lee. The Konoha Genin merely leaped above them, gracefully landing behind Mizuki. Before the traitor could turn back, Lee delivered a painful kick to the sides, sending him flying.

"Sensei!" Kin called.

"Kin, watch out!" Dosu called.

The three of them saw Hinata dashing towards them, her palms crackling with electricity. She thrust her palm at Zaku, however, both he and his teammates managed to jump back in time, and Hinata ended up striking the ground with such power it created a crater.

"Whoa!" said Zaku in awe. "If I let that girl hit me..."

"I don't remember her being that strong when we first fought her," Kin lamented.

Their comments fueled Hinata's confidence, who, in an uncharacteristic display, allowed herself to smirk.

"I trained a lot since the first time we fought. I faced enemies way stronger than any of you, helping me to improve in a way I couldn't think it would be possible," Hinata told the trio.

Dosu frowned. Or at least, Hinata thought he did, it was hard to tell with all those bandages. "And you think we spend our time sitting on a couch doing nothing? You'll see now! Underground Sound blast!"

Dosu slammed both palms into the ground, sending sound waves that tore the ground apart, forming large cracks, and shooting small but sharp rocks and pebbles into the air.

"Ow!" Hinata yelped as she tried to dodge all the tiny but painful projectiles coming from below.

"My turn!" Kin stated, now a bit more confident, pulling several senbon on each hand. "Catch these!"

The black haired girl tossed the needles at Hinata, who got ready to deflect them with the Gentle fist. However, while she was busy doing so, Zaku aimed his open palms at the Hyuga Heiress and prepared to attack.

"Decapitating Air Bullets!"

Zaku fired a quick barrage of compressed air projectiles, similar to the Vacuum Palm's vacuum shells, which Hinata was forced to run in order to avoid, since she knew such thing would be impossible to block.

"They're cornering me. Even if I'm at a disadvantage here, I need to attack, not just defend!" Hinata inwardly told herself. She eyed her opponents. *"The bandaged boy seems to be the only melee specialist. If I can bypass him, then the other two shouldn't be hard to deal with."*

Hinata's attack plans were disturbed when an array of senbon appeared out of nowhere and flew at her. The bluenette yelped and jumped backwards, trying to avoid them. One stabbed into her arm, while another was stopped by her flak jacket.

"Do you like my Echo Needle Attack?" Kin asked. "I created that jutsu myself. It would be very careless of me if I only relied on genjutsu, right?"

Hinata pulled out the senbon from her arm, and quickly healed the wound. *"So, like multiplying tools with the shadow clone jutsu, but with a delayed effect to catch the opponent off guard. I need to remember that,"* Hinata thought.

"I admit it is sort of impressive," Hinata agreed, as she stared defiantly at the three of them. "You three did grow stronger since the last time we fought."

"But I have the feeling you're not admitting defeat, are you?" Dosu guessed, before letting out a chuckle.

Hinata returned Dosu's chuckle with one of her own. "I didn't go this far by giving up. Vacuum Wall Palm!"

Thrusting both hands forward, Hinata projected a massive vacuum shell at the Oto genin, wrecking the ground below as it traveled. Zaku stepped forward, eager to meet the attack head on. His mouth formed a smirk of superiority as he raised his hands forward once more.

"You think you impress us? That's nothing!" Zaku scoffed.
"Decapitating Air Waves!"

Two streams of pressured air flowed through Zaku's hands once again, successfully slowing the vacuum shell to a halt, pushing back and forth with the Oto ninja's attack. Eventually the energy gathered by the clash reached critical point, and was released in the form of a respectable explosion of chakra and wind, raising clouds of dust that momentarily blinded the trio, forcing them to stand back to back in order to avoid being blindsided.

However, that moment was enough for Hinata to vanish from the trio's sights.

"Where did she go?" Kin asked, nervously looking around.

"She couldn't have gone too far," Dosu calmly guessed.

And indeed, Dosu's guess proved to be correct, since Hinata was much closer to them than what they imagined. Crackling electricity alerted them of a presence behind the three of them, but by that time it was too late.

"Lightning Release: Eight Trigrams, Thirty-two Thunder strikes!" Hinata began a series of lightning-enhanced palm strikes against her opponents. "Two Strikes! Four Strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen...!"

"Sonic Boom!"

Dosu slammed his two Melody Gauntlets together, creating a sonic explosion at point blank at Hinata. Zaku and Kin were also caught in the area of effect, but they weren't as harmed.

"Ow..." Zaku groaned, as he grabbed his head, while trying to fight the thankfully brief dizziness. "You could have warn us before doing that."

"We can't let a single opponent, much less a Konoha ninja, best us! So you better stop fooling around and put her in her place. Otherwise, we won't prove Orochimaru-sama of being worthy of his power!"

Hinata had also recovered, in no small part thanks to her healing abilities.

"That attack was sure something. I'm still having trouble finding balance. But that confirmed my suspicions that the bandaged kid is the melee specialist," Hinata thought. *"Okay, let's show this guys why I'm a Chunin..."*

At the same time, while Hinata was facing the Sound Genin, Lee was fighting their sensei. Just as Hinata had gauged, his abilities

were nothing Rock Lee couldn't handle without his weights on. Even if Mizuki's taijutsu, ninjutsu and skill with weapons was that of an average Chunin, Lee's taijutsu was beyond average. And in this word, is better to do one thing extremely well than do many things at a mediocre level.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

Lee's foot connected with Mizuki's shoulder for the third time in less than two minutes, sending the former teacher flying. What Mizuki thought would be easy picking was being far more challenging than he expected.

"You're pushing my patience brat..." Mizuki growled, as he stood back on his feet for the third time.

Lee, however, remained impassible, much to the former teacher's chagrin. The fact that he only used taijutsu enraged him even more.

"Take this then!" Mizuki quickly formed several hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullets!"

The head of a dragon made of earth and stone emerged from the ground. It opened its jaws, releasing multiple projectiles of compressed earth and dirt. However, much to Mizuki's shock, rather dodging them or using some jutsu to counter them, Lee started to punch and kick them, shattering them in the process.

"This is similar to an exercise Gai-sensei made us do," Lee casually explained. "Albeit he used a machine that shot rubber balls."

Burning in anger, Mizuki dashed at Lee, Fuma Shuriken in hand. "You think you can humiliate me by fighting with nothing but taijutsu? I'll show you!"

Mizuki's Fuma Shuriken was covered in flames the moment the white haired ninja tossed it, turning into a fiery disk of death. Lee's

legs prepare to jump above it, but Mizuki wasn't done yet. He did several hand seals.

"Shadow Clone Fire Shuriken Jutsu!"

In an instant, Lee found himself from facing a single disc of fire, to facing dozens of them, flying at different heights. Jumping was not an option. Instead, Lee decided to do something that would have him deemed a madman by his peers, but would have made his sensei unbelievably proud.

Much to Mizuki's shock, Lee rushed towards the flaming shuriken. Displaying an astonishing speed, agility and reflexes, the green clad ninja expertly dodged all of the flaming shuriken that flied close to him. His speed wasn't perfect, and sometimes they grazed his clothes and his skin, but aside from a minor burn, no damage was done.

"H-How...?" Mizuki mumbled, before he was snapped out of his trance by a painful punch to the face, making him lose balance and stumble back. He regained his senses soon after that. "HOW!? WHY!? Why you don't use ninjutsu to fight me!? Are you so arrogant to believe that you can defeat me with taijutsu alone?"

"I'm unable to use ninjutsu nor genjutsu, so taijutsu is the only fighting art I can use," Lee calmly explained. "And even if it's not my intention to sound arrogant, so far I'm not doing that bad against you with taijutsu alone."

Mizuki snarled, before a memory dawned upon him. "Wait, I remember you! You're that freak who wanted to be a ninja despite not being able to use ninjutsu! You're Rock Lee!"

"You remember my name? I'm honestly surprised," Lee stoically replied.

"How could I forget such a failure like you? Somebody that can't use ninjutsu, or at least genjutsu is not meant to be a ninja. But judging

by your forehead protector, you somehow managed to pass," Mizuki shook her head in disappointment. "So this is what Konoha became now. You guys give me every day more reasons to make me feel glad I decided to defect. Anyway, once Orochimaru-sama's plans come to fruition, Konoha will stop shaming the ninja world with its existence."

"Somehow, I find that as doubtful as you defeating me," Lee replied.

"You think I can't defeat you?" Mizuki laughed. "Oh, please! I've been only using a fraction of my power, but now," as Mizuki spoke, his body started to change. He grew bigger and more muscular, his skin turned maroon, his hair grew longer, his eyes turned yellow with black sclera, a pair of bone blades grew from the back of his hands, and two additional arms ended in sickle-like blades grew from his back. "THIS is the power of Orochimaru-sama! The power that he bestowed me!"

"And you're proud of a power that you didn't earn, that somebody just handed it to you?" Lee replied, slightly disappointed. "I'm not surprised that you don't believe I could become a ninja with taijutsu alone, if you disregard effort and hard work so easily. Now I will prove that my hard work will trump any borrowed power!"

Mizuki shook his head with a tsk-tsk, and chuckled.

"You're really deluded if you think you can defeat me like this. But I will be more than happy to give you a reality check. Get ready for the worst beating of your life!" Mizuki roared as he charged forward.

...

South of there, back in the grass expanse besides the lake, Zabuza and Kimimaro continued their duel, with neither of them gaining the upper hand over the other. Still, the power boost granted by the cursed seal was notable.

"Drilling Bullets!"

Kimimaro fired ten bony projectiles from each of his fingertips at Zabuza. The swordsman merely blocked them with his sword, ricocheting them into different directions. Then, he made several hand seals with a single hand, as his other hand was gripping the Executioner's Blade.

"Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Another large dragon made of water rose from the nearby lake. It let out a roar before diving at Kimimaro. The Kaguya ninja tried to outrun it, but was too slow and the dragon engulfed him, before it turned into a shapeless torrent that dragged him away.

Or that's what Zabuza thought, since when the water receded, a heaving Kimimaro wasn't that far from his initial position, heaving and spitting some water. He had grown two bone spikes from his palms, and used them to anchor himself to the ground, thus preventing the water from dragging him away and slamming him against a hard surface.

"This time, he didn't even try to dodge it," Zabuza thought. "While the cursed seal increased his strength as evidenced by his bigger muscles and stronger physical blows, it cut his speed. I need to take advantage of that."

"One handed seals. Not many people are able to do them," Kimimaro praised the swordsman, while keeping a neutral tone.

"Given my fighting style, it is pretty much a need," Zabuza replied, sneering a little. Noticing Kimimaro's slight exhaustion, he added: "You look tired. Why don't you make both our days easier and give up?"

"Never," was his answer. "Especially not since I didn't even use my best moves."

Zabuza chuckled under his mask. "Then go ahead, kid. See if you can impress me."

"Dance of the Clematis: Vine."

Kimimaro then proceeded not to impress as more to revolt Zabuza when the white haired teen pulled his own spinal cord out of his body. Zabuza guessed he re-grew a new one in the process, given that he was still standing.

"As you can see, I'm no stranger to swords either," Kimimaro mentioned, as he swung his extracted spinal cord as if it were a weapon, akin to a mix between a sword and a whip. "Shall we duel?"

Earlier that day, another person challenged Zabuza to a sword duel, and the Demon of the Hidden Mist ended up humiliated. He wouldn't allow such thing to happen a second time in a row. Gripping it tightly, he raised his sword and frowned.

"I'll make sure you regret those words," Zabuza coldly stated.

Both ninja dashed towards each other, meeting in the middle, a loud metallic noise resulting of their weapons clashing. Given that both of them used rather lengthy swords, it was very easy to parry and block the other's strike, and naturally very hard to land a hit on the opponent. At least, not without relying on something other than a sword. Zabuza made a hand seal.

"Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

Four blobs of water jumped out of the lake into the ground, and they took the form and shape of Zabuza, sword included. The clones then rushed to aid their creator.

This new threat forced Kimimaro to disengage Zabuza and face the clones. With a swing of his spinal cord sword, the Oto ninja easily destroyed one of the clones when it reached close combat distance, soaking Kimimaro completely. Undeterred, he proceeded to fight the other three.

"Given that you're relying on ninjutsu, I take that you admit I'm the best swordsman?" Kimimaro asked.

Zabuza, however, wasn't going to fall for such an obvious taunt. "Don't make me laugh. We're ninja, and as such, we use every resource available to win. If you expected me to do otherwise, then you're a bigger fool than I thought. The best swordsman will be the one who walks out of this fight alive, simple as that."

"Very well then," Kimimaro stoically replied, as suddenly multiple long spikes grew from different sides from his body, impaling the clones.

Kimimaro engaged Zabuza once more, but besides his makeshift weapon, he also used his body spikes to attack Zabuza, which would increase or decrease their length and sharpness whenever they were close or far from the former Kirigakure ninja. Such an increase of offensive power forced Zabuza to fight defensively, much to his chagrin.

Then, Kimimaro jumped backwards and made a swinging motion. The gaps between the vertebrae became bigger, increasing the length and the flexibility of the extracted spinal cord, turning it into something closer to a whip. Zabuza instinctively raised his sword to protect himself, and the chord wrapped itself around the sword. Zabuza and Kimimaro started to pull back and forth, until Kimimaro's superior strength won the struggle, and Zabuza's sword was yanked from his fingers, and tossed it into the nearby lake.

"What's a swordsman without a sword?" Kimimaro mockingly asked before he made the same movement, binding Zabuza. "I'll tell you, a corpse."

"SHIT!" Zabuza yelled as he tried to break free. But both the bones and the cartilage holding them together were very strong, and with his arms pinned against his body, he couldn't use all his strength.

"Now, time to finish this," Kimimaro extended his free arm. "Dance of the Clematis: Flower."

Much to Zabuza's horror, a massive drill made of bone formed around Kimimaro's hand. The bone construct appeared to be very hard and sharp. He didn't need to imagine what Kimimaro was planning to do. Kimimaro pulled Zabuza towards him while charging forward.

"NOW DIE!"

In the last second, Kimimaro could see how Zabuza's horrified expression morphed into one of confidence and mockery. Before the giant drill could impale him, Zabuza jumped and landed on top of it. Kimimaro's arm couldn't support so much weight, and dropped on one knee as the additional load pulled him down. Zabuza violently kicked Kimimaro in the face, forcing him to drop the spinal cord sword, and thus releasing Zabuza, who jumped backwards. Kimimaro quickly detached the giant bone drill and picked up the spinal cord sword as he got back on his feet.

"You're strong, kid. Very strong. Against another opponent, even one as skilled and strong as I am, you would have won. But your fate had already been decided," Zabuza claimed.

"What are you talking about? Sure, you avoided the killing blow, but you're no closer to defeating me than you were at the beginning of our fight," Kimimaro defiantly replied as he slipped once again into a fighting stance.

"You think so? Then you really need to check your current state, kid," Zabuza pointed out. "You said that you don't use that transformation against many people, and boy, it shows. It gives you quite the strength boost, but what you gain in physical power you lose it in speed. Something you could have remedied with enough training. And while your overall chakra is also boosted, the seal accelerates its consumption rate. As a result, you're both tired and almost out of chakra."

"You underestimate me," Kimimaro replied, not too happy.

"Am I? Those last attacks you used looked to have a hefty chakra cost. And that's not even counting all the chakra you spent fighting those three brats." Zabuza shook his head. "I'm not as arrogant as to think that you are my equal, even my superior, when it comes to raw power. But you have plenty of glaring weaknesses, and as the fool you are, you let me exploit them all with you none the wiser. That's why I told you no amount of borrowed power could match my skill, intelligence and experience."

"If you're so confident about your chances, why don't you try to beat me then?" Kimimaro asked.

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "It will be a pleasure."

In less than a second, Zabuza was in front of Kimimaro. The Oto ninja tried to raise his makeshift weapon to defend himself, but was too slow, and Zabuza delivered a quick punch to the gut, and another kick to the face that sent him flying into the lake. Zabuza immediately followed him as he made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Prison Jutsu!"

Before he could realize what happened, Kimimaro found himself trapped in a sphere of water, deprived of oxygen. He banged the wall of the sphere trying to break free, but it was as hard as steel.

"Your bones might be unbreakable, but I'm one hundred percent sure you'll die if I keep you enough time from breathing," Zabuza stated, his words arriving distorted but still understandable to the trapped Kimimaro, who continued to furiously pound against the water sphere. "The average person can last around four to five minutes deprived of oxygen. But given your pointless attempts to break free, I'll give you three minutes tops. Anyway, just to be sure, I'll keep you here for ten minutes," Zabuza shook his head in disappointment.

"Such a waste of power and potential. If I only got my hands on your

before that snake did... between you and Haku, I would have my work cut out for."

Kimimaro didn't heed Zabuza's warning, and continued to bang his fists against the water prison. The horrifying realization of his impending demise dawned upon him.

"It's... it's useless. He's right... I'm too tired, and have very little chakra..." Kimimaro thought, before another realization renewed his strengths. *"NO! I can't die here! Not against this opponent! I'm Orochimaru-sama's strongest fighter! I can't deprive him of my service! I can't disappoint him!"* Kimimaro desperately thought.

Kimimaro prepared for his last, desperate move. Zabuza started to notice that the water prison was becoming more and more unstable.

"What the...? The brat is gathering his chakra for one more attack... this is bad!" Zabuza removed his arm, undoing the water prison, a second before Kimimaro unleashed his remaining power.

A deafening cry rang across the land, scaring nearby animals into hiding, before Kimimaro exploded into a growing mass of shapeless bone spikes. Zabuza moved as fast as his body allowed in order to hide from the chaotic attack, and thankfully was fast enough to keep the distance until it ended.

"Idiot... that almost got me," Zabuza grumbled as he watched the sinking bone structure from the lake's shore. "Anyway, better retrieve my sword and see that those brats don't get themselves killed..."

However, unbeknown to Zabuza, Kimimaro didn't die. As his Bloodline Limit also allowed to merge with the bones he created, he used it as a way to escape the swordsman. Exhausted and with almost no chakra, he had reverted to his original form.

"I won't fail Orochimaru-sama..." he said as he climbed out of the water, gasping for air. "I won't fail..."

...

Back to the forests of the Land of Sound, Hinata continued her disadvantaged fight against the three Oto Genin.

"Decapitating Air Waves!"

Zaku once again shot his twin streams of pressured air at the Hyuga heiress, who dodged them with graceful agility, all while she pulled a few shuriken and tossed them at the spiky haired Genin. Dosu quickly intercepted the steel stars and swatted them away with his melody gauntlets.

Meanwhile, Kin pulled a couple kunai and tried to attack Hinata from behind, but the bluenette moved aside just in the nick of time, and delivered a painful palm strike to the black haired girl's abdomen.

"The hell? How did she know I was behind her?" Kin indignantly asked.

"She's an Hyuga. Her eye power allows her to see in every direction around her at the same time," Dosu explained. "Ambushes won't work on her."

"I've seen you've done your homework," Hinata mentioned.

"Then we will attack her from different sides! Even if she can see our attacks coming, she won't be able to stop all of them!" Zaku stated.

Dosu and Kin nodded, and the three Genin spread out to surround Hinata as they prepared to attack. Hinata made several hand seals and covered her body in electricity.

"Resonating Echo Drill!"

"Decapitating Airwaves!"

"Shadow Clone Senbon Jutsu!"

Hinata started to spin as destructive sound waves, pressured air streams and multiple steel needles flied at her.

"Lightning Release: Heavenly Thunderstorm!"

The blue haired Hyuga turned into a tornado of lightning that not only repelled the three attacks aimed at her, but it blasted her three attackers with lightning discharges, pushing them backwards. When Hinata stopped spinning, there was a large crater around her.

"What... what was that?" Dosu asked, incredulous, as he tried to stand back. Of the trio, he was the only one still conscious.

"That was my power. The power I developed after the first time we fought, with my hard work and determination," Hinata replied.

"You... Orochimaru-sama promised us power, but you... how can somebody become so strong so fast?..." Dosu stammered.

"Orochimaru can only promise you death," Hinata replied. "Don't you see? I don't know what your history is or what events led you to serve him, but you don't matter to him, except as disposable pawns and guinea pigs."

"No... that... can't be true..." Dosu unsure replied as Hinata walked towards him.

"If it was true, I alone couldn't have defeated you," Hinata said, before delivering a chopping strike to the bandaged ninja's neck, knocking him out cold.

...

At the same time Hinata fought the Sound Genin, Lee was fighting their master.

"Fire Release: Cursed Flame Destruction!"

Mizuki breathed a wave of blue fire at Lee, who managed to dodge it at a break-necking speed. The green clad Genin quickly reached hand to hand distance, and he engaged his former teacher in a rather short lived martial arts duel, which ended up with Mizuki on the ground once again.

"That cursed seal give you a boost. But it's still not enough to defeat me," Lee stated.

"How... why are you so strong? How can a kid that can't use ninjutsu be that powerful?" Mizuki asked in disbelief.

"Easy. Hard work," was Lee's answer.

"Hard work!? Do you expect me to believe you got that power on hard work alone!? Do you think I'm stupid?" Mizuki spitefully growled.

Lee merely shrugged. "It's not surprising that you find my claims unbelievable, given your eagerness to take shortcuts to power, such as that cursed seal," Lee pointed out. "Most people tend to underestimate how long can you go if you work hard and push yourself to your limits on a regular basis."

"LIES! Nobody can become so strong by simply trying hard!" Mizuki spat back as he charged at Lee. "If it was that easy, every ninja would be as strong as Orochimaru-sama!"

Lee effortlessly dodged the charge and kicked him in the back.

"Who said it was easy?" Lee retorted. "From an outsider's perspective, it might look like it. But trust me, it's not. You have no idea what I had to do to become what I am today. How much I had to sweat, to bleed, to cry. But I don't regret any of that, because the pay off speaks for itself."

"Nonsense! People are either born strong or weak, and the latter can't change their status by themselves!" Mizuki protested as he

threw a punch. "Especially if you're held back by others, like Konoha did with me!"

"Oh, I see it now," Lee said in realization, as he easily blocked the punch. "You were weak, but instead of trying to improve yourself with hard work, you shifted the blame to Konoha, and tried everything you could to gain power. Everything except tackling the actual problem. That's why you will never defeat me, no matter how much of a failure you think I am."

"SHUT UP!"

Once again, Mizuki lunged at Lee and tried to impale him with the sickles of his additional arms. Lee ducked in time and kicked Mizuki in the face while crouching, sending him up into the air.

"Gate of Opening: Open!"

Surrounded by a green aura, Lee shot upwards, catching the still flying Mizuki from behind, before both of them started to spin as Lee pile-drove Mizuki into the ground.

"FRONT LOTUS!"

Mizuki hit the ground headfirst with a loud crash, while Lee managed to jump out in the nick of time and land safely on his feet. While not lethal, the attack was strong enough to knock Mizuki out cold, who also reverted to his original form.

"Lee-kun?" Hinata's voice asked.

Lee turned around and saw Hinata walking towards him. Behind her, he could see the unconscious Sound Genin tied to a tree.

"Ah, Hinata-san, I see you defeated your opponents as well!" Lee pointed out. "And you were right, my flames of youth were more than enough to defeat our former teacher! I will never doubt your decisions ever again!"

Hinata smiled at him. "It's okay to doubt sometimes, Lee," she then grew serious again. "We should try to catch Naruto-kun. But we can't leave these people here unsupervised."

"I can see that you're eager to reunite and help Naruto-kun," Lee observed. "Go then! I'll stay here and watch over the prisoners!"

Hinata smiled once more, nodded, and headed towards Orochimaru's lair. She hoped she could find it on her own.

"Hold on, Naruto-kun, I'll be with you shortly!" Hinata thought.

...

While Zabuza fought against Kimimaro and Hinata and Lee fought against Mizuki and the Sound Genin, Naruto and Sasuke, the last two remaining members of the original rescue force, approached the entrance to Orochimaru's main base.

Sasuke's hawk had told them that it was located between two large oaks. It even showed them the actual spot. But all that they could see were a bunch of large rocks, with some bushes growing between them. Both of them reached the conclusion that there was a powerful genjutsu covering the entrance.

"Sharingan!"

Sasuke's Bloodline Limit flared to life, and with his enhanced vision, the youngest Uchiha could see a distortion between the large oaks. He made a hand seal, and released a small pulse of chakra in every direction. The effect was instant, and the illusion was dispelled, revealing the entrance to Orochimaru's lair: a simple set of stone stairs that headed underground.

"There it is," Sasuke pointed out.

"Should I send a clone to check if there are traps?" Naruto asked. Sasuke nodded, and Naruto made his most used hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A single clone popped into existence and went downstairs. After a few very tense minutes, the clone dispelled himself, sending his memories back to Naruto.

"No traps. It's safe to go down," Naruto informed Sasuke.

The two of them followed the same path the clone had walked before. However, much to their horror, the moment they reached the end of the flight of stairs, large stone slabs raised from the other end of the stairs, blocking the entrance completely, darkening the instance.

"The hell? How did the clone didn't spring that trap?" Naruto protested.

"It isn't obvious? They're watching us," Sasuke replied. "They knew we send a clone to scout, and when the real us entered, they activated the closing mechanism manually."

"Then there's no point in sending more clones to scout," Naruto concluded. "Come on, let's see if we can find my siblings. I'm sure we can force our way out of this underground lair."

"With the invasion going on, there should barely be any ninja manning this hideout, so I don't think we'll find much of a resistance," Sasuke observed. He was confident that both his and Naruto's strength would be enough to face any potential foe there.

How wrong he was.

They traversed a long but narrow hallway with multiple doors leading to what appeared to be rooms. All the rooms were inspected in hopes of finding the missing children, but to no avail. They both deduced that Orochimaru's grunts lived there. However, besides a bed and a small, empty wardrobe, there was nothing, as if they were abandoned.

After fruitlessly searching the last room, the two young Chunin exited the hallway, and entered a massive chamber illuminated by a multitude of torches. Massive stone statues of snakes oversaw the area. There were a few doors that lead into deeper parts of the hideout.

"Alright, this place is too big for just two people to search, so I better create an army of-" Naruto was about to suggest before being interrupted.

"So, you finally arrived," a voice said out of nowhere. Both Konoha ninja immediately tensed up and slipped into a combat stance. "Congratulations you two. I'm sure the path wasn't easy, was it?"

Before any of them could have a chance to ask who was there, a spiraling vortex appeared in the middle of the chamber, and a masked man wearing the Akatsuki cloak came out of it.

"However, your trip ends here," the Akatsuki menacingly said.

It took Naruto and Sasuke less than a second to know who that man was. They both knew that, according to official reports, Tsunade had fought against a hooded Akatsuki that wore an orange mask with a single eye hole on it. Said man claimed that he was after the Nine Tails, that he was responsible for the attack thirteen years ago that resulted in many deaths, Minato and Kushina among them, and freely admitted manipulating the Uchiha Clan into pulling the coup d'état, resulting in the deaths of most of Sasuke's family.

His name was Tobi. Yes, this man was responsible for two of the greatest calamities that ever happened to Konoha, which resulted in the loss of some of their closest relatives, parents included.

"YOU!" Sasuke roared as he dashed forward, unsheathing his katana. "YOU'RE DEAD!"

"Sasuke, wait!" Naruto shouted as he followed him.

Sasuke tried to stab Tobi, but the masked Akatsuki unsheathed his own sword as well and expertly deflected Sasuke's stab before kicking the Uchiha in the chest, knocking him on his back. Naruto suddenly appeared behind Tobi, ready to slash his back with his chakra blade, but Tobi swiftly sidestepped, avoiding the slash, before kicking the wide open Naruto in the face.

"Ugh..." Naruto groaned as he stood up. He rubbed his chin in pain. "Sasuke, remember that this man can turn intangible! According to mom, one of us should strike him while he's attacking the other!"

Sasuke didn't reply. He merely stood up, and shot Tobi a murderous glare.

Tobi chuckled, visibly amused. "Don't worry kids. You two are so below my level that I'm not going to resort to that."

This made the already angry Sasuke to be consumed by rage. He quickly made several hand seals as he tightly gripped his katana with both hands.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Sasuke's blade crackled with electricity, and once again charged madly at Tobi. Tobi was ready to counter that attack when the youngest Uchiha vanished seconds before he could reach close quarter combat.

"Predictable," Tobi stated as he quickly turned around and violently punched Sasuke in the face, sending him flying backwards, dropping his sword into the floor.

"Mass Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

In a few seconds, Tobi saw an army of green and orange clad blonds all leaping at him, Rasengan in hand.

"Impressive," Tobi flatly admitted as he started to make hand seals. "But insufficient. Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

The floor tiles broke apart as multiple sharp roots emerged from the ground and shoot in every direction, impaling and destroying most Naruto clones. He then started to walk through the vines and fighting the clones one by one until only the original remained. Naruto, however, rather than fight him, leaped above him and landed next to Sasuke, who just picked up his sword after getting back on his feet.

"He's too strong and skilled," Naruto observed. "I'd say he's as powerful as any of our Jonin-sensei."

"As much as I hate to admit it, I agree," Sasuke grumbled. "We need to think of a strategy, and fast."

"How about if we stall the fight until the others arrive?" Naruto suggested.

"We can't depend on others. We have to assume that we're alone on this," Sasuke countered.

"But we can't-" Naruto protested, before being interrupted once again.

"I'll save you the trouble of trying to think a way to defeat me. I'm not going to fight you," Tobi declared, as he sheathed his weapon. "I thought that it would be fun to toy with you first, but this is too easy. Now Naruto, be a good kid, and come with me."

"You must be crazy to think I'm going to surrender to Akatsuki, especially after what you've done. You give me back my siblings!" Naruto shouted.

Tobi let out a heavy sigh. "I didn't want to use this on you, but you leave me no choice," he sourly said. Then, Tobi's mood suddenly shifted, and in a much happier tone, he added: "Oh, who am I kidding, I was dying to use this! Kotoamatsukami!"

Naruto felt as if somebody smashed his head with a hammer from the inside, and stumbled back. Sasuke had to hold Naruto to make sure he didn't fall.

"Naruto, are you alright?" the Uchiha asked.

"Yes... I think?" Naruto groggily replied.

"Well Naruto, are coming, or not?" Tobi asked.

"Y-Yes," Naruto replied, unsure. "Yes, I'm coming with you!" he added, now sounding more determined.

Sasuke watched in shock what was happening. What kind of jutsu did the masked man use on Naruto to make him so suggestible? He could wonder on that later. Now, he needed to stop the blond from doing something unbelievably stupid.

"Naruto! What the hell are you doing!?" Sasuke shouted as he grabbed Naruto's arm.

"Don't you see? I'm going with Tobi-sama!" Naruto answered as he swiped Sasuke's hand. "Akatsuki needs the Nine Tails in order to make this place a better world, and thus it is my duty to hand it to them."

"WHAT!?" Sasuke asked, his shock growing with each second. "Don't you see? That Akatsuki poisoned your mind! Do you hear what you're saying?"

"I am. And all what Tobi-sama did was opening my eyes. This world is a mess, Sasuke, and Akatsuki have the way to change it for the better. Now please, let me go," Naruto calmly pleaded.

"What about your siblings? Did you forget about them already?" Sasuke indignantly asked.

The mention of Hagane and Kaida seemed to bring some lucidity back to the blond, but it was brief.

"They will be fine. I know they won't suffer any harm here," Naruto said with a shrug as he continued walking towards Tobi.

Sasuke, however, grabbed Naruto by the arm once again. "If you can't be reasoned with, then I'll knock you out and drag you back to the village unconscious. Like hell I'm going to let you leave with that man."

"I already told you to take your hands off of me, you idiot!" Naruto lashed out as he tried to punch Sasuke.

"Enough," Tobi calmly, but firmly, stated as he walked forward. "Sasuke, why don't you come with us? You have a lot of potential. Akatsuki could use somebody as strong as you, and under our guidance, you could become a powerful ninja."

"Join you!? After what you did to my clan!?" Sasuke roared, heaving with anger.

"Yes. Don't you see, Sasuke? This world is nothing but chaos and suffering. All Akatsuki wants is to create a world of order. A world where nobody will lose a loved one in nonsensical wars and power plays. A world where the friends you have today won't be enemies you will fight tomorrow. A world of peace and justice. Naruto can see that. Why can't you?"

"Maybe because unlike Naruto, I'm not under mind control," Sasuke spat back.

Mind control.

As soon as those two words let out his lips, Sasuke's brain started to make the connection. Shisui was able to mind control people. Shisui lost one of his eyes the day before the insurrection. Shisui claimed Danzo did it, but the eye never appeared.

Tobi was in Konoha the day of the insurrection.

"In that case, let me show you how hopeless this world is," Tobi looked at Naruto. "Naruto, kill him."

"... As you wish," Naruto flatly replied, grabbing a handful of kunai and tossing them at Sasuke.

"Maybe watching you two fight will be a better entertainment than fighting you myself," Tobi stated to no one in particular, before jumping into one of the statues' head in order to get a better view of the fight.

The Uchiha barely had time to deflect the incoming blades as he jumped back in order to put some distance.

"Alright, it seems I'll have to knock you unconscious then," Sasuke thought, as his hands flied through hand seals. *"Though I have to try to break the mind control."*

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a huge fireball at Naruto, who pulled out a kunai with a blue paper seal and tossed it. Kunai and fireball met midway, and the seal attached to the kunai burst in a watery explosion, putting the Uchiha's attack out, creating a wall of steam.

Coming from the steam, Naruto dashed at Sasuke, his trusty chakra blade in hand, ready to cut his former friend open. Sasuke was quick to raise his own katana, and after infusing it with his own chakra, used it to block the attack. Before Naruto had any time to react, Sasuke delivered a painful kick to Naruto's gut, which pushed him a couple meters backwards.

"Sasuke," Naruto spoke, looking at him with pleading eyes. "It doesn't have to be like this."

Sasuke's eyes flared with anger. "Shut up. You have no idea what you're talking about!" the Uchiha angrily protested.

"I do. I admit that I used to be quite dense back then, but now... now I know the truth. Now I see everything the way it is, and I know the way to fix it. If you only let me..." Naruto continued.

"Let you? LET YOU!?" Sasuke roared. "To let you help the man responsible for the death of my clan!?"

"That's why you need to help me, Sasuke! To make sure that such a tragedy won't happen again!" Naruto protested. "I can't be Hokage and let something like that happen again!"

"You won't be Hokage if you follow your actual path. Only death awaits you," Sasuke grimly reminded him.

"Perhaps. But a Hokage should be willing to die for the greater good," Naruto adopted a fighting stance. "But my death won't come today, Sasuke, nor it will come by your hand."

"We'll see about that," Sasuke replied as he adopted a fighting stance as well.

"We already fought once, I proved to be stronger than you. Even that jutsu with two elements wasn't enough to defeat me. You have no chance of winning against me," Naruto stated, hoping that maybe he could make Sasuke to stand down, but deep down he knew the Uchiha was as stubborn as himself.

"Things change. That jutsu was incomplete, and it's not the case anymore. And this isn't a mere fight for a promotion. There's too much at a stake for me to hold back, even if it ends in your death," Sasuke replied.

Naruto chuckled. "So, you are willing to kill me. It is true what they say about you Uchiha. You'd kill your friends without remorse."

"Do not dare to insult my clan!" Sasuke roared as he charged against Naruto.

Naruto smirked, as he prepared for Sasuke's onslaught. Even if the situation was dire, he was going to enjoy the fight.

Author's Note: So there you have. The reason that Naruto and Sasuke fought. I hope that the chain of events that lead to this moment made sense. Also, reviewer Mr. Spinner guessed that Kotoatsukami would play a role, but he thought that it would be Sasuke the one controlled instead of Naruto.

Besides the attention grabbing last part, I hope you liked both the Zabuza vs Kimimaro, Hinata vs Sound Genin and Lee vs Mizuki. The latter is pretty important to me at least given the theme. In canon, Lee always embodied the theme of hard work, but said theme was never properly executed because, even if Lee became really strong, he never won any important fight and always lost against people who were naturally gifted. It was even more exacerbated as Naruto and Sasuke kept getting power ups, each one more ridiculous than the one before. So unlike canon, Lee's hard work allowed him to beat somebody who simply had power handed to him.

And yeah, before you ask, both Kimimaro, Mizuki and the Sound Genin are alive. And while Kimimaro will crawl back to his master, the other four will spend the next days on a cell under Konoha.

Now you guys really don't want to miss chapter 40. Trust me, it's going to be mind blowing. And not just because the ensuing fight between Naruto and Sasuke but... well, let's say that there's going to be a plot development that none of you will see coming, even if I did leave a few hints already ;)

Once again, don't forget to read and review "A Fool's Dedication" by FireSharingan359!

Also, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Return of an Old Friend

Author's Note: Boy, I'm so happy with the response to the previous chapter. I was a bit afraid that people wouldn't like how the Naruto vs Sasuke fight ended up happening, but once again the reception has been mostly positive, much to my relief, and not only in terms of the reviews themselves, but its number as well. Thanks a lot!

I'm also hoping that this chapter will have a similar reception. Enjoy the last chapter of 2017:

Chapter 40:

Return of an Old Friend

or

Stop trying to be mysterious by wearing a mask

...

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a wide volley of fireballs at Naruto. The fireballs had shuriken hidden within them, so even if Naruto doused the flames with another of those annoying water seals, there was still something left to hit.

However, being the unpredictable ninja he was, Naruto opted for another strategy.

"Multi Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Like the name stated, a mass of green and orange clad clones appeared in a front of Naruto, clustering together in a barrier,

successfully blocking the attack, shuriken included, even if most of them had to "die".

Without issuing any order, the surviving clones formed a Rasengan each and charged at Sasuke. The Uchiha tensed up. A Rasengan was bad. Half a dozen were way worse.

" They won't be able to defend themselves from ranged attacks if they have to keep the Rasengan active," Sasuke thought as his hands flew through hand seals as they started to crackle with electricity. "Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Lightning bolts flew out of Sasuke's fingertips, striking the three foremost Naruto clones, poofing into cloud of smoke. However, the smoke also acted as a cover for the two clones of the back, who avoided Sasuke's lightning attack, and spread out and attacked in a pincer formation. Seeing no other way out, Sasuke decided to tackle one of them head on, and take care of the other next.

"Rasengan!"

The clone tried to slam the sphere of destruction into Sasuke's chest, but the Uchiha was faster, and grabbed the clone by the wrist before he could do so. Knowing the other clone was behind him, he slammed the first clone's Rasengan against the second, resulting in a massive chakra explosion that destroyed them, while hurling Sasuke against a stone column.

"Well, that looks like it hurt," Naruto observed, as he let out a taunting chuckle.

Sasuke just grumbled something unintelligible as he tried to shake off the pain of the impact.

"Not as much as this," he said as he made more hand seals, before pulling out his katana. "Fire Release: Burning Blade!"

Sasuke's sword was wreathed in flames. Holding it in a reverse grip, he charged at Naruto. The blond pulled out his chakra blade, and activated the moment he raised it to parry Sasuke's attack. Fire and steel fought against pure chakra, with neither of them gaining the upper hand. Sasuke then jumped back, allowing Naruto to attack. But the moment Naruto made a swing, Sasuke quickly dodged it by sidestepping, and slid behind Naruto. He placed a hand on his shoulders, and sent a chakra pulse through the blonde's body.

" I hope this can break the mind control," Sasuke thought.

Naruto's elbow violently connecting with the Uchiha's mouth signaled that no, the chakra disturbance wasn't enough.

"Godamn it Naruto, snap out of it already!" Sasuke angrily shouted as he held his mouth in pain.

"Snap of it? I was shown the truth, Sasuke. I can't just 'snap' out it," Naruto replied.

"What about your parents? What about Hinata? Are you willing to help the people who want to destroy everything they fight for?" the Uchiha asked.

"In time, they will understand that Akatsuki is a force of good, and that big changes always require sacrifices," Naruto retorted. "Such as how so I can fulfill my destiny, you need to die so you will stop getting in the way."

Sasuke snarled, as he prepared to continue the fight. He thought in summoning a hawk, but hawks fought poorly in caves and caverns, even in one such as big as this one. At least Naruto wasn't thinking in summoning a toad either. Probably because deep down he knew they wouldn't help him in his current state.

" Well, if the chakra pulse didn't work, then I'll have to use something more... potent," the youngest Uchiha thought as he got ready to

resume the fight. He stabbed his sword on the ground, and made several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade! Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Sasuke pulled out a kunai the moment he retrieved his sword. The former was covered in flames, while the latter started to crackle with blue electricity.

"That thing again?" Naruto asked, before grinning evilly. "Thank Kami I'm prepared now."

The Jinchuriki pulled out a second chakra sword from his ninja tool pouch and activated it, projecting another blue blade of pure chakra.

Naruto and Sasuke charged towards each other, meeting in the middle as they clashed in a storm of sword swipes and swings. While Naruto was indeed skilled with the swords, Sasuke's skill was greater, plus he had also been training in sword fighting much longer than Naruto. After a few strikes, Sasuke managed to swipe one of Naruto's chakra blades from his hand.

"Give up, loser. There's no way you can defeat me in sword fighting!" Sasuke boasted.

"You sound awfully sure," Naruto cockily retorted. "You see, my chakra blade still has a couple more tricks you haven't seen yet. Behold!"

Naruto held his weapon in front of him as he focused, and the projected chakra blade started to ripple, as if it was growing unstable. The chakra blade then expanded and turned white, almost looking like white fire.

"See this? My chakra blade is now a Wind Blade," Naruto told him. "One of the wind element's most known characteristics is its cutting power. Wanna help me test how deep this sword can cut now?"

Sasuke didn't answer Naruto's taunts and resumed the fight. While he wouldn't know if Naruto's weapon could slice any better, his blows now carried far more power. He immediately realized what was happening.

"The wind chakra is blowing gusts with each strike, increasing their power of his swings. Plus that wind sword can easily repel my lightning attacks," Sasuke quickly deduced. *"Better stick to fire alone."*

Sasuke dispelled the electricity coursing through his blade, and replaced it with fire. Naruto, however, looked undeterred.

"You're going to need something more than elemental advantage if you can hope to defeat me, dumbass," Naruto pointed out.

"We'll see about that," was Sasuke's response.

Naruto gripped his weapon tightly, and the white flames that formed its blade started to glow with an intense white light. Making a swinging motion, Naruto cast a crescent-shaped wave of chakra at Sasuke. The black haired boy managed to jump over it in time, and saw how the chakra wave cleanly slashed a column before it crashed against a wall, shattering a large area.

"See this, Sasuke? The culmination of my work and my training," Naruto boasted. "This is what you're up against."

Sasuke frowned. Naruto was boastful, but never sounded so... mean. The mind control altered his mind in more subtle ways than just buying the lies of Akatsuki. Sasuke then sheathed his sword and returned his kunai to his ninja tool pouch. He then made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a massive fireball at Naruto, so hot it left a trail of scorched, blackened floor underneath as it flew towards the

Uzumaki. Naruto merely smirked as he raised his sword above his head, and grinned.

"Is all the best you have?" Naruto taunted, as he lowered his sword in a vertical chopping motion.

The resulting action produced a gust of razor wing that literally split the incoming mass of fire in two, with both halves slowly disintegrating into smoldering embers. However, Naruto's smile was short lived upon noticed that Sasuke wasn't in his initial position anymore.

"Where did he go... !?" Naruto asked as he frantically looked around, until he saw the last Uchiha high into the air.

While he was into the air, Sasuke pulled out and unfolded two Fuma Shuriken.

"Take this!" Sasuke cried as he tossed the giant steel stars, one after the other.

Naruto smirked again and raised his wind blade in a defensive stance. He quickly sliced the first flying star in two as if it was made of butter, then in a quick swing, he repeated the action with the second one before it could get too close to him.

"Haha, look at that! You can't-"

Naruto was interrupted by a whirring sound, and much to his shock and anger, realized that Sasuke had tossed normal shuriken at him while he was falling to the ground. Shuriken that he didn't see because he was too focused on the Fuma Shuriken Sasuke tossed first.

However, Sasuke had fumbled the toss, and the steel stars were flying way too separated from each other, leaving large gaps between them that could be used to dodge them. Something Naruto naturally did.

"Your aim's getting worse, Sasuke. Guess that the Sharingan isn't all that cracked up as you make it out to be," Naruto taunted, as the shuriken flew past him.

However, Sasuke was smiling. "Trust me, I aimed exactly where I wanted," he replied, before making a pulling motion.

While confused at first, Naruto quickly realized that Sasuke was handling ninja wire. Ninja wire connected to the shuriken that he just tossed. No wonder they were flying in such a spread formation. Sasuke moved the shuriken in a circular motion, tying Naruto up before the steel stars embedded into his skin.

"I don't know if it was beating me at the Chunin Exams, or the mind control, but you certainly grew overconfident," Sasuke stated, then he started making hand seals while keeping hold on the wires. "This will hurt a lot, but I promise you'll much better afterwards."

Sasuke sent electricity through the metallic cords that bound Naruto, electrocuting the blond. He let out a loud cry of heart wrenching pain. Such action had the side effect of heating the cords until they snapped, releasing the blond and cutting the connection for the electricity to travel, but it had already did his job. Or at least, that's what Sasuke was hoping.

"Ugghh..." Naruto groaned as he fell to his knees. Smoke was coming out of his body, which had multiple small burns.

"Naruto... are you okay?" Sasuke tentatively asked.

"You were right when you said it would hurt a lot," Naruto weakly stated. He then raised his head, fixing a hateful glare on the Uchiha. "But it didn't hurt as much as what I plan to do with you! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

About thirty clones popped into existence, every single one of them sharing the original's anger, each of them holding a wind blade as

well. Without any order from the original, the army of Naruto clones charged forward.

Sasuke prepared for the incoming onslaught by making several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Burning Man!"

A cloak of flames surrounded Sasuke, as the youngest Uchiha unsheathed his katana once again, which was also set on fire. Not waiting for the blond army to arrive, Sasuke dashed forward, taking advantage of his superior speed to plow through the clones, as he started to cut them down.

Sasuke took advantage of the fact that the clones were clustered and thus were getting in each other's way to attack, giving him an easier time at dodging and counterattacking. But the moment the number of clones were cut in half, the clones also had more space to attack and no longer got in each other's way, forcing Sasuke into the defensive.

Sasuke jumped out of the fray, hoping to buy a couple seconds to regain his breath, but the clones -with the original among them- were relentless in their chase. Sasuke expertly parried most of the blows aimed at him, but he still got some pretty ugly cuts from the ones he was unable to block.

" Even if it's chakra cost will make me regret doing it, I need to use a jutsu with a wide area of effect," Sasuke thought as he stabbed his katana into the floor and made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Annihilation Nova!"

Naruto cursed upon hearing the name of the jutsu as he jumped back and tried to put some distance but knew he was too close to Sasuke to outrun it. The youngest Uchiha turned into a giant fireball that instantly destroyed all the clones, successfully catching the original in the blast. Naruto was badly burned and hurled against a wall before falling to the ground.

" *Did that get him?*" Sasuke wondered, before he was forced down on one knee once the effects of spending so much chakra at once kicked in. " *Damn! I should have listened to Itachi when he told me to try to create a jutsu less chakra heavy, even if it wasn't as powerful...*"

"You're really getting on my nerves, Sasuke," Naruto groaned as he got back on his feet.

"... how can you still stand after taking the brunt of that blast?" the incredulous Uchiha asked.

"I'm tough and heal fast. And with that move, you sealed your defeat," Naruto said in satisfaction. "Using that jutsu after all this fighting must have left your chakra reserves almost depleted, while I still have plenty to spare."

"Not entirely," Sasuke mentioned as he grabbed his katana once again, and gripped its handle with both hands. "I still have enough chakra for this!"

The blade of Sasuke's katana burst into flames, followed shortly by numerous electric sparks. Naruto let out a loud, mocking laugh.

"Are you serious? Do you plan to do that again?" Naruto asked, incredulous, but also amused. He made a single Shadow Clone. "Okay then. If it's a repeat of the Chunin Exam Finals what you want, I'm more than happy to oblige."

However, Naruto wasn't planning to use a normal Rasengan, but one infused with wind chakra. That would reduce Sasuke's victory chances to less than zero. Sasuke moved first, charging towards Naruto while trying to keep his complex jutsu under control. And once Naruto completed his jutsu, he had the clone push him towards Sasuke for additional momentum.

"Double Elemental Release: Plasma Blade!"

"Wind Release: Rasengan!"

Both attacks clashed against each other. The Rasengan suddenly expanding, and releasing powerful gust of winds everywhere, while blazes and lightning bolts came from Sasuke's sword.

"Come on... come on!" Sasuke cried as he struggled to keep both elements active.

"Die already!" Naruto hatefully shouted as he pushed the Rasengan towards Sasuke with all his remaining might.

Despite being able to keep the jutsu stable this time around, even with two elements it wasn't enough to counter Naruto's elemental Rasengan. Like it happened before, the force of the attack blew Sasuke's sword out of his hands, before he was trapped in a twister of wind and chakra that violently slammed Sasuke against a wall with such force, it shattered a good chunk of it.

Sasuke wasn't moving. Naruto, panting heavily, started to laugh. Even if he wasn't sure if the attack killed Sasuke, the fight was already over. His laugh grew in mirth and volume as seconds passed by.

"Hahahaha, yes! I defeated you again, Sasuke! The moment we graduated from the Academy marked the last time you would ever be better than me!"

However, Naruto's victory boast was interrupted when Sasuke's body poofed, stunning the blond into silence.

"What the...?" the Jinchuriki said as he proceeded to look around.

But before he could do anything, a sword pierced his back and burst through his gut, impaling him. A thread of blood fell from his mouth. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Sasuke behind him.

"How...?"

"You're not the only one who knows how to do Shadow Clones," Sasuke replied. "And you ARE rather confident now. But enough words. If this doesn't break the mind control... then I'm out of ideas. Lighting Release: Thunder Blade!"

Electricity once again coursed through Sasuke's katana, electrocuting Naruto again, this time from the inside out. Once he was done, he pulled the sword in a clean motion, and the blond fell to the ground, unconscious. He should be okay, given that the Uchiha carefully avoided every possible vital spot. But he would need medical attention soon.

And following his own advice, Sasuke made sure that Naruto hadn't tricked him, and prepared for any possible attack.

The attack came, in the form of a sudden kick to the face, but it did not come from Naruto, but from the Akatsuki who had been watching the whole fight, and Sasuke pretty much forgot his presence until now.

"What did you do?" Tobi asked as he knelt before Naruto's body. "WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

"What...?" a confused Sasuke asked upon getting up.

"You idiot! You killed him! You killed him!" Tobi angrily repeated.

Those words hit Sasuke like a sledgehammer. There's no way that could have been true. He made sure none of the attacks he used on Naruto were lethal. Besides, Jinchuriki were said to be far more resilient than normal humans due the creatures they hosted inside them.

"No, that can be..." Sasuke said, almost in a whisper. "I avoided all his vital spots!"

"You impaled him, then electrocuted him from the inside out!" Tobi loudly pointed out. "What the hell did you think was going to

happen!?"

Sasuke stood there, in shock, looking at Naruto's immobile body. He did look dead. He had killed him. The very first person he ever killed, and it was Naruto. While Sasuke has mentally prepared himself for his first kill, he would never imagine it would be one of the very few people he would call themselves their friend.

"No... no..." Sasuke weakly said as he stepped back. "This can't... AAAAARRRGHH!"

Sasuke's eyes started to burn as if somebody dropped a hot coal on them. His palms instinctively slapped against his pained eyes, as he bent over his knees. Tobi, meanwhile, watched intently.

"IT WAS YOU!" Sasuke roared. "YOU MADE ME DO IT!"

Sasuke had his Sharingan active again, but it acquired a different pattern: three red intersecting ellipses against a black background.

"Ah, there it is," Tobi casually said, now oddly calmed.

Sasuke let out an cry of rage, and too angry to think any kind of sensible strategy, or even use ninjutsu, the youngest Uchiha merely leaped at the masked Akatsuki, as if he were a wild animal pouncing on its prey.

Tobi merely chuckled, and easily kicked Sasuke in the chest, knocking him on his back. However, before he could get back on his feet, the masked man made a few hand seals, and plant vines emerged from the ground and wrapped around Sasuke's limbs, neck and body, pinning him against the floor.

"And there it is, the Mangekyo Sharingan," Tobi mentioned, then he turned back at Naruto. "But just in case..."

Tobi knelt once again before Naruto's body, and thoroughly check his vitals. An audible sigh of relief escaped his lips.

"Just as I imagined, he's still alive," Tobi said, now even more calm and relaxed. "I knew that your attacks wouldn't be enough to end his life, but I wanted to make sure."

"... what?" Sasuke asked, his anger dispelling, being replaced by confusion. "Then why did you trick me into thinking that I killed him?"

"It isn't obvious? Because I wanted you to awake the Mangekyo Sharingan," Tobi explained. Sasuke's visible confusion made Tobi realize that the youngest Uchiha wasn't familiar with the term. He let out a mocking laugh. "Oh, this is too good. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? It seems that your dearest brother and cousin kept you in the dark about one of our clan's secrets."

"Anyway, allow me to enlighten you then. The Sharingan has a higher form, named Mangekyo Sharingan, that grants the user a whole new set of very powerful abilities. Your brother, your cousin, and I myself have it. The problem, though, is to awaken it. In order to do so, an Uchiha must experience a sense of overwhelming guilt and/or despair. And what better way to make you experience such emotions than making you believe you killed one of the few kids that didn't treat you as trash when everybody else did?"

"But... but why? Why did you went to such lengths to help me?" Sasuke asked.

A scalpel appeared on Tobi's hand. Sasuke's normally pale face turned even whiter when the realization instantly dawned upon him.

"What do you think?" Tobi was grinning maliciously behind his mask. "I could have dispatched you and take the Jinchuriki the moment you set your foot on this lair. But then I realized how could I use Naruto to make you awake the Mangekyo Sharingan... and truth be told, it was too good to pass. Especially since we Uchiha now are an endangered species."

As his self preservation instincts kicked in, Sasuke tried to use his remaining strength to break free of his bindings and run away from

there.

"Don't bother, even if you were at your full strength, you wouldn't be able to break those vines," Tobi stated as he walked closer to Sasuke. "Now stay still while I begin the extraction... actually, now that I think about it.. I don't even need you to be alive anymore so... die."

Tobi made a hand seal, and the vines started to strangle Sasuke as they greatly tightened their hold over him.

"What a pity. Even by Uchiha standards, you had a lot of potential. You could have been an useful ally. But don't worry, the power of your eyes won't go to waste. I can assure you that," Tobi said as he watched Sasuke die.

The youngest Uchiha struggled with all his strength against the tightening vines, but the effect of lack of oxygen soon became noticeable. His movements become slower and jerkier, as his vision started to blur and darken.

Then, at that moment, a green, blue and silver blur crossed the instance in less than a second, as a sound of a thousand birds chirping filled the air.

"Lightning Blade!"

Kakashi's signature move impaled Tobi's heart. Or at least, that was the intention, as the Copy Ninja noticed that, even if his hand was buried inside the Akatsuki's chest, he felt as if he hit thin air. Tobi jumped back, and Kakashi realized that he had used his ability to turn intangible Tsunade has talked about.

"Whew, that was a close call, wasn't it?" Tobi casually mentioned.

Asuma and Kurenai entered the room as well, followed by Hinata, Haku, Tenten and Karin. Asuma walked towards Sasuke, and with a few accurate swipes, cut all the vines holding him down, releasing

the Uchiha Chunin, who started to violently cough, as he held his pained throat.

"Breathe slowly. Don't try to take too much air at once," Asuma instructed Sasuke.

Karin walked towards Sasuke and used the Mystical Palm Jutsu to heal him.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata cried in shock upon seeing Naruto laying motionless in the ground. Thankfully, she could see he was still alive since his chakra network was still active. She rushed to him and started to heal him.

"We need to take Naruto and Sasuke out of here, right now!" Kurenai urged.

"As well as find the Hokage's children," Asuma added.

"And you think I'm going to let you do that?" Tobi asked as he unsheathed his katana. "While I sadly won't be able to get Sasuke's eyes, I won't let you people stop me from claiming the Jinchuriki a third time!"

"Okay then. Asuma, Kurenai, let's deal with this guy," Kakashi suggested. "Remember what Tsunade-sama said about his abilities. Between the three of them should be able to put him down."

"You really overestimate your abilities, Kakashi," Tobi sourly said.

"Karin, can you look where the children are?" Kurenai asked.

Karin nodded, made a hand seal, and focused. As her senses expanded, she managed to identify the chakra signature of the twins.

"Got them!" she said.

"Alright then. Tenten, Haku, go with her and rescue them. Hinata, stay here and take care of Naruto and Sasuke. Once everybody is

safe, we'll cover your escape," Kurenai commanded.

"Now go!" Asuma added as he engaged Tobi in a duel of blades.

Taking advantage of the Akatsuki's predicament, Tenten, Haku and Karin rushed past him, and headed into the deepest part of the lair, where the twins were presumably held, while the three Jonin charged against the masked Akatsuki.

...

"Now to the left!" Karin stated, as the three of them reached a fork.

"How much until we get to them?" Tenten asked.

"Shouldn't be far. I think one more turn and then-WHOA!" Karin suddenly said, as she stopped in her tracks.

"What's wrong, Karin?" Haku asked.

"We're not alone!" Karin warned the others.

Tenten looked around, a bit puzzled. "I don't see anybody. And this empty hallway doesn't have any spots to hide and... wait, what's that?"

Suddenly, what appeared to be some kind of white, semi-gelatinous mass started to grow all around the hallway at a rather fast pace.

"What the hell is that?" Tenten loudly asked, as she unsealed a naginata from one of her remaining scrolls. Haku and Karin also adopted fighting stances.

"I don't know. But it's alive, and it has chakra!" Karin distressingly informed.

The mass then began to morph into something humanoid. An actual human, with green hair, yellow eyes, and no genitalia.

"You can't be here!" one of the artificial men stated.

"All intruders must die!" said another, as he charged towards the Konoha ninja.

Tenten was fast, and placing the naginata in the way of the attacker, the creature ended up impaling himself. This spurred the few others to attack as well. Haku quickly formed several hand seals.

"Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Haku exhaled an incredibly cold wind that completely left two of the attackers frozen. Tenten unsealed a barrage of shuriken from one of her scrolls, shattering them to pieces. Meanwhile, Karin reduced another of those strange beings to white chunky salsa with a well placed chakra-enhanced punch.

"What the hell are these things? Their chakra is so... weird!" Karin mentioned.

"What do you mean by 'weird'?" Haku asked.

"I don't know how to say it with words. It's like... their chakra is human, but at the same time is not. Does that make any sense?" Karin tried to explain.

"It's probably an experiment of Orochimaru," Tenten decided, before she knelt down and grabbed a chunk of white mass. She then pulled out an unused sealing scroll., "Maybe Tsunade-sama can analyze this properly. Whatever it is, it can't be good. Let's seal as much as we can."

"Alright."

After sealing the remains of the strange humanoid creatures, they continued their trek. More of those beings appeared to stop their mission, but the results were the same. After a few minutes and a

couple hallway fights, they reached the room where Hagane and Kaida were held.

"Allow me," Karin said, before she kicked the door down.

The room only held two beds, with each twin laying on one of them.

"They don't seem to be gravely injured, just some bruises," Karin said as she started to heal them with the Mystical Palm Jutsu. "They should be fine in no time."

And true to the redhead's word, the twins woke up once they were treated, groaning and rubbing their eyes.

"Huh... where I am?" Hagane groggily asked.

"What is this place? Who are you?" Kaida asked, looking at the trio of Konoha ninja, before her eyes rested on Karin. "Hey; I remember you? You're Naruto-niisan's cousin, right?"

"Your memory seems to be fine. That's good," Karin noted, as she let out a small sigh.

"To make a long story short, Orochimaru's lackeys kidnapped you. We're here to bring you back home," Haku quickly explained. "Can you walk?"

The two of them replied by jumping out of their beds.

"Okay then, if that's the case, then let's go. Try not to lag too much," Tenten instructed, as she and the now group of five ran back to the lair's entrance.

However, just like the way in, Karin suddenly stopped.

"Karin? What's wrong? More enemies?" Haku asked.

"Come on, we can't afford to lose any second!" Tenten protested.

"Well, it's that... when we passed this hallway, I felt a hidden presence, I couldn't pinpoint exactly where... but now I felt it again, even stronger," Karin pointed to a nearby door. "There's somebody behind this door."

Tenten tried to open the door, but it was locked. "Whatever they keep here, it's valuable if they locked it. Still, we can't risk the Hokage's children anymore. Maybe we can send-"

"Hey! Is somebody there?" a female voice asked from the other side. "Please, help me! Get me out of here!"

While the possibility of being a trap crossed their minds, Karin's sensing ability could tell her she wasn't lying.

"Move aside, I'm going to bring the door down," Karin stated, shortly before making good on that statement with a powerful kick.

"Whoa! You're so strong!" the prisoner observed.

Inside the room, which was just as bare and laconic as the one holding the twins, was a girl the same age as them, with shoulder length brown hair, brown eyes and purple facial markings. She was wearing a plain grey short sleeved t-shirt, and knee length pants of the same color.

"You're Konoha ninja, oh thank Kami!" the girl said, as she exited the room. "Thanks. You know, this room has anti-sensor seals, as well as other protections. How did you know I was here?"

"Let's say that I'm way more powerful than the average sensor," Karin proudly boasted.

"Who are you, by the way?" Tenten asked.

"My name is Rin Nohara, I'm a ninja of Konoha too. Now, we need to get out of here as soon as possible!"

...

While the three Jonin fought Tobi, Hinata was still taking care of Naruto, under Sasuke's distressed sight.

"How did you enter? The door was sealed by several stone slabs behind us," Sasuke asked.

"We opened the entrance by force," was Hinata's response, not taking her eyes from the unconscious Naruto. "It wasn't as solid as it looked."

That's something Sasuke would have done as well.

"How is he?" the youngest Uchiha asked.

"His injuries were grave, but he will survive," Hinata's sight shifted from Naruto to Tobi, and frowned. "That evil man impaled Naruto and submitted him to multiple lightning jutsu. A weaker person wouldn't have survived."

Sasuke shifted a bit uncomfortably. "Actually... it was I who did that"

Hinata suddenly turned at Sasuke, and looked at him with surprised eyes. However, she didn't look angry or outraged. "You did such a thing? Why?"

"Naruto was under mind control," Sasuke began. "But it wasn't a normal genjutsu; it was the most powerful mind control genjutsu to ever exist. Not only is the ability exclusive to the Sharingan, but only one person in the whole world can cast it: my cousin Shisui Uchiha."

"Shisui Uchiha...?" Hinata wondered, as she remembered who she was talking about, until she slowly remembered. "Oh, the proctor of the first part of the Chunin Exams, right? He only had one eye."

"Yes. He lost his right eye shortly before the Uchiha Insurrection. He claimed Danzo did it. Danzo claimed it was a lie. Regardless of that, the eye never appeared," Sasuke then glared at Tobi. "I think it's obvious where the eye is."

"So you were forced to fight Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked. Sasuke nodded. "But... if Naruto-kun was under his thumb the whole time, why didn't he take him away? Why did he jeopardize his plan like that with such a meaningless plot?"

Sasuke grew even more uncomfortable. "He said he wanted to show me how easily friendships can break and become enemies. As well as for his own amusement. Honestly, that man is very mentally unstable. It's not that surprising for him to make such an irrational decision."

Hinata narrowed her eyes a little. Sasuke was clearly hiding something from her. But she decided this wasn't the best time for an interrogation. It was obvious for anybody with functional eyes that the Uchiha had gone through a lot during the past couple hours.

"I tried to break the genjutsu by every way I knew, and none of them worked. Causing extreme pain and corporal damage was the only option I had, while making sure Naruto would survive it," Sasuke continued.

"It's okay, I'm not mad at you. You were cornered into a situation in which the choices available were few and hard," Hinata emphatically replied.

Still, Sasuke remained stiff.

Meanwhile, the three Konoha Jonin battled the masked Akatsuki, though they were barely able to land a hit on him.

"You know, this is actually much harder than Tsunade-sama made it look," Asuma protested as his swipe failed to hit anything but thin air for the umpteenth time.

"What, you thought that just because somebody figured out how my powers work, beating me would be piece of cake?" Tobi mocked as he tossed a barrage of shuriken at his opponents. "Besides, after my

encounter with that blonde cow, I made sure to get better at using them."

"Still, as long as we're here, you can forget about abducting Naruto! Get that inside your head!" Kurenai stated as she kicked him in the head, but sadly her foot phased through him.

"And you think you three can stop me? HA!" Tobi retorted. "Your presence is a mere setback! These events are part of a plan that was conceived and started decades ago! Nothing you can do can stop it! Nothing you can do can stop ME!"

"OBITO, STOP!"

As those two words echoed through the cavernous chamber, all the adults froze in place. Looking to the place where the cry came from, they saw that Tenten, Haku and Karin had returned with the Hokage's children. However, the white haired kids weren't the only ones they brought along. Among them, there was a brown haired girl with purple facial markings.

"Is that...?" Kurenai began, completely caught by surprise.

"It can't be..." Asuma said, just as shocked. Then, he looked back at the masked Akatsuki. "And he called him Obito?"

If Kurenai and Asuma were surprised, Kakashi was so shocked, he couldn't even articulate a single word.

"You let her out!?" the masked man roared. "NO! WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

"Obito, please... end this madness already..." Rin pleaded.

"No... Rin can't be alive..." Kakashi muttered, as he slowly became more and more agitated. "And you can't be Obito either! I saw both of them die! This has to be a trick!"

Tobi slowly turned at Kakashi, lowered his hood, and just as slowly, removed his mask, before casually tossing it away. The surprise of the three Konoha Jonin grew even more. That man was Obito, even if he clearly looked much older now. Still, he had the same facial features -ignoring his scarred left side of the face- and the same spiky hair. He also had two Sharingan.

"Surprise," Obito stated unenthusiastically.

"It's really you?" Kurenai asked in shock. "But... we all thought you were dead!"

Obito chuckled. "In a way, I was. Obito Uchiha, the loud, clumsy and dumb kid that boasted that one day would become Hokage died that day during the last Ninja War. Now I'm somebody else. Something else."

"But..." Kakashi stammered. "You were alive all this time? And Rin too? How? And why didn't you come back to the village?"

"As for how I survived... well, let's say that I was lucky a man rescued me. A powerful and wise man," Obito cryptically recounted. "I did plan to return to the village once I was healed of my injuries, but that man... he showed me the truth of this ugly world: that there's nothing but pain and despair awaiting for us."

Obito made a dramatic pause before continuing, as he was going to drop quite a revelation at his former comrades.

"Kakashi... I was there the night Rin died," Obito announced.

Once again, Kakashi paled with shock. How his heart managed to survive all this maddening revelations, it was anybody's guess. But to the adults, the implications of that statement were felt in full force.

"Wait a minute... how is that you're an adult, yet Rin still looks like a child?" Asuma asked.

Obito looked at Rin, before his sight rested once again onto the three Konoha Jonin.

"Let's say that it wasn't until recently that I managed to undo such a tragic mistake," Obito replied, still using ambiguous language. He then looked at her, his eyes reflecting sadness. "That's why I kept you here, Rin, even if it was against your will. I couldn't afford losing you again after finally getting you back."

"Obito, I'm not some sort of china doll you have to put in a locker! And neither I am of your property! What's the point of bringing me back to life, if I'm not allowed to experience what life is?"

"NO! You don't understand! This world is too dangerous! Once Akatsuki changes it for the better, you'll be able to roam it as much as you want!" Obito insisted. He then turned back at Kakashi, Asuma and Kurenai. His face was contorted by anger. "You won't take her away from me! Not again! I'LL KILL ALL OF YOU BEFORE LETTING SUCH THING HAPPEN!"

Asuma and Kurenai quickly adopted fighting stances. Obito was ready to attack, and he looked extremely unhinged. Kakashi was still frozen with shock, and remained immobile.

Then, at that moment, a strange humanoid creature which appeared to be engulfed by a venus fly trap plant emerged from the ground besides Obito. The Akatsuki cloak made it clear this new being wasn't an ally of Konoha.

"Good, you're here, Zetsu," Obito mentioned, noticing the new arrival. "Secure Rin while I-"

"Sorry boss, but this is for your own good," Zetsu said as he blew a green powder in Obito's face.

"What... are you...?" Obito didn't have the chance to finish that question before he felt asleep. Zetsu managed to grab him before he

could completely fall, and carried him over his shoulder, before he started to sink into the ground.

"Don't think this is the end, Konoha scum," Zetsu threatened as he sank. "We will see again sooner than you think."

And thus, Obito and Zetsu disappeared, leaving the Konoha ninja alone. An uncomfortable silence ensued. Finally, Rin began to walk towards the trio of adult ninja, followed by Tenten, Haku, Karin and the twins.

"Kakashi? Is that you?" Rin asked, once he got a better look at the silver haired man. "You're so... grownup..."

Barely breaking out of his stupor, the Copy ninja kneeled down in order to be eye-to-eye level with his thought to be deceased teammate. He put a hand on her shoulder, as if testing if it was really her, and not just some cruel mirage.

"Yes, I'm Kakashi," he replied. "And you... how? How can you be alive?"

Rin smiled, as she grabbed Kakashi's hand with her own. "It's... a very long story."

Asuma cleared his throat. "We should better return to Konoha immediately and treat our wounded, before any other danger appears."

The moment those words left his lips, the entire lair started to violently shake.

"Oh Kami, what now?" Tenten asked.

"Good job Asuma-sensei, you jinxed it!" Karin scolded the bearded man, while she tried not to lose her balance.

A huge hole was blown up in the roof of the chamber, dropping several large rocks inside. Tsunade appeared from that hole, landing

with a loud THUD, shattering the ground beneath her feet. Jiraiya landed besides her as well. Visibly shaken, she scanned the area until she found what she came for.

"My children!" the blonde Sannin cried as she rushed towards them.

"MOM! DAD!" the twins replied in unison as they went to hug their parents.

"When they told me that you were kidnapped by Orochimaru's ninja... my entire world shattered," Tsunade said, barely holding her tears back, as she hugged her youngest children. "Thanks goodness you're alright!"

"I don't know what we would have done if we lost either of you," Jiraiya added, just as emotional.

"It was Naruto-niisan and his friends who saved us," Hagane pointed out.

"Naruto!" Tsunade gasped upon seeing her adopted son laying on the ground, motionless. Breaking the embrace, she rushed to him. "Is he...?"

"Don't worry, Tsunade-sama, he's okay," Hinata reassured the Sannin. "But we should better head back to Konoha. I did heal him as best as I could, but it would be better if he was treated at a hospital."

Tsunade nodded at Hinata's more than sensible suggestion.

Relieved to learn that his children were relatively safe, Jiraiya took a moment to study Orochimaru's hideout.

"So, this is where that bastard has been hiding the whole time," Jiraiya mused aloud. He then looked at the slightly damaged snake statues. "The decoration certainly fits him. Anyway, once we reach Konoha, we need to send a team to secure the place, capture any of

the remaining underlings still hiding, and search the place to see if we can find something regarding Orochimaru, Akatsuki and their plans."

"Hokage-sama, Tsunade-sama," Kurenai said as she walked towards them. "Once we reach Konoha, we need to talk immediately. We've made some... astounding discoveries regarding a certain Akatsuki member."

Both Jiraiya and Tsunade turned at the genjutsu mistress with genuine curiosity. Still, that had to wait. The first priority was to take the kids to Konoha, now that it was safe again.

...

Orochimaru's New Base, Undisclosed Location

Orochimaru and Kabuto were walking through their new base as those who survived the failed invasion attempt arrived in what would be their new home for the foreseeable future.

"Impure World Resurrection has proved too unreliable to use for the time being," Orochimaru began, still sour for the failure of the jutsu that thought it would be his trump card over Konoha.

"Do you think that maybe Jiraiya or somebody at Konoha knows something about that jutsu that we are ignoring?" Kabuto asked.

Orochimaru shook his head. "Such thing is unlikely. Nobody but me would have dared to research a jutsu that tampers with death to such depth. Even if extremely unlikely, there's the chance that Konoha ninjas found a way to bypass the infinite regeneration and permanently kill Tobirama, Minato and Kushina. However, they managed to break my hold over Hashirama, and such thing should have been impossible."

"Our research in the past showed that somebody powerful enough can break the caster's control," Kabuto replied.

"Yes, but that's why I limited their power so they could be easier to control. During all the tests I made, none of the subjects rebelled against me."

"We will have to continue the research, then," Kabuto concluded.

"Indeed. I'm not letting this mistake slip by," Orochimaru declared, undeterred. "To change the topic, what about the secondary mission?"

Kabuto smiled. "The mission was a success."

Without waiting for Orochimaru to issue any order, Kabuto pulled out a small sealing scroll from one of his pockets, and unsealed a large, metallic briefcase, which he handed it to his master. Delighted, Orochimaru opened the briefcase, revealing its contents: vials of blood, brain fluid, spinal fluid, hair samples, among other things.

"Finally... enough biological samples of Jiraiya and Tsunade's brats. This will help us in the long run immensely," Orochimaru gushed, as he closed the briefcase.

While Orochimaru knew of the Bloodline Limits of those children, he sought to acquire them at any cost. However, he also knew that, if he kidnapped those children, their parents would never rest until they got them back. And said parents had the might of one of the strongest Great Villages backing them up. Hell, Jiraiya and Tsunade would offer Konoha itself as a bounty for anybody that knew where those children or their captor could be.

Of course, there was a much easier solution that would get Konoha out of his back for a while: harvest enough samples of them, and erase all the evidence of such thing happening. That way, Jiraiya and Tsunade would relax and lower their guard, unaware that Orochimaru got his hands on not one, but two potentially powerful bloodlines.

The plan's only downside was that the samples were limited, so if they were lost or degraded to the point of being unusable, he wouldn't be able to get more. But he liked to see such limitation as a challenge to his limitless genius.

"This victory didn't come without a cost, though," Kabuto continued. "Jirobo, Kidomaru, Sakon and Ukon died while fighting an improvised rescue team that was formed to retrieve the children. Only Tayuya and Kimimaro made out of it alive."

Orochimaru grinned. "Do not fret, Kabuto. While they were some of my strongest minions, only Kimimaro was truly irreplaceable. Besides, the payoff of the mission more than makes up for their sacrifice."

"I see," was Kabuto's reply. "What do you plan to do now, Orochimaru-sama?"

Orochimaru's grin grew even wider, almost like a child who couldn't wait to play with his new, shiny toy. "Make sure the laboratory is up and running as fast as you can. I want to analyze these samples immediately."

"As you wish."

Author's Note: So yeah, Rin is back. Needless to say, this needs to be addressed.

While bringing dead characters back to life is far from being new, most people seem to bring back characters like Minato, Kushina, Fugaku or Mikoto. I can count with one hand the number of fics in which Rin is saved/resurrected, and I would still have a couple fingers left. Though I can see why this happens, given that Rin's death is what kickstarts the whole plot, and undoing it would kill the plot. So I brought her back since I think she deserves a bit better than being just a

posthumous character in order to motivate a character to become a villain.

But fear not! Like I said before, this won't hamper Obito or Akatsuki's plans in the slightest. They will be the same as they were in canon, and they will continue hunting Tailed Beasts. Like I said in previous chapters, their endgame won't be the Infinite Tsukiyomi (because I think it was really dumb), but something else that in my opinion fits better the theme of Love vs Power which was introduced in Part II.

By the way, if you ever think that the Team 7 vs Sasuke "fight" (emphasis on the quotations, since it was barely a fight) from the Sasuke and Sai arc really sucked, go to Youtube and type "Naruto Shippuden Ultimate Ninja Storm 2 Sasuke Boss Fight", and see how that fight SHOULD have been. That fight was my inspiration for both Naruto vs Sasuke fights.

Also, those who were worried about Obito having Shisui's eyes, don't worry either since I'm planning to give that ability a much needed nerf.

So, while there's still one chapter left to wrap everything up, you can say that the Senju Twins Rescue Arc, as well as Part I, is pretty much over plot-wise. I hope you enjoyed the ride so far.

Anyway, see you in 2018, and hope you have a Happy New Year! In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The End of an Era

Author's Note: So, here we are, the first chapter of 2018, but ironically the last chapter of Part I. Boy, this arc has been the best received so far, and I hope both the ending and the arcs to come are just as good, if not better. Anyway, enjoy:

Chapter 41:

The End of an Era

or

Not really an ending

...

Many Years Ago...

"This... this is hell..." Obito cried, as he clutched Rin's lifeless body close to him. "Rin... Rin!"

"Er... it might not be my place to tell," Guruguru, mentioned. "But there's a chance that you might see Rin again."

Obito stopped crying, and perked up his head.

"Really?" he asked, his voice dripping with desperation.

Just like Guruguru had expected.

"Yes, we can do something to make sure you see Rin again," Guruguru continued.

"What is it!? Come on, there's no time to waste!" Obito desperately pleaded.

"It's not that easy," Guruguru replied, much to Obito's dismay. "It's a long and hard procedure, that demands a lot of effort and resources. If we are to do this, it has to be under one condition."

"Whatever! I'll do anything!" Obito cried.

"You must become a servant of Madara-sama, and do absolutely everything he says. There's no other way," Guruguru stated.

"Yes! Yes! I'll do anything he wants! But please, help me save Rin!" Obito pleaded.

If Guruguru had a mouth, he would have smirked. Oh, Madara was going to be so pleased with this development.

"Alright then, listen closely, this is what we need to do first: return to the lair with the body. A friend of mine will create a decoy corpse to fool Konoha. Time is of essence!"

"Right!" Obito stated, renewed determination coursing through his body.

The one eyed Uchiha carefully held Rin's body, and both he and Guruguru returned to Madara's secret hideout. Once there, they approached the elder Uchiha, and explained him what had happened. Madara didn't say anything, he just stared at the young girl's body for a few moments, as if studying it.

"Can you help her?" Obito asked, almost in a pleading tone.

"Hmm..." Madara carefully inspected the body once more, before stating his verdict. "This wound is too grievous..."

Obito felt his heart sank. No, it couldn't be, it couldn't be possible. If Madara had saved him, he could save her.

"... but I'd say she isn't beyond saving," Madara concluded. Obito sighed in relief, and smiled. He looked at his younger clansman.

"However, if I'm to do this for you, I need you to do something for me."

"I'll do whatever, I don't mind!" Obito quickly answered.

"You can't go back to Konoha anymore. You must remain here, and serve me. Be an extension of my will," Madara began, sounding rather ominous. His withered lips curved into a smile. "Don't be afraid, I'm not asking you to become my slave, but the tool that I'll use to reshape a world into a better place."

"I'll do anything you ask me," Obito sincerely replied.

Madara's smile widened. "Good then. I think it's about time we try that jutsu."

The two Uchiha and the Zetsu brought Rin to one of the lair's empty chambers. They placed her on the ground, and eight Zetsu surrounded her in a big circle. Vines emerged from the Zetsu's mid section, as if they were umbilical cords, and started to wrap around Rin, covering her in layers of vines. Then, the eight of them performed the same seal sequence in perfect synchronization.

"Wood Release: Majestic Cocoon of Divine Rebirth!"

The mass of vines started to glow with a green light, and merged into a shapeless radiant mass, which began to grow, and took an oval shape. And the glow ceased, there was now a pulsating green cocoon, connected to the eight Zetsu through vines.

There was a tense moment of silence.

"Well?" Madara asked to no one in particular.

"It's working, boss!" one of the Zetsu replied. "It's stable!"

"So... is Rin going to be okay?" Obito asked, almost pleading.

"She will be more than just okay," a very pleased Madara replied. "The cocoon will not only bring her back to life; it will infuse her with the power and life force of Hashirama Senju. Once the process is complete, she will have a power most people can only dream of."

"So... is she going to be like me, then?" Obito asked.

"You could say that," Madara replied with a nonchalant shrug.

"How long will it take?" Obito asked once again.

"I don't know for sure, but such a delicate and complex process like this one could take many years," Madara told Obito in an almost chiding tone. "Can you wait that much?"

Obito, however, didn't look deterred in the slightest. "I prefer to wait a long time to see her again, than never seeing her to begin with. No matter how much it takes."

Madara smiled once again. "Good. Patience is an invaluable virtue. Now, I fulfilled by side of the bargain. I hope you're ready to fulfill yours."

Once again, Obito's face reflected nothing but determination. "Konoha let Rin die. You saved her. My loyalty will always be with you... Madara-sama."

"Excellent. Then come. There's much to plan, and I don't have much time left."

...

Hokage's Tower, Present Time

A select group of people had been gathered inside the Hokage's office, these people being the Hokage, Jiraiya himself, his predecessor, Hiruzen Sarutobi, a trio of Jonin composed by Kakashi, Asuma and Kurenai, and lastly, Rin Nohara herself.

"I don't remember much between the time of my... death," she uneasily said, as she glanced at Kakashi, who tensed up in return, "and my resurrection. When I came out of that cocoon... it felt like waking up from a dream... or a nightmare, given the circumstances. The first thing I saw was Obito. I didn't recognize him right away, given that he was a full grown adult, but it took me no time to recognize some of his most prominent features.

"I was confused. I had so many questions... like where I was, why Obito was an adult, who or what where those weird pale naked guys... he said that it was a time to celebrate, that I was dead but not anymore, and how everything would be better now.

"However, answers never came. Obito pretty much locked me inside a room, claiming that it was too dangerous out there. I thought that a catastrophe of epic proportions had broken out, given how paranoid he looked. He visited me at least once per day, and asked me how I was or if I needed something. Yet he refused to do the only thing I ever wanted, which was to come back here."

"Do you know what jutsu Obito used to bring you back to life?" Hiruzen asked. Despite knowing that the dead should be left in peace, he couldn't repress some morbid curiosity about a jutsu that could bring people back from the dead for real, not like the Impure World Resurrection.

Rin shook her head. "I know it involved a cocoon, but nothing else. Besides... I don't think I came back as myself..."

"What do you mean?" Kurenai asked.

"The resurrection process... it didn't just revive me... it changed me," Rin cryptically stated, as she looked at her hands. "I can't put it into words, but I feel... different. For once, I don't need to eat anymore."

Many eyebrows were raised.

"Come again?" Hiruzen asked.

"It took me a couple days to notice that they didn't bring me any food. Yet I never felt hungry. I still need to drink, but my cell had running water," Rin explained. She shivered, hugging herself. "I'm afraid I may not even be human anymore."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure Tsunade-hime runs regular tests on you to make sure there's nothing to worry about," Jiraiya interceded.

"Given that you were a prisoner of Obito, you don't know that much about his or Akatsuki's plans, do you?" Asuma asked.

Rin shook her head once again. "No. But I'm okay if you want a Yamanaka to scan my mind. Maybe I saw or heard something that I don't remember."

"We will do that too," Jiraiya replied.

"Oh, I just remembered something. I think it's important," Rin spoke up. "When I came out of the cocoon... I remembered there was a second one."

"Obito was trying to revive a second person?" Kurenai asked.

"Could it be Minato?" Hiruzen guessed.

Kakashi shook his head. "Unlikely. As much as it pains me to admit it... Obito was the one behind the Nine Tails' attack thirteen years ago, which resulted in sensei's death. It would make no sense for him to want to resurrect sensei when he was the one who indirectly killed him."

Rin looked at Kakashi with apprehension. On the way back to Konoha, she was informed of several major events that happened during her absence, among them, the Nine Tails attack, the Uchiha Insurrection, and more recently, the Sound Invasion. And Obito played a part in all three. Like Kakashi, she couldn't believe how much Obito had fallen.

"When I saw Obito... rather than being an adult, what shocked me the most was how... miserable he looked. His eyes, which once were so full of joy and enthusiasm, reflected nothing but sadness and despair," Rin began.

"Obito was there when I killed you, Rin," Kakashi calmly stated.

Rin gasped, and looked at Kakashi, covering her mouth with her hands. "No! That can't be..."

"But he was. I think seeing me killing you broke him," Kakashi said with a tinge of sadness. "Obito was naive and idealistic. He did kill, but seeing somebody he was so close to being killed affected him greatly."

"I think we can discuss what to do about Obito later. For the time being, Rin, you will be kept here in the tower, while we try to come up with a proper explanation as for how you came back from the dead," Jiraiya stated.

"Understood, Hokage-sama," Rin replied.

"Okay, everybody else, you're dismissed. I need a lot of things to do before I leave," Jiraiya mentioned.

Naturally, this caused everybody to shoot him deservedly questioning looks.

"Jiraiya, what do you mean you're leaving?" Hiruzen asked.

"Oh, yeah, I didn't tell you yet, hehe," Jiraiya awkwardly laughed. "Don't worry, it's nothing long term. I remembered I promised Pa and Ma I would return to Mount Myoboku and finish my Sage training. Sensei, I hoped that both you and Tsunade-hime could fill for me while I'm absent."

Hiruzen sighed heavily. "I don't think we have much of a choice. But I wish you informed us of this decision sooner. You're not leaving in

the best moment."

"I know, I know, that's why I want to make sure I do as much as possible before leaving," Jiraiya apologized.

Finally, everybody else left the office. A couple minutes later, the door opened again, revealing Jiraiya's most recent battle partner.

"Hokage-sama?" Anko said, uncharacteristically timid. "May I enter?"

"Of course, Anko," Jiraiya's serious demeanor wasn't that usual either. "I'm sure you know why I called you."

"'You can court martial me later'," Anko sourly echoed. "I knew those words would come back to bite me in the ass."

"Yes, Anko. Even if I don't think I could have come out of that fight alive without your help, you still disobeyed a direct order from the Hokage, so there has to be consequences. What you did is high treason, and it's punished by death."

Anko gulped, and shoot Jiraiya a pleading look that pretty much screamed 'you can't be serious.'

"However, there were mitigating circumstances. Like I just said, if you didn't help me I might have died, so I'm going to take that into account," Jiraiya continued. Anko relaxed a little, but she was still tense. "So instead of being executed, you shall be demoted to Genin for the next two years, and you shall be expelled from the Torture and Interrogation Department. You may rejoin them once your sentence has been completed."

Anko let out a sigh, half of relief, and half resignation. While she wasn't looking towards the next year, it was better than the alternative.

"Guess that I can't complain. Doing D-Rank missions is still preferable to dying," Anko said.

Jiraiya smirked. "Oh, I don't plan to waste a kunoichi of your skill walking dogs and painting fences. Let's say that I have another task way more... fitting for somebody of your background and skills."

Anko didn't know how to take that, but she was fearing it wouldn't be anything good.

...

Naruto woke up with a killer headache. He didn't remember much of the last few hours, but the little he remembered wasn't pleasant. As his senses slowly returned to him, he realized that he was in a vaguely familiar chamber, with an incredibly damp floor. This was a place that Naruto had visited at least once, and he wasn't exactly happy to be here again.

"So you finally wake up, brat," a deep, booming voice welcomed him. **"But then again, you aren't truly 'awake'."**

Naruto stood up, and looked at the Nine Tails, staring at him from the other side of the gate that kept him in check. While the last time he met the fox, his tenant was rather cranky and angry, now he looked much more calm, and strangely enough, eager to talk to him.

"Nine Tails...?" Naruto groaned. "What are you... hey, what do you mean that I'm not truly awake?"

The Tailed Beast chuckled. **"It means exactly what I said. You're in a coma after sustaining nearly fatal injuries."**

Naruto paled. "WHAT!?"

The Nine Tails chuckled even further. **"Oh, that reaction was just too good. Don't worry, you'll wake up shortly. In the meantime, I think we could take advantage of this... parenthesis, to talk."**

Naruto crossed his arms, and raised an eyebrow. "Now you want to talk?" he asked, skeptical. "What made you change your mind?"

"Tell me, Naruto, what do you remember of the past few hours?" the Nine Tails asked, ignoring the blonde's questions. **"Do you remember fighting Sasuke Uchiha? And I'm not talking about your stupid Chunin Exams."**

"Actually... yeah, I have some vague memories of me and Sasuke duking it out..." Naruto uneasily admitted. "I thought it was a dream... but it seems it wasn't..."

"Oh, you can bet it wasn't," the Nine tails confirmed. **"You've got hit by one of those Sharingan mind control jutsu. A particularly strong one, might I add."**

"I was mind controlled?" Naruto asked in disbelief, before growing a bit pensive. "Guess that explains the feeling..."

This seemed to grab the Nine Tails' attention, who moved closer -as close as the steel bars allowed him to- before saying: **"Oh, do tell. How did you feel?"**

"It was... weird," Naruto began, as he tried to put his memories in order. "On one side, it felt that what I was doing was the right thing... but on the other side, there was a part of me that knew that it was wrong and begged me to stop... almost as if my mind was split in two, with both halves fighting against each other, but one of them overpowering the other. And now that I realize what I've been forced to do... I feel so manipulated and... angry."

The Nine Tails bared his sharp teeth in what very few people would consider a smile, regardless of the beast's intention. This wasn't unnoticed by Naruto, who looked annoyed at the fox.

"Does this look funny to you? But given it's you, it shouldn't come as a surprise," Naruto spat, as he crossed his arms.

"If I wanted to laugh at you, I would have picked a different topic," the Nine Tails replied. **"Trust me, a buffoon like you has endless possibilities when it comes to mockery."**

"Then why are you so interested? You never want to talk with me about anything. Were you mind controlled too or what?" Naruto asked. Upon seeing the Nine Tails' silent reaction, a realization dawned upon him. "You WERE mind controlled! When? How? I don't think it was possible to do such a thing!"

The Kyubi's smile disappeared, as he rested his head over his crossed front paws. His eyes narrowed in anger, though Naruto could tell that the monster's anger wasn't directed at him.

"You asked me earlier why the Valley of the End irks me so much," the Nine Tails began. **"While you humans gave it that name, for me it wasn't the end, but the beginning."**

"Beginning? Of what?" Naruto asked.

"Of my torment. Of my life as a prisoner. Of me joining my siblings' ranks as living weapons," the Nine Tails bitterly said. **"Then again, it could also be the end. The end of my freedom, and of my happiness. If Father could see what have been of us..."**

Naruto was taken aback upon hearing the last line. "You have a father? Are there MORE giant multi tailed foxes out there!?"

The Nine Tails growled, but left that question unanswered. **"Tell me, kid, are you aware of the history behind that place?"**

"It was formed during the last fight between the First Hokage and Madara Uchiha," Naruto began. "The intensity of the battle was so great, it changed the landscape forever."

The Nine Tails waited expectantly for Naruto to continue, but the blond remained silent. After a few moments, he started to look at him awkwardly. The Kyubi realized that he wasn't going to get anything out of his jailer.

"That's it?" the Nine Tails asked.

"... yes? I don't think there's more to that story," Naruto replied.

The Kyubi groaned. **"Of course they kept the truth hidden from you. And probably from most people, but that's irrelevant now. Let's take a different approach. Do you know what was of me before I was sealed inside you?"** the Nine Tails asked.

"Yes. You were sealed within my mother, Kushina Uzumaki," Naruto replied. His expression grew somber. "Whom you killed alongside my father the day I was born."

The Nine Tails smiled once again. **"So they did tell you about her. Good, then everything might not be entirely lost. And before that? Do you know who was my jinchuriki?"**

"Mito Uzumaki, the First's wife, and my adoptive great-grandma," Naruto replied, much to the Kyubi's delight. "And before you ask, I know she was the first jinchuriki to hold you."

"It seems that you at least are aware of your predecessor's history," the Kyubi observed. **"And tell me, brat, do you know how Mito became my jinchuriki?"**

Naruto opened his mouth to speak, but was forced to close it just as quickly. Now that was a very good question. Tailed Beasts are among the most powerful beings which ever lived. How do you even capture one and seal it inside a human? He tried to think for a couple minutes, but came up with no answer.

"Don't force that minuscule organ you call brain too much, it won't do you any good," the Nine Tails began. **"Since there's no way for you to know this, so I'll have to tell you. Mito became my Jinchuriki the night Hashirama and Madara fought."**

Naruto was once again taken aback. "WHAT!? But... that makes no sense! How did you-"

"I was the last of my siblings to fall prey to your loathsome race, thanks to my might and cunning intellect," the Nine Tails began. **"Many humans tried to capture me to harness my power, but very few managed to even find me in the first place. Until one man succeeded. His name was Madara Uchiha."** The Nine Tails' voice turned venomous the moment that name left his jaws.

"Madara captured you?" Naruto parroted. Sure, history books described him as powerful and unparalleled to all who came both before and after him, Hashirama being the exception, but being powerful enough to subdue a Tailed Beast on his own...

"Unfortunately for me, Madara had a weapon that I had no chance to defend against, and made me as helpless to him as a mere puppy: the Mangekyo Sharingan," the Nine Tails revealed.

"Mangekyo Sharigan? Never heard of that," Naruto admitted.

"Hardly surprising. The Mangekyo Sharingan is an ascended form of the Sharingan that grants the user an array of new abilities. One of them being complete control over my kind. After Madara made me his slave, he made me help him fight his longtime enemy, Hashirama."

"And with you at his side, Madara still lost?" Naruto asked, astonished, but gleeful. "Wow, the First was even more badass than history books made him to be."

The Kyubi snarled, baring his sharp teeth once again, as his eyes narrowed in anger, this time directed at Naruto. The Tailed Beast didn't take kindly to people complimenting one of the two individuals he hated the most, even more than any of his jinchuriki.

"And do you know why, despite the overwhelming odds, Madara failed to win? Because Hashirama, despite not being an Uchiha, possessed the same ability," the Nine Tails revealed. **"He managed to override Madara's control with his own, and removed me from the battle. Then, once the Uchiha was dead,**

he brought his wife to me, and together they sealed me inside her."

"Wow..." was all Naruto could say. Did anybody else knew about such turn of events? Jiraiya and Tsunade were bound to know, given their positions within the village. And the Old Man Hokage as well.

"That's why I hate that place. And that's why even if I hate your race as a whole, I hate the Uchiha and the Senju the most," the Nine Tails said, concluding his tale.

"That was... a fascinating story," Naruto admitted. "But why are you telling me that now?"

"Because now you can understand what I felt when Madara put me under his control. What I felt when the masked Akatsuki did the same thing to me decades later in his attempt to destroy Konoha."

"What the First did..." Naruto began, unsure at first, but became more resolute. "He had to do it! You are too dangerous! You're a threat to humanity, you said so yourself!"

The Kyubi snarled once again. **"Yes, that's exactly what he said. Despite the fact that I never killed any human that didn't provoke me first. He feared my power, and sought to keep me under control. That day I swore that humanity as a whole would pay for what Hashirama did to me."**

Naruto wanted to protest, but suddenly everything started to fade to white.

"It seems that your time here is up," the Kyubi observed. **"But even if I'm not looking towards it, we will meet again."**

...

Naruto slowly opened his eyes, seeing nothing but blurry white. As his sight became clearer by the second, he noticed he was in a white room. A hospital room, he guessed. He had never been in one, given that he was never sick nor got any kind of lasting injury that required being taken to such a place.

Of course, when your mother is the best medic who ever lived, hospitals become redundant. But the redundancy appeared to be broken now.

"Naruto?" a female voice besides him almost shouted. Naruto turned around, and saw Tsunade sitting on a chair besides him, watching him intently.

"Mom..." Naruto weakly said.

Tsunade let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness you're awake! I was afraid that you wouldn't come back from this one!"

Naruto chuckled a bit. "Oh well, you know me, nothing can put me down for long, hehe," Naruto cheerily replied. Then, he remembered something. "Hagane and Kaida! Where are them? Are they okay?"

Tsunade smiled. "Yes, yes they are. We managed to save them in time. Thanks to you and your friends."

This time, it was Naruto who sighed in relief. "Oh, thank goodness. Given what happened to me, I was afraid Orochimaru got away with them. Also, what about the others? Are they okay?"

"Your friends made it back alive. Sakura and Ino required some medical attention, but they will be fine in no time," Tsunade reassured him.

Naruto slumped back on his bed. "Thanks Kami everything turned out alright... and how about Konoha? How bad was the invasion?"

"Well, sadly many ninja died, and there's plenty of material damage. But thankfully it's nowhere near as bad as the aftermath of the Uchiha Insurrection. We will recover earlier than most people think," Tsunade assured. She then stood up from her chair. "Speaking of, I need to tell Shizune and the twins that you're awake!"

"Yeah, I can't wait to see them," Naruto replied.

After all, he went through hell and back to save them.

...

Hyuga Estate

As a small reward for their daring rescue of Hagane and Kaida, the members of the Konoha 15 had been granted a week worth of paid vacation, which they used to either rest or get some training. Or both, as a week was a long time. And of course, Hinata didn't want to miss this rare opportunity of spare time in order to keep bettering herself.

Hinata breathed slowly, as she prepared to repeat the same move she has been practicing during the morning, under her mother and sister's expectant gazes. Getting into the proper stance, Hinata gathered some impetus as she started to spin. After the initial spin, she released chakra from every point of her body, adding to her building momentum, until she reached the proper speed.

"Heavenly Spin!"

The chakra grew into a spinning blue dome, and stayed like that for two seconds. When Hinata stopped spinning, there was a crater in the training ground. Hikari smiled, got up from her bench, and started clapping.

"You did it my daughter!" Hikari gushed, as she walked towards Hinata. "I knew you could master the Heavenly Spin if you tried hard enough."

"Thank you, mother," Hinata replied, panting a little. "It wasn't easy. Neji-niisan was right. Gai-sensei's intense training helped me achieve the proper speed needed for the jutsu."

"Now that you have finally grasped the Heavenly Spin, you have to master the Sixty Four Palm Strikes," Hikari told her. "And your position as heiress will be more than assured."

Hinata's face dropped. Hanabi frowned, as she angrily crossed her arms.

"Why does neechan have to learn those jutsu in particular?" Hanabi asked. "She created a new jutsu way cooler than any of ours! Isn't that enough?"

Hikari shook her head. "Is not that simple, sweetheart. The Gentle Fist is as much part of the Hyuga Clan's identity as the Byakugan. The Clan Head needs to be the embodiment of the Hyuga as a whole, so being able to perform the most advanced Gentle Fist techniques is always a must."

"Yes, mother, I understand" Hinata replied.

"Don't feel pressured. You still have a lot of time before you have to replace me as the Clan Head," Hikari reassured her.

"I will do my best," Hinata obediently said.

"You know, it would be fun if in a few years, the new Hyuga had to learn the Heavenly Thunderstorm," Hanabi commented.

"It wouldn't be surprising," Hikari answered. "I'd say that there's a pretty big chance of such thing happening."

Hanabi quickly turned at her mother, looking at her with eyes wide open in surprise. "Really?"

"Despite our not entirely undeserved reputation as staunch traditionalists, the Gentle Fist isn't written in stone," Hikari explained.

"Sure, the basics always remain the same, but if somebody manages to come up with an useful innovation, is integrated into our fighting style. For example, the Vacuum Palm is a relatively recent move, invented by your late great uncle Tadashi Hyuga."

"Really? Then what did our ancestors did if they wanted to fight from a range? Use conventional ninjutsu?" Hanabi asked.

Hikari shook her head once again. "No, they rejected that option. The Hyuga had always been a clan proud of its power, and said power resided in hand to hand combat. That's why ninjutsu is discouraged, even if not outright banned. However, that didn't change the fact that we were at a serious disadvantage against a ranged specialist. That's why Tadashi created a move that could cover such weakness. Even if the Vacuum Palm was met with some resistance by the most conservative members of our clan, it was quickly embraced by everybody else due its sheer usefulness. I believe Hinata's combination of elemental ninjutsu with the Gentle fist might follow a similar path."

"Speaking of which... Hanabi-chan, how is your training in fire chakra going?" Hinata asked her little sister.

Hanabi's face lit in expectation. "Oh, it goes great! Look!" the youngest Hyuga ran towards one of the nearby trees of the courtyard, plucked a leaf, returned to her sister and mother, and easily burned it off with the force of her chakra. "See? I finally did it! Now I can go into more advanced exercises."

"Good to see that Hinata isn't the only one making progress. Good job to you too, Hanabi," Hikari complimented as she ruffled Hanabi's hair affectionately.

"Thanks! I'll be breathing fireballs in no time! And then, I'll create my own version of the Heavenly Thunderstorm, but with fire instead!"

Both Hikari and Hinata giggled at Hanabi's unbound enthusiasm.

"Well, I'm going to take a quick shower, and then leave. Today I have to help the Retrieval teams to salvage whatever valuable items remain under the wreckage caused by the invasion," Hinata told them. "After that, I plan to go to the hospital and see if Naruto-kun woke up yet. Do you want to come with me?"

Hikari smiled at her. "Of course, sweetheart. We could also bring him something. After all what Naruto-kun did, it's the least he deserves."

"Maybe we could bring him ramen," Hanabi suggested. "I don't think they have that, and he likes that as much as much as he likes you, neechan."

Hinata giggled. "I'm afraid I will never replace ramen as Naruto's first love."

...

Back at the Hokage's office, three Genin the same age as Naruto were in front of him, watched by two ANBU. The three of them were the Oto Genin that had fought against Naruto's team in the Land of Sound, and then against Hinata and Lee more recently. The three of them, as well as their sensei, Mizuki, had been taken prisoner to Konoha. But while Mizuki was taken to a dark and cold cell to await his execution, Jiraiya believed that there were still some hope for these youths.

"So, your names are Dosu, Zaku, and Kin, right?" Jiraiya asked the trio. None of them bothered to reply. "I'll take your silence as a yes. Do you know why you're here?"

"Yes. Obviously, to interrogate us about our master," Kin spat.

"But forget about it, old man, we'll never betray Orochimaru-sama!" Zaku angrily added. An ANBU squeezed his shoulder, prompting him to shut up.

Jiraiya chuckled, as he laid back on his chair. "If I wanted you interrogated, I'd have send you to the aptly named Torture and Interrogation Department," Jiraiya explained. Zaku and Kin visibly gulped upon hearing about torture, but Dosu remained impassible. "Besides, it's quite obvious that you're way too low on the hierarchy to know anything relevant."

"Then what do you want to do with us?" Dosu asked. "Wait, let me guess. You hope we switch sides with Konoha, like you did with that Swordsman of the Mist, am I right?"

Jiraiya smiled in satisfaction. "So I wasn't wrong when I pegged you as the smartest of the three."

Zaku and Kin stared at Jiraiya indignantly, but the Hokage paid them no mind.

"You can forget about such thing happening," Dosu continued, as if finding the very idea offensive. "Orochimaru-sama gave us a life and made us strong when we had nothing. We would never betray him."

"Too bad your loyalty isn't reciprocated," Jiraiya stated. "Listen, Orochimaru doesn't care about you. To him, you three are nothing but cannon fodder. He's an specialist in fishing out people with nothing to their name and nothing to lose to use as disposable minions. If he really was interested in you becoming more powerful, you wouldn't have been defeated by a single opponent the same age as you."

Dosu couldn't help but recall Hinata's words before the pale eyed girl knocked him unconscious. That was a good point to consider.

"Maybe," Zaku conceded. "Even if Orochimaru-sama isn't the most caring of masters, at least he gave us something better than we used to have."

"You don't have to tell me. I've seen those same eyes as yours countless times," Jiraiya told them. "Kids that lost everything to war,

their homes, their families. Forced to live in the streets and steal to survive. Am I getting close?"

"So what if you do?" Kin spluttered. "Besides, what would that say about us? To betray the man who gave us everything we have?"

"Orochimaru wouldn't doubt about betraying you the moment you became a burden, or you weren't useful to him anymore. I can guarantee you that such thing won't happen in Konoha," Jiraiya told them. "Besides, if you don't join us, the alternative is going to prison for being enemies of Konoha. Besides, don't you want to follow the same path as your sensei? He also betrayed his home village to join its enemies."

"Yeah, and he's going to be executed," Zaku dryly pointed out. "Something that will happen to us if Orochimaru lay his hands on us again."

"Mizuki ended up the way he did because he had an exceedingly large ambition, and not enough willpower to see it realized on his own. What I'm offering you here is the chance to be smarter than Mizuki. Work for us, and if you don't like it, you can always go back to jail," Jiraiya offered.

The Sound Genin looked doubtful. They traded unsure glances, until they apparently reached an unheard agreement. Dosu, who appeared to be the leader of the trio, voiced their decision.

"Given that you don't gave us much of a choice, guess we'll have play nice and work for Konoha," Dosu said, not without resignation.

"Wonderful!" Jiraiya heartily replied. "Well, if that's the case, then maybe you should meet your new sensei! I'm sure you'll get along fine, given that like you, she used to work with Orochimaru, and hopefully, she will be able to show you how much it sucked. Anko, come in!"

Even with all his bandages, Dosu paled upon hearing that name. "Anko? Do you mean... Anko Mitarashi?!"

The door opened with a loud slam. "The one and only!" Anko cheerfully said as she burst into the office. She stared at the three Genin, who turned back at her, and grinned. "So, you're the runts Hokage-sama asked me to train? This will be piece of cake!"

"This has to be a joke," Kin deadpanned.

"Like I usually said, if I told a joke, you'd be laughing so hard you wouldn't be able to breathe," Jiraiya retorted. "Now Anko, besides training, I'd also like you to show them what I means to be a pawn of Orochimaru."

Anko's mouth curved into a sadistic smile. "Consider it done. How much leeway do I have?"

"As long as you don't kill, maim, mutilate, or mentally scar them for life, you're free to do as you see fit," Jiraiya replied.

"Understood! Come on brats! We have a lot of work to do!" Anko happily ordered as she left the office, with the three reluctant former Oto ninja trailing behind her, as well as the ANBU keeping an eye on them.

Being alone at last, Jiraiya sighed, and slumped on his chair. Thankfully, that was the last of the loose ends that needed to be tied. However, before the Hokage had a chance to relax, a small toad jumped out of the window, landing on the desk.

"Before you say anything, Pa, everything's been take care of, and I'm ready to go," Jiraiya preemptively said. "But before we leave, can we just wait a little until Naruto wakes up? I want to see him again before we resume my training."

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk with you about, Jiraiya-chan," Pa replied, prompting Jiraiya to raise an eyebrow. "Ma and I have

been talking about it, and we believe Naruto-chan is ready to undertake sage training."

Such proposal took Jiraiya aback, to say the least. While he had plans to have Naruto learn Senjutsu, he was waiting until he was a bit older.

"Do you think he's ready? He's still too young," Jiraiya argued.

"Gamamaru-sama has been watching over him, and thinks he is. Ma and I agree with him. Besides, given how close Akatsuki were of catching him the last time, I believe Naruto-chan is going to need all the possible help we can offer," Pa explained.

"If you think so, then sure, Naruto can come with us," Jiraiya agreed, then chuckled. "But given how restless Naruto is, I doubt he'll find much joy in the kind of training we're going to do."

...

Uchiha Training Grounds

Sasuke was restless. Since the fight against Naruto and the masked Akatsuki, the youngest Uchiha felt an intense unease he had been unable to shake off. Training was Sasuke's main way to cope with stress, and so far, it was working, but he wondered for how long. There was just so much to process...

First, the fact that the masked Akatsuki was an Uchiha. He was also the Fourth's student and Kakashi's teammate, but that data was irrelevant to Sasuke. He was responsible for the Nine Tails' attack thirteen years ago, which laid the ground works for the Uchiha Insurrection to happen. Something Obito had masterminded as well. Not happy with that, he also collaborated with Orochimaru to invade Konoha.

All to get the Nine Tails. While Tailed Beasts were powerful and highly sought after, the extends Obito had taken and the lines he had

crossed were simply ridiculous. Was there something more to the Nine Tails that it's worth causing the demise of your own clan?

Second, the Mangekyo Sharingan. According to Obito, Itachi and Shisui had it, yet they never told Sasuke about it. They admitted the truth when Sasuke confronted them about it, but he decided to leave and not listen to their excuses. At least for the time being.

Tempted by its power, Sasuke decided to see for himself what kind of new abilities he had now. But the moment he activated his freshly awakened eye power, something happened that Sasuke didn't expect: his mind relived the moment he stabbed Naruto, and all the anguish he felt when he thought he had killed him. He tried multiple times, but the effect was the same. Deciding that he wasn't going to risk his sanity any longer, Sasuke gave up and opted instead for good old shuriken practice.

Grabbing four shuriken in one hand, Sasuke moved his arm in an arc, tossing the steel stars in four different directions. Each shuriken found its mark. He repeated the process again, with the same result, and a third time. Even without the Sharingan, his aim was flawless.

Sasuke sighed. "This isn't working anymore."

"Really? I think you did pretty good job," a voice from behind said.

Sasuke turned around, and saw his brother and cousin walking towards him.

"You know, you left before we had the time to explain ourselves," Shisui began, with an apologetic tone. "We're very sorry for hiding such things from you, but..."

"We thought it wasn't necessary for you to know about the Mangekyo Sharingan," Itachi continued. "In fact, we were both hoping that you would never awaken it."

Sasuke crossed his arms, and frowned. "And why not? So I'm always below you two in terms of power?"

Shisui let out a sad chuckle. "You know that's not true, Sasuke. Nothing would make us happier than seeing you surpassing the both of us. Something we're sure you'll do in the future."

"Listen, Sasuke, the Mangekyo Sharingan is a very dark power. I'm sure you now know how to awaken it, right?" Itachi asked. Sasuke nodded. "And tell me, did you try to use it after you awakened it?"

Sasuke grew uneasy, and averted his gaze. "Yeah, I did. I know what happens when you use it."

"The Mangekyo Sharingan is a tempting power. But making you relive the event that triggered it... it can drive anybody insane, even if used sparingly. That's why Shisui and I try to use it as little as possible," Itachi explained.

"Besides, we like to think that there's more to the Uchiha Clan than a mere bunch of fancy eye powers, you know? We have to show everybody that even without the Sharingan, we're still strong," Shisui added. "Besides, that's not the only drawback."

Sasuke opened his eyes wide in surprise. "There's more?"

"Sadly, yes," Itachi replied. "Like we said, the power of the Mangekyo comes with a price. The more you use its powers, the more will your eyesight deteriorate, until you'll end up completely blind."

"WHAT!?" Sasuke asked in shock, as he involuntarily took a step back. "How... is there a way to reverse the eyesight loss?"

"Fortunately, there is one," Itachi replied. Sasuke was almost tempted to feel relieved, but he was afraid there would be some sort of catch. "If you take the eyes of a direct relative and replace yours with them, not only will your eyesight be restored, but it will never

deteriorate again. So in order for such thing to happen, we must now trade our eyes."

"I already made an appointment with Shizune-chan for the surgery," Shisui helpfully added.

"After that, if you wish, I can teach you how to use the power of the Mangekyo," Itachi offered.

"Wait, you said you hoped I never awakened the Mangekyo. Then, if you kept using it, you would have ended up blind!" Sasuke pointed out. Itachi merely shrugged. "And you were okay with that?"

"I had accepted such fate, as did Shisui," Itachi explained.

"Well, in my case is easier. With only one eye, I only have one of the abilities of the Mangekyo Sharingan, Kotoamatsukami notwithstanding. So the temptation is much lower," Shisui detailed.

"Sasuke, they say that the Uchiha is a clan cursed by hatred and darkness. And as you just learned right now, people who said that had a point. There's no other clan that needs to feel strong traumatic emotions to awake their powers. People not only fear our power, they also fear that our powers may turn us mad, as it was believed of our ancestor, Madara Uchiha. And look what it did to Obito Uchiha," Itachi explained.

"And those fears were realized the night our clan rebelled," Shisui added, sounding melancholic.

"We simply don't want you to end like them."

Sasuke sighed. He turned his back at them, as he processed the words he just heard. His fingers tightly clenched into a pair of fists.

"Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it," Sasuke said.

"What do you mean?" Itachi asked.

"All of this. The effort of reigning ourselves in for the sake of people who already fear and hate us. What's the point? Maybe this is our fate. Maybe we should stop pretending to be something we aren't, and accept our nature. Maybe that's why Father decided to start an insurrection," Sasuke said, as he turned back at them.

"Sasuke, I know that sometimes follow the right path is hard, but trust me, it's worth it," Shisui solemnly said. "Don't give up when things get complicated. Don't let yourself be tempted by somebody offering you an easier alternative. Such things will only lead to misery and unhappiness."

"And remember that you're not alone. You have us, among many others, to support you whenever you feel bad," Itachi added.

"I... okay. I'll keep doing as you say. Besides, I always took pride in not giving up in the face of a challenge," Sasuke replied.

Both Itachi and Shisui smiled in relief.

"You won't regret that decision, Sasuke," Itachi said, as he put a hand on his shoulder.

"Now come on, you can train later. You guys have to see the house Shizune-chan and I chose to move to," Shisui said with renewed enthusiasm.

...

Hinata, Hanabi, and their mother Hikari entered the Konoha hospital to see how Naruto was doing. Hinata was holding a bento on her hands. While she was initially tempted to bring her boyfriend some ramen, she decided that it would be best if she brought him something a bit healthier. After all, she had to help him recover, and ramen wouldn't do the job.

"It's a good thing you don't have to make Naruto fall in love with you anymore," Hanabi had joked.

When they entered the building and headed to the reception, Hinata saw a familiar person already there. A boy in a kimono.

"Thank you," the boy said to the receptionist before turning around, seeing Hinata and her family. "Oh, hi there, Hinata-san. Came to see Naruto, I presume?"

Hinata nodded. "Indeed I am, Haku-kun. By the way, let me introduce you to my little sister, Hanabi, and my mother, Hikari. Hanabi-chan, mother, this is Haku, my other teammate."

Haku bowed his head before the Hyuga. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ladies. Hinata-san told us a lot about you two, but I regrettably I never had the chance to get to know you."

"Pleasure is all ours, Haku-kun. I guess that you're also here to see Naruto-kun?" Hikari asked.

"Indeed. The receptionist told me where his room is. Follow me," Haku told the girls.

The Hyuga women decided to follow Haku, who lead them to a room in the third floor. The room was open, and some voices could be heard from the inside. Peeking through the door, Hinata saw Naruto, still bedridden but thankfully awake and fully conscious, talking with his little siblings, as well Shizune. The medic-nin was the first one to notice the newcomers.

Shizune smiled. "Oh, look at that, more people came to visit you, Naruto-kun."

"Huh?" Naruto said, turning around, and smiled as well. "Oh, hey, Hinata-hime! You came to see me, great! But don't stay there, come in!"

"I'd love to, but... I didn't come alone, and the room is going to get a bit cramped."

"Nonsense! Come in!" Naruto insisted.

"I think I'm going to get something to eat," Shizune stated, as she went to exit the room. She noticed Hinata's bento, and added: "I'd ask if you want something, but Hinata already has that part covered, hehe."

The Hyuga heiress blushed a bit.

"Oh, you brought your mom and little sister. And Haku's here too!" Naruto noticed.

"Hello to you too, Naruto-kun. Glad to see that you're feeling better," Haku greeted his blond teammate.

"Haha, yes, it takes more than a mere blade to the gut to put me down!" Naruto boasted.

"A blade to the gut!?" Hikari asked in shock. The Hyuga matriarch activated her Byakugan, and saw that Naruto's gut didn't have any injuries. "Amazing... there's nothing left of that wound."

"You can thank Hinata-hime for that. She healed me before I could be taken to the hospital," Naruto stated, making Hinata blush a little, before she averted her gaze.

"Uh... it was nothing. I only did my duty..." Hinata shyly stammered.

"Dear Kami, even after the two of you became a couple, you're still so awkward and shy!" Kaida pointed out, shaking her head.

"That's how my nee-chan is, she can't help it," Hanabi agreed, shrugging.

"Hanabi-chan!" a flustered Hinata called her.

"Come on Hanabi, don't be so mean..." Hikari said.

"Heh, it's okay. I think that Hinata's cute when she's all shy like that, hehe," Naruto chuckled.

Rather than embarrass her even further, Naruto's comment brought up a smile to the shy Hyuga. She then remembered the bento still in her hands, and as an added bonus of changing the topic, she handed it to Naruto.

"Here, I made this for you!" Hinata said as she handed the item to the blond. "Hospital food isn't that good, so I thought it would make your stay here a little better. It's not ramen, though."

"Oh..." Naruto deflated a little, his hopes dashed away, but it didn't last long. "It's okay. Everything you cook tastes so great, so I'm sure I'll enjoy it. Thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome, Naruto-kun," Hinata happily replied.

"You know, seeing Nee-chan and Naruto makes me want to have a boyfriend too..." Hanabi mentioned out loud.

"Have you thought in dating Hagane? He's a great catch!" Kaida said, pushing her brother towards Hanabi.

"Hey! Don't I get a say in this?" Hagane indignantly protested.

"Nope!" was Kaida's reply.

"You kids are too young to start dating. Give it a few years," Hikari started, putting an end to the topic. "Trust me, you don't want to grow up too fast."

"By the way, Haku," Naruto began, realizing of something the last time he saw the Ice Ninja. "That bone guy looked really tough. How did you manage to defeat him between Tenten, Karin-nee-chan and you?"

"We didn't," was Haku's brief response, confusing Naruto a bit.

"Thankfully, Zabuza-sama appeared in the nick of time to save me

from what it would have been an horrible fate. After that, we left and tried to meet you and Hinata-san again, but we didn't find you until much later."

"Did Zabuza-san beat him?" Hinata asked.

Haku shook his head. "Technically speaking, Zabuza won the fight, but sadly he was unable to kill or capture the man, who managed to escape. I'm afraid we will see him again in the future as well."

"Neji-niisan told me the same about the kunoichi he and Kiba-san fought against," Hinata added. "At the very least, we won't have to worry about the other three ever again."

"I'm sure Orochimaru will try to recruit more people with Bloodline Limits in order to replace the people he lost with the invasion," Hikari gravely noted.

"Then we'll stop him before he has the chance to do such a thing," Naruto determinately stated.

"You won't be able to do much stopping in your current state," a new voice said. Everybody turned around, and saw Jiraiya standing besides the door. "Fortunately, I have good news for you."

"Really? What is it, dad?" Naruto asked, clearly interested.

"You're coming with me to Mount Myoboku for special training. The Toads have deemed you ready to undergo Sage training," Jiraiya announced.

Hikari gasped. Jiraiya realized she was the only one aware of what Jiraiya was saying.

"Sage training? That's... incredible! I didn't know that somebody so young as Naruto-kun could become a Sage!" Hikari exclaimed.

"I didn't think so either. But the toads told me Naruto is ready," Jiraiya replied.

"Uh... what is Sage training?" Naruto asked.

"A special kind of training that will allow you to gather and use nature chakra, besides your own. It has a large number of boons that will help you make stronger," Jiraiya explained.

None of the kids understood Jiraiya's explanation, mostly because none of them knew what nature chakra was to begin with. But Naruto knew that it was something it would make him stronger, and that was enough to catch his interest.

"Besides, give how close you were to being captured by Akatsuki, you need to become as much stronger as soon as possible," Jiraiya stressed.

"Naruto-kun won't be the only one to become stronger. I will train as hard as I can to match him as well," Hinata stated.

"So do I. I've seen that there are enemies out there that dwarf our skill and power so much, is almost laughable," Haku added.

"Good, because I'm sure Akatsuki won't give up until they have Naruto and the rest of the Jinchuriki in their power," Jiraiya mentioned.

...

Undisclosed Location

Obito slowly blinked as he started to wake up. He had a hard time remembering what happened before he lost consciousness, but as soon as he made a little effort, memories started to flood his brain as if it was a torrent.

"Rin..." Obito murmured, his heart filling with dread.

"Will you stop obsessing over her already?" a voice tiredly said.

As Obito's eyesight adjusted and became less blurry, the figure of Zetsu appeared in his field of vision. And soon, his confusion was replaced by unbridled fury.

"YOU! YOU LET THEM TAKE HER AWAY!" Obito screamed as he sloppily lunged at his fellow Akatsuki, who easily sidestepped.

"Yes, I did" the white half admitted.

"TRAITOR! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO OBEY ME!" Obito screamed, as he tried to pounce at Zetsu again. This time, the plant-man grabbed Obito's arm, and twisted it behind his back. Obito tried to use Kamui, but the aftereffects of the sleeping spores made him mold chakra extremely hard.

"That's true as well. But while Madara-sama left you in charge, he also allowed be to act on my own accord if I think you take a wrong decision," the black half stated. "And frankly, you've taken quite a lot of bad decisions as of late."

"You could have captured the Nine Tails, but you let it escape your grip," the white half added.

"It was Orochimaru's fault! His stupid minions failed to keep the Konoha ninja at bay!" Obito protested.

"Don't try to pin the blame on Orochimaru. He did what it was expected, which is more than we can say of you," Black Zetsu continued. "We've noticed that the moment that girl left the cocoon, you've become far less focused and driven. She was hindering you."

"SHE'S THE WHOLE REASON I'M DOING THIS IN THE FIRST PLACE!" Obito loudly screamed. "And now she's in danger again! Those Konoha fools will send her to die again!"

"Relax, boss. If the process worked as intended, Rin is pretty much impossible to kill now," White Zetsu assured. "You won't have to fear for her ever again."

"Besides, why would you? She chose Konoha over you. Clearly, you're not as important to her as she is to you," Black Zetsu added.

"But not everything is lost. Let's continue with the plan. When she sees the kind of just and peaceful world you plan to create, she'll soon join our side," White Zetsu added.

"I'm not convinced. I want our Konoha spies to keep an eye on her at all costs. I want to know when she's on a mission. I want to know when she's in danger of dying," Obito ordered. "I'm not going to let history repeat again."

"Of course, boss. It will be done as you say," Black Zetsu replied.

Satisfied with the answer, Obito left. Mostly to find out exactly where Zetsu brought him.

"Are we going to do that?" White Zetsu asked his Black Half.

"Of course," was the other being's reply. "How else are going to check the progress of our little test subject?"

...

Konoha Hospital, Next Morning

It was the first day of Rin's new job at the hospital. Jiraiya had offered her to return to active duty as a ninja, but she had declined, arguing that she needed some time to think and ponder what to do. And given what happened the last time she went on a mission, she was arguably not ready to go back into action as well.

Fortunately, Rin was a medic-nin, which were always needed, so of course it wasn't hard for her to get a job at the Konoha Hospital. Granted, hospitals could be rather tense and frenetic places for obvious reasons, but they couldn't compare to a battleground.

She had been assigned to tidy all the rooms that have been recently vacated. While most people would find such task bothersome and

boring, Rin enjoyed the simplicity of it. It allowed the young girl much needed time to think. And she had a lot of things to think about.

"Yo," an unknown adult voice said.

Turning around, Rin saw said voice belonged to his former teammate, now an adult. It would take her some time to get used to Kakashi's much deeper adult voice. And to a lesser extent, how her former friends and partners looked now. Having to adapt to this completely new world was something that made her feel overwhelmed, but she had to persevere.

"Oh. Hello Kakashi," Rin greeted him, as she continued with her work.

"I... I came here to see how are you doing," Kakashi began.

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking," Rin replied.

"You are? I mean..." Kakashi awkwardly continued. "Well, I just wanted to say that if you have any problems adapting, or just feel bad about anything, you can talk to me."

Rin let out a sad sigh. "I'd be lying if I say everything's okay. Konoha changed so much, that when you guys brought me here, I barely recognized it. Not to mention how much you guys changed as well. Meanwhile, I'm still stuck as a little girl."

"Hey, don't say that. Didn't Tsunade-sama said that you would continue growing at a normal pace?" Kakashi asked.

"She said that. But until I become an adult... seeing you, Asuma, Kurenai and the others is going to be difficult. Maybe I should befriend your students?" Rin asked, before letting out a sad chuckle.

"They're great kids. I'm sure you'll get along with any of them just fine," Kakashi earnestly replied.

Rin was a bit surprised by such a honest answer to her quasi-rhetorical question. Then again, she did meet a few of them during her escape, and they looked like people worthy of getting to know better, at the very least.

"Anyway, remember what I said. Even if a lot of things changed, if you want to find me, I still live in the same place as when we were kids," Kakashi told her, before turning around. "Well... see ya later."

"Aren't you going to ask me about Obito?" Rin suddenly asked, freezing Kakashi on his tracks.

"I'm tempted to. But I'm afraid of the answers," Kakashi uncomfortably replied. "Your world isn't the only one who's turned upside down. While I did have a hard time accepting that both of you were still alive, it's nothing compared to having to accept that all the tragedies and disasters that happened in Konoha during the last decade and a half were orchestrated by him."

"We're on the same boat then," Rin sadly replied.

"So it seems. Well... I better get going. It's great to have you back again, Rin," Kakashi said before finally leaving.

Rin sighed once again. "I wish it was as great for me too."

After making the bed, Rin grabbed a small watering can and went to water the potted plants on the window. The plants were still small, but in a few days, they would grow up and sport beautiful flowers.

"I wish I could grow just as fast..." Rin moaned as she sprinkled the plants with water.

Then, much to her shock, the plants started to grow and bloom before her very eyes, speeding a process of days to mere seconds. An astonished Rin dropped the watering can, and stumbled back in shock.

"What... what the hell is going on?" the brown haired girl asked.

...

Senju Residence

The entire Senju family -plus Hinata- were gathered in the house's backyard. Jiraiya and Naruto were standing next to each other, carrying backpacks, while the girls (and Hagane) were in front of them, bidding them goodbye.

"Boy, I can wait to see Mount Myoboku! The toads I summoned made it look like an awesome place," Naruto gushed in anticipation.

"It's a sight to behold, kid. I'm sure you'll like it," Tsunade told him.

"You're not going to like the food much, I can guarantee you that," Jiraiya sourly replied.

"I know. That's why I packed a lot of food. Including some things Hinata made me," Naruto replied.

Hinata blushed a little. "I want you to think in me when you're so far away."

"You don't need to make me food to make me think of you, Hime," Naruto sweetly said. "But it will sure help a lot!"

"Dad, when can we train to become sages?" Hagane asked.

"When you grow up a bit more, I'm sure the toads will be more than happy to train you two as well," Jiraiya reassured him.

"Bring us something cool when you get back!" Kaida requested.

"And make sure you come back for the wedding, you hear me!? I won't forgive you if you miss it!" Shizune energetically told them.

Jiraiya chuckled. "I wouldn't let anything make me miss it. Even if we take more time than intended, I'm sure Ma and Pa will understand."

"Hey, don't take too long with the training either! Being Hokage is YOUR job, not mine!" Tsunade protested.

"I bet I can complete the training in less than a week!" Naruto boasted.

"That's a bold claim. Let's see if you back up those words once we get started," Jiraiya replied.

That moment, Fukasaku appeared before them. Upon seeing that Jiraiya and Naruto looked ready, his lips curved into a smile.

"I see you're ready to go, then," Fukasaku guessed.

"Yeah, we were saying our goodbyes," Jiraiya replied.

Before leaving, Hinata walked to Naruto and gave him a small peck on his lips.

"Good luck with your training, Naruto-kun. I already can't wait to see you back," Hinata told him.

"That's another incentive for finishing my training as soon as possible," Naruto said, laughing a bit.

"To Mount Myoboku then!" Fukasaku exclaimed, and both he, Naruto and Jiraiya disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving the girls and Hagane alone.

...

Mount Myoboku

"Wow, this place is amazing!" Naruto gushed, as his eyes witnessed the natural paradise around him. "The toads weren't exaggerating when they talked about this place."

"Glad you like our home, Naruto-chan," Fukasaku replied, as he nodded. "So, are you ready to begin your training to become a Sage?"

Naruto smiled confidently, as he punched the palm of his hand. "Let's do it!"

End of Part I

OMAKE: Shizune's Revenge

Shizune was giving the Senju Residence one last look before leaving for good. She had already move all her things to her and Shisui's new apartment, but she couldn't help feeling nostalgic and a bit melancholic for leaving the house that had been her home for so many years.

"I'm going to miss this place so much. It was my first permanent home after Tsunade-sama returned to Konoha for Naruto-kun," Shizune sighed.

"I know how you feel. I do miss the old Uchiha Compound as well. But live goes on and we have to move as well," Shisui told her. "But hey, it's not that you can't come back to pay Tsunade-sama and the others a visit, right?"

"Now that you mention Tsunade-sama... there's something I'd like to do before I leave," Shizune then wrapped her arms around her fiancée. "And I need your help for it."

Shisui smiled innocently. "Sure, babe, whatever you need."

Shizune smiled wickedly.

...

Hours later, Tsunade returned home from work. As she entered the house, she heard something. Moans and giggles, coming from the living room.

"What the...?" Tsunade walked towards the living room, and turned on the lights. The sight before her surprised her to say the least. "THE HELL!?"

"Oh, sorry, Tsunade-sama, we didn't think you'd come so soon," Shizune cheekily replied.

"Uhhh... hello, Tsunade-sama," Shisui nervously greeted.

Shizune and Shisui were laying on the couch, completely naked, the latter on top of the former. And while Tsunade didn't notice due the abundant nudity before her eyes, there was a blanket covering said couch. She glared at Shizune, and frowned.

"You're a petty brat, you know that?" Tsunade snarled, before stomping upstairs.

The naked couple spend a few seconds in an awkward silence before Shizune let out a happy squeal.

"Oh yes, revenge is sweet! I've been wanting to do that for years!" Shizune said.

Author's Note: So now you know how Rin came back to life. As I told to some reviewers, it wasn't either Rinnegan nor Edo Tensei. But a question remains, is that the real Rin, or is just a clone with the real one's memories? Would there be any difference between the two anyway?

And yes, the "reliving the traumatic moment that awakened the MS every time you use it" is an addition entirely made up by me. I think it's a good and fitting way from having the Uchihas abusing the MS like Sasuke did in late Part II, so instead is more

like a last resort power. Though I doubt this would have stopped canon!Sasuke, given that he was pretty deranged by the time he got the MS anyway, but this Sasuke is not, and won't trade his sanity for more power.

As I said before, Shippuden won't come next. There will be another arc that will take place between parts I and II. But fear not, I'm sure all of you will like it.

And before you ask, this omake is canon ;P

Thanks a lot to gio08 for his betareading job.

So, how did you find the conclusion to Part I? Tell me in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

A New Mission

Author's Note: I'm glad to see the overall good reception the ending of Part I got. Anyway, even if that part is over, there's still quite a lot of story left to tell! So now, before we head into Shippuden, there's an arc that could be considered Part 1.5. This chapter will mostly cover how much Naruto and his friends changed during the next year and a half, and towards the end, you'll see what this new arc will be about- Enjoy:

Chapter 42:

A New Mission

or

Let's give the neglected villages some love

Fourteen and a half years since the Nine Tails Attacked

Training Ground Nine

Today, two of Konoha's most promising young ninja were about to fight. Even if it was just a spar, the combatants' own reputation and the fact that they didn't clash since the Chunin Exams made plenty of ninja eager to see the fight.

"Let's hope that this time, things turn out different," Hinata, one of the many people among the spectators, commented a bit worried.

"Oh don't worry, I'm sure it won't be a repeat of the last time," Naruto assured her, as he held her hand.

While the year and a half following the Invasion of Konoha hadn't been as chaotic as the year preceding it, it wasn't uneventful either. All of Naruto's former classmates managed to score a promotion to

Chunin during the Chunin Exams in Kumo, and many of them went beyond that. Naruto himself quickly earned a promotion to Special Jonin specialized in fuinjutsu when he mass produced his Chakra Blade for the ANBU to use as their main weapon. At first, it turned out it wouldn't work since the sword drained too much Chakra, but with Jiraiya's help, he realized that the original model wasted way more chakra than it consumed, something Naruto didn't notice thanks to his seemingly never-ending reserves. But once he fixed that design flaw, it could be used by people with average chakra pools.

In fact, Naruto himself was strong enough to be a full Jonin already, but Jiraiya thought he still needed more experience before he could grant him the rank. Hinata and Haku were also on their way to becoming Special Jonin, with specializations in tai-ninjutsu and ninjutsu, respectively.

"They're finally going to start," Naruto pointed out, as the two fighters got in position.

On one side, there was Sasuke Uchiha, no longer the youngest of his clan, who during the past year managed to get promoted to the rank of Special Jonin specialized in ninjutsu and sword fighting. Besides his usual katana, he also added a shoto to his regular arsenal, which he dual wield alongside his main weapon.

Facing Sasuke was Neji Hyuga, also a Special Jonin, though specialized in taijutsu, and the one who requested the spar to begin with, since he wanted to test a new jutsu he had developed recently.

"Boy, I don't know whom I should cheer," Karin whined. "Neji-kun is my boyfriend, but Sasuke is my teammate..."

Acting as referees were their respective Jonin-sensei, Shizune Uchiha and Maito Gai.

"Alright, combatants ready?" Shizune asked, looking at both of them, who nodded at her. "In that case let the fight... begin!"

Like it happened the first time, the first thing both fighters did was activating their ocular power. And the moment the word let out Shizune's lips, Sasuke and Neji dashed towards each other at such speed they were seen as blurs by some of the onlookers. Sasuke's left hand reached for his shoto, and unsheathed it in a circular motion against Neji, who prepared to deliver an arc strike.

However, Neji's opening move was a fake out, as Neji nimbly crouched and slid towards Sasuke, dodging his blade, and striking the Uchiha in the chest with an accurate palm hit. Sasuke heaved a little as he jumped backwards, holding the stricken area in pain with his free hand. He shot Neji an angry look, which was replied by a smug smirk.

"I believe the first strike is mine," Neji declared.

"Maybe, but victory belongs to those who deliver the last strike of the fight, not the first one," Sasuke replied, as he charged against Neji as once again.

Knowing that Sasuke would see it coming, Neji decided to let Sasuke strike this time and then counterattack. However, he didn't expect Sasuke reaching into his tool pouch, grab a handful of shuriken and toss them at him. As quickly as he could, Neji pulled out a kunai from his own pouch, and used it to deflect the incoming steel stars. And while he was doing that, Sasuke disappeared.

Thanks to his Byakugan, the Hyuga prodigy could see that Sasuke had appeared behind him -more than likely, after using the Body Flicker jutsu- and was about to strike. Even then, Neji was still in a disadvantageous position. Still, he wasn't deterred by Sasuke's tactic, and quickly sidestepped to avoid the incoming slash. While he was moving, Neji turned around and thrust his open palm forward.

"Vacuum Palm!"

Now it was Sasuke's turn to jump back and dodge. If Neji wanted to switch to ranged fighting, the Uchiha was more than happy to oblige.

He started to make hand seals with a single hand.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed from his mouth a volley of fireballs at the Hyuga prodigy, covering an area so wide that it would be impossible to dodge. Fortunately for Neji, he didn't need to dodge, and started to spin as chakra poured from every point of his body.

"Heavenly Spin!"

The fireballs crashed against a spinning dome of blue chakra, which successfully blocked both the fiery projectiles and the explosions they made upon crashing. When the dome vanished, Neji was completely unharmed.

"You'll need to do better than that," Neji taunted Sasuke.

Sasuke sheathed his shoto, while at the same time unsheathing his katana. He also made several hand seals, again with just one hand.

"I admit that's an impressive defense. But then again, there's no barrier my sword cannot cut down," Sasuke replied, almost boasting.
"Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

The blade of Sasuke's katana was soon engulfed by a cloak of flames. His weapon now ready, the Uchiha attacked once again. Neji took a step back, and adopted a defensive position once again, seemingly trying to come up with a way to counter Sasuke's attack, given that normal weapons rarely did well against elemental-enhanced ones. And much to Sasuke's surprise, he blocked the Uchiha's flaming sword with a palm strike.

And to Sasuke's even greater surprise, the block was successful. Using his other hand, Neji tried to deliver another palm strike to the Uchiha, but Sasuke quickly grabbed his wrist before such thing could happen.

"So you focused your chakra on your fingers in order to make your hand stronger and protect it from the flames of my sword," Sasuke stated, as he inspected the Hyuga's hand with his Sharingan.

"Intelligent trick."

"Oh, it's more than a mere trick. And you haven't seen anything yet," Neji replied, as he kicked Sasuke in the chest, breaking the struggle, before quickly adopting a stance Hinata knew too well. "You're within my divination range. Eight Trigrams. Sixty Four Palms!"

"Shit!" Sasuke cursed as Neji lunged at him, ready to strike. He made a hand seal one of the onlookers was very familiar with.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two clones of Sasuke appeared in front of him as Neji was about to attack.

"Two strikes!" one of the clone disappeared before he could ever record what was going on. "Four strikes!" the next clone soon followed his equally short lived brother's fate. "Eight Strikes!" This time, the strikes landed on the real Sasuke, who groaned in pain as his chakra points were closed. "Sixteen Strikes!"

This time, however, Sasuke managed to successfully block and dodge all of Neji's palm strikes, and force the Hyuga back by slashing his flame wreathed katana at him.

"You managed to interrupt one of the Hyuga Clan's most prized taijutsu techniques? I'm impressed," Neji genuinely praised.

"That fancy combo isn't as great as it seems once dissected through the Sharingan," Sasuke replied. "Technically, it's only a repeat of the first sixteen strikes, which I managed to see when you hit both my clones and myself, thus giving me the means to counter them. That attack won't work on me again."

"I wouldn't be so confident in your abilities, Sasuke. Just because you see a hit aimed at you, it doesn't mean you'll be able to prevent

it in time," Neji countered, as his position relaxed. "I believe that was enough of a warm up, don't you think so?"

"I couldn't agree more," Sasuke replied, as his lips curved into a smirk. "I can't wait to see that technique you bragged about so much a few moments ago."

"Then I won't keep you waiting any longer," Neji then crossed his arms in front of him, a position the other members of the Close Combat Squad knew too well. He then quickly spread his arms as a burst of chakra pulsed from his body.

"Gate of Opening: Open!"

The resulting burst of chakra blew a powerful wind in every direction, as a green aura started to slowly appear around his body. Even those who weren't sensors could feel the resulting power boost.

"Whoa!" Naruto said in awe. He turned at the remaining members of Team Gai. "Didn't know that Neji could use the Gates too!"

"Well, it's only fitting, given that he was the only one of use that didn't learn to use them yet," Tenten replied, as she shrugged.

"Neji saw them as the invaluable tools they are, and requested me to teach him how to use them," Gai proudly added. "Now, my team is the first ninja squad in Konoha, probably in the world, that knows how to use the Celestial Gates."

"Since Gai-sensei and Lee use the Gates for their enhanced taijutsu moves, and I use them with armed combat, Neji thought he could create a new school of Gentle Fist by combining it."

"Nii-san said he was inspired by seeing me combining Gentle Fist with elemental manipulation," Hinata chimed in, with a slight and uncharacteristic edge of pride.

"Well, this certainly looks like something worth seeing!" an excited Naruto said as his eyes returned to the combat.

While this wasn't the first time he opened the Celestial Gates, Neji would never stop enjoying the rush of power result of the larger amounts of chakra surging through his body. Feeling more confident than ever, the Hyuga prodigy rushed towards Sasuke, ready to strike.

For his part, the Uchiha could barely dodge the much faster Neji's palm strike -and would have been unable to if it wasn't for his Sharingan- while Neji continued to launch a flurry of palm strikes, some of which were blocked or dodged, while others found its mark.

"Damn it, so this is what he meant with my Sharingan won't be able to keep it up!" Sasuke thought, as he tried as best as he could to dodge the wave of soft but painful strikes. *"I need to put up some distance!"*

Sasuke made a hand seal, and Body Flickered a few meters back. However, in less than a second, he saw a green flash, and Neji was in front of him already, continuing his onslaught.

"What do you think of my speed? And that's just with one Gate opened," Neji boasted as he reengaged Sasuke.

"I admit is impressive," Sasuke conceded, as he started to make hand seals with one hand while using the other to defend. "But let's see how your Gentle Fist does against an opponent you can't touch! Fire Release: Burning Man!"

Sasuke burst into flames, before they stabilized, forming a fiery cloak around the Uchiha. Naturally, Neji stopped attacking, and his confident expression morphed into a thoughtful one, as his brain tried to come up with a way to harm his opponent. It was Sasuke's turn to sport a confident and even smug grin.

"I can't believe I didn't do this earlier," Sasuke admitted. "Guess my pride didn't allow me to use my best moves from the very beginning."

"While withholding your true power is a valid tactic sometimes, doing so due to a sense of pride is something I'd call 'beyond stupid'," Neji replied, prompting Sasuke back into his usual frowning expression.

"You didn't show me your true power from the start as well," Sasuke retorted.

"Because I wanted to assess my opponent's abilities and capabilities first. And now, I have an approximate measure of what I'm going against," Neji explained.

"Measure THIS then!" Sasuke replied as he shot forward towards Neji, leaving a trail of fire behind.

Using his enhanced speed, Neji dodged Sasuke's charge, and moved to the side. However, the cloak of fire somehow increased Sasuke's speed as well, and the Uchiha was now able to match the Hyuga in that department. They spent a few seconds engaged in a game of cat and mouse, with Sasuke chasing and attacking Neji, and the latter evading and dodging him. That's it, until the Hyuga managed to find a window of opportunity long enough to prepare his next move. He slipped once again into the stance used for the Eight Trigrams Combo.

"Let's see how well you do against this," Neji announced, as he prepared to attack. "Eight Trigrams: Sixteen Exploding Strikes!"

While some people in Sasuke's situation would have believed that there's no way taijutsu, even the Gentle Fist, could bypass a shield of fire, most people didn't have a Sharingan. Thanks to his ocular power, the Uchiha could see, much to his worry, that Neji was gathering an inordinate amount of chakra into his hands.

"This is bad!" Sasuke thought as he moved to dodge the strike.

"Two Strikes!" Neji delivered two palm hits that, as the name implied, created two small chakra concussive blasts upon hitting the target, effectively bypassing Sasuke's fire cloak, but leaving Neji unharmed. "Four Strikes!" two more strikes were delivered, to the same effect. "Eight Strikes!"

"His palm strikes aren't closing my chakra points, but those blasts are making a number on my body!" Sasuke noted, trying to contain the pain caused by the hits. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A clone of Sasuke appeared before the original.

"Sixteen Strikes!" Neji finished the short but devastating combo, though it was wasted on the clone Sasuke summoned in the nick of time.

Sasuke put some distance, panting heavily. He wasn't expecting that Neji would aside the subtle damage usually caused by the Gentle Fist and replace it with brutish explosions. Then again, that was probably the idea.

"Pity I was unable to finish the combo properly," Neji lamented, shaking his head in disappointment. "Then again, you're not Naruto. Using Shadow Clones so lightly will hinder you in the long term. Your chakra levels decreased substantially."

"That might be true, but never underestimate me. I still have plenty of chakra to spare," Sasuke replied.

"After what happened the last time, I would never even dream about underestimating you," Neji sincerely admitted. "In fact, I think it's about time to step up my game even further. Gate of Healing, open!"

Meanwhile, to the onlookers, the match had become even more interesting now.

"How many Gates can Neji open?" Naruto asked.

"Neji can open up to three Gates right now, just like myself," Tenten replied. "We're working on the fourth one, but so far we've been unable to handle the strain caused by the withdrawal backlash."

"Don't worry, Tenten, just keep training! That's how both Gai-sensei and I managed to surpass our limits!" Lee chimed in, with his usual optimist demeanor.

"Some limits can't be overcome by mere training, Lee," Tenten replied.

"Nonsense! That's just unyouthful talk from a quitter!" an indignant Lee replied.

"So are you telling me that, if you train a lot, you'd be able to use ninjutsu?" Tenten sharply asked. This managed to shut Lee into a stunned silence, as he wordlessly accepted Tenten's previous statement. "Thought so."

Meanwhile, Hinata was watching the fight with her Byakugan activated, in order to get a better assessment of the situation.

"Neji-niisan was right, Sasuke-san wasted a lot of chakra using Shadow Clones so carelessly," Hinata confirmed. "But the Gates is consuming niisan's chakra at a fast rate. The match won't last much longer."

"My money's on Sasuke. We've fought quite a lot of times this past year, and he got really strong," Naruto stated.

"And you just saw Neji-niisan also spent a lot of time growing stronger," Hinata replied, almost with a hint of animosity.

Back to the match, Neji and Sasuke continued trading blows, producing a strong gust of wind every time they clashed. Neji's blows created shockwaves upon impacting, while Sasuke's fire aura shot fireballs with every move the Uchiha made. However, he deactivated it after a few moments in order to save chakra.

"Smart move," Neji told Sasuke.

"I'm not the only one whose chakra is quickly burning," Sasuke said as he stabbed his katana into the ground and made several hand seals, this time with both hands, before grabbing his katana and unsheathing his shoto once again. "Fire Release: Burning Edge! Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Once again, Sasuke's katana was wreathed in flames, while his shoto started to crackle with electricity. Lastly, he crossed both blades, casting a beam of fire surrounded by electricity from the intersection point at Neji.

"Double Elemental Release: Plasma Beam!"

Neji turned into a green blur as he outran the destructive beam aimed at him. Sasuke moved his crossed weapons in his efforts to hit Neji, leaving a trail of burned earth behind. In no time, Neji managed to reach mid distance, and prepared for his next attack.

"Eight Trigrams, Invisible Palm!"

Neji started to thrust both palms back and forth, generating spectral arms made of chakra that flew at Sasuke. The Uchiha parried all the hits with his elemental-enhanced weapons, but the strikes packed so much power they pushed the Uchiha back with each blow. Neji finished the combo with a double palm strike that blew Sasuke's weapons out of his hands and pushed him so hard, he fell on his back.

"This is over!" Neji proclaimed as he prepared for the finishing move.

Sasuke saw Neji gathering chakra on the tip of his fingers, and knew whatever he was preparing, it couldn't be good. Thankfully, he rolled on his back in time to avoid the strike -which created a small crater on the ground-, got on his feet, and managed to retrieve his shoto.

"Don't underestimate me!" Sasuke indignantly shouted.

"This IS over," Neji insisted. "Gate of Life open!"

Another burst of chakra, this one even more intense than the previous two, shook the battleground. Neji's green aura became more intense, as his pale skin started to take a reddish tint. A powerful wind started to blow. Sasuke made a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A single clone appeared besides Sasuke, and both he and his clone continued making hand seals, a different sequence each.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

The clone blew a massive fireball at Neji, as the real Sasuke prepared his next attack.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Sasuke released an array of lightning bolts at his fireball, coating it with electricity. Neji, however, didn't look impressed.

"I've been looking for an opportunity to use this," the Hyuga prodigy stated, as he started to spin. "Heavenly Spinning Lotus!"

Neji turned into a green spinning chakra dome that successfully deflected Sasuke's bi-elemental attack. The Uchiha, however, wasn't impressed.

"So, a beefed up Heavenly Spin. It won't help you any-what!?" he asked in shock.

Much to his surprise, Neji started to move -rather fast- while still spinning.

"The hell!? How can he move?" Sasuke asked, visibly taken aback.

The Uchiha tossed a few shuriken at Neji, but as expected, they failed to slow him down. Sasuke leaped above the spinning Hyuga

and landed besides him, but Neji merely moved in the opposite direction. Sasuke sheathed his shoto before retrieving his katana from the ground.

"Thanks to the additional power provided by the Gates, I can now use some chakra to propel myself while I'm still spinning," Neji thought. *"The Hyuga's Ultimate Defense can now be used as a weapon to attack!"*

Sasuke's hands flew through hand seals as he prepared his last attack. *"Let's hope this can be enough to counter that technique!"* he worriedly thought.

Sasuke gripped his sword with both hands, and the blade was quickly covered in both fire and electricity, before dashing at Neji.

"Double Elemental Release: Plasma Blade!"

Sasuke's elemental sword struck Neji's spinning chakra dome. The two forces clashing resulted in a powerful wind blowing outwards as flames, lightning sparks and chakra bursts flew everywhere. Both forces struggled against each other, neither of them bulging one bit. And finally, like it happened all the time Sasuke used that jutsu, when the energy gathered reached a critical point, it was released at once in the form of a large explosion, which hurled both combatants up in the air, before they both landed in the floor with a loud thud.

Shizune and Gai quickly went to check their respective students. They both were bruised and badly beaten, but they didn't have any serious injury. They would be fine after being healing.

The onlookers started to murmur among themselves, until somebody, namely Lee, voiced what most of them were thinking.

"So... who wins?" the green clad ninja asked.

"Since both Neji and Sasuke are unable to continue fighting on their own, then it's a tie," Gai declared. "But even if none of you won, it

was a fight to remember! You showed everybody the height of your passion and your flames of youth!"

"Karin, go and heal Neji-kun! Sakura, help me treat Sasuke-kun!" Shizune instructed.

"Right!" Karin obediently said as she rushed towards her boyfriend, kneeling before his fallen body, and started to heal his injuries, not with her innate ability, but with the Mystical Palm Jutsu. It seemed that, despite the intensity of the match, Sasuke made sure not to make any irreparable damage.

Neji himself didn't deal any crippling blow to Sasuke either. Gai was a bit worried that, even after all this time, the Hyuga prodigy would be hungry for payback.

"So... how was I?" Neji asked Karin.

"You were impressive, honey," Karin earnestly told him as she treated his wounds. "I wish you could have seen yourself."

"I couldn't be that impressive, given that I still lost," Neji bemoaned.

"You didn't lose, it was a tie," Karin pointed out.

"I didn't win, hence I lost," Neji insisted.

"Sasuke didn't win either," Karin countered, sounding a bit annoyed now.

"Well, in that case-AW!" Neji yelped after Karin pressed one of his wounds.

"You didn't lose, end of discussion!" Karin sternly stated. "Now shut up while I heal you!"

Neji let out a sigh, but smiled as well. "Of course, Karin."

Meanwhile, Sakura and Shizune were having a similar conversation with Sasuke.

"You did great, Sasuke-kun. Truly an amazing display," Sakura sincerely praised.

"I didn't so great if I was unable to win," Sasuke replied.

"You were holding back," Sakura justified.

"While I was with-holding my most powerful moves, I was still giving it my all," Sasuke insisted.

"You simply weren't fighting with the intent to kill, despite the magnitude of your attacks. You kept the fight to a level your opponent was able to follow, which is what we should do when sparring," Shizune interceded. "Hence, you should feel proud of your fight. Just as I am."

Like Neji before, Sasuke decided not to press the issue. So far, no Uchiha had ever won an argument against Shizune, and he didn't have any hopes of being the first one.

Realizing that there was nothing else to see, most of the onlookers - with the exception of Sasuke and Neji's respective teammates and sensei - quickly dispersed and went their separate ways to do their daily tasks and jobs.

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It would be lunchtime soon, and thus, Naruto and Hinata were heading towards the latter's house. They had some free time during the afternoon, and Hinata wanted to spend it training alongside Hanabi, and asked Naruto if he wanted to tag along, and naturally, he agreed. She also asked him to have lunch with her family.

"Hanabi's finally starting to get the hang of elemental manipulation," Hinata commented. "In less time than I did, might I add. Not that

surprising, since she has far more talent than I."

"Come on, don't sell yourself short. You also had the inventiveness of combining the Gentle Fist with Lightning Release," Naruto reminded her. "If it wasn't for you, Neji wouldn't have had the idea of combining it with the Celestial Gates."

"But I did it because of my inability to master the proper Gentle Fist," Hinata replied.

"So? That just meant that your talents laid elsewhere. You turned a weakness into a strength," Naruto insisted.

Hinata couldn't help but giggle. She loved when Naruto praised her like that, even if she felt sometimes it was undeserved.

"Speaking of which, Hinata, I know you want to focus on Hanabi, but I'd also like to continue with my training on Lightning Release," Naruto told her.

"I don't know why you're so insistent about it. You already have mastered wind and water. Isn't that enough for a Jonin promotion?" Hinata asked.

During the past year, Naruto asked Haku to teach him how to use Water Release jutsu, given that wind's weakness was fire. After he mastered Water Release to an acceptable level, he then went to Hinata with the same request. And while Hinata was happy to oblige, she always thought such thing wasn't necessary.

"For a promotion, yes, but for me? Not in the slightest," Naruto sharply replied. "The Old Man mastered all five elements, and I'm not going to be any less. But don't think I'm doing this out of pride, having all five elements at my disposal will make me a force to be reckoned with."

"With that Sage Mode of yours, I think you already qualify as that," Hinata pointed out, giggling a bit.

"What about you, Hinata? You're pretty good with lightning already. Don't you plan on learning a second element?" Naruto asked.

Hinata put her finger on her lips, as she started to think. "Mmmmm... I didn't think about that until you mentioned that. So far, I've been good with what I already have."

"Remember that if you want that Jonin promotion, you'll need two elements," Naruto reminded her. He left the part about having an outstanding mastery of another discipline unsaid, since he felt it wouldn't be nice to point out his girlfriend's shortcomings.

"Well, first I want to focus on being promoted to Special Jonin. I mean, we're still young, there's no hurry, right?" Hinata asked him.

"Kakashi-sensei was a Jonin when he was twelve," Naruto stated.

"Naruto-kun, this isn't a competition. While your desire to surpass yourself is admirable, you shouldn't be concerned about what Kakashi-sensei or other people did. Other people's accomplishments don't diminish your own," Hinata sagely said.

"Guess so. Still, can't help to feel like that," Naruto replied. "By the way, you didn't answer my question."

"I believe I can afford learning a second element now. Besides, with how much I've been helping Hanabi-chan with her training in Fire Release, I believe I have a good base to start with that," Hinata stated.

"Besides, fire is wind's weakness, which is lightning's weakness," Naruto pointed out.

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Memorial Stone

"You know Kakashi, after all what happened, I thought I'd stop seeing you here."

Kakashi turned around, and saw his friend and rival Gai, standing there with his arms crossed, shooting him a mildly disapproving stare.

"I know it makes no sense, but what can I say, some habits are hard to break," the silver haired Jonin replied. "I just... I can't believe that the two of them are still alive."

"Yes. People don't come back from the dead like that. Even the Impure World resurrection doesn't work that way," Gai continued. "While what happened to Obito is indeed tragic, I'd expect you to be a bit happier to have Rin back."

"I am happy," Kakashi pointed out.

Skeptical, Gai raised an eyebrow. "You don't look all that happier to me."

"You know Gai, people have different ways of expressing happiness. Not all of us go around screaming about youth at the top of our lungs," Kakashi softly but mockingly said.

"WHOA! Don't say anything you might regret! You may be my rival, but there are lines that are never meant to be crossed!" Gai angrily shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at the Copy Ninja. Kakashi merely chuckled. "I think you should spend some time with Rin. She needs you more than ever."

"I know. I do spend time with her whenever I can. We all do," Kakashi replied. "Kurenai took her to eat out today," Kakashi told him.

"How is she doing?" Gai asked.

"Good, I think, but I couldn't really tell," Kakashi replied, sighing. "She looks like she's getting used to her new life and how everything changed since the day she died. But there's something that disturbs her, I know that. But when I ask her, she tells me everything's fine."

"Rin was -is- a very selfless girl, she probably doesn't want to worry you, or anybody," Gai concluded. "Then again, it's obvious that what bothers her is Obito. It's what bothers you as well these days, am I right?"

"Guess that there's no point in denying it," Kakashi conceded, and sighed. "I just can't imagine what did he go through in order to end up part of Akatsuki. And not just that, but the fact that he was behind so many tragedies, starting with the Nine Tails' attack..."

"You know what this means, Kakashi?" Gai asked, now in his usual boisterous tone. "We need to train even more now! No doubt we will meet Obito again in combat, and when that day comes, we need to be ready in order to protect our village, and make sure to knock some sense into that empty head of his!"

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Meanwhile, in Konoha's downtown, just as Kakashi said, Kurenai and Rin were having lunch together. Even if Rin didn't really need to eat, she liked to do so, since it made her feel more human and less... whatever she was now. So far, they two of them had remained silent, but the red eyed Jonin decided to break the ice.

"So, how was your day at work?" Kurenai asked.

"Good, I guess. Nothing worth mentioning happened. And quite frankly, I'm starting to enjoy the monotony," Rin admitted, as she took a bite of the hake she was eating. "It's relaxing, and leaves me time to think."

"So you're not planning to return to active duty anytime soon," Kurenai concluded.

"I don't think I'm ready yet," Rin replied.

Kurenai smiled emphatically. "It's okay, just take all the time you need. All of us we'll be here to support you."

Rin smiled back at her. "Thanks. I don't think I could have done this alone."

"You came back from the death, girl. I'm sure there's little to nothing impossible to you now," Kurenai said.

That made Rin chuckle. "If only that were true. You know, you became quite the motivational."

"What do you mean 'I became'?" Kurenai asked, mildly indignant. "I have always been like this! But I admit that being a Jonin-sensei allowed me to hone my skills in that area."

"You know, I always wanted to become a Jonin-sensei. I think I'd make a good teacher. Minato-sensei was a very good reference," Rin mentioned. "And you got to teach his son."

"Naruto's a hard worker, and quite eager to learn. The dream of any teacher. But he sometimes can exhaust me," Kurenai said, chuckling lightly. "Not to say my other two pupils aren't great either."

"I always wanted to meet Naruto. But whenever I plan to do so... I don't know what I can tell him," Rin confessed.

"I can introduce you to him if you want. To my whole team, really. I'm sure you'll like all of them," Kurenai suggested.

"I think I already met one of them, if briefly. The girly looking boy with the Ice Release. Haku was it, right?" Rin asked. Kurenai nodded affirmatively. "He seemed nice."

"He is. Like you, he also went through a lot. In fact, all of them had their own share of past tragedies, yet they didn't let them to define who they are," Kurenai replied. "So, how about if you come with us the next time we have a training session? I'm sure it'd be good for you. You should make a few friends your age." That last comment made Rin to lower her head in sadness, and Kurenai realized too

late what she just said. Her hands flew to her mouth. "Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to-"

"No, it's okay. It has to be just as weird for the both of us, you and the others being adults, and me still being a teenager," Rin replied.

"At least, you won't stay like that forever. I notice you're getting taller," Kurenai pointed out.

"Obito said that he did something similar to whatever they did to him in order to save his life. I was expecting to grow up into an adult, given that he did. But truth be told, I was a bit scared to be stuck like this forever," Rin told her.

"Look at the bright side. Eternal youth!" Kurenai pointed out.

Rin chuckled, and rolled her eyes. "Eternal life isn't all that great if you can't enjoy it to its fullest. For example, you wouldn't be able to drink."

That comment made the Genjutsu Mistress to rethink what she said. While she wasn't a drunk, she did enjoy alcohol regularly, and she wouldn't be so eager to give up such a pleasure.

"And I wouldn't be able to marry and start a family. Speaking of which, when do you plan to marry Asuma?" Rin cheekily asked.

Kurenai was a bit taken aback by the question. But then again, he had to admit that she and Asuma weren't exactly subtle.

"There's still time for that," Kurenai hand waved. "What about you? Did you meet any boy worth pursuing?"

"I don't think I'm ready for a relationship just now," Rin admitted. "But I think you're right in that I should try to get to know some people my age."

"Good! My students would love to meet you!"

...

Senju Residence

That afternoon, Hagane and Kaida were in the house's backyard, entertaining a small, few months old baby boy with both black hair and black eyes. They were using small scale ninjutsu to create spectacular visuals that the baby would enjoy. The baby would giggle and clap whenever he saw something he liked, which was often.

The house's back door opened from the inside, revealing a smiling Shizune. The baby smiled and tried to stand up upon seeing the medic-nin.

"Aw, there you are!" Shizune happily cooed as she held the baby in her arms. "Did you miss mommy, Shiro-kun? Because mommy misses you a lot when she's at work,"

Six months after her wedding, Shizune gave birth to a baby boy, which they named Shiro. This caused a lot of people to groan and roll their eyes, but neither Shizune nor Shisui paid them any attention.

"So, did he gave you much trouble?" Shizune asked.

Both twins shook her head in unison.

"Not at all. Thankfully he didn't cry today," Hagane mentioned.

"Because he's a good boy, isn't he?" Shizune cooed again, making Shiro giggle. "Anyway, now that I'm done for the day, I can take him out of your hands."

"Will you bring him tomorrow?" Kaida asked, almost pleading.

"Probably, yeah," Shizune replied. "I didn't see Tsunade-sama, is she still at work?"

"Nope, she is home. I think she's upstairs taking a nap. Let me check," Kaida took a deep breath.

[illegible]

A second later, a window in the second floor opened, revealing a very angry Tsunade.

"Goddamn it Kaida, what the hell did I say about yelling like that!?" Tsunade angrily shouted back. Then she noticed Shizune and Shiro, and her murderous expression changed into a happy one. "Oh, Shizune, didn't see you! And you brought Shiro-kun! Wait a second!"

Not wanting to waste a moment, Tsunade jumped out of the window, shattering the earth upon landing, leaving a small crater with spreading cracks.

"Kaida, honey, fix that, please," Tsunade told her.

Kaida groaned and rolled her eyes, but complied. Making a few hand seals, she used her powers to repair the damage to the grass and the ground.

"I'm the closest thing Konoha has to a princess, yet I always find myself doing gardening jobs..." the white haired girl angrily groaned.

Tsunade ignored her daughter's complaints and took Shiro from Shizune's arms. Shiro giggled as he started to pull Tsunade's bangs.

"Ow!" Tsunade cried.

"Come on Shiro-kun, don't do that to grandma," Shizune said, grabbing the baby's hand.

Tsunade's eyes narrowed, as she shot her former apprentice a murderous look. "Shizune, what did we say about the G-word?"

"Awww, it isn't cute, Shiro-kun? Grandma hates being reminded she's not young anymore," Shizune cooed in an incredibly mocking

way.

Tsunade rolled her eyes, but she didn't do anything else. Of course, Shizune was more than aware that, if any other person sassed Tsunade the way she did, the Slug Princess would shatter every bone in their bodies without mercy. Even then, Shizune still knew not to push her luck.

"Any progress on the investigation regarding the cursed seal?" Shizune asked.

Tsunade shook her head. "Some, but not as much as we would want. There are elements in the seal we are unaware of its nature, though one of my researchers think there's a key component based on an unknown Bloodline Limit."

"And the investigation regarding Orochimaru's possible hideouts?" Shizune asked again.

"We did locate some of them, but they were mere laboratories and glorified storage warehouses, nothing big so far," Tsunade replied.

"Orochimaru uses a ninja village to gather funds, we should be able to track that," Shizune pointed out.

Once again, Tsunade shook her head. "Jiraiya and I thought the same, but Orochimaru already thought of that. Rather than having the customers come to his village, if it ever exists, he sends his ninjas to offer their service to potential customers. And those ninjas more often than not never come from the same place. Basically, just like how his Akatsuki friends operate."

"Drats. At this pace, we will never find again until he decides to stop hiding. And by the time he does that, he might have a whole slew of nasty surprises prepared for us," Shizune lamented.

Tsunade sighed. "If he succeeded in kidnapping my children, we may had never seen them again. We were lucky Naruto and his

friends tracked them in time."

"I prefer not to think what would have happened," Shizune then looked at the blissfully unaware Shiro in Tsunade's arms. "Shisui and I are constantly afraid that somebody might want to target our son as well, given he's the first Uchiha born after the insurrection."

"You know what happens to people who target out family. I'm sure Obito will never forget the beating she got from us that night," Tsunade stated.

...

Hokage's Office

"Well, this is the last meeting of the day," Jiraiya told his predecessor turned advisor. "I can't wait to get back home with my wife and kids."

"A feeling I'm familiar with, much to my distaste," Hiruzen agreed. "Then again, today hasn't been a particularly busy day."

"If only all days could been like this one," Jiraiya mentioned.

The office's door opened, revealing Shisui Uchiha. He was holding a folder in one of his hands.

"Hokage-sama. Sarutobi-sama," the black haired man respectfully greeted.

"Look at that, my son-in-law!" Jiraiya heartily said. "So, what bring you here, Shisui?"

"I've been working on a project for this past year, and I believe it's ready to be implemented. Said project would benefit Konoha immensely," Shisui explained as he handled the folder to Jiraiya.

"Let's see it then," the Toad Sage replied, as he opened the folder and took a look at its contents, an action Hiruzen mimicked.

However, as they read Shisui's proposal, their cheerful and relaxed expressions morphed into tense and disapproving ones, much to the Uchiha's discomfort.

"So you want to... revive the Military Police?" Jiraiya asked, shooting an skeptical look at the young man.

"I know the implications, but listen to me on this one. There are a lot of ninja, mostly people with families and small kids to take care such as myself that would love to have a job that doesn't require them to leave the village for long periods of time. Not to mention that it would release most Chunin from doing the job the Police used to do in the past," Shisui explained.

"I understand your concerns, Shisui, but even with the benefits you exposed, the matter is far more complex than it appears," Jiraiya replied.

"The Military Police was strongly associated with the Uchiha, to the point that it incorporated the clan's crest into its logo. Many people may see this as a ruse for your clan to recover their lost power and influence," Sarutobi explained, trying to sound as reassuring as he could.

"I know about that, but here's the thing: everybody will be able to join the Police, not just the Uchiha. Which was kind of a given, since even if we count Shizune-chan as an Uchiha, there's only four of us to man it," Shisui added with an awkward laugh.

"You raise good points. And I do agree that Konoha would become more efficient with the Police back," Jiraiya agreed, much to Shisui's joy. "The hard part is how are going to implement it without reopening the old wounds of the Uchiha Insurrection."

"I think I may have an idea," Sarutobi interceded. "We can do a survey, asking both the ninja civilian population about it, but trying to push into the forefront the benefits of having the Police back in force in order to gain support."

"Good idea. However, in order to placate those who distrusts the Uchiha, I think it should be run by somebody other than you or your clansmen. I mean, you planned to become its new chief, am I right?" Jiraiya asked.

Shisui nodded. "Indeed, but trust me, I don't mind giving up that if the Police can be reinstated."

"Very well then, tomorrow I'll get the survey started. I'm sure we can make this project into reality," Jiraiya stated as he closed the folder, and handed it to Hiruzen, who placed it inside one of the shelves.

"Thank you, Hokage-sama! You won't regret this!" an enthusiastic Shisui stated.

"I'm sure I won't. Now everybody, let's get the hell out of here! It's closing time!" Jiraiya eagerly said as he got up from his chair.

...

Next morning appeared to be just another uneventful day like those in the past few months. The night shift guards on the north gate were finally able to leave their posts as their replacements for the morning shift, Shikamaru, Ino and Choji, appeared to take their place.

"Boy, I hate gate duty," Ino said with a yawn. "It's even worse than the worst of Asuma-sensei's training."

"Eh, it's not so bad," Shikamaru replied. "I mean, after all the deadly missions we got as Genin, I learned to appreciate the joys of a monotonous chore."

"Of course you'd say that. I can't believe you find checking passports and interrogating merchants who come into the village enjoyable," Ino said as she rolled her eyes.

Choji, who had been silently eating from a bag of chips, spoke for the first time. "Somebody is coming,"

"This soon? We barely opened the gates," Ino groaned.

Shikamaru narrowed his eyes as he focused his eyesight on the newcomers. It was a rather large group, much larger than usual, composed of a dozen people at least. Upon getting closer, they noticed they were ninja.

"They're ninja," Shikamaru warned his friends. "Mist ninja, if their forehead protectors are any indicators."

Worry spread among the trio, as they thought what they should do. Having a group of ninja from a non-allied village were never good news.

"Should we warn anybody?" Choji asked.

"Let's wait a bit. If they were enemies, they wouldn't be walking towards the gate like that," Shikamaru replied.

"Maybe they're a distraction," Ino conjectured.

"I'll deal with this, you two stay behind. In case it's a ruse, run back into the village and alert everybody," Shikamaru instructed. Ino and Choji nodded.

Minutes turned into hours as the group of Kiri ninja got closer. Shikamaru now could see that it was being led by a very tall and attractive redheaded woman. Upon getting closer, the woman noticed the Nara, and shot him a smile that could melt any man, regardless of his sexual orientation.

"Halt," Shikamaru told the group, trying to sound commanding, who promptly stopped in front of him. "State your name and purpose."

"Of course, handsome," the redheaded woman said with a tender smile, making Shikamaru blush. "My name is Mei Terumi, leader of the Kirigakure Liberation Movement. As for why I'm here, I wish to have an audience with your Hokage, if it's not asking much."

Author's Note: Yep, this new arc will cover the Kirigakure Civil War! Props to... well, nobody in particular, since nobody guessed it. Then again, I didn't leave any kind of clue as for what this arc would be about. And as you can expect, this arc will focus on Zabuza and to a lesser extent Haku.

I hope you liked the Sasuke vs Neji fight during the first half. It's my delayed apology for the admittedly lackluster match they had in the Chunin Exams preliminaries. I hope I made Neji justice with his new abilities. I mean, in canon we only saw the Celestial Gates applied to normal taijutsu, so I wondered how other arts, such as the Gentle Fist or Ninjutsu would benefit from the boost granted by the gates.

Like I said in the secondary title, I want to flesh out the other villages before the Five Kage Summit/Fourth Ninja War begins. I'll flesh out Suna way more during the Gaara Rescue Arc, and I have other arcs that will focus on Taki and Kumo. I'm still planning how to bring Iwa into the forefront without disrupting the flow of the story too much. The hardest part is that Iwa is the village with the least amount of canon characters to use, and I'm very reticent to add even more OCs.

Thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Anyway, hope you liked this chapter, as well as the arc that is to come, and don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Mists of the Past

Author's Note: I'm quite happy to see how eager most readers are about this arc. Truth be told, I was afraid that most people would react negatively and prefer if I went directly with Part II. Not that this arc is filler by any stretch of the imagination, since the events that are going to take place will affect future arcs in rather meaningful ways, but still.

Also, after more than a year of silence, "True Potential" is updating again! I think I recommended this story before, but I'm going to do it again, since it's one of the best and overall better written Naruhina fanfics out there.

Now, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 43:

Mists of the Past

or

Zabuza can't catch a break

...

Training Ground 21

When they traveled together, Zabuza had Haku wake up before sunrise so the two of them could have a good training session before they moved onto other matters. Such habit didn't change since they were forced to live in Konoha.

They were practicing some water jutsu at the edge of a lake before the Jonin decided to stop and rest for some time. Zabuza also decided to ask his protégé a few questions.

"You've been Chunin for quite some time now. How do you find the higher rank missions you're getting?" Zabuza asked.

Haku simply shrugged. "Not that difficult from the missions I did as a Genin, truth be told. Many missions ended up being way more dangerous than we believed. But in the end, I think it was for the better. I wouldn't be as strong as I am now if it wasn't for that."

"Indeed. You survived, and that meant that you were strong enough to deserve to continue living," Zabuza stated. "All you need is a little more experience before you can be of real help in my endeavor."

"How long until we can leave Konoha?" Haku asked.

"Given how long I've been here, I'd say it can't be longer than a couple years," Zabuza wondered, as he thought about it. "My track record is pretty much flawless. So flawless that I think Jiraiya doesn't want to let me go. But so far, he has proven to be a man of his word, and I trust he'll honor his end of our bargain."

"If Naruto-kun is anything to go by, I can say that the Hokage is the same as him," Haku agreed.

There was something about Haku, however, that didn't go unnoticed by Zabuza.

"You surprise me, Haku. I wasn't expecting you to be so eager to leave Konoha. You have friends and even a girlfriend here. Would you ditch them for me?" the swordsman skeptically asked.

"You know my answer. My loyalty will always lay with you, Zabuza-sama. If you didn't take me in, I would be dead right now. I have a debt I will never be able to repay," Haku replied.

While such a statement would make Zabuza feel proud and satisfied in the past, it made him feel rather conflicted. On one side, he didn't want to lose Haku, since he was a useful asset. On the other hand, he did care for the boy, regardless how much he wanted to deny it,

and the idea of forcing Haku to abandon the life he had built here made him feel uneasy.

However, before the former Kiri ninja had more time to ponder on his conflicted feelings, a lizard-masked ANBU appeared behind them.

"Zabuza, Haku. Your immediate presence is required by the Hokage. He's waiting for you in the Hokage Tower's Council Room," the ANBU stated in a cold and neutral tone before vanishing.

"Alright then, let's see why he wants to see us," Zabuza said as he and Haku headed back to the village.

...

Upon arriving to the Hokage Tower, the two Land of Water natives were greeted by an unsettling sight. Several Kiri ninja were in front of the Tower, being watched over by several Konoha ninja. Needless to say, this didn't bode well for the duo.

"Zabuza-sama, I have a bad feeling about this," Haku whispered to his master. "What should we do?"

"For the time being, let's play nice, and do what we're told to do. I don't think Jiraiya plans to hand us to Yagura like that," Zabuza reassured him.

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then prepare to fight like you never did," Zabuza grimly replied.

While they were restless on the inside, Zabuza and Haku entered the tower as if nothing weird happened. They reached the Council Room, where two ANBU stood guard, and opened the doors for them. What awaited for them there was certainly surprising.

"Well, here they are," Jiraiya stated, pleased, as he saw the duo enter the room. "Now that we're all here, we can finally begin."

The Council Room was a large room where most meetings were held. There was a long and large table in the middle, surrounded by several cushy chairs and cushions, with several drawers full of scrolls and thick folders resting against the walls. Jiraiya, Tsunade, and their sensei and former Hokage, Hirzuen Sarutobi, were the only Konoha ninja present.

There were other three ninja, two women and a boy, sitting around the table. The youngest two were a nervous looking young man with light blue hair who wore glasses, and an angry looking short girl with dark red hair. Zabuza didn't know who those two were -but the fact that they were carrying two of the seven swords didn't go unnoticed- he did recognize the third one, a woman in her late twenties with long, spiky dark red hair with a bang covering half her face, given that she was almost like a celebrity in Kirigakure.

"Mei Terumi," Zabuza dourly stated. "I must admit seeing you here is a surprise."

"Am I a good surprise, or a bad one?" Mei asked in her trademark sultry voice.

"That would depend on your reason to be here," Zabuza replied, before staring at Jiraiya. "Hokage-sama, I think I deserve an explanation for this."

"And you'll have it, Zabuza. But first, take a seat and let's hear what Miss Terumi has to say," Jiraiya replied.

Begrudgingly, Zabuza did as he was told, with Haku doing the same.

"And given that you two know each other, we can skip the introductions. Now, let's begin," Jiraiya said.

Mei cleared her throat before beginning. "Like all of you probably know, Kirigakure has been involved in a civil war these past few years. The war was a result of our village's increasingly bloodthirsty customs, which reached such point that civilians grew to hate us

ninja as if we were demons. After our original leader died, I took the duty to continue the fight," Mei recounted.

"And let me guess," Zabuza interrupted. "You want me to help you with your rebellion?"

"Yes, that's why I came here," Mei confirmed. "I'm aware of your current predicament, and want to negotiate with Hokage-dono the terms so you can be released from your probation and go back with us to liberate our home."

"You can't do that!" an outraged Zabuza shouted at Jiraiya. "I might have a debt with Konoha, but you can't sell me as if I was a slave!"

"Nobody's a slave here, Zabuza," Mei told him in a reassuring tone. "You'd work for me as any other ninja of Kirigakure. I don't plan to put you in chains and whip your back. Unless you're into that kind of stuff," she added with a giggle.

Zabuza didn't find that funny.

"What if I refuse?" Zabuza tentatively asked.

Mei looked slightly surprised, but overall unimpressed. "Well, I don't know why you should. We have common goals, wouldn't be for the best if we joined forces? You started a coup against Yagura years ago, the same coup that inspired this rebellion. However, we managed to amass way more resources than you did. Now you have a chance to finish what you started all those years ago."

"And once Yagura is deposed, who'll take his place? You?" Zabuza asked.

Mei looked as if the swordsman asked something glaringly obvious. "Well, yes. I'm leading the rebellion, and so far all my followers support me as the next Mizukage."

"That's where the problem lies. I threw that coup so *I* could be the next Mizukage, not somebody else! I fight to see *my* ambitions become a reality, not *yours* !" Zabuza angrily shouted.

"It isn't tradition for the strongest ninja to be the leader of a village?" Mei asked in a faux-innocent tone.

Zabuza's eye twitched upon catching the implication of that question.

"Are you implying that you're stronger than me?" Zabuza asked in a threatening tone.

Once again, Mei looked as if he said something obvious. "Well, yes. I mean, I know the extent of your capabilities, and they're impressive," Mei shoot him a condescending smile. "But compared to me, you don't even reach the sole of my boots."

Zabuza slammed his fist on the table. "Enough! I won't allow you to keep me insulting like that! You think that having two Bloodline Limits already makes you that strong? You have no idea of what true strength means!"

"Is that a challenge?" Mei asked, raising her visible eyebrow. "You want to fight me?"

"You can bet it is," Zabuza seethed.

"Okay then, let's make this more interesting. If you manage to defeat me, once I negotiate the terms of your release, I'll step down and appoint you the leader of the rebellion. All my resources and assets will be yours. But if I win, you'll join my forces and fight for me against Yagura and his minions. Deal?" Mei asked, showing a conciliating smile.

"You have no idea what you got yourself into, miss," Zabuza said as he stood up.

"Whoa there, calm down everybody!" Jiraiya asked, raising his voice. "Miss Terumi, you said the matter at hand was urgent. Can't this wait?"

"Don't worry, Hokage-dono. It won't take more than ten minutes," Mei replied as she stood up.

"Let them fight," Tsunade told Jiraiya, repressing a small giggle. "Seeing them argue and bicker is way funnier than any of the soap operas I watch."

"Zabuza-sama, is this really necessary?" Haku asked as he followed his master outside.

"Yes. We have to make clear who's in command here," Zabuza stated.

...

Outside the Tower, Five Minutes Later

Zabuza laid in the ground, trembling. His trusty Executioner's Blade was stabbed into the ground a few meters from him. His clothes were charred and had several burns across his body.

Mei, on the other hand, didn't look any worse for the wear. To make her obvious victory even more evident, she planted a foot on Zabuza's chest.

"Well, that was a fun spar, Zabuza-chan, but now we have a village to liberate," Mei then looked at the staring Jiraiya. "Once somebody heals Zabuza-chan, we can continue the meeting."

"Zabuza-sama," Haku called. "Now that it's clear who's in command here, what do we do?"

...

Ten minutes later, after Tsunade healed Zabuza and the swordsman was given new clothes to wear after the ones he was wearing were damaged, the Konoha and Kiri parties resumed their meeting inside the tower. And after a few minutes of bargaining, Zabuza's probation was finally over and he was free to leave Konoha if he chose to.

"Is Zabuza that important to you? I admit that he's a good ninja, but I doubt that a single man will be able to give you such an edge over your enemies," Jiraiya questioned. "Given how much you're willing to pay to have him back."

"Is not about him, but what he represents," Mei replied. "The Seven Swordsmen are the pride and joy of the Hidden Mist, and keeping their loyalty is a must for any Mizukage. Of the current wielders of the seven swords, three of them still serve Yagura, while other two are loyal to the rebellion. Of the two remaining, Kisame Hoshigaki joined the mercenary group Akatsuki, while Zabuza became an independent mercenary. At least, until a few years ago. After taking part in the Uchiha Insurrection, he vanished. Rumors said that he was now working for Konoha, but they were just that, rumors."

"And you decided to check if those rumors were true?" Hiruzen inquired.

"Oh, no. If I came here with such unreliable information, you could have claimed that Zabuza wasn't here. I came here once I had irrefutable evidence about Zabuza's change of allegiances," Mei replied.

"And that would be...?" Zabuza asked.

"It's a long and really funny story, but I guess I can tell," Mei replied, as she began. "You see, our main tactic to win this war is to target the ships that supply Kirigakure and steal them for us. Tracking the ships, however, was the hardest part, since they're manned by the best sailors money can buy, and often changed their sea routes in order to avoid us. About a year ago, this changed. The ships weren't so careful, and we were able to plunder plenty of them. Not just that,

but we also found out the business who owned those ships: The Gato Corporation."

All of them were aware of who Gato was and how he met his end. That was a very good lead that would take her to Zabuza.

"We decided to track and kill Gato in order to disable Yagura's main supply lines. My spies eventually tracked him in the small island nation of the Land of the Waves. But when we got there, it turns out that somebody beat us to the punch: Gato was already dead, and the company's board members have been trying to cover his demise, while they all fought to become the next CEO, which explained the company's poor state.

"The locals told my ninja everything: turns out, Gato wanted to take over the small country, and to do so bought all the ports and harbors. However, a man named Tazuna challenged Gato and started building a bridge to connect the island nation with the continent. Of course, Gato wasn't going to have any of that, and sent a squad of assassins to kill him. Tazuna managed to avoid them and escape to the continent. A month later, he returned with a Konoha ninja escort, who by all means fit Zabuza's description, who kept Gato's assassins at bay while the bridge was being built. When the bridge was close to being finished, Gato himself showed up, leading an army of thugs, in order to kill Tazuna and his ninja. None of them got out of there alive. The bridge was complete, and his job done, the ninja left."

Mei smiled widely as she leaned back on her chair as she put both hands behind her head. This was going to be really good. "My spies decided to follow this lead and go to Konoha. So imagine their surprise when they were about to cross the bridge, and saw 'The Great Zabuza Bridge' written in big, capital letters on it."

Zabuza's eyes opened so wide, they looked they would pop out of their sockets. "WHAT!?"

"You made such an impression there, that the villagers decided to name a bridge after you. So cute," Mei cooed.

"I'm going to kill that old man and his whole family!" Zabuza growled as his hands violently strangled an imaginary victim.

"Save all that killing intent for when we go back to fight Yagura's ninja," Mei calmly told him, as she stood up from her chair. "When the news of Zabuza joining my ranks spreads, not only it will provide a morale boost for my troops, but it will encourage others to join us as well. With three swordsmen supporting the rebellion, people will see we have more chances at winning this than what they initially thought. But let's not dwell in the past anymore. As the most experienced member of my swordsmen, you shall be their captain. Now I believe you should meet your kohai."

Mei made a hand motion, and the two young swordsmen walked towards Zabuza. The bespectacled boy introduced himself first.

"It's an h-honor to finally m-meet you, Zabuza-sempai. My name is Chojuro," the boy stammered as he made a polite bow.

"You have the Hiramekarei? What the hell happened to Mangetsu?" Zabuza asked in disbelief.

"Mangentsu-senpai sadly-"

"Shut up, it was a rhetorical question. If you have his preferred sword, I can figure out what happened to him," an irritated Zabuza growled. He then stared at the intimidated young man a bit more. "You're a kid. How old are you, ten?"

"A-Actually, I'm seventeen," Chojuro meekly said before returning to Mei's side.

The other swordsman, the redheaded girl, walked to Zabuza, ready to introduce herself.

"Another little kid? You've turned the Seven Swordsmen into a nursery!" Zabuza said, before the girl could introduce herself.

"I'm eighteen, you moron! And what I lack in height, I make up for in sheer deadliness! I bet killed more people than you!" the kunoichi protested.

"I find that unlikely, brat," Zabuza scoffed.

"Now, now, Zabuza-chan, don't be like that. Ameyuri Ringo proved to be worthy of the blades she carries, and so did Chojuro. Don't let their youth make you underestimate them," Mei interceded.

"Will you stop call me Zabuza-chan!?" Zabuza shouted indignantly.

"Absolutely not, Zabuza-chan," Mei replied with the most condescending and mocking smile she could.

Deciding the discussion was over, Mei then walked towards Haku, who so far had remained silent for the whole meeting.

"Reports said Zabuza had an apprentice of the Yuki clan. Is that you?" Mei asked.

Haku looked at both Zabuza and Jiraiya. The two of them nodded at him.

"Yes, Mei-sama, it's me. My name is Haku Yuki. A pleasure to meet you," Haku said, as he made a slight bow.

Mei smiled tenderly. "Such polite boy. Can I see a demonstration of your powers?"

Haku nodded and placed his hands in front of each other, as if grabbing an invisible object. Suddenly, a small ball of ice appeared between his hands, rotating around itself.

"Impressive. Good to see that at least one clan survived the Bloodline Purges," Mei stated in satisfaction.

"Do you want to hire Haku too for your campaign?" Jiraiya asked, a bit uneasy. While he was okay with letting Zabuza go, he wasn't so eager to lose the chance to give Konoha a new Bloodline Limit-bearing clan.

"Yes, but not just him," Mei replied, much to Jiraiya's confusion. "So far, we've been fighting a guerrilla war due not having enough numbers for a proper assault, but that's going to change soon. You see, my pirate fleet is very lucrative, and has amassed quite amount of wealth during the past years. Now is the moment to put that wealth to good use, and use it to expand our forces. Konoha made quite a display of power during the last few Chunin exams, especially the one that took place here. I'm very interested in the ninja of that generation that Haku-kun here belongs to. But I know that Konoha has a lot more to offer than that as well."

"Why us? Konoha and Kiri have always been enemies. Why do you think we should help you?" Hiruzen asked.

"You answered yourself: none of Kirigakure's allies would help me oust Yagura, so of course going to their enemies would be the best option," Mei explained. "Besides, given the way you stopped both the Uchiha Insurrection and Orochimaru's invasion, I'd say Konoha's ninja have a lot experience when it comes to warfare."

"I think I'll take that as a compliment," Jiraiya unsurely replied. "Anyway, how much money are you willing to spend, Miss Terumi?"

Mei's smile curved even more. "I was expecting you to ask that, Hokage-dono, and I'm sure that the answer won't disappoint you."

Turns out Mei was right. She was willing to spend A LOT of money. The money she spent to have Zabuza released from probation was nothing compared to all the money she brought with her. And while all that money could allow her to hire literally hundreds of Konoha ninja, the Mizukage hopeful decided that she preferred quality over quantity.

Her first choices were the squads formed by the generation known as the "Konoha 15", of which Naruto and Haku were part of, as well as their respective sensei. Her next choice were Jiraiya and Tsunade themselves. Jiraiya had to decline the offer, since he was a Kage, he didn't do missions and was needed at the village. Tsunade also disagreed, not just because her responsibilities at the Konoha Hospital, but because she was no longer a ninja. Still, she ensured Mei that the medics of the Medical Squad were the next best thing after her.

Mei wanted to recruit Itachi Uchiha as well, but unfortunately he was out of the village doing a long term intelligence gathering mission. Fortunately, Shisui was available to go -the fact that his wife was going was a big boon-. That means that little Shiro would be left under Jiraiya and Tsunade's care until the two of them returned.

By the time Mei ran out of money, she had hired one hundred and twenty two Konoha ninja, forty seven Jonin and Special Jonin and seventy five Chunin. Many people might think it was an insignificant number, given the scale of the campaign the rebel leader was embarked on, but if Jiraiya's word that those ninja were the best Konoha had to offer at the moment, she had high hopes they would be enough to tip the balance in her favor.

Lastly, Mei also asked for Zabuza's other two accomplices, Goizu and Meizu, the so called "Demon Brothers". Given that they weren't as big of a threat or an asset as Zabuza, Jiraiya agreed to hand them to Mei.

"Well, it was a pleasure doing business with you, Miss Terumi," Jiraiya stated once the contract forms had been filled and signed. "When do you plan to go back to the Land of Water?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow morning we shall return to the ships, so make sure your ninja are ready to go by then," Mei replied.

"They will, I can assure you that. Now, is there anything else you'd want to discuss before you go?" Jiraiya asked.

"As a matter of fact yes. There's an important fact about Yagura that you and your ninja need to know," Mei began.

"If you're going to tell me that he's a Jinchuriki, I already know that," Jiraiya replied, as he crossed his arms.

Mei was taken aback. Her visible eye was wide open in shock, her mouth agape. "How... how did you know?"

Jiraiya smirked. Despite being a married man, he loved whenever he managed to impress or surprise beautiful young women .

"Before being Hokage, I used to run Konoha's spy and intelligence network. Due a certain... series of events, I had to conduct an extensive research on Tailed Beasts and their Jinchuriki. Said research was rather fruitful. Konoha knows the identity of all nine Jinchuriki, as well as what Tailed Beast they hold," Jiraiya explained, though it was more of a boast.

"Really impressive," Mei conceded. "And do you know the level of control said Jinchuriki have over their beasts?"

"In some cases. I know that one of Kumo's Jinchuriki, the Raikage's brother, has perfect control over his Tailed Beast. The rest all have a varied range of control, though they aren't that big of a threat by themselves," Jiraiya replied.

"Well, in that case, let me provide you with some additional intel: Yagura also has perfect control over his Tailed Beast," Mei stated.

This time, it was Jiraiya, Tsunade and Hiruzen's turn to be surprised.

"What?" Hiruzen asked in surprise.

"That is troubling news," Tsunade interceded. "If the enemy has a perfect Jinchuriki, then your war has become much harder to win."

"I know. That's why I was banking on your son the Jinchuriki to balance things out," Mei replied, and before the others could have

any chance to ask, she added: "Yes, I know your son is a Jinchuriki. Of the Nine Tails, no less. Is not that hard to guess if one connects the dots, starting from the eponymous beast's attack on Konoha almost fifteen years ago."

"Sadly, while I did train Naruto to the best of my ability, and he has grown into a fine and powerful ninja, we've made little progress when it comes to control the Nine Tails' chakra," Jiraiya sadly admitted. Mei visibly deflated.

"Then we don't have any means to match Yagura's power. Still, we have to keep trying-"

"Actually, Naruto might be of help. He might not be able to use the Nine Tails' chakra on his whim, but he is a master of Senjutsu," Tsunade interceded.

That piece of information caught Mei's attention, who seemed to grow hopeful once again. "Senjutsu? Your son is a Sage? How? He's so young!" Mei asked, clearly surprised. "But if what you say is true... then we might still have a chance!"

"By the way, Miss Terumi, I noticed something. If you were interested in Naruto-kun, then that means that there are no jinchuriki among your ranks," Hiruzen deduced. "Does that mean the jinchuriki of the Six Tails is also loyal to Kirigakure?"

Mei shook her head. "Utakata is loyal to no one. He refused to serve Yagura, and thus he left the village, becoming a missing-nin. My spies managed to locate him before Yagura did, and I personally tried to persuade him to join us, but he refused to get involved in the war."

"Well, that's one thing less to worry about," Jiraiya stated. "Are you sure he will remain neutral?"

"That's the impression I got the time I spoke to him. In fact, he was planning to leave the Land of Water altogether," Mei replied.

"Alright then, if there's nothing left to discuss, then we're finished here," Jiraiya stated.

"I agree. I'll go to prepare for the journey back," Mei replied.

...

Konoha Hospital, that afternoon

Rin had just finished to check the last patient for the morning, and decided to go to the hospital's cafeteria in order to have some light snack before resuming her shift. However, before she could get there, an old friend of hers made himself known.

"Yo."

Rin turned around and saw Kakashi perched on an open window.

"Oh, hello, Kakashi," Rin greeted, showing a hint of a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to leave for a long term mission. I don't know how long it will last, but it can be weeks, even months," the Copy Ninja gravely said.

"Oh..." Rin held her hands a bit worried. "What is this mission about?"

"My team and I, as well as many other Konoha ninja, have been hired to take part in the Kirigakure Civil War," Kakashi announced.

The mere mention of Kirigakure made her heart stop for a second. The Hidden Mist. It was the ninja of that village who started everything. The ones who turned her into a jinchuriki, forcing her to commit suicide, which was unfortunately witnessed by the still living Obito, which in turn pushed him to join a terrorist organization that eventually resurrected her.

She still had nightmares in which Kiri ninja returned to take her back and do unspeakable things to her.

She did learn about the still ongoing civil war when she was catching up on all the events she missed the years she was inside that cocoon. Truth be told, she didn't care much which side won, and hoped that conflict wouldn't splat Konoha. Her hopes had been cruelly crushed.

"Well, I wanted to tell you that if you see that time passes and we don't return... so you don't think the worst has happened," Kakashi tried to reassure her.

Rin looked pensive, but still worried. She bit her lip while trying to figure out what to say, but Kakashi beat her to the punch

"So... how have you been?" Kakashi asked, even if he knew what her answer would be.

"Okay, I guess. I think I'm finally getting used to this new future Konoha, even if it took me some time," Rin replied. "Thankfully, I don't need to go to any of those seminars to update my medical knowledge anymore. I can't believe how much our medicine has advanced since I was... absent."

"Well, you can thank Tsunade-sama for coming back to the village. Thanks to her, we now have the best medic-nin of the whole Elemental Nations," Kakashi stated, then he added: "Of which you are part now."

"I may be a medic, but I'm not a ninja anymore," Rin sadly said, her statement being followed by an awkward silence.

Feeling the mood was way too somber, the Copy Ninja decided to change the topic. "I see you're getting taller. Whatever Obito did you, it didn't hamper your natural growth."

Rin chuckled, as her body visibly relaxed. "Yeah. I've never been so happy to see that my clothes didn't fit anymore."

"It's a good thing, because otherwise you would never be able to go out to drink at night with me and the others," Kakashi replied awkwardly, placing his hand behind his head.

Rin giggled a bit as well. "Well, I can still hang out with you guys, even if I can't drink yet. And even if it's kind of weird for a teen to hang out with grown men and women."

"Hopefully in the future, we'll look back at this moment, and we'll all laugh. Anyway, I better get going. Wish me luck," the silver haired Jonin said before leaving.

"Actually..." Rin said too late. She groaned, and resumed her way to the cafeteria.

Once there, she sat in one of the tables, and tried to push what Kakashi had told her out of her mind. However, it wasn't possible. She wouldn't have given any thought if it was any other village, but Kiri? The memories were too strong, and too painful. It was partially thanks to what happened during her final mission that she has been unable to return to active duty.

And now, Kiri came back to her doorstep, to finish what it started so many years ago.

"It's okay. I don't need to get myself involved in this," she said aloud. "Kakashi and the others will come back safe and sound. There's no need to worry."

But she was worried. Very worried. It couldn't be a coincidence that Konoha was once again involved with that accursed village. Then again, it may have never stopped being involved, since there was one of the infamous Seven Swordsmen working for the village for a couple years now.

And she had the dreadful sensation that something horrible was going to happen.

Pushing her fears aside, she stood up, and took a decision.

...

Hokage's Office

"Come in!" Jiraiya said after somebody knocked on his door.

The door opened, revealing Rin Nohara, better known as the girl who came back from the dead. So far, she had kept a low profile while working at the hospital. Kakashi hoped that, by giving her space, maybe one day she'll feel ready to return to active duty. According to the silver haired man, she had the potential to be almost as good as Tsunade-hime when it comes to medicine.

"Ah, good afternoon, Rin," Jiraiya greeted the girl with a sincere grin. "What can I do for you."

"Hokage-sama. I came here to ask you for a favor," Rin politely asked.

"Well, I'm all ears."

Rin took a deep breath, as if she needed to mentally prepare what she wanted to say. Jiraiya suspected it would be something big, and he wasn't wrong.

"I wish to take part in the mission to Kirigakure," the medic-nin finally said.

Jiraiya was taken aback. For a girl who spend so much time away from battle, and her history with that village, it was rather shocking.

"Uh... I think there may be a problem," Jiraiya replied, after the shock wore off. "You see, the leader of the rebels has already spent

all her money hiring other ninja. You weren't part of the selection process since you weren't in active duty."

"I don't care! I'll go for free!" Rin pleaded. "Please, Hokage-sama, I need to go!"

"Isn't this too much of a leap? I mean, you've been off duty for more than a year, and now you want to get involved in a war? Especially in Kirigakure. Given your history with that village, I never imagined you'd want to get involved," the Toad Sage told her.

"I know. It sounds so nonsensical but... that's exactly why I need to go," Rin asked. "I need to face Kirigakure again if I ever want to move on."

Jiraiya didn't say anything, as he pondered what to do, before he finally took a decision. "Alright then, you can go. Given you used to be teammates, you'll be a temporary aggregate to Kakashi's Animal Squad. Stay close to him and do everything she says, understood?"

Rin beamed with joy. A weird way to react to know you're going to a war, but then again, she asked for it in the first place.

"Understood, Hokage-sama. Thank you for this," Rin said as she repeatedly bowed before him.

...

The next day, as Jiraiya had promised, all the Konoha ninja Mei had hired for her rebellion were already in Konoha's northern gate, ready to go to the Land of Water. Some of the ninjas there, such as Kakashi, Rin and Gai, were veterans of the Third War, while most of them weren't, and their closest experience to war were either Orochimaru's invasion attempt a year ago, and/or the Uchiha Insurrection.

Regardless of this, all of them couldn't help but feel nervous. Going to war was way above the average mission, even those ranked as S.

Many of them were talking among each other, mostly to entertain themselves before it was time to go.

"Haku-kun, given that you're from the Land of Water, how do you feel about going back?" Hinata asked her teammate.

"Guess that you'll be happy to return to your previous home and help to liberate it," Naruto added.

"Truth be told, I hardly think in the Land of Water as my home anymore," Haku began. "I've been living in Konoha for so much time, coupled with the fact that that place was where I lost my original family... you can imagine my feelings towards that place are mixed at best."

"That's really sad. I can't imagine myself having such feelings for Konoha," Hinata mentioned. "Even with all the bad things that happened here."

"Konoha had the luck of being ruled by just men, and not bloodthirsty tyrants," Haku observed. "Something that wasn't always the case in Kirigakure's case."

"But thankfully our help to the rebellion will put an end to that," Naruto optimistically stated.

"Haku-kun... in case everything goes fine... what are you going to do?" Hinata fearfully asked. "I know Hokage-sama allowed you to leave with Zabuza-san the moment the latter finishes his probation."

"Honestly, I don't know," Haku admitted. "I don't want to leave Konoha. I made many friends and even have a girlfriend here. But my loyalty will always be with Zabuza-sama. If he returns to Kirigakure and wants me to go back with him, I have no choice."

"Why don't you tell Zabuza you're happy here, and ask him to stay?" Naruto asked.

"I can't do that. My debt with Zabuza-sama is one I will never be able to repay. Asking more is simply unthinkable," Haku replied.

While Naruto and Hinata were unable to understand such train of thought, they decided to respect it nonetheless, even if they really wanted to tell Haku to make his own decisions regardless of what Zabuza said.

"What about Tenten? Aren't you going to tell her about this?" Naruto asked. "You might have to break up with her."

Haku sighed again. "I've been trying to bring up the topic but... I just can't bring myself to have this conversation with her. I know I have too soon or later but... it's really hard for me."

"I hope Zabuza allows you to stay here once the war ends," Naruto said. "Or else, the team will be down to Hinata and I. And I don't want some newbie upstaging your place."

"I hope that too. But for the time being, we should focus on the mission at hand," Haku declared.

The three ninja saw their sensei walking towards them, with a small smile on her lips.

"I heard we'll be going soon. Are you guys ready?" the raven haired woman asked her students.

"Yup! You bet we are!" Naruto proudly declared. "You know, I've always wanted an opportunity to test everything I learned during the past years. The missions we got weren't all that big."

"You might find this way too big for your taste, Naruto," Kurenai advised. "Even if I do agree that you've grown powerful, there are always enemies out there ready to show you how weak you are."

"Besides, Mei-san wants you to help her fight the Mizukage, who is a perfect jinchuriki. Even with your Sage Mode, he's an opponent not

to be underestimated," Haku warned him.

"I know, and I'll be ready. I have a new jutsu capable of harming even a Tailed Beast," Naruto boasted.

Hinata then turned around noticed something. "Oh look, there's Meisan!"

Everybody's attention was drawn to the woman who would be their new boss for the foreseeable future. She was flanked by the three of the Seven Swordsmen loyal to her. Everybody stood to attention as she was ready to give a speech.

"It seems that all of you are here, good," Mei began, as she inspected the ninja in the front rows. "I know you're Konoha ninja, but as long as this campaign lasts, you will only be loyal to me. Fear not, since I won't test your loyalty by making you go against your village's interests. Your only enemies will be Yagura's men.

"Time is of essence, so we need to move fast. We will travel to the east until we reach the coast. There, I have a transport ship prepared to carry all of you to my base. Once we reach there, we will plan our next move. Now if somebody has any questions..." several hands were up. "... I suggest you to keep them to yourselves until we reach my main base."

All hands went down, as some ninja started to murmur.

"Well, I hope you guys are ready, because we're leaving NOW! So everybody, move!" Mei ordered as she and her entourage began their march towards the west coast.

While they took a couple seconds to react, the large group of Konoha ninja quickly began to move, following their temporary boss into the thick forests of the Land of Fire.

...

Back in Konoha, Hokage's Office

After seeing the Konoha ninjas hired by Mei, his son among them, finally leave for Kirigakure, Jiraiya returned to his never-ending pile of work. Of course, it didn't last long until the monotony of his work would be disturbed. An ANBU appeared in front of him.

"Hokage-sama, there's somebody who wants to see you," the ANBU informed.

"Hm? Weird. I don't have any appointments until one in the afternoon," Jiraiya replied. "Tell that person to ask for an appointment like everybody else."

"It's not some random person, Hokage-sama, but Danzo Shimura," the ANBU uneasily clarified.

Now that was something that got Jiraiya's attention. Despite being part of the Council of Elders, Danzo rarely showed up to the meetings, nor voiced any concerns over the way the Toad Sage ran the village. Until now, that's it.

While reluctant, Jiraiya decided that he could spare a moment to hear him out. "Tell him to come in."

"As you wish, Hokage-sama," the ANBU said before vanishing.

A couple seconds later, the door of his office opened, revealing the crippled one eyed man that was both his sensei's longtime friend and sworn rival.

"Danzo, what a surprise. Take a seat, please," Jiraiya said in a painfully fake polite tone. Not paying attention to that, the Elder did as Jiraiya told him. "What do I owe this visit?" Jiraiya asked. Albeit deep down, he knew the answer.

"I've recently been informed that you allowed a contingent of some of our best ninjas be deployed to intervene in Kirigakure's civil war," the

war hawk began. "I wish to know why I haven't been told the moment this decision was made."

"Last time I checked, the Hokage doesn't have to answer to anybody, so I don't think I owe you any explanation of what I do," Jiraiya replied.

"Quite fooling around, Jiraiya," Danzo snapped, without losing his usual cool. "Getting involved in another village's affair is something that needs to be discussed with the council, so the best decision can be reached."

"First of all, it's Hokage-sama to you," Jiraiya gravely replied, as he fixed a hard glare on the war hawk, who wasn't perturbed. "Second, I didn't randomly decide to have Konoha be part of their civil war. The leaders of one of the sides hired some of our ninjas to boost their forces. It's a job just like any other."

"That's a lie, and you know it," Danzo replied. "A group of ninja of such scale, coupled with the skill of many of its members, can easily tip the balance of the civil war."

"And that's a bad thing because...?" Jiraiya asked, clearly not following the elder. "The faster the civil war ends, the more lives won't be senselessly wasted."

"Those lives are of foreign people, and thus not our concern," Danzo coldly dismissed.

Jiraiya chuckled. "See? That line of thinking is why you were always passed over the title of Hokage."

Despite such a shot, Jiraiya failed to get a reaction out of Danzo.

"And are you so willing to save lives even if it comes at the cost of our ninja?" Danzo questioned.

"I know many ninja won't come back home, but that's a risk they are aware of," Jiraiya rebutted, as he crossed his arms. "But like I said, this isn't an humanitarian mission. Mei paid for the ninja she took with her. We never discriminated any client before, and I see no reason to start now."

"Don't you see it? The longer the civil war continues, the more Kirigakure will be weakened. And if they don't end up destroying themselves, we could have easily finished off the winner, erasing a longtime enemy and competition of Konoha," Danzo explained. "And then Konoha would have reaped the benefits of their chaos, such as any survivor with a bloodline limit, and some of the swords of the Seven Swordsmen. Given what you did with Zabuza and Haku, I thought that was your long-term plan, but it seems you're not as interested in strengthening Konoha as much as I thought."

Jiraiya found Danzo's accusation insulting, but thought it would be better not to let him be carried away by his emotions. "I wouldn't have accepted this job if I didn't have Konoha's best interest at heart, and if you had a more open mind, you'd see the benefits of this transaction."

"Such as?"

"If we manage to help Mei overthrow Yagura, we will gain a powerful ally, given that, even if she did pay for our help, she will owe part of her victory to us," Jiraiya started to explain. "With Suna and Kiri as our allies, Iwa and Kumo won't be as eager to start wars against us like they did in the past. Incidents like the Hyuga Affair won't happen again."

"Alliances cannot be trusted. A friend today can become an enemy tomorrow. What will be of us if any of our so called allies betray us? We have to learn to be self-reliant, or else destruction will be our only fate," Danzo stated.

"Trust me, I made everything in my power to make Konoha strong, but alliances are never to be dismissed. That's why, even if we

encourage all of our ninja to train to become stronger, they go to missions in squads and not alone," Jiraiya replied. The Sannin was starting to lose his patience. "You wanted to know why I allowed Mei to acquire the services of our village, and now you know it. As a Hokage, I'm a very busy man, so if you don't have any more grievances to discuss, I'd like to resume my work."

Danzo seemed to accept the end of the discussion, as he stood up and moved towards the door, but before opening his mouth one last time.

"You'll regret this decision, Hokage," Danzo gravely told him.

Jiraiya's eyes narrowed, as he glared at Danzo. "Is that a threat?"

"It's a warning. And it's not me I'm warning you about," the head of Root stated before leaving the room.

...

Root's Headquarters, sometime later

While the old war hawk was an expert at suppressing his emotions, there were times, such as now, in which he wished he could scream into the sky and let all his rage away. But he knew from experience that such actions brought short term relief at the expense of long term consequences. Not that it made him feel any better.

Days like today make him lament losing Shisui's Sharingan to the Akatsuki. With the power of that unique eye, he could have manipulated all the right people in order to get himself promoted to Hokage.

But alas, fate had a different plan, and favored the enemy that day, in more ways than one. Jiraiya was pretty much a follower of Hiruzen's philosophy of seeking peace and creating bonds with other villages, instead of crushing them when they're down so Konoha can

reign supreme. And it wasn't the first time that he was told that his refusal to adhere to such way of thinking cost him being Hokage.

Danzo had to admit there was some truth to Fugaku Uchiha's words regarding the clan's reasons to launch a coup d'état. Every Hokage was related to the previous one in some way. Tobirama was Hashirama's brother. Hiruzen was Tobirama's apprentice. Jiraiya was Hiruzen's apprentice, and Minato was Jiraiya's. And given Naruto's meteoric rise in power and prestige, it was more than likely that he will become the next Hokage once Jiraiya retired.

He wouldn't say Hiruzen was a bad Hokage, at least on paper. His old friend was powerful, experienced, wise and knowledgeable. He had all the desirable traits a Kage should have. However, his childlike naiveté and delusions about forgiveness and peace made him a wrong choice. The ninja world was cruel, with no place for childish ideals, and no way to be changed. The only way to survive was to be more cruel than your enemies.

As soon as he entered his lair, his two strongest and most loyal agents appeared besides him.

"Danzo-sama," Fuu, the Yamanaka redhead, greeted him. "How was the meeting with the Hokage?"

"As fruitless as I had feared. I'm afraid that there's nothing we can do now," Danzo replied.

"Maybe we can send some agents to sabotage Kirigakure while they're fighting?" Torune, the masked Aburame, suggested.

Danzo shook his head. "For such idea to work, would have needed to know about Konoha's intervention well in advance. However, not everything is lost. Fortunately, I managed to sneak an infiltrator among the group which left with the Kiri ninja. At the very least, we'll obtain some valuable information about our enemies."

...

Three Days Later, aboard Mei's ship

The Konoha ninja managed to reach the coast in two days, just as Mei was hoping. Thanks to their celerity, they were able to board the ship in no time and head towards the Land of Water. Then, it would be an estimate of three days until they reached Mei's main base and planned the offensive.

Sadly, three days was too much, and the ship was too small for sparring, or even doing any kind of exercise. So the only way to pass the time was talking with others, eating, or, if you were lucky enough to have a significant other aboard, making out.

Unfortunately for Sakura, the latter option wasn't available to her, despite the object of her affections being on board. Oh well, since she had nothing better to do, she might as well try to change that.

Like most people, Sasuke was in the deck, resting against a railing with his arms crossed and his usual "I don't give a damn about anything" expression. Without saying anything, Sakura walked towards him, and rested her arms on the railing while she gazed at the expanse of water before her eyes.

"I've never seen the ocean before. So much water..." Sakura casually mentioned. Even if Sasuke appeared to pay her no mind, she had learned that the Uchiha was indeed listening. "It's so beautiful, don't you think?"

"Maybe at first, but it gets boring really quickly," the Uchiha replied. "Hope we can get to Land of Water as soon as possible."

"Where's the hurry? You should try to enjoy the trip a bit more. I mean, it's not every day we can get a sea trip, right?" Sakura asked.

"I've never been a fan of this kind of things. But at the very least, it gives me time to think," Sasuke replied, as his eyes sharpened.

Sakura turned around, resting her back on the railing, and looked at Sasuke with a sincere smile. "And do you mind sharing what are you thinking right now?"

"See that guy over there? The one drawing a picture?" Sasuke mentioned.

Sakura scanned the crowd before her, until she saw the boy Sasuke was talking about. A pale looking, black haired boy, dressed in black, sitting on a chair, working on a picture.

"What about him?" Sakura asked, as a dreadful thought crawled up her back. *"Oh please, don't tell me you're into guys, Sasuke-kun..."*

"That boy appears to be the same age as us, yet I don't remember seeing him in the Academy," Sasuke mentioned.

Sakura inwardly sighed in relief, and addressed Sasuke's worries. "Well, maybe he graduated before us?"

"Then how is that we didn't see him in the Chunin Exams? Neither the ones who took place in Konoha, nor the ones in which you and Karin graduated," Sasuke observed. "And before you said that maybe he's still a Genin, remember that this is an S-Rank mission. No Genin would be allowed."

"You think there's something fishy about him?" Sakura asked.

Sasuke nodded. "It's a gut feeling, but there's something about that guy that makes me distrust him."

"I see. Do you want me to go and talk to him? Maybe I can get something out of him," Sakura offered, knowing very well that for all his talents as a ninja, Sasuke wasn't the most social person.

"I'd appreciate it," Sasuke replied.

Sakura nodded, and headed towards the drawing boy. Walking to him from behind, she took a look first at the picture he was drawing.

While it appeared he was drawing the oceanic scenery, it was an abstract picture. That would be an excellent topic to break the ice.

"Nice picture," Sakura praised, her tone soft enough as not to startle the pale boy. "I don't know much about art, but it looks really pretty."

The boy turned around, and smiled at her. "Thank you."

"I'm Sakura Haruno, by the way," the pinkette said as she extended her hand at Sai, which he took. "Nice to meet you."

"My name is Sai, and the feeling is mutual, " Sai replied, keeping that smile all the way. The stiffness of his obviously fake smile was making Sakura a bit uncomfortable.

"Uh, you can stop smiling now," Sakura awkwardly said.

"Oh, sorry. I read in a book that a smile is a good way to show others your friendliness," Sai explained, much to Sakura's bewilderment.

"But if I'm making you feel uneasy, I'll stop... ugly."

Sakura's eye twitched, as her teeth gritted. "The hell did you call me!?"

"Oh, I also read in a book that giving nicknames is a good way to connect with people, and the best nicknames are those who define the-"

"SHANNARO!"

Sai suddenly found himself at the opposite end of one hell of a right hook, which sent the pale boy flying out of the ship and into the ocean.

Author's Note:

So, the Civil War is about to kickstart. Next chapter will mostly develop a bit most of the Kiri characters before the action can

begin.

Boy, I love writting Mei being so condescending towards Zabuzza. It's almost as fun as Shizune being sassy to Tsunade. But don't worry Zabuzza, your partnership with Mei will be very fruitful. And well, Mei overall is a pretty fun character, and I enjoyed a lot writing chapters in which she's prominent.

Some people asked for him in the reviews, so I'm going to say it now: Uakata isn't going to have a big role in this fic. Mostly for three reasons: first, fleshing him out and giving him a large role would slow down the story's pace a lot; second, this arc is going to introduce quite a lot of new characters, mostly canon and a couple of OCs, and is getting very crowded as it is; and lastly, I don't find him terribly interesting, so I have no incentive to write for him. Sorry to all the readers who were expecting to see him.

And Sai also makes his debut. He won't be an important character during this arc, but he will in a future original arc of Part II that will deal with Danzo and Root, so I thought I'd introduce him now in order to lay the groundwork for that future arc. Sorry if I suck at writing him, but I find writing for Sai quite hard, and while I saw other writers that are able to grasp what makes him funny, so far I've been unable to, besides his usual lack of tact.

Thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Alright, end note. Next chapter will focus on fleshing out the rest of the Kiri characters before the action can truly begin. In the meanwhile, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Kirigakure's Hope

Author's Note: I'm so glad Mei and Zabuza's interaction got such a good reception. I was afraid that people would think I was making a disservice to the character by havinh Mei whipping him like that. Glad to see you find it as hilarious as I did.

Also, the story just broke the 500K hits! Yay!

Nothing much to say here. Enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 44:

Kirigakure's Hope

or

Ready for the Prison Break

...

Land of Earth, Undisclosed Location

The mountains of the Land of Earth are one of the most inhospitable places of the entire Elemental Nations, with only the Land of Wind's Demon Desert managing to be close in such terms.

The mountains had everything that made them unfit for humans being to live there: no trees to harvest lumber, no fertile land that could be farmed, very little available water, an extremely strenuous terrain difficult to traverse, much less to build a village on, and the only animals who dared to live there were large, ferocious beasts that were constantly fighting each other, usually for food, who didn't mind the collateral damage their fights could cause. Yes, such

combination of factors made the mountains a place completely devoid of human beings.

Just like Han wanted.

Han, known as Han of the Steam Armor, while technically being an Iwa ninja, preferred to live alone, far away from civilization. He was an extremely tall man, wearing a crimson armor that covered most of his body, and his face being obscured by both a mask that covered his mouth and nose, and a red conical straw hat. Being a jinchuriki, the man had faced discrimination and scorn from his peers most of his life, that's why he chose a life of quiet solitude.

While he was preparing some food, Han could hear the footsteps of several men. Whenever the Tsuchikage had a mission for him, he would send a squad of ninja with the news and details for his mission. It was an agreement he reached with Onoki, the current Tsuchikage; he would be allowed to live alone in peace, but he would work for Iwa whenever they needed him. It was a better alternative than being a missing-nin. Besides, that way he could get the supplies he needed to survive in such an hostile environment.

However, there was a problem: these men, the four of them, weren't Iwa ninja. In fact, they didn't look like ninja at all. They were wearing robes akin to religious men, had their head shaved, and their skin was dyed pitch black with white patterns, almost emulating bones. Han deduced they had to be some sort of cultists.

"I don't know who you are," Han calmly said as he stood up. "But if you value your lives, you should leave this place immediately."

The weird looking men grinned, and unsheathed ritual daggers. Such a strange weapon to bring to a fight.

"Sorry, you sinner, but our High Priest has asked us to get you," one of the cultists said, grinning widely.

"Alive, unfortunately. Janshin-sama won't be happy, but the word of our High Priest can't be denied," another cultist said, as he menacingly advanced towards Han.

"So make our jobs easier and-"

The third cultist never got to finish his sentence. In a blink, Han appeared before him, and blew a hole in his chest with a brutal punch, his fist bursting through the man's back. Han shook the man's lifeless corpse from his arm, and shot a murderous glare at the other three.

"Who wants to go next?" he asked.

A moment of silence. Then, the three remaining cultists' faces contorted with rage, raised their daggers, and charged at Han.

"FOR JANSHIN-SAMA!" They yelled in unison.

Meanwhile, hidden above them, two men wearing black cloaks with red clouds observed the fight. One was a young man with slick silver hair combed backwards, who carried a large, three-bladed scythe. The other was a taller man whose face was covered by a mask, leaving only his bloodshot green eyes visible.

"Your cultists are so inefficient, it's almost hilarious, Hidan," the second man commented.

Hidan just shrugged, and chuckled. "I know. But I didn't bring those fuckers here to do our job for us, Kakuzu. It was you who wanted to assess our target before taking him on. Who cares if they die?"

"We aren't going to do much assessment if they die so quickly," Kakuzu noted, as he observed how Han cooked a cultist alive with an attack that involved steam. "Look, he already killed three of them."

"We aren't going to kill him, and Jashin-sama demands sacrifices. It doesn't matter if it's a faithful or a heretic, even if Janshin-sama prefers the latter. It will grant us a swift victory," Hidan explained.

Kakuzu frowned, and glared at his partner. "Do not let those superstitious beliefs of yours make you think you're invincible and fumble the mission. It took us way too long to locate Han to fail now."

"WHAT ARE YOU SAYING BY SUPERTITIONS, YOU SON OF A BITCH!" Hidan yelled at Kakuzu as he grabbed his scythe. "Fucking take back those words or else-"

"Hey, who the hell are you!?" Han asked from below, after noticing the two Akatsuki.

Kakuzu's glare intensified. "Way to go idiot, he saw us. Now we lost the element of surprise."

"Oh, who the hell needs that! I'm sure this fucker ain't that strong! Come on Kakuzu!" Hidan shouted as he leaped at Han.

Kakuzu groaned loudly. "One day, Hidan, I'll find a way to kill you. "

...

Seas of the Land of Water, Mei's Transport Ship

Sasuke and Sakura moved to the latter's cabin, of which she shared with Karin and their sensei, Shizune, to discuss the pinkette's less than stellar attempt at getting closer to Sai.

"You know, the point of asking you to go talk to Sai instead of me is because you are better suited for this kind of situations," Sasuke pointed out.

Sakura groaned. "I know... but the guy called me ugly! We just met, and he called me that! And he had the gall to claim it was an 'affectionate nickname'!"

"Anyway, while the guy was being fished back to the ship, I asked some questions to the others, mainly if they knew about him," Sasuke told her.

"And what did you find out?"

"Apparently, he's an ANBU. And not just that, but he had been trained as an ANBU all his life, " the Uchiha revealed.

Sakura raised an eyebrow. "That's... odd. ANBU or not, all ninja are required to graduate the Academy."

"I thought that as well. But apparently, he's part of some sort of experimental training in order to produce agents better suited for black ops," Sasuke explained.

"No wonder the guy is so socially awkward. I didn't know the Hokage allowed for this kind of brutal methods. Isn't that the reason there's a rebellion in Kiri?" the pinkette asked.

"Yes. But you can voice your concern when we get back. As for the time being, we should keep an eye on him," Sasuke decided.

"Shouldn't we focus on the mission at hand instead?" Sakura asked.

Sasuke snorted. "We're not Genin anymore. We can do both things."

Sakura blushed a bit in slight embarrassment. "Right, sorry."

"By the way, where is Karin? I haven't seen her in all day," Sasuke wondered.

...

To answer Sasuke's question, Karin was with Neji on the latter's cabin, of which he also shared with the other male members of their team. As previously stated, there was nothing much to do on a plain transport ship other than talk with others, eat or make out, and Karin and Neji decided to do the latter.

However, after their make out session, they decided to just relax, and remain snuggled on Neji's small but comfortable bed.

"I don't know how can I resist being far away from you for so long," Karin moaned, knowing full well that she wouldn't be able to stay with Neji once the mission began.

"They say absence makes the heart to grow fonder," Neji replied. "The longer we are apart, the more we want to see each other again."

"Even then. Sometimes I envy Naruto-niisan so much. He gets to see his girlfriend all the time. How I wish you were on my team," Karin continued.

"Maybe, but it was our fate not to be teammates," Neji replied. "That doesn't mean that our bond is any weaker, though."

Karin smiled, "Of course not," she said as she kissed him in the lips. "But maybe once this mission is over, we can ask for some vacation days. To spend it together, you know."

"While that sounds enticing, I'm afraid I will still be busy preparing my promotion to Jonin. Leisure time will have to wait," Neji replied.

Karin frowned, and crossed her arms over her chest, and pouted a little. "You're no fun. You already train and a lot, and are among the strongest ninja of our age. Isn't that enough for you?"

"No, not until I don't achieve the Jonin rank," Neji replied. "There's always room to get better. What about you Karin?"

"What about me what?" Karin asked back. "Are you implying that I'm weak or I don't train enough?"

"Far from it. But I wonder if you plan to stay a Chunin forever," Neji asked.

Karin raised an eyebrow. "I just got the rank not even a year ago. I don't think I'm ready to go for another promotion so soon."

"Why not? You're strong, and one of the kunoichi with the greatest potential I've ever seen. You could easily become Jonin before reaching adulthood," Neji observed.

Karin blushed a bit. "Y-You think so?"

"I wouldn't say that if I didn't think it. You only need to push yourself further," Neji advised.

"Hey! I do push myself really far, thank you very much!" Karin protested, as she fixed a hard stare on her boyfriend.

Neji, however, smirked. "You think so? In that case, you wouldn't mind training with me and my team one of these days?"

"Oh, please. Sakura trained with you guys. If she can do that, then so can I," Karin confidently replied.

"You sound very sure of yourself," Neji noted.

Karin smirked at him. "Of course I am. I'm very strong and have a lot of potential, right? And since I'm so sure, let's make this more interesting: if I manage to resist everything your training routine throws at me, you'll take a few days off to spend with me. No missions, and no training."

"And what if you fail?" Neji asked.

"How dare you suggest I'm gonna fail," Karin stated, sounding half-indignant. "Let me think... if I fail, I'll admit you're right, and I'll continue training alongside you until you deem me worthy."

"Both outcomes involve getting closer to me," Neji observed.

Karin frowned once again. "And you're complaining?"

This, time it was Neji who smirked at her. "Not in the slightest."

Neji then moved closer to Karin, and the two teens continued kissing. That's it, until somebody knocked the door.

"UGH!" Karin groaned. "Go away! We're a bit busy here!"

"I'm sorry to tell you that make out time is over. We arrived at Mei-san's base," a voice the two of them recognized as Tenten informed them.

"Awesome timing," Karin snarked, as she rolled her eyes.

"I feel you, sister. Haku-kun and I were getting intimate too when Lee told me to look for Neji," Tenten replied.

...

When they said that the first stop would be Mei's base, everybody imagined that they would go to some sort of town, small city, hidden fortress, or even a campsite. Yet instead, looming over the transport ship was an even bigger metal ship, way bigger than the one that hosted the preliminaries during the Chunin Exam finals at Konoha.

The huge ship was also surrounded by a thick layer of mist, probably created by the ninjas on board, in order to keep the ship hidden from any kind of sea patrol.

Once the smaller ship was closer to the bigger one, a gangway was placed between the two of them so the Konoha ninja could access Mei's base.

"That... that's your base?" an incredulous Kiba asked.

"Of course," Mei replied. "The Land of Water is not exactly big, and if I had a base on land, it would have been found and razed sooner or later. But by establishing my command center in a ship, my forces and I can be constantly on the move and avoid Yagura's trackers.

"I do have a few decoy bases in the mainland in order to distract the enemy, though," Mei added.

"That's a very intelligent thing to do," Kakashi praised.

"Aw, thanks. But I have to admit this idea was born out of experience and necessity rather than wit or intellect," Mei conceded.

Ameyuri took a step forward. "Everybody, get on board the ship! There's much to discuss and prepare, so time is of essence!"

"Our personnel will show you your new cabins, as well as all of the ship's place of interest. And unlike this one, it has places where you can spar and train," Chojuro continued. "We hope that you find the Kirigakure's Hope to your liking."

After a few minutes, all of Konoha's ninja were aboard the Hope, and the smaller transport ship took a different direction.

"All of the Jonin, come with me to the War Room so we can discuss your first mission for the rebellion. Everybody else will be briefed once a plan had been devised. For the time being, feel free to roam the ship and see everything she has to offer," Mei instructed the Konoha ninja.

...

Everybody took on Mei's offer, and decided to explore the ship. Much to their joy, the ship had multiple training and sparring rooms where the idle ninja could blow some steam and keep their skills honed. Plus the rooms were extra reinforced so the fights wouldn't damage the rest of the ship. Made sense for the ship to have such rooms, since Mei's ninja needed a place to train.

Naruto and Hinata wondered if they could resume the make-out session that was tragically interrupted when Haku told them they had arrived, but neither of them were in the mood after such a jarring interruption.

The blond jinchuriki then suggested to continue his training in Lightning Release, something Hinata didn't mind at all.

"Lightning Release: Spark shot!"

After doing the required hand seals, Naruto pointed two fingers forward, releasing a ridiculously small electrical bolt.

"Dammit!" he yelled, as he stomped his foot in frustration.

Spark shot was a D-Rank jutsu, and the weakest and most simple Lightning Release jutsu. Yet Naruto was having trouble mastering it. His other thirty nine clones weren't having a much better time either.

"Calm down, Naruto-kun. Frustration rarely leads to success," Hinata wisely advised.

"I can't help but feel like that when I fail to master such a simple jutsu as this! I mean, I completed a jutsu my biological dad was unable to! I'm better than this!" Naruto replied.

"Even with clones, you can't expect to master everything the first try. I mean, you told me it took you weeks to combine elemental chakra with the Rasengan, right?" Hinata pointed out. Naruto reluctantly nodded. "This is the same. Now, let's continue, shall we?"

"Maybe you could give me some advice? There's something I must be doing wrong," Naruto told her.

Hinata looked pensive. She brought a finger to her lips. "Hmmm... oh, I know! I'll use my Byakugan and see how you mold your chakra before using the jutsu. That way I can see if you're doing something wrong."

A devious smile appeared on Naruto's face. "Hinata-hime, if you wanted to see me without clothes, you only need to ask."

Hinata turned incredibly red. "W-WHAAT!? T-That's not what-I mean, I would never... !" she started to babble.

"Relax Hime. You should know that I'm joking," Naruto laughed.

"W-Well, it wasn't funny, I don't like when people insinuate that about me or my clan," Hinata protested, her normally pale face still pink. "And I wish you stop doing it."

"I do it because you're adorable when you get that flustered," Naruto replied, still showing that roguish smile.

"Well, do you want me to help you, or not?" Hinata huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Okay, okay, sorry," Naruto replied. 'Boy, I think I did that way too many times already. Hinata-hime doesn't anger easily, but I better do something to make up for that just in case.'

"Byakugan!"

Naruto and his clones repeated the jutsu a couple times, under Hinata's watchful gaze. They didn't need to go it a third time.

"Okay, I think I know what you're doing wrong," Hinata said.

All clones looked at her, expectant. "And that would be?" the original asked.

"You release the chakra way too early. You need to let it build up for a while before casting the jutsu," Hinata stated.

"Oh, I see," the original Naruto replied, and both he and his clones proceeded to do the jutsu as Hinata advised. "Like this?"

This time, the lightning bolt was thicker, even if it still didn't have enough power.

"Yes, like that! Good job!" Hinata cheered.

"Hey, wait a minute," a clone said in realization. "Both you and Sasuke use lightning jutsu instantly. How's that?"

"Practice," Hinata said, as she shrugged. "When I started, I also had to spend a couple seconds building up the chakra so I could release the jutsu properly. As time passed, my skill improved so I needed to do it less and less."

"Of course," the blond replied, then he turned at his clones. "Alright guys, let's work on this so by the end of the day, we can do it instantly just like Hinata-hime does!"

A chorus of "Right!", "Yeah!", and "Sure!" replied, as the army of clones began to work on the jutsu with even more enthusiasm and energy than before.

Hinata giggled as she kept watching over the clones trying to master the jutsu down. However, it seemed like the training would come to a stop, since her Byakugan saw somebody who was about to enter the room. Somebody who was rather close to Naruto for personal reasons.

"Naruto-niisan?" Karin asked as she entered the training room. "Oh."

"Oh, Karin-nee-chan, hi!" the original Naruto said, while the clones were still focused with the training at hand.

She looked around, and saw Hinata among the army of clones. "Is this a bad moment? Are you busy?"

"I'm training with Hinata-hime, don't worry!" the original Naruto said, as he created an additional clone. "I hope you don't mind talking to a clone."

"I guess not," Karin said as she shrugged.

"Cool then!" the new clone said, as he left the original and his "siblings", and went to talk with Karin. "So, what's up?"

Karin and the Naruto clone exited the training room, so the original and his girlfriend could train alone.

"Naruto, I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to answer honestly," Karin started, looking at Naruto in the eyes. "Do you think I'm strong?"

"What? Of course you are!" Naruto replied. "Why ask me that? You think you're not?"

"Well... Neji pointed out that I could be stronger than what I'm now. That I'm not 'fulfilling my potential'," she said, making air quotes. "Do you... agree with him?"

The clone looked pensive. "Well... you do have a lot of untapped potential. But I'd say you should improve at your own pace. Neji is a genius. Guys like him improve at an insanely fast pace. Normal people like you and me should take it easy."

Karin raised an eyebrow. "You, normal? I think you're actually closer to him than you're to me."

"Well, I kinda have the clones, so my case is special, hehe," the clone laughed. Then, he remembered something. "But then again, you do have Shadow Clones too, right? You can use that to get stronger faster than normal."

"I can't make as many clones as you. My limit used to be four, and with a lot of training I managed to push it to five," Karin explained.

"Hey, even then, it's still something," the clone replied. "My dad's limit is six, yet he still used them to great effect. You should try that too."

"Alright, I will," Karin replied, as she let out a weary sigh.

Something the clone noticed. Worriedly, he decided to press on a little. "Is everything between Neji and you alright?"

"Neji-kun is as loving as ever. Is just that recently..." Karin began, and paused for a bit, before sighing again. "Neji-kun nowadays

seems to be overly focused on his ninja career. He's been working on his promotion to Special Jonin like crazy, and now he wants to be Jonin."

"And you think he's neglecting you?" Naruto asked.

Karin rubbed her arm. "A little bit, yes. But I can't blame him for wanting to look for his future. Is just that I'm afraid that I might be a load to him. I don't want to drag him down."

"Well, you can always train more. Push yourself to-"

"It's not that," Karin interrupted the clone. "I worked very hard for my Chunin promotion, and I'm very happy with it. While I don't plan to stay a Chunin forever, I wasn't looking forward any further promotion anytime soon. But after talking with Neji it made me feel... inadequate."

"If you're happy with the way you are, then you shouldn't try to change that. Let Neji progress at his preferred pace, and you progress at your own," Naruto said with a shrug. "Funny, I got a similar conversation with Hinata. She seems to think the same as you."

"She has to, given that you're her boyfriend, and I know that she isn't a genius," Karin replied, placing her hands on her hips. "So, anyway, what do you think I should do?"

"Try to get a promotion whenever you want it, and most importantly, whenever you feel you're ready. If you're not ready, it won't matter how much you want it," Naruto told her. "I'm sure Neji will understand your reasons."

"Let's hope he does," Karin replied. "Anyway, thanks a lot for talking with me. Now I feel a bit better about both myself and my relationship with Neji."

"Hey, what's family for?" the clone heartily replied, and chuckled. "I'm sure I can always talk with you if I ever have a problem."

"You can, but I don't have your spirit, so don't expect me to be of much help. Other than having somebody listen to you," Karin replied.

"Sometimes, having somebody to listen to you is all what you need," the clone said before dispelling in a cloud of smoke, leaving Karin alone.

...

Ship's Cafeteria

Feeling she could get some food after doing some light training, Rin decided to head to the ship's cafeteria. As expected from such a place that served as the rebel's main base, the cafeteria was a huge place, full of long tables and benches attached to the ground.

It was relatively early, so there were only a few people scattered through the many, many, tables.

"Well, at least I'm not going to have any problems finding a place to eat," she chuckled.

After picking her food, she headed towards the nearest table, until a shout followed by laughter caught her attention. Looked around, she saw that the commotion came from one of the tables towards the middle, where a trio of Konoha ninja were also eating while chatting a bit. Taking a better look at them, she realized that they weren't some random ninja, but Kakashi's Animal Squad.

The silver haired Jonin did talk to Rin about his "cute little Genin" (now cute little Chunin), but she never met them properly. Maybe now there was a chance to do so, and also befriend some people of her age group. From what Kakashi had told her, they were very friendly. Taking a deep breath, she walked towards their table. None of them seemed to notice her presence until she opened her mouth.

"Excuse me, do you mind if I sit with you?" Rin politely asked, putting on her best smile.

"Sure! The more the merrier!" the brown haired girl cheerfully replied as she patted the empty seat next to her. "I'm Tamaki, and these are my friends and teammates, Kiba and Shino!"

And indignant bark came from under the table.

"Oh, and Akamaru. Sorry for forgetting about you, boy," Tamaki replied, as she handed the now visible dog a treat, which he happily munched.

"Hi there," Kiba replied, just as energetic as Tamaki.

"Hello," Shino said in his usual monotone.

"Nice to meet all of you. My name's Rin Nohara," the medic-nin introduced herself as she took a seat.

"Wait,, Rin Nohara? THE Rin Nohara?" Kiba asked in shock. "As in, Kakashi-sensei's deceased teammate who came to life by mysterious means!?"

Rin chuckled awkwardly. "Yup, that's me."

"Awesome! What does it feel to be dead?" Kiba asked. Tamaki's mouth curved into a frown, and kicked Kiba under the table. "Ow, what was that for?"

"Don't be so rude! That was such an insensitive question, you jerk!" Tamaki chastised him. "Rin clearly had a really bad time, and she doesn't need us to remind it to her!"

"While I agree that Kiba could have used a bit more tact in his question, his curiosity is not misplaced," Shino calmly interceded. "So far, Rin is the only person we know to come back from the dead."

"What about the Hokage Orochimaru revived with that forbidden jutsu?" Tamaki asked.

"They don't count, since not only were they zombies, but according to official reports, they had no knowledge of what happened to them or where did they go after death," Shino explained. "Knowing with exactitude what awaits us after death is something everybody sought to know."

"I'm afraid I have to disappoint you, but I don't remember anything after my death either," Rin admitted, then she smiled. "And while I appreciate your concern, you don't need to walk on eggshells around me. I already came to terms to what happened to me, and accepted my new situation."

"That's something good to hear, Rin-san," Shino praised.

"Okay, let's change the topic to something less grim, then," Tamaki leaned close to her, and smiled wickedly. "Given that you were Kakashi's teammate, can you tell us stuff about him when he was our age?"

Rin smiled back. "Oh, plenty! What do you wish to know?"

"Was Kakashi always late to the team meetings?" Kiba asked.

Everybody eagerly awaited for the answer.

"Actually... no," Rin said, to everybody's surprise. "He used to be pretty diligent back then. He was never late to a meeting, and often chastised those who did."

"Unbelievable. And what happened to make him change like that?" Tamaki asked.

Rin sighed, as her expression darkened. "Well... Obito happened." The mood immediately grew much somber when the female medic-

nin mentioned her fallen teammate turned Akatsuki. "Did Kakashi... tell you about him?"

"No, he didn't," Shino replied. "And given the circumstances, I find understandable that he prefers not to reminisce of events regarding him."

"Yeah, sorry for unintentionally bringing that up," Tamaki apologized.

"No, it's okay. I think if I talk about it with somebody... I think I'll have an easier time getting over it," Rin replied.

"Even if talking about a traumatic event is indeed good for the psyche, do not feel pressured to do so if you don't feel ready," Shino continued.

"Yeah, what he said. You owe us nothing," Kiba added.

"No, no. I want to do this. I need to do this," Rin said once again.

"You see, Kakashi back then was nothing like you described. He was always punctual, took his missions very seriously, followed the ninja code to the letter, and believed the mission was more important than your teammates."

Needless to say, the Animal Squad was taken aback by such revelation.

"Kakashi? The same 'those who abandon their teammates are trash' Kakashi?" Kiba asked in disbelief.

Rin nodded. "Actually, that line wasn't from Kakashi, but from Obito. Obito used to believe that your teammates were more important than the mission. You see, Kakashi's father, Sakumo Hatake, forsook a mission to save his teammates. When the repercussions of such actions were felt, everybody shunned and ostracized Sakumo for his decision, including the very same people he saved. It was so bad, he was eventually driven to suicide. That's what made Kakashi adopt such a mindset regarding missions."

"What happened then?" Kiba asked.

"During a mission in the Third War, I was captured by enemy forces. Kakashi wanted to complete the mission, while Obito wanted to save me. Eventually, Obito went to save me on his own, but was outnumbered and outmatched. He would have died there if Kakashi didn't appear to save both of us. However, we weren't safe. The enemy made the cave we were in to collapse. Kakashi tripped and fell, and he would have been crushed by an avalanche if Obito didn't push him out of the way, and took his place," Rin explained.

A somber silence followed. Given their sensei's usually carefree attitude, they would have imagined that Kakashi had such a harsh background. They had to admit that the silver haired Jonin was really good at masking his emotions.

"Before the cave collapsed completely, Obito had one last request: to have his left eye removed and implanted on Kakashi, who lost his own left eye on the mission. After that, Obito died. Or we thought he did," Rin finished her tale.

"So that's how Kakashi got his Sharingan," Tamaki commented.

"Yes. Obito's death affected him deeply. He believed it was his fault that he died to begin with, even if he really didn't. But given that he's part of a terrorist organization now... well, I don't think that will cheer him up much," Rin commented.

"I'm sure your and your sensei's death also affected him as well," Shino deduced.

"How can a man keep going after so many loved ones die like that?" Kiba asked bitterly, as his mind started to think in his loved ones.

"When this mission is over, I'm going to tell my mom and sister how much I love them."

"Careful Kiba. People who say that in stories usually end up dead," Tamaki pointed out.

"Yeah, but this isn't a story, this is real life," Kiba retorted, crossing his arms.

"You know... I never imagined Kakashi being a sensei," Rin interceded, changing the topic.

"Why do you say that?" Tamaki asked.

"Well, from how he used to be when we were teens... I don't think he'd had the patience to teach. Kakashi is a genius who pretty much got everything right the first try. He might have had exceedingly high expectations of his students, and would have tossed the towel in frustration when he saw that wasn't the case," Rin told them.

"Well, you're not that far off," Kiba admitted.

"We were the first team Kakashi-sensei passed," Shino began. "We don't know the exact number, but a few other teams were assigned to Kakashi-sensei before us. He tested them, found them unworthy, and sent them back to the academy."

"That's it, until we came and passed that test!" Kiba proudly boasted. Akamaru happily barked in agreement.

"That sounds more like it. You three must be really skilled if you managed to pass a test from Kakashi," Rin praised them.

"Actually, I don't think you're following. You see, Kakashi didn't want to test our skill or strength, but our teamwork," Tamaki clarified.

Rin raised an eyebrow, and a memory came to her mind. "Wait, are you talking about the Bell Test?"

"Yea! You know it already?" Kiba asked.

Rin nodded. "Minato-sensei made us take that test as well."

"And how well did you do? I'm sure you passed since you became their students, but was it difficult?" Tamaki asked.

"Did the Fourth had to tie somebody to a log?" Kiba asked as well, bitterly remembered that moment.

"Actually... Kakashi got the two bells in less than five minutes," Rin stated.

A deafening silence ensued as the Animal Squad processed Rin's words. They knew Kakashi was one of the strongest ninja Konoha had at the moment, but to do something like that...

"Wow. And you said your sensei was the Fourth?" Kiba asked in disbelief, his eyes open wide.

Rin giggled a bit. "Minato-sensei said that he was going to go easy on us since we were newbies. Well, Obito and I were, Kakashi had been a ninja for some years already. Guess he didn't think Kakashi could be so good."

"Thank goodness Kakashi doesn't expect that level of skill from us," Tamaki said in relief, not realizing how lucky she was. "Not that we don't give our all."

"Guess he knows he's the exception rather than the rule," Rin replied. "Anyway, now that I told you all this, I hoped it help you understand Kakashi a bit better."

"It was. I could never imagine how much suffering that man went through. Now that we're armed with this knowledge, we can give him proper support of any kind," Shino concluded, as he adjusted his shades.

"Good, because he's going to need it," Rin agreed. "I believe that our return, and especially what happened to Obito broke him even further."

"Anyway, enough to talk about Kakashi-sensei. Tell us about you!" Tamaki interceded, changing the topic.

"Me? Well... there's not that much to say. What do you want to know?" the medic-nin asked.

"For starters, what have you been doing since you're back among the living. I don't think we've ever seen you once," Kiba pointed out.

"I've been working at the hospital. I wanted a quiet and calm job away from everything so I could think about all what happened to me after my death and resurrection, and get adjusted to this new era. A lot can change in fourteen years," Rin replied.

"Understandable. And what made you change your mind? Given that you're in a mission to a civil war," Shino asked.

Rin took a deep breath, and sighed. "Because Kirigakure had a big role in my death, and I need to face that."

...

War Room

Mei, her inner circle, and most of Konoha Jonin were standing around a large rectangular table with an equally large map of the Land of Water on top of it. The map had several figurines that represented several points of interests. Kirigakure was the biggest. There was also a boat figure that symbolized the ship they were all on.

"Alright, let's get down to business," Mei began. "During these past months, the rebellion have been preparing to invade Kirigakure and end this civil war already. The invasion should have happened already, but a certain event became a major setback to my plans.

"Ao, my spymaster and head of my intelligence network, was captured during a skirmish. Ao knows almost everything about the rebellion. Our future plans, which of our bases are decoys and which are the real ones, the location of our secret hideouts... everything. As you can probably imagine, the invasion can't happen as long as

Ao is in the hands of the enemy," Mei concluded her explanation. "Unfortunately, I don't have enough forces to liberate Ao, so that's the main reason for coming to Konoha for help."

"So, Ao defected to the rebellion? Interesting," Shisui thought. He had clashed with Ao quite a few times during several skirmishes following the Third War, and wondered if he would have to fight him again.

"If you don't have enough troops to assault a mere prison, what hope do you have to take over a major village?" Asuma asked. Other Jonin started to murmur, many of them apparently agreeing with Asuma.

Mei, however, smiled at the question. "Most of my forces are spread around the Land of Water, hidden, keeping on tasks vital for the rebellion in secret. If I make them come out of the shadows and join me this soon, they won't be able to work undercover again. If I do that, it has to be when we invade Kirigakure, not earlier. Besides, that way Yagura thinks that our forces are much smaller than they really are."

Her explanation seemed to satisfy the Jonin's doubts about Mei's chances in the war. The rebel leader continued.

"This is the Crimson Citadel," Mei used a pointer to refer to a castle figurine on a small island. "During the Second War it was a military outpost, but it was later converted into a prison. My spies report that Ao has been taken there for interrogation. We need to liberate him, as well as the rest of the prisoner rebels there, as soon as possible."

"How do you know Ao didn't spill the beans already?" Kakashi asked.

"Like most spies and intelligence gatherers, Ao has been trained to withstand the worst forms of torture. It will take a lot of time to break him, if they break him at all," Mei replied. She clearly had a lot of faith in that man's ability to remain silent. "And even if they have

mind reading jutsu, they won't work since there are protective seals carved into his head."

"So, what's the plan?" Kurenai asked.

"The Crimson Citadel only has one entrance: a dock that's heavily guarded, and only opens its doors whenever a ship carrying supplies or prisoners enters or leaves the place. Unfortunately, no such ship is scheduled to arrive in a long time, so if we try to pretend we are going to bring prisoners or supplies into the prison, we'll raise suspicions, and our plan will be foiled," Mei told them.

"How are we going to enter, then?" a Konoha Jonin asked.

Mei smiled once again. "That's when you guys enter. One of the reasons I contacted Konoha, and hired several specific ninja, is because they have summoning contracts of flying animals. We'll employ some of those animals to infiltrate a small team whose task will be to open the main gate. Once the mission is a success, the rest of the forces will invade the prison on small but fast boats, kill the guards, and release the prisoners.

"Lastly, it's imperative that news of the prison break does not reach Kirigakure. If Yagura realizes what happened, he will be waiting for us. Any questions?" Mei asked, scanning the small crowd. Upon seeing no raised hand, Mei smiled once again. "Good. You're dismissed. Now we'll decide which ninja will form part of the infiltration team. For security's reasons, we'll use the standard four man squad. Anything bigger would draw too much attention. You'll receive further information shortly."

With the briefing concluded, everybody left the war room, and prepared for the incoming battle.

...

Like with the other ship, Sakura would have loved to go to the dock and admire the vast oceanic sight, but there were two major reasons

stopping them from doing that. The first one was the constant veil of mist that followed the ship everywhere, making sightseeing impossible. And the second was that dock access was heavily restricted for security reasons, forcing the pink haired kunoichi -and nearly every Konoha ninja- to remain indoors.

Fortunately, the ship had quite a few living rooms made for a comfortable stay. Going to one of them reserved for Konoha ninja, Sakura saw Ino in the one she entered, sitting on one of the cushioned benches.

"Ino!" Sakura called her blond friend as she walked towards her.

"Oh, hey," Ino replied. "What's up?"

"Nothing. I heard we're going onto our first mission soon, and decided it would be good to rest and relax a bit, in order to be at one hundred percent," Sakura replied, as she took a seat next to Ino.

"You read my mind," Ino replied. "Anyway, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Why did you punch that guy into the sea? What did he do? Did he insult you or something?" Ino asked.

"You can say that. It was literally the first thing he did and, well... even with my flawless lady-like behavior, something like that can bring out the worst of me."

Ino chuckled. "You don't have to tell me. Anyway, what made you approach him in the first place?"

"I wasn't that interested, but Sasuke-kun was suspicious of him. He has our age, yet we never saw him in the Academy nor the Chunin Exams. We did some research, and found that he started his ninja career as an ANBU."

"As an ANBU?" Ino parroted, raising a visible eyebrow. "I thought that you had to be at least a Chunin to be admitted there?"

"My thoughts exactly. But if he's truly an ANBU, I'm afraid I won't be able to get anything out of him by simply asking, or tricking into giving me the answers I want, is not going to work," Sakura complained as she slumped a bit.

"I hope you don't expect me to probe his mind, do you?" a very wary Ino asked.

"I would never dream asking you that unless it was a life or death situation," Sakura replied, but Ino remained tense. "And no, this is not the case."

Ino finally relaxed. "Good. But you know, you got me curious. I'll see if I can talk to this guy, just to see if he's as bad as you describe him."

"He's even worse, but you don't have to take my word for it," Sakura replied with a shrug.

"Huh? Sorry for intruding, but who are you talking about?" a new voice said, making Sakura and Ino to turn at the newcomer, and saw Hinata walking towards them.

"Oh, hey, Hinata. Just some guy who got on Sakura's nerves, and she and Sasuke think he's up to no good," Ino quickly summarized.

"I see," Hinata replied as she not so much took a seat as she let herself fall on the bench, letting out a tired moan.

"You look exhausted. Were you training?" Sakura asked.

Hinata nodded. "Mmhmm. I don't know where Naruto-kun gets so much energy. Well, I do, but you know what I mean. Says he wants get promoted to Jonin as soon as possible."

"Let's hope he doesn't get exhausted too much. I heard we're going to launch our first attack on Kiri forces in less than a day, and we're going to need him," Ino said, as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Trust me, someone who is able to exhaust Naruto has not been born yet," Hinata replied, with a tired smile. "He'll be fine."

"Sasuke-kun is the same. He wants to do nothing but train and get stronger as soon as he can. I don't know why he needs to be so much power so soon," Sakura added, raising her arms in frustration. "He'd be more happy if he learned to relax."

"Well, Sasuke-san lost many loved ones..." Hinata looked at Ino warily. "... that night."

"It's okay, Hinata, you can say it," Ino replied. "It's not like I'm going to have a meltdown if you mentioned that day by its name. What kind of kunoichi I would be if I had such a fragile psyche?"

"Anyway, due to what happened to the Uchiha back then, maybe he wants to get stronger to make sure he can save the loved ones he still has, should something happen to them," Hinata explained. "In a way, I feel the same. I know that I couldn't have done anything to save my father, but I want to become stronger, even if it takes me a lot of time, so I can protect my loved ones."

"That's... a very good reason," Sakura replied, then she looked down at her lap. "Guess I was among the lucky ones who didn't lose anybody important that night."

"Your parents are civilians, so of course nobody would want to target them," Ino pointed out.

"You know... I just realized that we're going to do with Kiri what the Uchiha tried to do with Konoha," Hinata realized.

Sakura and Ino stared at her in mild shock, realizing that there was some truth to her words. This made them feel a bit uneasy.

"But then again, it's not the same. The Mizukage's such a bloodthirsty tyrant, it inspired half the ninjas of Kiri to rise against him. The Uchiha wanted to take over due having an imaginary chip on their shoulder. We're still the good guys, and we're helping the right side win the war," Sakura argued.

"And what if we were hired by the Mizukage to help him crush the rebellion?" Ino pointed out.

Sakura was taken aback by such a harsh question, but nonetheless managed to come up with what she believed was a satisfying response.

"Then I'm sure Hokage-sama would have turned their request down, no matter how much he was willing to pay us. Shizune-sensei said that, even if we're professionals and not a charity, Konoha and its ninja are devoted to make the world a better place, and I don't know how helping Yagura keep the hat would align with that," Sakura replied. "Besides, if Hokage-sama wanted to gain favor with the Mizukage, he could have deported Zabuza-san and Haku-san back to the Land of Water, but he didn't do that."

"That's a fair point," Hinata conceded. "After all, the First Hokage created the village system as a way to pave for an era of peace."

"And now we're helping spread that peace even further by helping the right side of this conflict to end a years long civil war!" Sakura enthusiastically declared.

"Let's hope you're right. I'd hate to see that, after we help them win, the rebels turn out to be worse than Yagura ever was," Ino mentioned.

"You're actually getting ahead of yourself. We didn't help the rebels win yet," Hinata pointed out.

Sakura smirked at her. "'Yet' being the key word here."

...

Meanwhile, in one of the ship's private training areas, Zabuza was in a sparring match against Ameyuri and Chojuro, the two of them against him. So far, the older swordsman was doing a good job keeping them at bay, and making it look as if fighting his two younger colleagues was a boring task.

Ameyuri charged forward, her swords crackling with electricity, and thrust them towards Zabuza, who used his much larger blade to block them, then pushing back, using his superior strength to knock the redheaded swordswoman on her back.

"Somebody should have told you that direct confrontation with an enemy that surpasses you in both height and muscle is a bad idea, little girl," Zabuza sneered. Ameyuri snarled, baring her sharp teeth.

While Zabuza was taunting Ameyuri, Chojuro sneaked from behind, and tried to slash Zabuza with his Hiraamekarei, but the moment the blade descended, Zabuza casually sidestepped, and used Chojuro's momentum against him by tripping him on his legs, making him tumble on top of the still fallen Ameyuri.

"And you, I'll give you credit for sneaking on me from behind like that. However, your silent killing would be far more effective if you didn't breathe so hard," Zabuza pointed out, as he rested his Executioner's Blade on his shoulders.

"Get away from me, four eyes!" Ameyuri snarled as she pushed Chojuro away.

"S-Sorry!" the bespectacled swordsman stammered.

Ignoring Chojuro, Ameyuri's eyes focused on Zabuza once again.

"Let's see how well you like this!" Ameyuri crossed her swords in front of her face in an X, producing a white electric flash.

"Thundersword Ninja Art: Eye of the Storm!"

Ameyuri spread her arms wide, and started to spin at a rapid speed, turning herself into an electric sharp twister, which quickly moved towards Zabuza.

"I kill dozens of enemies with this technique alone! Let's see how well you fare against it, 'demon'!" Ameyuri boasted.

Zabuza wasn't impressed. The moment Ameyuri got close to him and was about to tear him to shreds, Zabuza instantly vanished and reappeared behind the spinning kunochi. The taller ninja then kicked her in the back of the knees, sending Ameyuri back to the floor.

"AUGH!" she cried, unwillingly dropping her swords.

"Let me guess, those enemies were all cluttered and with little space to move, am I right?" Zabuza asked. "As you can see, that move is pretty much useless in a battle with few people and plenty of space to move. Not to mention that you could possibly harm your allies with that as well."

Chojuro, meanwhile, remained locked in place, watching Zabuza dissing Ameyuri once again.

"I always thought Ameyuri-san was so strong, yet Zabuza-sempai is toying with her like that... what chance do I have... no! I can't think like that! Mei-sama says that I can be strong, and I'll show her faith in me is not misplaced!" Chojuro thought, as he raised Hiraamekarei above his head, and charged once again, letting out a battle cry.
"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

Zabuza turned around, and looked at the now emboldened Chojuro unamused. Making display of his uncanny speed, Zabuza vanished and reappeared centimeters away from the blue haired swordsman, who let out a shocked yelp.

Zabuza grabbed Chojuro by the neck, and raised him in the air, making him drop the Hiramekarei, falling to the ground with a loud clang. Zabuza then proceeded to slam Chojuro against the ground on his back.

"Owwwww... !" Chojuro cried in pain.

"If you two are the best Mei has to offer, then the future of the Seven Swordsmen, as well as the rebellion, is pretty bleak," Zabuza chided, shaking his head in disappointment.

"Don't flaunt yourself as all that! We all saw how Mei-sama wiped the floor with you back in Konoha!" Ameyuri fired back.

Zabuza smirked, walked towards Ameyuri, and crouched before her in order to look at her in the eyes. "Yet here I am, wiping the floor with you two. What does that say about you?"

Ameyuri couldn't say anything but angrily snarl at her fellow swordsman.

"Come on, you two, we're not done yet! I might not have much time, but I'll make sure to whip you up into shape by the time we have to invade the village!" Zabuza shouted, slamming his sword into the ground for added emphasis.

Watching the spar from above, on a special box, were four people. One of them was Mei, the rebel leader, admiring her newest investment. The remaining three were three of her ninja, two men and a woman.

The first one was rather young, the same age as those who belonged to the group called "Konoha 15". He had shoulder length white hair with a light blue tint at the tips, purple eyes, and a pointy tooth sticking out of his mouth. He was wearing a black sleeveless shirt with blue stripped wrist warmers and leg warmers.

Next to him was a rather tall and fit girl, with long dark blue hair that fell down her back, with a long bang covering half her face. Her eyes, or at least her only visible eye, was also dark blue. Like the young man besides her, she was wearing the same type of attire, only with a Chunin flak jacket over it.

Behind the two of them was an even taller man of unknown characteristics, given that his whole body was covered by a black hooded cloak, and his face was obscured by a Kirigakure ANBU mask.

"So, what do you think?" Mei asked the others.

The white haired boy showed a toothy grin. "I did hear a lot about Zabuza-sempai, but seeing him in action is even better."

"Of course you'd think that, Suigetsu," the woman replied, crossed his arms over her chest. "Let's hope Zabuza-sempai is just as good in the battlefield."

"You seem to doubt him, Miyako," Suigetsu pointed out.

"Zabuza-sempai already tried to depose the Mizukage once, and his plan was an utter failure. I think we'd be better off without him," Miyako insisted.

"Zabuza-chan is impulsive, yes, but also skilled. And his failure to depose the Mizukage didn't detract from his reputation, far from it," Mei pointed out. "Just for that, it's more than worth it to have him here. Besides the obvious fact that he has one of the seven swords."

"What about you, Kumori? What do you think?" Suigetsu asked the masked man, who merely moved his head to acknowledge the question, but remained silent. Suigetsu frowned. "You know, you may think that being all silent and mysterious makes you cool, but I know for a fact that everybody thinks you're a pretentious asshole."

"Enough chitchat, I think it's about time for Zabuza-chan to meet you, given that you'll be under his command," Mei stated, as she jumped from the box, followed by the other three.

The moment the foursome landed, Zabuza turned around, and glanced at them inquisitively. Mei merely smiled, and started clapping.

"Impressive, Zabuza-chan. I knew I did the right choice by bringing you with us," Mei earnestly said.

Zabuza growled irritatingly. "Could you stop calling me Zabuza-CHAN!?"

"Of course not, Zabuza-chan," Mei replied, keeping that beautiful but unbelievably smug smile. "Anyway, now that you've already met Ameyuri and Chojuro, and tested their capabilities, I thought that maybe you should meet the rest of the next generation of the Seven Swordsmen. This handsome young man here is Suigetsu Hozuki."

"Glad to meet you, Zabuza-sempai. I've always been a great admirer of your work, and hope that one day I can equate your body count" Suigetsu greeted him with one of his unnerving smiles.

"Hozuki? Are you related to Mangetsu?" Zabuza asked.

"Mangetsu was my brother. Most of our clan, Mangetsu included, was killed because we sided with Mei-sama. I'm all what's left," Suigetsu replied, though he didn't sound especially hurt or mournful.

"If you're his brother, how is that you didn't inherit the Hiraekarei?" Zabuza asked. "Weren't you his apprentice?"

"No. Chojuro was Mangetsu's apprentice. Due his untimely demise, Chojuro's training is incomplete. Hopefully, you'll put a remedy to that," Mei interceded. "Suigetsu was training to become a Swordsman one day, but he wasn't assigned a sensei yet."

"And you want me to train all these brats?" Zabuza asked, almost groaning.

"By virtue of being the only Swordsman who completed his training, yes," Mei replied with a shrug. "Anyway, this lovely young woman here is Miyako Kiui."

"Mei-sama has faith in your abilities despite your track record, so guess that I'll follow your orders," Miyako replied, not too thrilled to meet Zabuza.

"And lastly, this man over here is Kumori Nashi," Mei said, pointing at the masked man.

Kumori didn't say anything, just nodded.

"A talkative one, huh?" Zabuza snarked. "I like those the most. So, where are the remaining two?"

Mei looked confused. "Which remaining two?"

"You know, for both Samehada and my sword. I'm sure you had a backup plan in case you weren't able to get me back into the fold," Zabuza said.

"Oh, I was pretty sure I could get you back 'into the fold'. I have a lot of confidence in my diplomatic skills, so preparing a replacement for you wasn't necessary. As for Samehada... well, you know that sword is different from the others, since it's the sword who chooses its wielder, not the other way around. But I hope to have it back one day."

"You'll certainly need something better than what you have gathered here if you hope to kill Kisame one day. He wasn't Fuguki-sama's apprentice for nothing," Zabuza retorted.

Mei smiled once again. "Zabuza-chan, soon you'll see that what I've gathered here has way more to offer than you think."

...

Later that afternoon, all Konoha ninja were summoned to one of the ship's largest rooms, which was mostly devoid of all furniture, with the exception of a small platform. Mei Terumi and some of her closest allies were on top of it. The rebel leader took a step forward, and began talking.

"Are all of Konoha's ninja here? It looks to me nobody's missing," Mei stated, smiling once again. "Anyway, we've been talking with your commanding officers, and you're about to do your first mission working for us. Our first endeavor will be taking over the island prison named the Crimson Citadel.

"The plan is a simple one, but it has to be done as fast as efficiently as possible. Using the night's darkness as a cover, a team composed by four ninja will sneak into the prison from air. The infiltration team will proceed to disable the guards manning the dock gates, and open them. Once they're opened, the rest of our forces will board the prison, killing all the guards, and releasing all the war prisoners.

"One last thing: once the attack begins, they will try to send a message to the village warning them about what we're doing. Such thing can't happen, so keep your eyes open for possible birds or small boats trying to leave the prison.

"Your commanding officers know all the finer details of this operation, ask them to debrief you even further if you still have any doubts. Time is of essence, and we need to act as soon as possible. Meaning that the attack will take place this midnight."

Naturally, such announcement caused many of the Konoha ninja to murmur among themselves, some of them even wondering if they can get ready in such short notice, while the most veteran ninja told them that they've been training for such unexpected situations like this one. Thankfully, the whispers didn't last long.

"The infiltration mission will be lead by Ameyuri Ringo, one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist currently serving the rebellion," Mei motioned her arm, and the younger kunoichi took a step forward. "As for the rest of her squad... can those Chunin belonging to the Tactical Squad, I believe that was the name, take a step forward, please?"

Again, more murmurs ensued as Shikamaru, Ino and Choji left the crowd and came closer to the platform.

"You three? Good," Mei smiled. "Ameyuri will explain the finer details of your mission now. You could also try to get each other acquainted a bit better." Mei then turned at the rest of the crowd. "Several smaller ships should arrive soon. My men will organize you in several larger squads and tell you which ship you need to board.

"That's all. Good luck, and I hope all of us can make it back in one piece."

The short briefing finished, the crowd dissolved as the Konoha ninjas left the room and got ready for the incoming mission. Chojuro then walked towards Mei

"What do you think, Mei-sama? Do you think we can pull this off?" the young swordsman asked.

Mei turned at him, and smiled. "I have to think we can. But something tells me that I did the right thing by asking Konoha for help. I think we're in for an spectacle."

...

Land of Earth, Undisclosed Location

Enveloped in cloak of Tailed Beast Chakra, Han dashed towards Kakuzu at an almost lightning fast speed. Kakuzu then made three hand seals, and channeled chakra.

"Fire Release: Searing Migraine!"

However, it wasn't Kakuzu who fired the jutsu. A monstrous masked being made of a pulsating mass of threads and tendrils opened its mouth, breathing a massive firestorm forward. Han's speed was so great that he was unable to change course, and he was engulfed by the wave of fire. However, despite the great devastation caused by the attack, when the fire and smoke dispelled, Han didn't look any worse for the wear, and resumed his charge.

As Han got closer, he wound a fist back.

"Erupting Propulsion Fist!"

Steam started to come from his gauntlets' holes as Han delivered what it would be a devastating attack towards Kakuzu. However, the strange creature that used that fire jutsu appeared between Han and the Akatsuki, taking the brunt of the attack. Its mask shattered in contact, and the mass of tendrils and threads lost all form and shape, and fell to the ground.

"Damn, that's the second heart I lost to this guy," Kakuzu inwardly cursed. Besides his Fire Heart, he had also lost his Wind Heart. Now only Water, Lightning and his own Earth Heart remained.

"You're strong, I'll give you that," Han admitted. "That won't make me any more merciful towards you once this fight ends."

Hidan chose that moment to appear from behind and tried to slash the jinchuriki with his three bladed scythe. However, like it happened the previous three times, it harmlessly bounced on the Iwa Ninja's thick armor.

"You know Hidan, it'd be great if you could stop being so absurdly useless," Kakuzu groaned.

"Oh shut your mouth! It's not my fault! Who the fuck wears an armor this heavy nowadays?" the Jashin priest complained. "This shithead

has to be as old as you are, Kakuzu!"

"Erupting Strong Foot!"

Hidan found himself at the receiving end of what it could be easily considered the most brutal kick ever delivered.

"FUCK YOUUUUUUUUUUUuuuuuuuuuu... !" Hidan screamed as he was sent flying into the air, before he crashed against a large rock.

"That one isn't very strong, but for some reason he refuses to stay dead," Han observed. "Which wouldn't be so bad if he could remain silent for more than ten seconds."

"Trust me, if I knew a way to kill him, it would be long since that man drew its last breath," a resigned Kakuzu said. "Then again, you're my current target."

Kakuzu made a hand seal, and his two remaining monsters attacked Han. The masked monsters opened their mouths, releasing a stream of water and a bolt of lightning, respectively. This forced Han to fall back, as he made several hand seals.

"Boil Release: Heat Cutter!"

Han created a long blade of pressurized steam, and threw it forward like a javelin. The monsters jumped aside, but that's what Han expected. His true target was Kakuzu, since he knew that if he was able to take him down, then those strange beasts would go down with him.

But when the monsters moved aside, Kakuzu was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did he-?"

"Earth Release: Earth Spear!"

Han turned around to see Kakuzu in front of him, his fist, now blackened, wound back. He wasn't fast enough to dodge it, and much to his shock, the punch packed enough force to crack his armor. Not letting his enemy time to breathe, Kakuzu then delivered Han a kick to his face. Han, however, managed to grab Kakuzu's foot before the attack could connect.

"I'm baaaaaaaaaaaaaack!" Hidan shouted as he landed near the two, and delivered a swipe of his scythe to the armor's cracked zone.

This time, the armor gave in, and Hidan's scythe managed to slash Han's flesh. The jinchuriki disengaged Kakuzu, and jumped backwards a few time, as he clutched his wound on one hand.

"Sorry, kid, but you've already lost," Kakuzu stated.

Han couldn't help but chuckle. "You made me bleed once, and you think you already won? You guys are sure confident."

"Trust me, that's all what we need," Hidan said as he licked the blood of his scythe.

The Janshin cultist then transformed. His skin turned black, as white, bone-like patterns appeared across it, giving him an appearance similar to the other cultists Han fought before. Except this time, it was obvious it wasn't body paint. Hidan then cut his hand, and used his own blood to draw around him a circle with a circumscribed triangle.

"Kakuzu, would you kindly...?" Hidan asked, almost in a submissive tone.

Wordlessly, Kakuzu's hand clutched Hidan's throat, and started to strangle his partner, much to Han's confusion.

Han then noticed that something was very wrong. He started to feel as if somebody was strangling him as well. Han's hands instinctively flew towards his neck in a vain attempt to break free from the

strangling, but he was unable to do anything. He struggled as the lack of oxygen started to take its toll.

"Wait a minute... his jutsu! Whatever happens to him, it happens to me too! I have to stop them!" Han realized at last.

But it was too late, and before the jinchuriki could do anything, his entire world turned into darkness...

Author's Note: So yeah, goodbye, Han. Sorry if you were expecting him to have a bigger role in this story. And the thing is, I actually added the parts with Han pretty much right before I sent the chapter to betaread, since Han was going to be caught offscreen. There are two reasons for this:

-The first one, some reviewers asked for the jinchuriki who weren't going to appear in the story, that there was at least an implication that they gave the Akatsuki a big fight before they went down.

-The second one was a rant from DryBonesKing, an author from one of my favorite Naruto fanfics, "True Potential", who made a plea for other authors to use the jinchuriki other than Naruto, Gaara and B a bit more.

So that's why, even if some jinchuriki won't play big roles in the story, they will at least be shown giving their would be captors some hell before they go down, so I hoped you enjoyed Han's fight. Conversely, I will try to give some jinchuriki a bigger role in the story than I had originally planned. Then again, I won't promise anything, since this story is getting way too crowded as it is now.

An added benefit is that it allows me to include some action in the slower chapters like this one. But hey, fleshing out relationships is important too! This chapter has Naru/Hina, Neji/Karin and a little Sasu/Saku, Rin meeting Kakashi's team

and they learning more about their sensei, more Naruto/Karin family moments, and Hinata, Sakura and Ino having some friendly chat. I'm really proud how many interactions and relationships I managed to put into this chapter.

Once again, thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Anyway, the next two chapters will be far more action packed as the rebellion assaults the Crimson Citadel. In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Crimson Citadel, Part I

Author's Notes: Hmmm... the latest chapter got much less reviews than usual. Wonder if it was because people thought it wasn't up to par, or because the website was acting up and notifications didn't work properly. Here I'm hoping is the latter. Anyway, hope this chapter is far better received then. Enjoy:

Chapter 45:

The Crimson Citadel, Part I

or

Mission: Maybe Possible

...

Midnight came sooner than expected, and everybody was ready for the attack. But first, the infiltration team needed to do its job.

Through the dark sky of the night, two large animals flew above the sea. They would have been seen if there was a moon, but thankfully, it was in its waxing crescent phase, so there was little natural light that could betray the infiltration team's presence. That's why it was so important for the attack to be carried out as soon as possible.

The two animals in question were a giant hawk, and an equally large beetle. Riding the bird was Sasuke Uchiha, its summoner, and he was carrying Ameyuri and Shikamaru on its back as well. Shino was the one riding the giant beetle, and behind him were Ino and Choji. All six of them quickly saw the Crimson Citadel.

The prison in question was a rather large military base that encompassed nearly the whole island. It was surrounded by a rather tall and thick wall, with only a single entrance in the dock. Many ninja

patrolled the walls, and multiple searchlights scanned the area with powerful beams of light. However, they only scanned the surrounding water, and paid no attention to the sky. It was obvious why Mei had chosen an aerial drop.

"Fly closer to the southeastern wall. We'll land there," Ameyuri instructed Sasuke.

"The gates are east of the island. Don't you want me to drop you closer to the dock?" Sasuke asked.

Ameyuri shook her head. "There are far too many searchlights there, and the risk of being seen is too big."

"Alright then," Sasuke agreed.

The two flying beasts headed towards the area Ameyuri instructed, and as expected, it was the safest zone to land.

"Alright, let's go!" Ameyuri said as she jumped from the bird.

Shikamaru softly groaned, and followed her. Ino and Choji joined them a couple seconds later. With their job done, Sasuke and Shino returned to the rebel fleet located not far away from then.

The four infiltrators, upon landing, immediately hid in a dark alley between two small buildings.

"Everyone accounted for? Alright then, listen up. See those two towers at each side of the dock? According to our intelligence, that's where the gate switches are. We will also place a bunch of explosive notes on the towers and some sections of the walls for additional damage. Both of them need to be activated at the same time in order to open the gates, so we need to split up in two groups of two. Choji, you'll come with me. Shikamaru, Ino, you'll be the second team," Ameyuri stated.

"Actually," Shikamaru began. "I believe that you should go with either me or Ino, and have the other go with Choji."

The redheaded woman raised an eyebrow. "And you say that because...?"

"Choji's abilities are more combat focused, as are yours. On the other hand, Ino and I fill a supporting role better. That's why the ideal teams should have one combat specialist and one support," Shikamaru reasoned.

Ameyuri fixed a hard stare on the Nara genius. "I don't like being contradicted, pineapple head. On the other hand, you make a good point, and given that it's your team, I'll take your word. Blondie, you come with me, and help me take the northern tower. You two can go together, and take the southern one."

"What do we do with the guards? Should we kill them?" Choji asked.

"Not yet. If those manning the searchlights don't see any guards patrolling the wall, they'll get suspicious. Try to avoid confrontation until you're close to the towers. And even then, try not to cause a ruckus," Ameyuri advised. Then, she shot them an unnerving smile. "But once the gates open, the fun will begin and you can go all out."

Choji and Shikamaru laughed a bit awkwardly.

"Can I go with Choji instead?" Ino uneasily pleaded.

"Nope! Enough chitchat, we can't waste anymore time, go, go, go!"

The group of four split in half. With Ameyuri and Ino taking the northern tower, and Shikamaru and Choji taking the southern one.

...

Now on their own, Shikamaru and Choji proceeded to cover the place in explosive tags. So far, Shikamaru watched the surroundings, while Choji placed the explosive notes. While doing

so, Shikamaru also learned quite a few things from the guards and the searchlights.

One, the guards were in groups of two or three. Some of the groups of three were made of Chunin, while some Jonin made half of the groups of two. The groups of three patrolled the longest sections of the wall, while the groups of two the shortest. Also, he noticed that the searchlights illuminated the area not currently being patrolled.

"Not to blind the patrollers, or to keep the least amount of area unwatched? Probably both," Shikamaru deduced.

"Alright, explosives placed here, let's move towards the next one!" Choji whispered, then he made a hand seal. "Reverse Multi Size Jutsu!"

Choji shrank to the size of a marble, allowing Shikamaru to pick him up and place him inside one of his flak jacket's pockets. Just as he did, Shikamaru heard a patrol coming his way. The lazy Nara rushed to hide behind a couple of wooden crates, which were big enough to barely cover his lithe body.

"Thank goodness for this jutsu. Otherwise, trying to hide somebody as big as Choji would have been nearly impossible," Shikamaru thought in relief, as he watched the guards passing by. There were two, and one of them was a Jonin.

Choji brought up the idea of using Transformation to turn into a pair of generic Mist ninja and pass as guards, but while the idea was good, Shikamaru turned it down, since there was a chance that they were asked something, and unable to respond, their disguise would become apparent. No, they couldn't be seen.

Once the guards were far enough, Shikamaru continued advancing, not as fast as he'd wish if he wanted to remain hidden. The fact that a patrol had just passed meant that he had some time before a searchlight would illuminate the area. However, upon reaching a certain point, Shikamaru found an obstacle impossible to surpass.

Two searchlights cast two beams of lights over the wall at specific intervals, in a way that it was impossible to avoid the light and thus being discovered.

"Troublesome lights," Shikamaru groaned.

"What's wrong?" Choji asked from his pocket.

"We're so damn close to the tower, but this section of the wall will be nearly impossible to watch due those searchlights. And we can't disable them without alerting our presence," Shikamaru explained his shrunken teammate.

"Hmmm... maybe we could use my size to our advantage? Even if the search lights illuminate me, at this size the guards from the towers will think I'm a rodent or something like that, if they see me to begin with," Choji explained.

"Not a bad idea, but at your size, it would take you forever to cross this section," Shikamaru pointed out. "Not to mention that a guard that saw you closely wouldn't mistake you for a small animal."

"Then what do we do?" Choji asked.

An idea started to form in Shikamaru's mind. "The fact that we haven't been found yet means that none of those guards are sensors."

"Sensors are rare. What about it?" Choji asked.

Shikamaru smirked in return. "Do you think that somebody will notice that one of the guards has a little stowaway inside their ninja pouch?"

"So it will be guards themselves who will bring me to the tower. Great!" Choji replied, smirking in return. "But how are you going to get into the tower then?"

"Don't worry, I'll think something," Shikamaru replied, as he took Choji from his pocket, "Okay, here comes a patrol, get ready!"

From his hiding spot, Shikamaru waited until the guards passed him. Then, silently, Shikamaru approached the unsuspecting Kiri ninja from behind, and let Choji latch onto the guard's ninja tool pouch on his back. The guard suddenly stopped. Shikamaru's heart skipped a beat before he returned to his hiding place.

"Dammit, did he notice me?" Shikamaru worriedly thought.

"Are you okay?" one of the guards asked the one carrying Choji.

"Well, I just noticed as if somebody was trying to pick my pouch," the guard in question replied.

"Please do not grab your pouch, please do not grab your pouch," Shikamaru mentally begged.

"But there's nobody here and my pouch doesn't feel any lighter, so guess it was just my imagination," the guard replied with a shrug, as he and his partners continued their patrol.

In the background, Shikamaru silently sighed in relief. When the guard passed in front of the tower, he saw something -presumably Choji- jumping out of the guard's pouch -and the guard once again complained about feeling something- and successfully infiltrated the tower.

"Okay, got an idea, it's a bit risky, but it's the best I have," Shikamaru thought.

Once the guards were out of sight, Shikamaru started to run as fast as possible while trying to remain silent. The searchlight's beam of light came dangerously close to him. The Nara then stopped, and made a hand seal.

"Transformation Jutsu!"

In a poof of smoke, Shikamaru turned into a pile of crates just as the searchlight illuminated him. Thankfully, it didn't raise any suspicions. Once the light passed, Shikamaru turned back to normal and rushed towards the tower, in order to rejoin Choji.

"Once they notice those crates are no longer there, or that they weren't there before, it will be too late," Shimamaru thought, mostly to try to relieve himself from the stress he was enduring.

"Shikamaru!" Choji whispered from inside the tower. He was still in the lower floor. "Good job!"

"We haven't finished yet. We need to disable those guards and open the gate," Shikamaru reminded Choji.

"Yeah, but that part shouldn't be hard. We no longer need to be stealthy, and we have the element of surprise," Choji replied. "So, you immobilize them, and I knock them out?"

Shikamaru smirked. "Sounds like a plan."

...

Meanwhile, to the north, the kunoichi proceeded as well with their side of the mission. However, their approach wasn't as subtle as Shikamaru and Choji.

"I'm sensing a patrol. Two ninja. Do you think you can take them out?" Ino asked.

Ameyuri smiled evilly, showing those scary sharp teeth. "Just watch," the redhead said as she unsheathed her trusty twin swords.

"Remember to leave one alive!" Ino reminded her.

"Don't sweat it," Ameyuri casually replied.

The Mist kunoichi silently walked behind the patrolling duo. In an instant, she grabbed one of them from behind, and slashed his throat

open, preventing him from shouting. His partner reacted too late.

"What the? We're under-!" But before he could give the alarm, Ameyuri slammed the pommel of one her swords into the man's throat, rendering him mute. She then hit him in the bridge of his nose, knocking him on his back. She then proceeded to immobilize the man, who struggled against the rebel swordswoman.

"Come on, blondie, I can't keep him like this for long!" Ameyuri protested.

Ino rushed towards her, and placed her two hands on the man's head.

"Mind Yokel Jutsu!"

Suddenly, the man stopped struggling. Ameyuri tentatively released him. The man then stood up, and remained there, almost as inert as an inanimate object.

"What did you do to him?" Ameyuri asked, as she waved a hand in front of the hypnotized ninja, who didn't react.

"The Mind Yokel Jutsu pretty much turns an opponent into a puppet of mine. He won't do anything unless I order him to. I can also speak through him. Sadly, the effect isn't permanent. The stronger is the target, the shorter the jutsu will last," Ino replied. "I also have access to most of his memories, so if they interrogate us, there won't be any problem."

"That's some killer jutsu you have there, blondie. Not just for intelligence gathering, but you can also force somebody to commit suicide," Ameyuri praised.

Ino shook her head. "I do receive sympathetic damage from the jutsu. If my target is harmed when it's under my control, I do suffer the same harm. Lethal injuries mean I go down as well."

"Well, you can always force them to jump off a cliff, then undo the jutsu before they hit the ground. Easy and clean," Ameyuri suggested.

Ino crossed her arms, and frowned. "You do have a terrible mind, anyone ever tell you that? I'm afraid what I'd find if I scanned your mind."

Ameyuri merely shrugged, not affected by Ino's critics. "I like to think myself as being efficient at my job. Anyway, enough chit chat, time is of the essence."

Both of them made the same hand seal.

"Transformation jutsu!"

Ino transformed into the ninja Ameyuri just killed, while Ameyuri herself transformed into a random Kirigakure ninja.

"Okay, let's go," Ameyuri said.

The two disguised kunoichi and the mind controlled ninja walked towards the tower, trying not to look suspicious. So far, whenever they crossed another patrol, or a searchlight illuminated them, no alarms were raised, so their plan was working so far.

"These guys have red uniforms. I always thought that Kirigakure's clothes were blue?" Ino asked, while looking at the mind controlled guard's uniform.

"It was. To represent water and all that. Guess that it's red now to represent blood," Ameyuri replied with a shrug. "Well, it works to our advantage. That way, you Konoha guys won't mistake one of them for our own, or vice-versa."

They continued their walk in silence, though when no one was watching, they tried to hurry a bit, since Ino's mind control would end

anytime soon. Eventually, they managed to reach the tower without much incident.

"Okay, I'm going to release the jutsu," Ino said, making a hand seal.

After undoing the mental link, the guard reacted as if he just woke up from a very strange dream.

"What? Where am I?" the guard asked, looking dizzy.

The answer came in the form of two blades piercing his gut, killing him in a couple seconds. After hiding the body, Ameyuri and Ino stormed the tower.

"Alright, stealth is no longer an issue, let's cut loose!" the redheaded kunoichi said as she rushed upstairs.

...

Back in the southern tower, Shikamaru and Choji had already disabled the few ninja inside the tower, and were waiting for Ino to contact them, since they had to open the door at the same time. Fortunately, they didn't have to wait much.

"Shikamaru, Choji, are you there?" they heard Ino's voice in their minds. *"Ameyuri and I have taken over the northern tower, what's the situation?"*

"Wow, that was fast, given that your tower was much farther away than ours," Shikamaru commented. "On our side, Choji and I also took over the tower as well, and we're waiting for your signal."

"In that case, let's open the dock gates so the mission can begin," Ino replied.

"Don't forget the fireworks," Choji asked. Both he and Shikamaru smirked evilly.

...

Not far away from there, but far away enough not to be seen by the searchlights, a fleet of transport boats awaited. The sea was thankfully calm, and silence filled the air, something that greatly benefitted the rebels. Unfortunately, the ansty troops aboard the boats weren't as calm, as expected from somebody who was about to storm a high security prison.

Of all the rebels, none was more restless than Mei Terumi. While she was trying her best to maintain a cool and collected facade, the rebel leader was stressed. She risked a lot on this operation, and if the Konoha ninja weren't up to par, then the rebellion would end there. Then again, she didn't get far by playing it safe.

Her mission was to liberate Kirigakure from Yagura and his reign of blood, not to simply survive as outlaws.

The redhead woman walked towards the prow, where one of her ninja was scouting the prison with a spyglass.

"Nothing yet?" Mei asked.

"I'm afraid not, Mei-sama," the scout replied, not taking his eyes from the target.

"I see. I thought we'd have news from them by now," Mei replied, sighing.

"The infiltration team just departed. It will take long to complete their mission. I think it's best not to get too impatient and-"

But the scout was interrupted by a chain of loud explosions that illuminated the night sky. Several of the watchtowers crumbled down, while at the same time the dock gates started to open.

Mei and her scout watched the display with their mouths agape.

"... incredible!" was the stunned guard's reply.

Mei, however, quickly recovered, and smiled in satisfaction. "I knew those Konoha ninja were good. Now is time to show them that we're just as good as well! Everybody, sail forward to the prison!"

A wave of cheers and shouts erupted in response to Mei's orders, and as she instructed, the fleet of boats quickly sailed towards the island prison. The chaos ensued made sure that the defenders would be unprepared to stop their arrival. Mei's boat was the first one to invade the prison, and the rebel leader herself was the first one to set foot on the island.

"Attack! We need to push them out of the dock!" Mei commanded as she rushed to meet the first wave of defenders. Her hands flew through hand seals as she was ready to spill the first blood. "Boil Release: Skilled Mist Jutsu!"

Mei released a cloud of burning mist from her mouth, instantly burning a trio of unfortunate defenders. The others, seeing what Mei was capable of, wisely fell back, and attacked from afar. Mei merely smirked.

"The end of the Blood Mist begins tonight!" she shouted.

...

Meanwhile, atop the highest floor of the main building inside one of the offices, was the warden. The warden had already seen and heard the rebels' attack, and was getting ready to respond. At that moment, the door of his office burst open, and a shaken ninja barged in.

"Warden-sama! Mei and her band of criminals are attacking the prison!" the ninja informed, panting heavily.

"I noticed. Now calm down. They caught us by surprise, but we'll show them what mistake they made coming here," the warden replied, as he picked his iconic weapon. "Try to hold them as much as you can, while I go and activate our special defense mode."

The guard grinned when he heard those three words. The rebel trash won't know what hit them.

...

Loyalist and rebel forces clashed for the control of the dock, trading blows, kunai, shuriken and elemental ninjutsu. However, it was clear that the rebels, with the surprise factor on their side and their -for the moment- superior numbers proved to be too hard to keep contained, as more and more rebel ninja came out of the still arriving boats.

"Don't let them pass!" cried a prison guard.

"They're too many!" replied the other.

"Don't dare to let them advance a single millimeter!" the first guard angrily replied.

But those failed to inspire the defenders to fight with more ferocity or determination, as the Rebel-Konoha alliance soon broke through the defenders' line, forcing them to fall back, and taking over the dock. Cheers soon ensued.

"Mei-sama, they're retreating to the innermost zones of the prison," Chojuro noted.

"Just as expected," she then turned towards her army. "This isn't over, far from it! Now we will be forced to split and fight on several fronts, but I believe we can do it. Fifth division, secure the dock and start setting up an infirmary! Second division, to the armory! Third and fourth divisions, to the barracks! Everybody else, with me to the prison blocks!"

...

Meanwhile, under the main building cluster, the warden reached his destination, a small, empty room, with a complex seal pattern drawn on the wall in front of the door. He placed his hand in the exact

center of the pattern, and send a pulse of chakra. The seals started to glow with a blue light.

The warden smirked as chains of seals started to glow, leaving the room and spreading through the whole prison.

"Let's see how much you like these, you rebel scum," the warden said as he left the room, ready to meet those daring enough to storm his prison.

...

Befitting their role, Kurenai's Assault Squad was leading the charge against one of the points of interest Mei had deemed a priority, the barracks, where most of the ninja who guarded the prison lived and slept. Accompanying them was also Miyako, one of Mei's best swordfighters, and hopeful for the new Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. Taking over it would provide an additional foothold for the rebel forces. Of course, the loyalist Kiri ninja weren't going to surrender it without a fight, and a large contingent of them rushed to meet the rebel forces mid-way.

"So, the rebel scum has brought some Konoha trash in a pitiful attempt to bolster their strength? Pathetic!" a masked ANBU Kiri ninja sneered, as he unsheathed his katana. "Kill them all!"

One of them made a hand seal. "Water Release: Hidden in the Mist Jutsu!"

Soon, a thick mist formed, covering the battlefield. The rebels stuck to each other, expecting the enemy to resort to a silent attack.

"I'll take care of this!" Naruto said as he started to make hand seals. "Wing Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

The jinchuriki cast his hands forward one over the other, and a horizontal tornado shot from them, dispelling the mist.

"Keep the mist active!" the same ANBU as before ordered, and other two Kiri ninja proceeded to recast the mist jutsu. "Somebody kill that blond brat! He's a Wind Release user!"

Several Anbu leaped into the air, and unleashed a barrage of shuriken and kunai at the blond. Hinata appeared just in front of him.

"Naruto-kun, stay behind me!" Hinata asked, as she activated her Byakugan. "Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!"

"Huh? That's new!" Naruto thought, not recognizing the jutsu's name.

Hinata started to move her palms forward in a pushing manner, so fast they became blurry, releasing thin streams of chakra from the palms of her hands, deflecting every one of the steel projectiles that were falling at them.

"Whoa, amazing jutsu, Hinata-hime!" Naruto praised.

"Thank you. I created it because I realized that, with the Heavenly Spin, I can only protect myself, and I can hurt my friends and allies if they're too close," Hinata explained.

"Good thinking, Hinata-san," Haku praised as well. He then started to make hand seals. "But you aren't the only one with something new to show. Ice Release: Ice Dragon Crystal Blast!"

Haku made the same hand motion Naruto did a few seconds ago, but instead of wind, he created a large, serpentine dragon made of ice, which flew at the cluster of enemy Kiri ninja, letting out a roar. The dragon then crashed headfirst into them, exploding into multiple sharp icicles, which seriously injured many of them.

"And that one has Ice Release? I thought that that bloodline was extinct!" an enemy ninja cried, as he removed an ice shard from his arm.

"Don't stay like that looking like idiots! Counterattack already!" the head ANBU ordered.

The loyalist Kiri ninja started to make hand seals of their own, as the rebels prepared for the incoming barrage of attacks.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Several watery projectiles and waves flew at the rebel group, merging into a massive, chaotic water torrent.

"Counter that quickly!" Miyako ordered.

This time, it was Kurenai and Haku who took a step forward, as both started to make hand seals as fast as they could.

"Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

A large wall of stone erected behind a smaller wall of ice. The wall of ice was broken by the incoming barrage, but the stone wall successfully absorbed them without breaking. At least for the time being.

"Thank Kami you're an Earth Release user," Miyako told Kurenai.
"Are there many more among you?"

"I'm afraid not," Kurenai replied. "Earth affinity is rare in Konoha. Most of them there have fire affinity."

"Yet none of your students are, as I can see," Miyako pointed out. She then heard something, and turned around, her katana in front of her. "Watch out, I think there are some ANBU hidden in the mist ready to strike us!"

"Hinata, can you see them?" Kurenai asked.

"I'm trying, but this mist is laced with chakra, and it's interfering with my Byakugan!" Hinata replied, as she forced her eyesight as much as possible. "But the chakra is more concentrated in many points around us, I think that's them!"

The whistling sound of several kunai flying at them filled the air, but so far, nobody reported being hit. Yet everybody had the feeling that they did miss on purpose. And, indeed, Kurenai managed to see one of the Kunai embedded into the ground, and the Jonin's eyes widened in shock.

"Explosive notes! Take cover!" the genjutsu mistress warned.

Everybody fell back as explosions surrounded the battlefield, sending rebel ninja flying into the air, and briefly dispelling the mist before it reformed itself again. Seconds later, it was followed by the sound of blades clashing, and people crying in pain.

"Dammit, they used the explosions to scatter us and kill us one by one!" Miyako cursed as she stood back on her feet.

Her acute hearing picked up somebody sneaking behind her. An ally wouldn't do that. Turning around, she raised her katana in return just in time to block a swipe from an enemy Kiri ninja. The two of them struggled a bit, until the blue haired woman forced him back with a kick to the gut. She gripped her katana tightly as she delivered her counterattack.

"Water Release: Razor Stream!"

She swung her blade while she moved at the enemy ninja, who jumped back further, avoiding the slash by mere centimeters. He smirked at her for missing, but soon he felt a sharp pain crossing his body, and a bleeding scar formed across his chest.

"H-How...?" the surprised ninja asked.

"A sharp, condensed blade of water cast through my sword, so thin it's invisible to the eye, but any less lethal," the blue haired girl explained, before slashing his throat. "Did knowing that make your death any better?"

Meanwhile, Kurenai's team was also fighting against a group formed of standard prison guards and masked ANBU that had them surrounded.

"Give up, you're outnumbered!" an ANBU taunted them.

Naruto smirked in return, as he made a hand seal. "You think so? Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

An army of orange and green clad blonds emerged from thin air, pushing the Kiri ninja backwards, as they engaged in combat, but not without retaliating with their kunai, shuriken and mostly water jutsu.

"Good one, Naruto! Everybody, keep pushing forward!" Kurenai shouted as she placed a couple enemy Kiri ninja under a genjutsu.

Then, that moment, several circular sealing patterns started to appear all around the prison. The patterns were black at first, but they started to glow with a blue light.

"What's this? A trap?" Haku asked, taking a step back.

"Probably some sort of defensive measure. Stay alert!" Kurenai warned.

Naruto, however, opened his eyes wide upon recognizing some of the seals.

"Wait a minute... those are Uzumaki seals!" Naruto indignantly pointed out.

The seals produced multiple smoke explosions, which dispelled quickly, revealing something the rebels weren't expecting. Across the battlefield, multiple metallic golems had appeared. While not as large

as the one summoned by Jirobo, they still towered over any normal human. Like Jirobo's golem, they also had a stocky build, with massive upper body and shoulders, long arms ending in massive, gauntlet-like forearms, a small head with a v-shaped visor, a small but armored midsection, and short legs ended in massive boot like feet.

They were covered in red plating, with multiple sealing patterns craved around their bodies. Their heads had a small gray metal plate with Kirigakure's symbol, as if they were wearing forehead protectors.

"Ha! The Warden activated the Chakra War Golems! You're so screwed!" an enemy Kiri ninja laughed.

The two nearest golems identified Team Kurenai and Miyako as enemies, and stomped towards them.

"The seal on their bodies, they are also Uzumaki seals!" Naruto realized in shock, but also in anger.

"It seems that Kiri didn't returned as empty handed from the invasion of Uzushio as we thought," Kurenai bitterly said. "Anyway, we haven't been ordered to retreat, so keep fighting!"

"I plan to!" Naruto stated as he started to form a Rasengan in his hands. "I'm going to teach those assholes to use stolen knowledge from my clan!" Once complete, Naruto rushed towards the nearest golem, and smashed the orb of chakra against its chest. "Rasengan!"

The sphere of chakra exploded, but rather than shatter the golem to tiny pieces, some seals on the mechanical construct started to glow, and the golem began to absorb the chakra of Naruto's attack, much to the blonde's bewilderment.

"The hell!?" an indignant Naruto asked, and jumped back before the golem could smash him to pulp.

"The golem used the attack to empower itself!" Hinata noticed. "Don't use ninjutsu, or you'll make them stronger!"

"Then what are we supposed to do? Those things are made of metal!" Haku pointed out.

"We'll do what we can, Haku. Hinata, see if you can find a weak spot," Kurenai asked.

"Maybe we should attack the articulations. Those parts can't be armored if they have to move," Miyako deduced.

"Alright, I don't think we'll need it so soon, but time to ask for reinforcements, " Naruto bit his thumb, and made five hand seals, before slamming his hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto summoned a huge, aquamarine toad with yellow eyes and a green back. His only piece of clothing was a orange sash around his stomach. He was also carrying two katanas to his back.

"Hi there, Naruto. What can I do for you?" the sword fighting toad asked.

"Gamahiro, I need you to help us deal with those annoying golems, as well as the Kiri ninjas dressed in red. Can I count on you?" Naruto asked.

"Sure!" the toad replied as he unsheathed his katanas. "Let the fun begin!"

With Naruto standing on his head, Gamahiro jumped into the battlefield, just in front of Naruto's friends and allies, creating a shockwave that knocked those near him back., and started to deliver multiple swipes at the prison defenders.

"Golems, fire upon that creature!" an ANBU ordered.

The few golems present cast one hand towards the large toad. A hole opened in their palms, releasing a stream of fire from it.

Gamahiro was forced to step back.

"Ouch! Ouch! It burns!" the large toad complained.

"Don't worry, I'll help you!" Naruto said as he started making hand seals. "Water Release: Water Gun!"

Naruto fired several water missiles at the golems from his mouth, reducing some of the fire.

Following Naruto's example, Miyako rushed forward while making hand seals. "Water Release: Water Formation Wall!"

The blue haired kunoichi expelled a huge wave of water from her mouth, countering a couple of the golem's flamethrowers. Other Kiri rebels followed her example, and did as well, saving the giant toad.

"Thank you!" Gamahiro replied, as he slashed a nearby golem in half with one swing of his massive katanas.

"The toad can clear the path for us! We must defend him from the enemy attacks!" Miyako ordered.

"Right away, ma'am!" several Kiri rebels replied.

...

Not far away from there, Kakashi's Animal Squad, alongside Rin, were fighting against a group of enemy Kiri ninja, with neither side pushing the other back.

"Aburame Secret Art: Swarm Spear!"

Shino extended his arm forward, and from his sleeves shot a spear made of bugs compressed together in a tight formation. The spear pierced a Kiri ninja, who vanished in a cloud of smoke.

"A shadow clone," Shino pointed out. "Some of them must be using them to bolster their numbers."

"In that case, we should find those who create shadow clones and take them out. They should be the Jonin," Tamaki deduced.

"Good idea. Why don't you take Kiba and Shino go and try to find them?" Kakashi suggested. "I'll stay here with Rin."

Rin stared at Kakashi disapprovingly. "Kakashi... you don't have to be afraid to leave my side. Even if this is a war, I can take care of myself. It won't be a repeat of the last time."

"Oh, I don't do it for that, Rin. I don't think these three need me to hold their hand all the time, right? They're old enough to do some dangerous tasks without their old sensei," Kakashi jovially replied, before turning at his students. "Now go, I'll create an opening."

Rin continued staring at Kakashi with worried eyes. Certainly, there were a lot of issues that needed to be solved.

...

Meanwhile, in another part of the island prison, Shizune's Medical Squad was acting as support of the rebel division tasked with taking the armory. They mostly stayed behind the front line healing the injured, while Sasuke and other ninja protected them.

And just like it happened before, the prison guards got unexpected reinforcements in the form of chakra golems, who were making a number on the rebel forces.

"Alright, done! You're good to go! Give them hell!" Sakura told a Kiri rebel she just healed.

"I will! Thank you, medic-san!" the rebel gratefully replied as he returned to the battlefield.

"Unless we find a way to get rid of those annoying chakra absorbing golems... we'll we're not going to last long," Suigetsu complained, as

he dodged a massive metallic fist from one of those mechanical monsters.

And to prove Suigetsu's words true, one of the golems managed to break the rebel's lines and stomped towards the medic-nin, busy healing the wounded. Fortunately for them, Sasuke cut his path, and forced the golem to engage him in a fight.

"Good one, Sasuke-kun!" Sakura praised.

However, the Uchiha didn't feel he was doing any good. Ninjutsu, his specialty, was out of the equation. Genjutsu was useless on a mechanical being, even if it had chakra, and his sword alone failed to make any dent on that metallic shell.

"Sakura, I'm not doing that good," Sasuke admitted, as he dodged a fist slam. "Maybe your fighting style might be better suited to deal with this thing!"

"You think so?" Sakura asked. If Sasuke was having trouble defeating an enemy, then what chances did she have? But then again, she couldn't deny his request of help. "Alright then, here I come!"

"Either that, or I'll have to use the Mangekyo Sharingan," Sasuke bitterly thought.

The moment Sakura was at close quarter range, the golem tried to squash her with its fists, but the pinkette gracefully dodged them with a surprising show of speed, and jumped as she reared her fist back.

"SHANNARO!"

The effect was instant. The moment Sakura's fist connected with the golem, it made a huge dent on its chest plate, before sending it flying back a few meters.

"Just as I expected. These golems aren't meant to deal with overwhelming physical force. Sakura, you must join the front lines and help them out," Sasuke told her.

"But what about the wounded? I'm a medic-nin," Sakura replied.

"Don't worry, we can go on without you! Make sure those golems don't cause more wounded among our troops!" Shizune told her.

Sakura nodded. "Alright then, take care!"

And the pinkette joined Sasuke in the battlefield.

...

While the bulk of the rebel army fought on the ground, Ameyuri and Asuma's tactical squad remained in the walls, in order to disable the island's defenses, such as the searchlights and the kunai launchers.

"You know, we could take a few of these for the village," Ino commented, as she inspected one of the captured kunai launchers.

"Seal it inside a scroll if you wish, but don't waste much time on that!" Ameyuri told her, while she engaged on a couple enemy Kiri ninja, who suddenly stopped moving. The redheaded girl noticed that their shadows were linked to Shikamaru's. After quickly dispatching them, she turned at the Nara, and said: "Thanks, but it's not as fun if they don't move or defend themselves."

"Hey, look at that! What's going on?" Ino asked, noticing the Chakra Golems popping up across the battlefield.

"What are those things?" Choji asked.

"I don't know, but guess we're going to find out real soon!" Shikamaru pointed out as he stepped back, as two Chakra Golems had just materialized in front of them.

"Ameyuri?" Ino asked, a question unsaid but implicit.

"First time I see these things," the swordswoman said as she also cautiously stepped back.

"That armor looks strong," Shikamaru observed.

"There's no armor my Thunderfangs can cut through," Ameyuri boasted as she channeled lightning chakra through her trusty blades, making them crackle. "Cover me! I'll take them out!"

Ameyuri leaped at the closest golem, and tried to pierce its armor. A seal on the golem's plate glowed, and the lightning of Ameyuri's swords was absorbed, robbing them of their cutting power.

"What?" she asked in shock.

"So they can absorb chakra too. Boy, this is all kinds of troublesome," Shikamaru groaned.

"Let's try physical attacks then. Choji, your turn!" Ino told the Akimichi heir.

Choji nodded and clasped his hands together. "Partial Multi-Size Jutsu!"

Both of Choji's arms suddenly grew, as he reared one of them back, before delivering a devastating punch to the closest golem. The machine, however, managed to cling to the Akimichi's fist. He then proceeded to pound it with his other hand.

Shikamaru made a hand seal. "Let's take care of the other. Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Shikamaru easily bound the other golem, but soon he realized how strong the metallic construct was, forcing the Nara to spend large amounts of chakra to keep him in place.

"Damn! I don't think I can hold him for too long... !" Shikamaru warned.

"Make it walk to the edge of the wall! Let's toss it into the water!" Ino suggested.

Shikamaru nodded, and forced the golem to do as Ino said. When the mechanical creature was in the edge, the two kunoichi delivered a flying kick each to the chest, knocking it over the wall, before falling to the sea. Following his team's example, Choji also tossed the golem clinging his fist into the ocean.

Their enemies defeated, Ino looked at the battlefield below her, and noticed the amount of golems that had appeared, and were giving the rebel forces a hard time.

"I don't think we'll be able to bring all the remaining ones here and toss them into the sea," Ino commented.

"No, but we can't give up. Come on! We need to clear this section of the wall if we want to increase our chances of victory!" Ameyuri shouted, as she lead the Tactical Squad forward.

...

Mei herself was leading the offensive against the main prison block. Going with her was Gai's Close Combat Squad, Zabuza and Chojuro. Due to being the most numerous division, as well as the one with the most heavy hitters, they had the least problems making way through the enemy lines. That's not to say that they didn't had any trouble the moment the golems started to appear all around the prison.

"The hell? They absorbed my jutsu!" an enraged Mei shouted.

"My sword isn't doing as good against them either," Zabuza snarled. "And I doubt any of my assassination techniques may work on them either."

Gai, however, was feeling rather excited at such prospect.

"So, the enemy is immune to ninjutsu? Alright then, good thing the Youth Squad is here! Neji, Lee, Tenten, focus on the golems! Let everybody else deal with the human opponents!" the green clad jonin ordered. "Show them the power of your youth!"

The three of them nodded, and in perfect synchronization, they crossed their arms in front of their face, before spreading it downwards, releasing three overlapping bursts of chakra.

"Gate of Opening, open! Gate of Healing, Open!, Gate of Life, open!"

Neji and Lee slipped into their usual fighting stances, while Tenten unsealed a pair of katanas from a small sealing scroll.

"Go!"

Lee charged at a nearby golem, and started to throw punches and kicks at an extremely quick speed, not letting the mechanical construct counterattack and forcing it to step back. Neji did the same, with quick palm strikes that, even if it couldn't disable his opponent like a human, still managed to produce a similar effect.

Tenten started to channel an ungodly amount of chakra through her swords, which started to shine with a radiant blue glow, so bright, it was almost like looking directly into the sun. The ensuing aura made the swords look much longer and thicker than they were.

Two golems stomped towards the dango haired kunoichi. Tenten smirked, as she leaped above the mechanical monsters.

"Strong Sword: Armor Splitter!"

Tenten made two diagonal slashes forming an X, before falling behind the golems. At first, it looked like it didn't have any effect, but after a couple seconds, the slices made themselves known, and the golems fell apart.

"Good work, you three! Keep destroying the golems, and the prison will be ours!" Mei cheered, as she engaged a couple of enemy Kiri ninja.

Suddenly, the gates of the main building opened, and more guards and golems poured from them. However, they made a hallway in the middle, as if somebody of utmost importance was about to appear.

"The warden is here!" a Kiri ninja shouted.

"The warden?" Mei asked. "Good, if we take him out, we'll be much closer to winning!"

"Taking me out? While I admit that you're a strong kunoichi, Mei Terumi, I find that unlikely," the warden said, as he stepped out of the gates.

The battle came to a halt. Mei, Zabuzza and Chojuro were frozen in shock when they saw the warden. A tall man, with a brown moustache and a beard, wearing a cap over his head, and a dark brown poncho over the typical Kiri Swordsmen attire. He was holding a strange weapon that appeared to be an axe linked by a chain to a hammer.

"Jinin Akebino," Mei said, astonished. "You are the warden?"

"Hello to you too, Mei-san. Zabuzza-san, I'm not surprised to see you here. Come to finish what you started all those years ago?" Jinin asked, making Zabuzza to grip his sword tighter. Jinin's eyes then rested on Chojuro. "I don't know who you are, but I see you have the Hiramekarei.. It's sad to see so many swordsmen turning on their village."

"What are you doing here? Being a warden is certainly a job below your capabilities," Mei pointed out.

"I spoke against Mizukage-sama's regime and way of ruling the village. He thinks I can't be trusted, so he sent me here. But I'll show

him that I'm as loyal to Kirigakure as anybody else," Jinin replied.

"If you disapprove of Yagura, why are you still loyal to him?" Mei asked, taking a step forward. "I know you, Jinin-san. You're an heroic and honorable man, why are you still loyal to somebody so corrupt?"

"Because it's our duty as a ninja to remain obedient to our superiors. If not, chaos and anarchy will ensue. It's not my place, nor anybody else's, to judge the actions of our Kage," Jinin retorted. "Tell me, Meisan, in case you succeed in your endeavor and become the new Mizukage, will you encourage people who don't support you and your ways to wage another civil war against you?"

"It's not the same thing! Yagura's reign of terror needs to end! People sees us as nothing but bloodthirsty murderers! It might not look like it now, but I'm doing this to save lives!" Mei protested.

"Sure, tell that to yourself. Why don't you-" but Jinin's question was left hanging when he noticed a certain green clad Jonin. "YOU! You're alive! No, it can't be... no, wait, you're not him. His son, perhaps?"

Gai took a step forward as well. "Yes, I am Maito Gai, son of Maito Dai. It seems you remember my father."

"Hard to forget the man who slaughtered the Seven Swordsmen on his own. You have no idea what we had to do in order to silence the rumors that the pride and joy of our village had been defeated by a mere Genin," Jinin bitterly said. "Did you come here to finish what your father started?"

"I came here because the rebels hired Konoha to help them in their campaign. Regardless of what happened in the past, I bear no ill will towards you," Gai sincerely said.

"Jinin-san, please," Mei begged once again.

"Enough," Jinin firmly stated, putting an end to the conversation. "You and your followers are traitors to Kirigakure, and the punishment for treason is death! Everybody, attack!"

"Zabuza, Chojuro," Mei took a step backwards. "I think you two should be the ones to deal with Jinin. Be careful, he's a hardened veteran who fought in the Third War."

Zabuza and Chojuro took a step forward. The former looked confident, the latter not so much.

Ninja from both sides left the three swordsmen some space to fight unmolested. Zabuza and Jinin stared at each other defiantly, while Chojuro attempted to hide behind Zabuza's back.

"You look good, Zabuza-san. It's true what they said? Were you in Konoha all these years?" Jinin asked.

"Not by choice," the masked swordsman replied, as he rested his sword on his shoulders. "But that's irrelevant now. Once the rebellion triumphs, I'll be closer than ever to realize my ambition of becoming Mizukage."

"You were always way too above your head, Zabuza-san. Youth these days..." Jinin then looked at the trembling Chojuro. "What about you, boy? What's your story?"

"I... I..." Chojuro stammered, before gathering some courage to speak up. "I fight under Mei-sama to end the Blood Mist!"

"You must think you're so noble, destabilizing a ninja village so our enemies can take us out easier. But that won't happen under my watch, you hear that!?" Jinin shouted, as he charged at the duo.

Zabuza and Chojuro adopted fighting stances. The fight of the swordsmen was about to begin.

...

OMAKE: SAI'S SECRET

The Fourth Ninja War had taken a turn for the darkest. Despite Madara and Obito not capturing the last two remaining jinchuriki, Naruto and Killer B, they still managed to recreate the Ten Tails. The beast's power was so great, not even the whole Ninja Alliance was able to deal any lasting damage.

"This is hopeless!" Sakura cried. "No matter what we do, that monster just shrugs it off!"

"There's no such thing as an invincible foe. That thing must have a weakness. We need to find it and exploit it," Sasuke replied.

"Yes, we can't give up now! There's too much at stake!" Naruto said.

"If we did, all the people who died in this war would have died for nothing.." Hinata sadly said.

"That sounds pretty nice, but what can we do? That monster will kill us all!" Sakura shouted.

"I believe I can be of help," A new voice said.

Naruto turned around, and saw the ex-root agent, Sai, smiling as if the end of the world wasn't about to happen.

"You? No offense Sai, but I don't think you have enough power to tip the balance in our favor," Naruto dubiously said.

"Actually, I believe do. I have a secret power I haven't used yet, but I don't think I can keep holding it back anymore, given the circumstances," Sai said, before creating a giant bird out of ink, jumping on top of it, and ordering it to fly towards the Ten Tails.

"Sai, wait!" Naruto cried.

"That idiot is going to get himself killed," Sakura deadpanned.

Meanwhile, Madara and Obito looked at Sai, flying at them alone. The zombified ninja smirked, amused.

"Look at that, Obito. A single insect think it can take out a god," Madara said.

Obito chuckled. "Let him try to harm the Ten Tails. This is going to be fun."

When he was over the head, Sai jumped off of the ink bird, and delivered a single punch to the ten tailed abomination.

That punch was all what he needed.

The punch was so powerful, I created a shockwave that shattered the ground and rocks around it, generating a loud booming noise. The Ten Tails cried in pain, before it fell down to the ground, motionless, and lifeless.

Everybody stared at the scene with wide open eyes and mouths opened agape, as their brains tried to understand what their eyes just saw.

"The Ten Tails... it's dead!" Obito said in shock. "That guy killed it in one punch!"

"Who... who are you?" Madara said, experiencing fear for the first time in decades.

"People call me Sai, but it's not my real name. Well, it's more like a diminutive of my real name..." Sai then pulled out his hair, which happened to be a wig, revealing a shiny bald head underneath. He tore off his Konoha uniform, revealing that he was wearing a yellow jumpsuit, red gloves and boots, and a white cape that billowed dramatically despite the lack of wind. "... Saitama."

"ONE PUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUNCH... !" somebody cried in the background, as an epic guitar riff began to play.

Saitama then happily ran towards the amazed and terrified Obito and Madara, both of them knowing that this would be their end.

"I hate crossovers so much..." Madara muttered.

Author's Note: One of the good things of introducing Sai, is that I could finally use that Omake. Any One Punch Man fans out there? Because boy, it's a pretty enjoyable work.

So, the attack on the Crimson Citadel begins, and the first roadblock our heroes have to face in the form of Jinin Akebino. By the end of this arc, all seven swords will make an appearance, and some of them will change owner.

Some readers requested Hinata to have her anime only "Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms" attack, so there you go. At first I thought that it was made redundant by the Heavenly Spin, but I realized that the former can be used in ways the latter is impractical. And don't worry, it won't be the last time she'll use that attack.

Now, onto what I think is the biggest foreign element this arc has brought so far: the chakra golems. While I always played to introduce them, they wouldn't show up until much later. I had an idea for a future arc of Naruto and Karin (as well as more Konoha ninja) traveling to the ruins of Uzushio to recover some of the lost Uzumaki fuinjutsu knowledge, among them the chakra golems.

What changed my mind? The Boruto anime Kirigakure arc. When Shizuma and the rest of the wannabe swordsmen broke into the vault where the Seven Swords were kept, they triggered a security mechanism that summoned several self moving puppets to stop them. Said puppets turned out to be hilariously ineffective, and their only purpose was to give the wannabe swordsmen a good target to test their swords and remind the audience what they could do. After seeing that, I decided that

maybe I could combine both ideas, and have Kirigakure develop the chakra golems as a secret weapon from the fuinjutsu knowledge they looted from Uzushiogakure. That way, I could also make Kiri into a more formidable opponent. Anyway, hope you like and find them interesting additions.

Thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

I think that's all. In two weeks, the resolution of the Crimson Citadel mini arc. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Crimson Citadel, Part II

Author's Note: So the previous' chapter review count is pretty similar to the last batch of chapters that came before that. So I'm going to assume that the unusually low number of reviews of the chapter before that was the website malfunctioning and not the quality of my writing slipping. Something my ego deeply appreciates XD

Anyway, here's the conclusion to the Crimson Citadel mini arc. Enjoy:

Chapter 46:

The Crimson Citadel, Part II

or

Hammer Down

In front of the secondary prison blocks, Shisui Uchiha was leading a small squad in order to liberate it, since the prisoners would make for great reinforcements. At least those who were rebels or dissenters. He already had in mind all the criminals that would claim to be political prisoners just for the excuse to be free.

Turns out, despite the attack, no guard had left the secondary blocks unprotected in order to repel the invasion force. Of course, Shisui was going to prove that quality trumped quantity any time of day.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Shisui breathed a huge fireball at a group of guards, while they countered with a volley of watery projectiles, clashing in the middle,

cancelling each other out and creating a cloud of steam. Just as Shisui had expected.

Without giving the guards time to react, Shisui unsheathed his tanto and silently dashed towards his opponents. However, he soon found himself being pelted by shuriken, thrown with impressive aim even in the middle of the cloud of steam.

"What the...?" the one eyed Uchiha asked as he deflected the steel stars with his weapon.

"They must have a sensor among them! Watch out!" one of his ninja warned him.

"If they can sense me, then there's no point in stealth. I'll have to take them head on!" Shisui decided as he charged forward.

As Shisui charged, he also heard a second set of quick steps running parallel towards him, as a shadow blurred through the dispelling steam.

"Another one to your right! Watch out!" an enemy ninja warned.

Shisui smirked. "Found the sensor."

However, said sensor wasn't alone, as two more ninja were protecting the one he deduced was the sensor. One of them unsheathed a katana and lunged at the one eyed Uchiha while the other remained close to him.

"So, that traitorous whore got you of all people to help her with her temper tantrum? The nerve!" the red clad ninja scoffed as he delivered vicious swings at Shisui.

"Why the hate? My squad usually has the lowest body count. Did you lose a loved one to my blade or something?" the Uchiha calmly asked.

"You humiliated us by letting your defeated enemies get away! But you won't insult us any longer!" the Kiri loyalist angrily replied.

"Wait... you're angry over the fact that I spared your comrades? You guys have issues," Shisui replied.

"Dark Mirror Clone Jutsu!"

Suddenly, clones of the Kirigakure loyalists appeared alongside the originals, their skin and clothes having a dark blue tint that set them apart from the originals, which drew their weapons, and attacked them. Some of them were caught by surprise.

"ARGH!"

"What the hell is this?"

Shisui took no time to notice that the jutsu had been cast by a masked rebel kiri wearing a dark blue long cloak. The masked ninja swiftly attacked all the enemies fighting their dark replicas, and Shisui did the same. In no time, the block entrance was secured.

"Alright, entrance cleared, go inside and release all the rebel prisoners!" Shisui ordered. All men under his command nodded, and followed him inside.

"Good work out there. That's quite the jutsu," Shisui praised the masked ninja.

"Thanks. Unfortunately, it only works on small groups," the masked ninja replied.

"Hey, it get the job done. I'm Shisui Uchiha, by the way," Shisui introduced himself.

"Kumori Nashi," the man said. "Let's talk later, we have comrades to free."

...

"Forget about the humans, keep firing on that giant toad!" a Kiri ANBU commanded.

Given the damage it was causing, most of Kiri's forces were concentrating their fire on Gamahiro. While arriving at the barracks didn't prove to be too difficult, taking them was a different endeavor. The building was heavily fortified, as well as defended with several kunai launchers that sprayed the attackers with constant rains of kunai.

The golems kept aiming their flamethrowers at Gamahiro as well, and while the rebel ninjas tried to counter them with their water ninjutsu, the Kiri loyalists targeted them instead, keeping them busy. Other ninjas, having identified Naruto as the one who summoned the creature, decided to take the fight to him directly.

"Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

A tornado surrounded Naruto, which blocked the kunai, shuriken and ninjutsu a trio of Kiri ninjas had thrown at him.

"Ouch! Watch out with what you do there, Naruto!" Gamahiro protested.

"Dammit, I forgot I wasn't on the ground. I have to be careful with my attacks or I can hurt Gamahiro!" the blonde thought. "Sorry! Force of habit!"

On the ground, the rest of Team Kurenai and Miyako tried their best to protect Gamahiro from the enemy Kiri ninjas and the golems. One of them aimed its hand cannon at her and released a torrent of flames.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Hinata turned herself into a spinning dome of blue chakra, deflecting the stream of fire. Haku took a step forward and made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

The Ice Ninja expelled multiple watery projectiles at the stream of flames, slowly pushing it back. Miyako rushed forward, seeing it as the perfect opening to attack.

"The mobile parts have to be unarmored, and thus vulnerable to my blade. They have to!" She exclaimed as she leaped into the air, katana above her head. But when she came down and delivered a vertical slash, her hit was parried by another sword. "What?"

Much to her shock, a blade had appeared on the golem's left hand, blocking the blue haired kunoichi's strike, before she was pushed backwards by the mechanical beast.

"Ice Release: Thousand Needles of Death!"

Multiple icicles rained from above over the golem, though not randomly, as they embedded themselves into the articulations and other unarmored spots. The golem started to shake erratically as it tried and failed to move. Sparks of chakra started to jump from its body as it malfunctioned.

"Good work, Haku! This should put it down!" Miyako said as she tossed a bunch of kunai with explosive notes attached to them. Several explosions later, the golem was down.

"Good one. Let's see if we can repeat the process with the other golems," Kurenai said.

However, a new information about the enemy was about to be known, much to a certain kunoichi's concern.

"Hey, somebody just told me that Mei-sama's group is facing the warden who is nobody but Jinin Akebino himself!" a Kiri ninja shouted out loud.

"WHAT!?" Miyako replied just as louder. Then, she turned at Kurenai. "Kurenai-san, I'm sorry, but if that's true, I need to go there!"

"I know you're an aspiring swordsman, but isn't somebody like Jinin a bit too much for you?" Kurenai questioned.

"Me alone, sure. But I won't be alone. I need to take part in that fight so when we have his sword in our power, Mei-sama will deem me worthy of inheriting it," Miyako replied.

"So you're putting your own ambition over the success of the mission?" Kurenai disapprovingly asked.

"If you think that my presence here will make a difference, or I can do something nobody else can, then I'll stay," the blue haired girl replied.

Kurenai was forced to admit that, truth be told, the Kiri kunoichi leaving wouldn't change the course of the battle too much.

"Alright then, I guess we'll manage without you. Good luck," Kurenai told her.

Miyako smiled at her. "Good luck to you two, and take care!"

And thus, the blue haired rebel dashed towards the entrance of the main prison block.

...

And in the aforementioned main prison block, the three Swordsmen of the Mist were about to begin their private duel.

"Let's get rid of the distraction first! You're in, kid!" Jinin shouted as he dashed towards Chojuro, Helmet Splitter in hand.

Chojuro yelped and held his sword in a defensive position. Zabuza's eyes shot open upon realizing what the blue haired teen was planning to do.

"Watch out, brat! That sword is not like the others! Don't-!"

But it was too late. The moment the axe half of the Helmet Splitter came down, Chojuro raised the Hiramekarei to parry it. Jinin smirked, and used the hammer half of his weapon to slam into the backside of the axe, overpowering Chojuro's defenses. It didn't break Hiramekarei, but it managed to blow it out of Chojuro's hands, and cause him some damage in the forearms.

"My sword can break through any defenses! Blocking or parrying is useless!" Jinin boasted, as he prepared to attack the downed Chojuro. "Now die, traitor!"

Fortunately for Chojuro, his death was delayed when Zabuza tossed the Executioner's Blade at the older swordsman, which forced him to parry it. In a second, Zabuza closed the gap and retrieved his sword, which he used to deliver a series of swipes, which Jinin dodged as he jumped backwards, but much to his chagrin, the size of Zabuza's sword gave it a lot of range.

"Your sword might be the ultimate offense, but it lacks in defense!" Zabuza said as he continued attacking. "Brat, kill him now that he's wide open!"

"R-Right!" Chojuro stammered as he recovered the Hiramekarei and rushed towards the struggling Jinin. Gripping the two handles of his blade, Chojuro delivered an horizontal slash that cut the senior swordsman in two. "Yes! What?"

Unfortunately, Jinin disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a cleaved log behind.

"Not bad, definitely not bad," Jinin said from behind them. "It's about time for you to see what you're up against! Bluntsword Ninja Art: Earth Breaker!"

Jinin slammed the hammer half of the Helmet Splitter into the ground, shattering it, creating multiple quakes and sending a wave of

rock and pebbles against the rebel swordsmen. Chojuro quickly stepped in front of Zabuza, raising his sword in a defensive position.

"Hiramekarei: Release!"

Chojuro's sword was engulfed by a cloak of glowing blue chakra, which expanded and took the shape of a shield. Said shield managed to absorb the impact of the rocks and pebbles aimed at them.

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "Not bad, kid. Seems that you're at least aware of some of your sword's abilities, even if you're ignorant of the others."

"Uhhh... thanks?" the bespectacled ninja asked, a bit confused.

Zabuza suddenly grabbed Chojuro by the shoulder and pushed him aside, while he himself jumped in the opposite direction, narrowly avoiding Jinin's swing.

"God damn it brat, one compliment, and you get so distracted he almost kills you!" Zabuza angrily groaned. "This is why I never say nice things!"

Meanwhile, not far from there, Mei spared a glance to check how their duel was going on, and worry spread through her face as she saw that Jinin was proving to be a hard nut to crack. She was tempted to lend them a hand, but in the end, it wouldn't be a good idea. If she, a non-swordsman, disrupted their duel, then the enemy would aid Jinin in return, making the task of taking him down much harder.

There was also the fact that the Seven Swordsmen had a reputation to uphold. If she had to babysit them all the time, it would erode their prestige, and that would be seen as a disservice to Kirigakure's culture. No, she had to let them, and hope that they would come out on top.

The whirring sound of flying shuriken snapped her back from her admittedly brief trance. Gracefully, the rebel leader dodged the steel stars aimed at her, and faced the ones who tossed them, a group of elite ANBU.

"Look at that. The most wanted criminal in the Land of Water, coming right into our prison. That's what one would call irony," one ANBU mentioned.

Mei smirked at him. "Oh, trust me, I didn't come here to become a permanent resident. Pretty much the opposite."

"You have a 'Kill on Sight' order placed on you, miss. Spending your last days on a cold, damp cell is a comfort you won't experience," another ANBU replied as he unsheathed his katana, an action mimicked by his partners.

"Kill on sight? Wow, I'm flattered! My rebellion must be really more of a threat than what Yagura lets on, if he's so desperate to have me dead, don't you think?" Mei squealed in fake joy.

Under their masks, the ANBU growled. "Let's silence this whore already," one of them seethed.

Mei stopped smiling, and frowned. "Whore? Now that's being rude. It seems that not only ninjas under the Blood Mist lack compassion and empathy, but also basic decency. Guess I'll have to teach you some myself."

"The dead can't teach anything! Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

The ANBU created several water shuriken from thin air and made them fly at the rebel leader. Mei smiled as she made hand seals in quick succession, before slamming her hands into the ground.

"Amateurish. Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

A wall of stone erected from the ground between Mei and her enemies, absorbing the water shuriken. However, while she was

doing that, other two ANBU had flanked her, and were ready to slash her from two different angles. Mei, however, was unfazed.

"Not bad," Mei admitted as he made several hand seals. "But as you are going to find out, bloodlust isn't a good replacement for genuine skill and power. Water Release: Water Whip!"

Mei generated a whip made of water, and she twirled it around herself, expertly parrying and blocking the quick strikes of the enemy ANBU. Their fight was interrupted when a chakra golem tore down the wall, startling her a bit.

"Let's see what your ninjutsu can do against this!" an ANBU standing on the golem's shoulder taunted.

Mei smirked once again, as she started to make more hand seals. "You'll see it shortly. Water Release: All Devouring Maelstrom!"

Water appeared out of nowhere and started to spin around the golem, quickly forming a water tornado. The ninja riding the golem let out a loud laugh.

"You idiot! No matter how big you make your jutsu, the golem can absorb it!" the ANBU taunted.

"I know the golem can do that, but can you?" Mei asked, shooting him a condescending smile.

The ANBU stopped laughing. "Shit..."

When the water tornado formed, while the golem was left unharmed, the ANBU was sent flying high into the air.

"Thought so," Mei nonchalantly said. She saw the golem stomping towards her with predictable intentions. "Well, let's see what can I do with you, big guy..."

...

While Kiba, Shino and Tamaki went to deal with the enemy Kiri ninja spawning shadow clones to bolster their numbers, Kakashi and Rin were holding the rest in line. Most of the enemy forces focused on Kakashi, whom was deemed as the biggest threat, while Rin covered his back. Soon the Kiri ninja noticed that trying to take Rin out was just as hard as Kakashi.

As the brown haired girl clashed with the Kiri ninja, she started to notice something about her body. It was much more resilient and resistant. Despite all the time she had been fighting, she didn't feel tired in the slightest. She moved faster, hit harder, and her reflexes were much sharper. She wondered how she never noticed this earlier, but then she realized this was the first real fight she had been since her resurrection.

"What? How a little girl can be this strong?" a Kiri ninja incredulously asked, as he struggled with the medic-nin in a kunai lock.

"I work out a lot," Rin lied before pushing the enemy ninja backwards.

"Keep your act together! They're just two, even if one of them is the Copy Ninja!" an ANBU captain angrily exclaimed.

"They might be just two, but they're quite strong, and their defense is too solid!" a lesser ranked ANBU complained.

"You whiny cowards! And you call yourselves ninja of the Blood Mist?" the captain yelled before making a hand seal. "Show them what we're made of! Hidden Mist Jutsu!"

Soon, a dense mist covered the area, hiding the enemies of the Konoha duo. Kakashi tensed up, and tightly held a kunai in a defensive position.

"Rin, be careful! Stay back to back!" Kakashi told her.

"Alright," the medic-nin complied with Kakashi's requests, as she expected the enemy to make their move any moment. Then, a realization dawned upon her. " *Wait a minute, this mist... I think I can use it to my advantage,*" she thought, before making several hand seals.

As the group of Kiri ninja slowly approached from all directions, ready to bathe their weapons in the blood of the invading Konoha trash. Little did they know that the only blood spilled today would be theirs.

As they slowly approached, they noticed that walking was becoming more and more difficult. It took them no time to notice that tall grass was growing around them.

"Grass? But how can...?" A Kiri ANBU wondered, puzzled.

But it was too late. The moment they stepped on the grass, Rin located their position, and marked them for death. Soon, multiple vines grew from under their feet, wrapped around their bodies, and were strangled to death. Rin was careful to target their throats as well so they couldn't shout or warn the others about her power.

Nobody could know. At least not yet.

Time passed, and the attack never came. Kakashi was growing antsy, and so was the ANBU captain. Unable to shake a bad feeling, he decided to dispel the mist. The image that appeared before his eyes surprised him to say the least, as he saw the bodies of his subordinates lying on the ground, motionless.

"What the...?" the ANBU captain stammered in shock.

"Good job taking care of those, Kakashi," Rin told her former teammate.

The Copy Ninja looked at her with some concern. "It wasn't me who took them out."

"Really? Oh. Well, guess that somebody helped us out, and then decided to leave," Rin said with a shrug.

"You know, you were never the best liar, Rin," Kakashi sternly said. "But now you're being ridiculous."

She had to admit that trying to fool Kakashi maybe wasn't the best of her ideas.

"Can we talk about it later? We have a mission to finish," Rin replied, weariness seeping into her voice.

Kakashi, nodded and the two of them pressed forward.

...

Meanwhile, on another side of the island prison, the division Kurenai's Assault Squad was part of had successfully taken over the barracks, and were quickly securing the building. Most of the enemy Kiri ninja had retreated towards the main prison block.

"I took quite a beating from those golems. I hate to leave given that the fight is far from over, but I don't think I can be of much more help," Gamahiro apologized.

"Hey, it's okay, you were awesome! We wouldn't have taken over the barracks so easily without you," Naruto complimented the giant toad.

"Thank you. Good luck for what's left!" Gamahiro said before vanishing in a cloud of smoke.

"Alright, now that the barracks are ours, we can establish a proper infirmary and move all our wounded here," Kurenai mentioned.

"Should we help the other divisions?" Haku asked.

Kurenai shook her head. "Our orders were clear. Capture and protect the barracks. Unless we're given new orders, our duty is to stay here."

"Alright then. Can I send a few clones to see how the others are doing? They might be in a position that stops them from sending a request for help," Naruto suggested.

Kurenai pondered the blonde's petition for a few moments, before deciding that there was no harm in doing such a thing. "Alright then. Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Several Naruto clones popped into existence, and run away into different directions.

"Soon we should have pretty good intel on what's happening on the rest of the isle," Naruto proudly said.

"Zabuza-sama and Tenten-chan were on the main division. I hope they're doing right," Haku mused.

...

"Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Using the nearby water, Zabuza summoned a gigantic dragon-shaped construct that dived at the older swordsman. Jinin looked unimpressed, and started to swing the hammer half of his weapon at an incredible speed.

"Bluntsword Ninja Art: Hurricane Hammer!"

The swinging hammer created a strong whirlwind around Jinin, and when the water dragon reached its target, it crashed and dissolved against a barrier of gale force winds, much to Zabuza's chagrin. And it wasn't going to end there.

"Take this!" Jinin shouted as he swung the hammer forward, sending the tornado at Zabuza.

At first, Zabuza was lost on how to survive against such attack, but then he quickly remembered how a past opponent managed to withstand one of his water jutsu, and decided to give the idea a try.

He then stabbed the sword into the ground, and channeled chakra through his fingers in order to stick them to the sword's handle.

When the tornado came, it violently tried to send him flying, but Zabuza was anchored to the ground, and thus wasn't moved.

"Not bad, definitely not bad," Jinin complimented. "But will it be good enough to beat me? I find that doubtful."

"I already killed a Swordsman of the Mist before. You're nothing special," Zabuza snarled.

"Ah, yes, I know how you killed Biwo-san and acquired his blade. Did you best him in single combat, or did you attack him during a moment of vulnerability?"

"Does it matter? The fact that I managed to kill him shows that he wasn't worthy of wielding the Executioner's Blade and belonging to our select group anymore," Zabuza retorted. "I surpassed Biwo-sensei and every sensei, and thus his sword deserved to be mine!"

"While there is some truth to your words, you won't be able to catch all your opponents off guard for an easy kill, as I myself am proving right now," Jinin replied, as he swung the half axe of his weapon at Zabuza, who was smart enough to dodge and not parry it. "Doesn't change the fact that you're a traitorous disgrace that needs to be put down. When the two of you are dealt with, I'll make sure Mizkage-sama gives your swords to loyal ninja of the Mist!"

"Zabuza-senpai is the product of the regime you're defending so ardently!" Chojuro blurted out, his words came with a surprising lack of stammer.

"You have no idea what are you talking about, kid," Jinin condescendingly said.

"Maybe I'm too young. But I know the history of my village. I know how Zabuza-senpai came to be. It was the Blood Mist customs' that

drove him to the path he ended up taking, as it did the same to many others who also became missing-nin, some former Swordsmen amongst them! The Blood Mist will end up tearing itself apart!" Chojuro shouted, as he swung the Hiramekarei at Jinin, who easily parried it.

"There will always be people unhappy with a government. But it's impossible to please everybody. Our duty as ninjas is to maintain order and stability," Jinin replied. "Don't try to shift the blame of this war on my side, kid. It was your side who started!"

"We HAD a reason to start this!" Chojuro said as he jumped at Jinin, his sword over his head, which started to glow with a blue light. "Hiramekarei: Release!"

The cloak of chakra covering the giant sword took the shape of a giant hammer, which the bespectacled young man swung at Jinin. Knowing there was no way to block such an attack, he opted to avoid it by jumping back, even if he knew that it would leave him wide open, something Zabuza took no time capitalize on, as he appeared behind the bearded swordsman,

"Your sword might carry a lot of destructive power, but your defense is non-existent!" Zabuza taunted, ready to cleave Jinin.

Then much to Zabuza's surprise, rather than trying to avoid or block his swing, Jinin instead swung the axe half of his weapon at Zabuza's neck. Zabuza released one of his hands from his sword's handle, and used it to grab Jinin's wrist, stopping the attack. But in doing so, he robbed his own swing of much of his power, and Jinin easily blocked it with the hammer half of his weapon.

"You know what they say, the best defense is a good offense. And no offense is better than the Helmet Splitter!" Jinin shouted as he kicked Zabuza in the chest, pushing him back, before lunging at him again.

But once again, Jinin was forced to jump backwards as several kunai rained upon him, a few of them dangerously close to find its mark.

Angry and startled, he looked around to see how had ambushed him, and saw a tall and slender girl with long blue hair that hid one of her eyes landing near Zabuza. Her uniform identified her as a rebel.

"Who the hell are you?" Jinin angrily asked.

The newcomer smirked. "My name is Miyako Kiui, Special Jonin of the Kirigakure Liberation Movement, as well as an aspiring member of the Seven Swordsmen."

"Get lost, little girl, this is a fight between actual Swordsmen, not pretenders," Jinin dissed her.

Miyako crossed her arms. "What, am I too much for you to handle, big guy?"

"Quite the opposite, I'm not going to deal with such an opponent that's below me, so leave if you value your life," Jinin warned her.

Miyako replied by unsheathing her katana. "The most common way to become a Swordsman is to kill the previous wielder of a sword and claim it as your own. And that's why I'm planning to do."

This seems to hit a nerve on Jinin, who dangerously scowled at her. "Alright girl, you got your wish. I'd be more than happy to put you in your place. Bluntsword Ninja Art: Underground Fissure!"

Jinin raised the axe half of his weapon above his head, whose edge started to glow with a dim blue light, before slamming it into the ground, sending an underground shockwave that shook the earth, and left a deep crack in the ground behind it.

"Oh shit!" Miyako shouted as she jumped aside multiple times in order to avoid the widespread destruction.

"Don't get too cocky, girl. This man is a veteran of the Third Ninja War, and possibly the strongest Swordsman loyal to Yagura," Zabuza pointed out.

"You should listen to your sempai, little girl. You're way over your head," Jinin added before raising the hammer half this time. "Bluntsword Ninja Art: Earth breaker!"

Jinin brought the hammer down once more, creating a massive quake that send the two swordsmen and the one aspiring swordsman flying with an incredible force.

"You can bring as many pretenders who want to get their dirty hands onto our swords, yet it won't be enough. Do you know why? Because we fight for a higher cause. We fight for peace, order and stability. You're fighting for the delusions of a mad woman consumed by her lust of power, and you yourselves are nothing but naïve children throwing temper tantrums just because things aren't the way you want," Jinin harshly told them. "That's why you're destined to lose!"

Zabuza managed to land on his feet, and raised his sword in a defensive pose as he slowly advanced towards his foe.

"You see us as children throwing a temper tantrum. Do you know how do we see you? As an old man who desperately clings to the old times because he's too afraid to face the fact that the world has changed., and realize that he's the last of the few relics of a past time. Now go to the place you belong, relic!" Zabuza shouted as he tossed his sword at the older swordsman once again.

"Not falling for that one again, boy," Jinin replied as he also tossed the hammer half of his weapon at the flying sword. Both weapons clashed with a loud clang. Zabuza's sword was sent spinning aside, while Jinin merely tugged the leather link bounding both weapons, and returned the hammer to his hand. "And now it's when either you or one of your allies ambush me from behind, right?"

And true to his words, he turned around and saw Chojuro ready to cut him in two, Hiramekarei already moving to strike. Chojuro yelped upon seeing that Jinin had seen him coming. Jinin smirked, and parried the blow with the axe half, while smashing Chojuro's arm with the hammer.

"AAAAAAAARRRGGGHH!" the young swordsman yelled, dropping his weapon to the ground, as he himself fell on his knees.

"Does it hurt? Well, that's what happens when you get into a war. People either die, or get horribly maimed for life. And while I doubt that injury might be permanent, you won't live to receive medical attention," Jinin said as he prepared to finish the job.

"Leave him alone, you asshole!" Miyako shouted as she charged at Jinin.

Even if the yell was an obvious alert, Jinin was already expecting either of them to try to save their comrade, and was unsurprised that his guessing of the girl turned out to be correct. Jinin's axe clashed against Miyako's katana, resulting in a shower of sparks.

"At the very least, two of the lost swords will go back to their legitimate owner," Jinin said as he effortlessly pushed Miyako back, who made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

Shuriken made of water formed in front of the blue haired kunoichi, as they flew towards Jinin. But the older swordsman merely swung his hammer, and easily destroyed them.

"Nothing you can throw at me will have any kind of effect, girl. Give up already," Jinin dismissively said. "Even if by some miracle you manage to win here, Mizukage-sama is already aware of what you did! Then you'll have no option but face Kirigakure in the open, and you will be crushed!"

"Do you take us for idiots? The island is surrounded by our forces, ready to intercept any bird messenger that tries to fly into the mainland. Yagura will be none the wiser when we storm the village, just like we did with this prison!" Miyako countered, as she delivered fast swipes with her katana at Jinin.

The older swordsman merely smirked. "Ah, yes, the birds. We found out later than what would have been desirable that that's how you've been gaining intel on us. But that tactic won't work with you anymore."

Miyako wanted to believe it was just a bluff to get her upset, but he couldn't feel that her foe wasn't lying.

"What are you talking about?" the blue haired kunoichi shouted.

"Do you have anybody checking underwater?" Jinin mysteriously asked.

"Underwater? Why would...?" she asked, confused, before a realization hit her like a sledgehammer. "No way... !"

"Yes. Upon noticing that you were intercepting our messenger birds, we decided to take advantage of the sea, and used sea animals to carry messages underwater instead. Several couriers were sent away to Kirigakure a few minutes after your invasion started, detailing, among other things, that little sneaking you did in order to disable our defenses and open the dock gates. Mizukage-sama knows everything. You have no way to defeat him."

Miyako was left stunned. Secrecy has always been the rebellion's greatest weapon, and now, they could no longer count on it. Even if Yagura didn't plan to hunt them down, he'll expect them to attack the village anytime, and would reinforce its defenses. Mei had stressed how important Yagura not knowing about them was. There would be no way to take over the village now. They had already lost.

"No... it can't end like this..." a still stunned and shocked Miyako said, almost in a whisper.

"It can," Jinin said. "But Mizukage-sama won't have to end your revolt personally. That honor will belong to ME!"

Jinin was about to cut Miyako in two with his axe, before Zabuza suddenly appeared between him and his potential victim, deflecting the axe blow to the side.

"Goddamit girl, snap out of it!" Zabuza angrily shouted, as he pushed Jinin back. "This isn't the end! I refuse to let it end here after how long I've been walking this path!"

"Didn't you hear what he said? Yagura knows about this attack now! He will be expecting us! All our efforts from these past years are now wasted! We can't win!"

"So what? Things didn't go as planned. When do they do? I did meet my fair share of failures, and here I am, ready to take Kirigakure away from Yagura's hands!" Zabuza shouted.

Zabuza sounded so sure. Did the rebels still have a chance to win? He certainly think so. And what he said is true. He failed in his initial coup. He was captured by Konoha when he helped the Uchiha Clan with their failed attempt at seizing Konoha. Yet the man didn't let discouraging odds to put him down, and persevered.

Yes, he was right. They couldn't give up. Every problem has a solution, and they'd find a solution for this one. Besides, this was far from the first setback the rebellion had faced. Wiping the stunned expression from her face, Miyako gripped her katana tightly, and prepared to rejoin the fight.

"Sorry, I don't know what came over me," Miyako told him.

"Be sure it doesn't happen again. I can't waste my time babysitting you all the time!" Zabuza snarled, as he charged at Jinin once again.

Zabuza and Jinin engaged in a fight once, more, loud clangs rang through the air as their weapons clashed. In no time, it became obvious that Zabuza was gaining the upper hand. Still, that was nowhere near enough to make Jinin consider defeat.

"Just like I said, your defense is pretty poor. Your sword might provide you a formidable offense, but it will be for naught if I simply don't let you attack," Zabuza told him as he pressed on.

"And you think I'm going to let you?" Jinin replied as he parried a blow with the axe half of his weapon, while trying to smash Zabuza with the hammer.

Zabuza, however, disengaged in time to duck the mighty hit., and landed a punch on Jinin's stomach. Still, the bearded man didn't bend over. As the two kept fighting, Miyako decided that the best course of action would be supporting Zabuza from afar. She positioned herself behind Jinin, and made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

Once again, multiple water shuriken formed in front of her, and she directed them towards Jinin, being careful not to hit Zabuza with them. However, as if Jinin had eyes on his back (or a Byakugan), the swordsman swung his hammer in an spinning motion, deflecting all the shuriken, while all the same time using the axe to parry Zabuza's sword.

"You think I'm such an amateur to not to notice how many enemies I'm fighting against? Trying to catch me off guard is-URK!" Jinin choked, as he spat blood.

It took the presents a couple seconds to notice that Chojuro had appeared behind him, and struck his side with Hiramekarei, whom he was holding with his only good arm. He was unable to put much force into the swing, but it was enough to make a grievous wound.

"Y-You... !?" Jinin asked in disbelief.

"I'm... I'm not dead yet, I can still fight!" Chojuro shouted, though he couldn't suppress his stutter.

Then, Miyako appeared besides them, and impaled Jinin with her katana for a good measure. The older swordsman dropped his weapon, and fell to his knees.

"You're right..." Jinin said, coughing more blood. "To think that I of all people made such a rookie mistake... you have guts, kid, I'll give you that."

Zabuza walked towards him, and raised his sword. "Any last words, Jinin-san?"

"Yes. Do know that I don't regret my actions or loyalties, and die as a loyal swordsman. And since I'm sure you're going to give my sword to somebody else, make sure it's somebody worthy of it," Jinin asked.

Zabuza nodded. "I promise you the next bearer of the Helmet Splitter will be a swordsman worthy of your praise."

And then, the aptly named Executioner's Blade descended upon Jinin, separating his head from the rest of his body, ending his life.

Across the battlefield, all the chakra golems suddenly stopped fighting and were rendered inactive, with the seals slapped across their plating losing their glow.

Zabuza then grabbed his head, and raised it above his own.

"Attention everybody! Jinin Akebino of the Bluntsword is dead! The warden of this prison has died! Now give up, unless you want to follow a similar fate!" Zabuza shouted.

The fights around him immediately stopped. The effect of seeing their hero's severed head was immediate for the red-clad Kiri ninja. Some were disheartened, others enraged, but no one was left different.

"Jinin-sama is dead!?" a loyalist Kiri ninja asked in shock.

"Maybe we should surrender..." another one suggested. "The golems were bound to his will, and since he's no longer alive, there's nobody to make them fight..."

"Never! We're the Blood Mist! We don't have mercy, and we shall accept none!" another one shouted.

"Yes! We will go down fighting!" another Kiri ninja replied.

"Don't be such an idiot! Do you value your lives so poorly?" Mei asked.

"As if you don't plan to execute all of us, you traitorous whore!" the same ninja replied.

Trying to contain her anger at such crude insult, Mei breathed deeply. "No. I promise you that no harm won't befall on those who surrender peacefully. You will be treated as fairly as possible by my forces, and you will have the chance to return to active duty once Yagura has been deposed. No more blood needs to be spilled today."

Mei's words seems to have some effect on the enemy ninja, who dropped their weapons and walked towards the blue clad rebels, who quickly grabbed them.

"No! What are you doing, you idiots! Keep fighting!" an ANBU yelled as he lunged at a random rebel ninja, and many others followed his example.

The fight continued for a bit longer, but without Jinin, the golems, and a good chunk of the prison guards surrendering, those who refused to do so were quickly killed.

The effect was the same in the rest of the island. They realized that the golems' sudden deactivation meant that their leader was dead, and thus they were without two of the biggest assets they had. Around half of the prison guards choose to throw their weapons and

hope the rebels would have mercy on them. The rest decided to go down fighting.

And as soon as the battle was over, all the rebels celebrated their victory with loud cheers and shouts of joy.

"We're not done here. Come on, we need to release all our allies, and lock up the prisoners!" Mei commanded. "And look for Ao! Finding him is of utmost importance!"

Miyako then walked towards Mei, her face reflecting worry.

"Mei-sama, before he died, Jinin-sempai said something you should know," Miyako told her leader. "Turns out, they did manage to send a message to the village. Apparently they use sea creatures that travel underwater as couriers now."

"That is grave news, indeed. Then again, it was a good thing that Jinin told us that. Otherwise, the invasion of Kiri might have turned into a disaster. Even if that means we can no longer use our original strategy," Mei replied. "I knew that part of your heart was still in the right place, Jinin-san."

"Are we going to continue with the invasion?" Miyako asked.

Mei nodded. "Yes. Now that Yagura knows of this, we can't fall back, even if he will be waiting for us."

...

Turns out, the man named Ao was locked in a secret underground cell which couldn't have been found without a sensor's help.

"Ao. We finally found you," Mei said, as the blue haired man came out of his confinement. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to be free again, indeed. I was afraid I would never see you again, Mei-sama. I'm glad that I was wrong," Ao said as he made a small bow.

"How are you? Did they torture you?" Mei asked, a bit concerned.

"They did, and with a lot of enthusiasm. But they couldn't crack my will nor my mind," Ao proudly replied.

Mei smiled in return. "I see. What about your Byakugan? Do you still have it? Your seals are still in place, so I presume the answer is yes."

"Still in place," Ao said as he tapped his eye patch. "And as you said, they were unable to undo the protective seals. Not without killing me first, which they wouldn't do until they made me talk."

"Then it's a good thing that everything turned out as we had planned," Mei replied, then she turned at the group of ninja behind her. "Somebody please find Ao some proper clothes to wear in place of that hideous prison attire."

"Right away, ma'am!" two ninja said before leaving.

"Now that the island is under our control, let's check how the rest of the fights went, and how many losses we suffered," Mei said.

...

A few hours later, the sun started to rise in the horizon. Most of the clean-up had already been complete, and the island was fully under the rebel's control.

The guards that had surrendered had been locked inside the very same cells they used to watch, while the prisoners, at least those who could be identified as war prisoners, were released, given ninja uniforms and weapons, and reenlisted in the rebel army. Other criminals remained there.

Mei also called one of her hidden divisions into the island so they could man the prison while the bulk of her forces took a well deserved rest. Said reinforcements also brought food, clothes,

weapons, medicine, and other supplies that the battle had drained from the rebel leader's main army, as well as their Konoha allies.

Some of said allies, namely Kurenai's Assault Squad, were inspecting one of the deactivated chakra golems, which was laying on the floor, motionless. Earlier, in an underground basement, they had discovered some sort of machine powered by the chakra of multiple ninja that actually supplied the golems with energy. It was decided that it wouldn't be destroyed, but kept for analysis instead.

And while their next orders arrived, Kurenai's team was studying one of those golems. Or better said, Naruto studied it while his teammates and sensei watched.

"I didn't want to believe it, but it's true. These seals were made by my clan," Naruto concluded. "I don't get it. Mom and Dad told me that neither Kiri nor Kumo got anything from the invasion of Uzushioagakure," Naruto protested.

"Or they did, but decided to pretend that it wasn't the case so their enemies wouldn't suspect anything," Kurenai wisely pointed out. "And it worked, given how off-guard these machines caught us."

"If this prison had these golems as reinforcements, then Kirigakure has them too. And possibly in a much bigger quantity," Haku observed. "It won't be an easy battle."

"No, but we already had experience fighting them. And despite their strength and abilities, they aren't invincible," Naruto pointed out.

"That power generator we found out underground suggest that the golems cannot be deployed far away from them, which means that they can only be used for defensive purposes. If we could lure the enemy into fighting outside the village..." Hinata pointed out, with a small glint of hope.

Kurenai, however, shook her head. "That won't happen. Yagura won't deploy his troops in mass outside the safety of the village's

walls. This war won't end until we take over Kirigakure," Kurenai stated.

"Then we'll need a way to counter these golems. Naruto-kun, do you think you can create a seal that can disable them?" Haku asked his blond teammate.

Naruto looked pensive, but dubious. He placed two fingers under his chin. "I don't know. I can try, but the sealing matrix that makes the golems work is way more complex than anything I've studied."

"Whatever you do, no matter how little, it will be welcomed," Haku said in an almost pleading voice.

"Alright, I'll try to work on something," Naruto replied, much to the Ice Ninja's joy.

...

Meanwhile, in the prison's morgue, Mei and her swordsmen were around the table in which Jinin's body, covered by a sheet, was lying.

"His death was a tragedy. He was a good man, I just wish his loyalty wasn't so misplaced," a sorrowful Mei said. "Once the war ends, Jinin will be buried alongside all the previous swordsmen, with all the honors he deserves."

There was a moment of silence.

"Uh... even if it's too soon to ask... what's going to be of his sword?" Suigetsu asked. "Is any of us going to get it?"

Mei nodded, but shot Suigetsu a glare. "I was planning to talk about this later and not in front of Jinin's dead body, but given that you so tactfully brought up the issue..." Mei then looked at Miyako. "Miyako, I know you assisted Zabuza-kun and Chojuro with the fight, so I think you should be the one to inherit Jinin's sword."

"Zabuza-kun!?" the Swordsman Captain protested. *"Well, it's not as bad as Zabuza-chan, but still..."*

"Really?" Miyako gasped in excitement. "Thanks a lot, Mei-sama! I'll make both you and every past owner of the Helmet Splitter proud!"

"Oh come on! You need a lot of upper strength body to use that sword! Upper strength I have!" Suigetsu protested.

"Do you dare question the decisions of our leader?" Miyako asked, raising an eyebrow.

Suigetsu merely sighed in defeat.

"Chojuro, what about your arm? Does it feel better?" Mei asked the bespectacled swordsman.

"It does, Mei-sama. Konoha has some truly amazing medic-nin. I still need some time before it's fully healed, but it will be recovered by the time the invasion of Kirigakure begins," Chojuro replied with unusual enthusiasm.

Mei smiled. "Good to know that. But don't try to overdo it. Nobody will force you to fight until you're completely healed. Anyway, we should get some rest. The battle has been exhausting, and we only just begun."

...

Kirigakure, Mizukage's Palace

Yagura Karatachi, the Fourth Mizukage, was in a meeting with some his advisors. Like usual, the topic they were debating was how to deal with the ongoing rebellion. More specifically, how to make them come out of hiding. It turns out, however, that such problem was about to solve itself pretty soon, albeit at a very high cost.

"Mizukage-sama!" a couple ANBU burst into the meeting room, drawing everybody's attention. "We carry grave news! The rebels

have taken over the Crimson Citadel!"

While Yagura remained silent and pensive, all the councilors started to shout and argue among themselves. The Mizukage raised a hand while releasing killing intent, silencing everybody in the room.

"So Mei has finally made her move. I have to admit it was sooner than any of us were expecting," Yagura commented.

"That's not all. There were Konoha ninja among her ranks. It seems she hired them or struck an alliance with Konoha," the ANBU continued.

"I see. That explains how she was able to launch such an attack," Yagura said, keeping his cool. "The loss of the prison is unfortunate, especially since we had the rebel head of intelligence there, as well as plenty of other rebel war prisoners. She will feel emboldened by this victory, and will move to invade the village next," Yagura deduced.

"Aren't you worried, Mizukage-sama?" one of his councilors asked. "With Konoha helping her, even if we defeat her, she could cause a lot of harm to the village, leaving us vulnerable to foreign enemies."

Yagura turned around, and shot him a small smile.

"Not in the slightest. I was already counting on this to happen, and thus, I made the necessary preparations for the rebels' arrival," Yagura told them.

Author's Note: Well, there you have it, the Crimson Citadel mini arc comes to an end. I hope you liked it. You can consider it a prelude of what the invasion of Kirigakure is going to be. Hopefully Jinin Akebino was a suitable opponent, and worthy of the title of Swordsman of the Mist. One go, other two more to take down. And that's not counting the "final boss", Yagura himself.

And as expected, Akatsuki plans to join the fray. How will their interference pay out? Will they fail to capture Yagura, or will they be succesful? And how will that affect the outcome of the invasion as a whole?

Thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Next time, prelude to the invasion. In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Prelude to the Invasion

Author's Note: I just realized that I never out the disclaimer that I don't own Naruto and I'm not making any profit out of this fanfic. But... plenty of fanfics don't put it either, so I don't think it has to be that important, right? Either way, I already said it in this note. Anyway, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 47:

Prelude to the Invasion

or

What does it take for Zabuza to love somebody?

After the Crimson Citadel was secured, Mei ordered the rest of her forces back into the *Kirigakure's Hope* . Once they were in the security of the open sea, the Mizukage aspirant called for a meeting at the ship's war room. Like the previous meeting, her highest ranking officers and Konoha's Jonin were present.

"First of all, congratulations everybody on a job well done. We managed to recover most of our prisoners of war, my head of intelligence among them, and we did so while sustaining minimal loses," Mei praised all the ninja before them, before her expression turned serious. "However, what we did back then is nothing compared to the task ahead. It is now time to invade Kirigakure."

"And there are more complications that the ones we initially expected, right?" Kakashi guessed.

Mei sadly nodded. "Yes. Despite our best efforts, they managed to sneak a message to Kirigakure, and now Yagura knows what happened there. Since he knows we finally came out of hiding, we have no choice but attack Kirigakure now. If we take too long,

Yagura will drag us into a war of attrition we have no hope of winning."

"And do you believe that, with our current forces, we will be able to take over a major village?" Asuma asked.

"Especially now that they know we're coming for them," Kurenai added.

"Yes. Now that we rescued so many p.o.w's, our numbers have grown to a more acceptable level. Besides, there might be a silver lining to our prison break not being a secret anymore," Mei stated and nodded at Ao, who took a step forward.

"This victory has proven that the Blood Mist is not invincible. We know of many groups and individuals who opposed Yagura, but feared him too much to join us. We believe it might not be the case anymore," Ao explained. "And with the news that we now have four of the Seven Swords in our power, as opposed to the two that remains within the village's walls, it will help our cause to gain more support as well, especially with the Feudal Lord of the Land of Water.

"But we shouldn't ignore the fact that even with the additional support, the information leak robbed us of the element of surprise. Yagura will be waiting for us to come, and there won't be any way to prevent that," Mei added.

"Kirigakure has two accesses: one from land, and a gated dock," Ao continued.

"I can take a small team with me to infiltrate the village and open the dock gates, just like Ameyuri did when we stormed the prison," Zabuza suggested.

Mei, however, shook her head. "Sadly such thing won't be possible anymore, since Yagura will be expecting that. In fact, my original plan consisted in luring Yagura's forces to the land gate, while a small team of infiltrators would open the dock gates, which the bulk

of our troops would use to penetrate the village, and trap the enemy between us. The typical pincer movement. Our best option would be to do the last thing Yagura expects us to do."

"But that would be full assault from land, and we aren't going to do that," Chojuro pointed out, then he nervously looked at Mei. "... right?"

Mei looked at him, and sighed. "I'm afraid we have no other options."

Needless to say, the whole room erupted into a cacophony of yells, shouts and even profanities as the present ninjas tried to support or debunk the reckless, almost suicidal strategy of the Mizukage aspirant. It took Ao and Mei a couple minutes to calm down everybody, at which Mei continued her explanation.

"I'm not done yet. Listen, I'm not suggesting that we take over the village with our current forces. That's impossible and stupid. But we can do what we did at the Crimson Citadel: if we kill or capture Yagura, the other side will have no choice but surrender," Mei explained.

"But they will expect that too as well. The Mizukage's Palace will be heavily guarded. How will we reach Yagura then?" a Kiri Jonin asked.

"While the village defenders are busy with our forces, a small team lead by myself will infiltrate the palace and confront Yagura. We will either kill him, or capture him alive. Presumably the latter," Mei explained.

"Why do you care so much if that monster dies? He's the reason we're doing this!" another Kiri ninja protested.

Mei nodded at Ao, who took another step forward.

"Because, while there's no solid evidence to back it up, we suspect that the Mizukage might be under somebody else's mind control.

After sharing our intel with our Konoha allies, we suspect that it might be the same man who orchestrated several attacks on Konoha: an Akatsuki under the name of Obito Uchiha," Ao told them.

Kakashi couldn't help but sigh in sadness upon hearing his former friend's name. *"Kirigakure too, Obito? Is this because of what Kiri did to Rin?"*

"So if we manage to expose the Mizukage, we will be able to end this while avoiding unnecessary bloodshed," Ao finished, taking a step back.

"Who will be part of the infiltration squad?" Zabuza eagerly asked. It was obvious he was dying to have another shot at fighting Yagura.

"Besides myself, it will only have one more ninja: Naruto Uzumaki," Mei told them.

"WHAT? You want my student to fight a Kage on his own!?" Kurenai indignantly asked. Asuma placed a hand on his girlfriend's shoulder, hoping to wordlessly calm her down.

"As far as I've been told, Naruto is a Special Jonin who has mastered senjutsu, and is the jinchuriki of the strongest Tailed Beast. Between the two of us, we should be able to subdue Yagura and whoever is guarding him," Mei explained. "I know that you might feel attached to him given he's your student, and he's pretty young as well. But don't worry, Naruto will be fine under my care."

"But even then... just you and him? Shouldn't a four squad man will have a higher chances of success?" Kurenai suggested.

Mei shook her head once again. "They will expect infiltrators. The fewer we are, the less chances of being spotted. And between the two of us, the only ninja we should worry about is Yagura himself."

"I understand. It doesn't mean that I have to like it, but I understand it," Kurenai regretfully said.

Mei smiled. "Good. Now that's out of the way, let's talk about the invasion in a more minute detail. Konoha's medical corps will be a key to keep our casualties to a minimum. The enemy will foresee that, so we should assign a division to keep them alive and..."

Mei and the rest of the Jonin there spent the rest of the day discussing the invasion plan.

...

Once lunchtime was over, the ship's cafeteria soon became empty, as everybody else went to spend their time elsewhere. Everybody except a certain blonde, who took advantage of the place's large tables and the current quietness in order to work in his current project.

Naruto had created multiple clones and spread them around the table, all working tirelessly on a seal that could disable those pesky chakra golems, while the original studied the theory he had available now.

Spread in front of him, there were several books and scrolls on fuinjutsu, as well as several crumpled papers, the result of a failed attempt at seals. After his latest attempt followed the same route, Naruto groaned, and rubbed his eyes.

"Naruto-kun? Are you still here?"

Naruto turned around and saw Hinata walking towards him.

"Yeah, I am. Why, I'm not sure," the blond half joked.

"Weren't you able to make the seal work?" Hinata asked, as she took a seat beside him.

Naruto shook his head. "Counter-seals are way more complex than regular seals. And the seals that power and direct those golems are

way more complex than anything I've seen so far. If only dad was here to help me, or had more time..."

"Don't feel so bad. You did what you could. Besides, it's not that those golems are invincible," Hinata reassured him. "We beat them before."

"Yeah, but if I came up with a seal, it could help a lot with the invasion of Kirigakure," Naruto replied. "Besides, I'm an Uzumaki, and these are Uzumaki seals. I should be able to know how to undo them, right?"

"Oh, I see, so that's what's bothering you," Hinata realized.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"You're facing an enemy that uses knowledge of your clan to fight, and that is eating you on the inside," Hinata pointed out. "It's like if I fought an enemy with a stolen Byakugan."

Naruto let out a weary sigh. "And that's not the worst part. They seem to use it better than me, an actual Uzumaki! You'd think they have Uzumaki on their side or something!" Naruto complained.

"From what you told me, the fall of Uzushio happened many decades ago. They had a lot of time to learn about their stolen fuinjutsu art. Even with Shadow Clones, you can't hope to bridge such a massive gap," Hinata told him, as she placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "When all of this is over, I'm sure Mei-san will be more than happy to give you everything Kirigakure plundered from Uzushio."

"I hope so," Naruto said, not entirely convinced.

"And then, maybe we can convince Hokage-sama to create those golems for Konoha as well," Hinata suggested.

"That would be cool. I'm sure dad would love to open one of those up and see how it works. I'm sure we could even find a way to make them better!" Naruto excitedly said.

Hinata smiled. "Now that's the Naruto I know. Though, if you have some trouble with this, maybe you could ask Karin-san for help? I'm sure two Uzumaki are better than one."

"Even if that one can become one hundred?" Naruto cheekily replied.

"Does having a hundred clones increase your intelligence a hundredfold, or gives you a new hundred point of views and perspectives to see things?" Hinata replied, just as cheekily.

Naruto then frowned. "You know, Hinata, nobody likes a smartass."

Hinata, however, continued smiling, and kissed Naruto in the cheek. "But I know you love *this* smartass, Naruto-kun."

"How I hate that you're right," Naruto said, as he returned the kiss as well.

"But seriously, you should ask Karin-san. Maybe she can be of help," Hinata insisted.

"Eh, Karin-neechan is more into medicine than fuinjutsu, besides those chain thingies. And even then, I heard the invasion is going to be real soon, so I don't think we'll be able to pull it off," Naruto replied.

"In that case, then maybe you should try something more productive?" Hinata asked. "Do you want to spar with me a little?"

"Yes, please," Naruto said in an almost desperate tone, happy to have an excuse to get away from the books and scrolls.

...

"Are you sure nobody can hear us?"

Kakashi and Rin were inside an empty cabin that wasn't used by anybody at the moment. The door was locked, Rin was wise enough to know that such thing wouldn't be enough to secure the privacy she needed.

"Fuinjutsu is far from my specialty, but I'm really good at privacy seals," Kakashi said as he finished placing the last one on the wall.

"When did you learn to do privacy seals?" Rin asked.

"During my time in ANBU. They're pretty much a must. They made you do them so many times, you end being able to do them in your sleep," Kakashi answered.

Kakashi had told Rin about how Minato convinced Kakashi to join ANBU in order to get him over the deaths of his teammates, though by Kakashi's own admission, that hardly helped him. It wasn't until he became the sensei of a team of Genin that he started to rediscover his lost humanity.

Rin was hoping she could also help with that. As well as try to bring Obito back from his dark place.

"And done. Nobody will hear us, and nobody can enter this room," Kakashi said, then he crossed his arm, and his friendly demeanor grew a bit more serious. "Now, I believe there's something you should share with your old teammate."

Rin sighed heavily. Even if Kakashi was one of the persons she trusted the most, it was still very hard to open up to him. Or maybe because it was so important to him.

Wordlessly, Rin extended her hand at Kakashi, with the palm facing upwards. Kakashi took a look at her palm, seeing nothing at first, until a flower started to grow. The silver haired man's expression remained unchanged.

"So, you do have Wood Release. Interesting," Kakashi observed, in an almost boring tone.

Rin tilted her head, a bit confused. "'Interesting'? I have the First Hokage's Bloodline Limit, and that's all you have to say about it?"

"Rin, I remember as if it was yesterday how I used my Chidori to impale you through the heart. Yet here you are, fine and unharmed, talking to me as if nothing happened. I think I went past the point of these kind of things being surprising," Kakashi replied in the same casual tone.

Rin had to admit he had a point.

"Besides, you're not the only one in the village with that ability," Kakashi pointed out.

"I know. The Hokage's daughter has it as well," Rin stated.

"I mean besides her," Kakashi said. Rin was visibly surprised. "During my time with ANBU, I met this guy who also had Wood Release. Turns out, Orochimaru had experimented on him as a baby in order to reproduce the Wood Release. Of the fifty children he infused with the First's DNA, he's the only one who survived."

"That's... monstrous," Rin said, visibly horrified. She wanted to hope that Obito didn't do something similar in order to bring her back to life, but deep down she knew the answer.

"So, who else knows about this?" Kakashi asked.

"Just Hokage-sama and Tsunade-sama," Rin replied. "They told me not to tell anybody, at least until I could master my powers and grow stronger, since that would make me a prime target for kidnapping. I only used Wood Release back then because it was an emergency, and the fog could hide the nature of the jutsu I used."

"You did good in keeping it a secret, even from me. Don't worry, I won't tell anybody about your new abilities," Kakashi told her in a reassuring tone.

"That's... that's not all," Rin uneasily said, as she rubbed her arm.

"What do you mean?" Kakashi asked.

Once again, without saying a word, Rin pulled out a kunai, and much to Kakashi's shock, she cut her pinky finger off, before tossing it to a trashcan.

"Rin! What the-?" Kakashi asked in shock.

"Just wait," Rin calmly said as she held her four fingered hand.

In less than a minute, the wound stopped bleeding, and healed completely. Then, little by little, a small bulge appeared on her stump, and it grew longer until it became another finger.

"Can your friend do this too?" Rin asked.

This time, Kakashi was genuinely surprised. "No. At least, I think he can't."

"I can regenerate my whole hand as well. Though I didn't dare to check if I could regenerate an arm or a leg," Rin explained.

Kakashi knew that the First has a healing factor in a similar vein to Naruto's, in that he could heal in minutes wounds that would take hours or even days to normal people. But what Rin had was beyond that.

"I told you I don't think I'm the real Rin. I may not even be human anymore. Do you see why now?" Rin asked.

Kakashi could see why Rin was having such identity issues. Still, that didn't mean he wasn't going to help her.

"Hey, Rin, remember that time, during the Third Ninja War? Gai, you and me were completely surrounded by Iwa's forces. You went to call for help while Gai and I held up the enemy," Kakashi began.

"Yes, I do. I was really worried that I wouldn't be fast enough and that, by the time I could bring help, it would have been too late. But thankfully you two managed to survive," Rin finished the tale. "Why do you bring that up?"

"You remember that. If you do, you must be the real Rin, regardless of how much they modified your DNA. Because, what are we, if not the sum of our memories and experiences? And you clearly have the original Rin's memories, regardless if your body is the same one or a clone," Kakashi explained, then he placed a hand on his former teammate. "And in my eyes, that makes you the real Rin."

Rin held Kakashi's hand on her shoulder, as she pondered her older friend's words. She let out a sad sigh.

"I wish it was just that easy, Kakashi," Rin replied, as she slowly removed Kakashi's hand. "Anyway, is there anything else you want to know about me?"

"No, that's all."

"Alright then. I think I'm going to take a nap," Rin said, before exiting the safe room, with Kakashi leaving as well shortly after.

That's when an ink mouse came out of hiding, climbed inside the trashcan, took the severed finger, and ran away back to its master.

...

Tenten was alone resting in her cabin when somebody knocked the door. The brown haired girl got up from her bed, and opened the door. She smiled upon seeing her boyfriend standing there.

"Oh, Haku, hi!" Tenten happily greeted.

"Hello, Tenten-chan. May I enter?" Haku asked.

"Sure," she replied, moving aside to let him in. She immediately noticed that there was something wrong with the Ice Ninja. "Haku, are you okay? You look tense."

"We... we need to talk," he said, not without difficulty.

Tenten tensed up. Those four words usually signaled the end of a relationship. Worrying thoughts started to form in her mind. Did she do something wrong? Did Haku meet another girl, somebody from Kiri? However, her rational part decided to push them away and listen what her boyfriend had to say.

"What's going on Haku?" she asked.

"You know that in case we manage to oust Yagura, Zabuza will remain in Kiri as the new captain of the Seven Swordsmen," Haku explained.

Tenten nodded. "Yeah, I guessed so. How does affect you?"

"I told you how Zabuza-sama saved me from a certain doom, and in return, I became his faithful follower. That's why, if Zabuza-sama asks me to remain with him in Kiri, I will do so. Which means... if that happens, we will have to break up," Haku finally said.

"Wait, what?" Tenten asked, shocked. "But... aren't you happy in Konoha?"

"I am, but this doesn't have to do with me. I can't disobey Zabuza-sama," Haku regretfully told her. "Listen, you can be angry at me if you want. It was I who asked you to become my girlfriend, not realizing that this could happen, and for that, I will always be sorry. I will try to make it up for you, I promise."

Tenten felt an hurricane of emotions forming between her. She wanted to shout, to cry, to yell... but once again, her rational part

stood triumphant. She breathed deeply, before making her question.

"Did Zabuza tell you that he wants you to continue with him?" Tenten asked.

"No, I didn't ask him. But I'm telling you this, just in case," Haku replied. "Listen, Tenten, Konoha has been great, and you were the best part of that. But I swore I'd help Zabuza-sama help to realize his ambitions, so if he wants me to be by his side, I have to obey."

"I see," Tenten replied. "Then if such thing happens... I'll move to Kirigakure with you."

This time, it was Haku's turn to be surprised. "What? But... you can't do that!"

Tenten raised an eyebrow. "And why not, exactly?"

"But... what about your life in Konoha? Your friends? Your family?" Haku asked. "I can't ask you to leave all that behind just for me."

"First of all, I don't have a family. I don't even have a last name, remember?" Tenten asked. "And second, I will be doing the exact thing you're going to do, so I don't think you have the right to call me out on it."

"Yes, precisely! Do you think it's easy for me not just to leave you behind, but my teammates, sensei and friends as well? I don't want you to go through that as well!" Haku insisted.

"Sorry, but that's not your decision to make," Tenten replied, as she moved to hold both of Haku's hands. "We will go through this together. We will be there for each other."

"There's nothing I can't tell you to make you change your mind, right?" Haku asked.

"I'm a strong, independent woman who takes her own decisions. So no," Tenten replied with a smirk.

Haku couldn't help but a smile. "Thank you, Tenten-chan. You're a great person, whom I don't deserve."

"Maybe you don't. Be thankful you're pretty cute," Tenten said as she leaned closer and kissed Haku in the lips.

...

Speaking of Zabuzza, the Swordsman Captain was sparring against the newest member of the Seven Swordsmen, Miyako Kiui, whom Mei had given the Helmet Splitter, with everybody else's approval.

"Come on, put more strength into it!" Zabuzza told her as he pressed his attack.

"I'm trying, dammit!" Miyako replied, dodging Zabuzza's fast swing.

"The bluntsword is a weapon meant for an all out offense! Stop dodging my attacks and attack me already!" Zabuzza insisted.

"I would, if you let me some room to breathe!" Miyako protested.

"Oh, sorry princess. Guess that you also expect the enemy to have such a consideration with you!" Zabuzza angrily snarled, as he attacked with even more ferocity.

"But this is just training!" Miyako countered.

"Training or not, there's no purpose without threat!" Zabuzza replied, as he continued his attack.

"ENOUGH!" she yelled.

Fueled by anger, Miyako nimbly dodged Zabuzza's latest swing, and taking advantage of her opponents slower movements, she dashed towards Zabuzza, and tossed the hammer half of the weapon at him. Zabuzza moved his sword aside, deflecting the flying hammer. Just as Miyako expected, as Zabuzza was left momentarily wide open, and took the chance to sink the axe half into his chest.

Zabuza then dissolved into a puddle of water.

"Not bad, girl, not bad," the real Zabuza said from behind. "You're getting it. Maybe you'll be able to get some skill with the bluntsword by the time we invade Kirigakure."

Miyako nodded and smiled in satisfaction.

From a box above them, Mei and the rest of the swordsmen watched the display, just like they did when Zabuza was testing Ameyuri and Chojuro.

"Do you think she's the right choice for the Helmet Splitter?" Ameyuri asked the Kage aspirant.

"I believe she is. However, despite what Zabuza's saying, she won't be nowhere near as ready for the invasion," Mei replied. "Carrying one of the Seven Swords will make her a target, and without the proper training to master it, that weapon will be like a bull's-eye painted on her back, rather than an asset."

"Pity. More swordsmen to our side would have been a boost to our troops' morale," Ameyuri lamented.

"They know we do have a fourth sword, even if they won't see it. We still have three Swordsmen," Mei countered. She then looked at Chojuro. "That's it, if all of them are completely recovered from the prison break."

"I am, Mei-sama," Chojuro replied, winding up his previously damaged arm to show that it was fine. "Like I said before, the Konoha medic-nin did a good job fixing it."

"Good. Because we're risking pretty much everything on this attack, and I don't want any of my soldiers to be in less than perfect condition, much less one of my swordsmen," Mei sternly said.

"Boy, I can't wait to get my hands on the remaining swords," Suigetsu commented. "Of the ones we can get, there's the Sewing Needle, and the Splatter... I think I could master both, but I'll have to choose one..." he then turned at Kumori. "Which one do you prefer?"

If Suigetsu was expecting to get an answer other than silence, he was about to get disappointed. Suigetsu unamusedly frowned.

"You're an idiot, you know that?" Suigetsu said before stomping out of the room.

"How long do you plan on doing that, Kumori-san?" Mei asked..

"As long as it's funny, Mei-sama," the cloaked man asked.

...

Land of Water, Mainland

A couple days later, the rebels abandoned the *Kirigakure's Hope* and established a hidden base within a forest near Kirigakure. Mei had sent messengers to her scattered forces, telling them to drop whatever they were doing and meet at the designated point. It was about time to gather all their forces and launch the invasion.

Even if there was still some unrest caused by a combination of lack of activity and the impending invasion, pretty much everybody were glad to be outdoors rather than trapped inside that ship. And most people found ways to keep themselves distracted until the time of attack.

One said person was Ino Yamanaka, who was looking for her best friend in order to talk for a bit, and maybe do some sparring. It has been a while since the last time she fought Sakura, and wanted to check which one of the two was stronger. However, she was starting to grow frustrated due her lack of result.

"Where is she?" Ino asked to no one in particular. "You'd think somebody with bright pink hair would be easy to find..."

As she wandered around, somebody drew her attention. A pale looking, black haired boy sitting by himself, and drawing in a sketchbook. Ino then remembered a conversation he had with Sakura some days ago in the ship about some creepy guy that insulted her, and this guy matched the description. And both she and Sasuke, but mainly the latter, believed that this guy was up to no good.

Pushed by curiosity, she decided to get to know the boy a bit better.

"Hello there," Ino greeted with her usual charm. "Name's Ino. What are you doing?"

The boy turned around and smiled at her. Ino could easily see it was a fake smile. "Hi, blondie. My name is Sai. And as you can see, I'm drawing."

Ino raised an eyebrow. "Blondie?"

"An affectionate nickname. I read in a book that friends give each other nicknames," Sai explained, never dropping his smile. "But the last time I used it, I got a negative response. This time, I decided to use a more objective nickname, based on your hair color."

Ino stared at him in disbelief. Where did this guy come from? It was certainly weird, and that constant, painfully fake smile wasn't helping.

"Okay, you clearly didn't read that book right, or that book is complete bullshit," Ino said, shaking her head. "While it's true that sometimes friends give each other nicknames, they do it when there's a lot of trust between them, not when you're meeting new people. In fact, calling a stranger by a nickname is something extremely rude to do."

Sai's smile disappeared, and was replaced by an expression of mild surprise. "It is?"

"Yes, it is. It's considered insulting in most of the times. Just because somebody might allow a friend to call them by a nickname, even an unflattering one, it doesn't mean they'll extend the same courtesy to a stranger," Ino explained.

"I see. By the way you talk, you seem to be versed in the art of socializing," Sai replied.

Ino's chest swelled in pride, taking his neutral observation as a compliment. "I'm more than 'just versed', Sai."

"Then you'll know what to do in case you want to get close to somebody? All my attempts have been unsuccessful, despite following many books' advice to the letter," Sai told her.

"Okay, first of all, drop the nicknames. And that fake smile as well, it will make people think you're a shady guy. At best," Ino stated. Then, she remembered her conversation with Sakura and realized that this boy *might* be shady.

"Oh. That was the opposite of the impression I wanted to transmit," Sai replied.

"That's the opposite of the impression anybody wants to transmit," Ino said, rolling her eyes.

"Once I do that, what do I do next?" Sai asked.

"If you want to make a good impression, asking people about themselves is a good way to let them know you care," Ino explained. "For example, I saw that you like to draw, so if I wanted to get close to you, I'd ask you about it."

"Showing interest in other people's interest..." Sai repeated. "Yes, I think it sounds logical. But what if I don't know anything about

them?"

"Well, you ask them, of course," Ino replied, as if saying something obvious.

"But we're ninja, and we're supposed to conceal as much about ourselves as we can. If somebody else shares personal information, they're giving the enemy potential information to use against them," Sai explained.

Ino groaned loudly. Where did this guy come from? "Sai, I don't think that a hobby, or a particular interest in clothes, books or movies can be used against somebody in any serious way."

But then again, Ino did remember back in the academy how many girls did she shame because they wore clothes she thought were unfashionable. Oh well, those days were behind her now, and it was unlikely than young adults like themselves would fall into that.

"I see. And why can't I smile? People smile a lot," Sai pointed out.

"Yes, but it has to be a natural smile, not a forced one," Ino told him.

"And how do I make my smile natural?" Sai asked.

"... you really have issues, did anybody tell you that?" Ino asked, weirded out. There was being socially awkward, and there was being this. "But to answer your question, your smile will be genuine when it appears as the result of being happy."

"This sounds way more complicated than the book made it appear," Sai said, feeling a bit overwhelmed by this new information.

"It's easier than you think, you only need practice," Ino said, smiling.

"I will do that, then. I will follow your teachings from now onwards, Ino-sensei," Sai replied, smiling once again.

"Ino-sensei? Heh, I like the way it sounds," Ino chuckled.

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Naruto, Hinata and Haku were happily chatting, when they noticed their sensei walking towards them. Walking alongside Kurenai was a brown haired girl with purple markings on her cheek. A certain girl Haku remembered saving more than a year ago from Orochimaru's lair.

"Hey, Kurenai-sensei!" Naruto said upon seeing her approaching.

"Hello there. I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. Rin, these are Naruto Uzumaki, Hinata Hyuga, and Haku Yuki, whom you met already. Guys, this is Rin Nohara, a former classmate and friend of mine," Kurenai introduced the girl.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Rin said, making a slight bow.

"Hey, you're that girl that came back from the dead, right?" Naruto pointed out, before Hinata nudged him in the ribs. "What?"

"Naruto-kun, be more tactful. That's not something she'd like to remember," Hinata gently chastised him.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry!" he apologized with a sheepish grin.

"It's okay. I guess that's a part of me that's impossible to ignore," Rin replied with a light chuckle.

"Anyway. Naruto, I'd thought you'd be interested in meeting Rin, given that she used to be your biological father's student, alongside Kakashi and, regrettably, Obito Uchiha," Kurenai said.

"Really? Wow, that's so cool! You have to be super strong if you were trained by the Fourth!" Naruto gushed.

Rin giggled sheepishly. "Well, not as much. I filled more of a supporting role while Kakashi and Obito did the heavy lifting. Though I'm trying to change that now."

"There's nothing wrong with fitting a more supporting role. From what I heard, you're a medical-nin, right? Keeping your teammates alive is

something important as well," Hinata replied.

"Yeah! You have no idea how many times Hinata-hime saved our skins!" Naruto cheerfully added.

"Besides, I still have some catching up to do. Working at the hospital this year made me realize how much medical science has advanced. Besides, I don't think I can compete with a generation of medic-nin trained by Tsunade-sama herself," Rin said, rubbing the back of her head.

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. You performed an eye transplant in the middle of a battlefield when you were twelve. I'm sure you'll do fine," Kurenai encouraged her.

"From what I heard, you refused to rejoin Konoha's ranks when you returned to the village. What made you change your mind?" Haku asked.

"It was Kirigakure who kidnapped me and started the chain of events that led to my death and Obito's downfall. And that memory made me terrified of being in a battleground again. However, I didn't want to be afraid all my life, and that I needed to face my demons. Hence I'm here. And if everything goes fine, I will ask Hokage-sama to formally rejoin the ninja ranks," Rin told them.

"While my case isn't exactly the same, I did lose a lot thanks to Kirigakure as well. In fact, I'm a native of the Land of Water," Haku stated. "It might be too late for me, but I know I can help other children have a better childhood than mine."

"Yes, I hope that nobody else has to go through what I went through as well," Rin replied. "Once this war is over, I might be able to finally move on."

"That's the spirit! You can't let such an insignificant thing like dying get in the way!" Naruto cheered.

"Insignificant?" Kurenai asked, mildly upset.

"Hey, she came back from it! If she did that, then why can't everybody else?" Naruto asked.

Kurenai merely sighed and shook her head. Rin simply giggled.

"You know, despite how much you look like Minato-sensei, I'd say personality-wise you are more like Kushina-san. She was really energetic and carefree, and saw the good side of everything and everyone," Rin said.

"Naruto-kun is just the same. Nothing can keep him down, not for long at least," Hinata replied.

"Are you two a couple?" Rin asked, noticing the closeness between Naruto and Hinata. Upon receiving an affirmative nod from the two of them, she added: "You know, the two of you kinda remind me of Minato-sensei and Kushina-san, if they swapped personalities, hehe."

"What about you, Rin? Is there somebody special in your life?" Naruto cheekily asked.

Rin blushed a bit. "Well, not now. I used to have a crush on Kakashi back in the day, but given my current state, I don't think there will be anything beyond friendship between the two of us. Not that I'm looking for a relationship right now. My very existence is still kind of a mess."

"I do think that a relationship would help you a bit with your issues. Help you back into the good things of life," Kurenai intervened.
"Besides, you're pretty cute. Lots of boys would love to date you."

Before the conversation could continue, one of Mei's unofficial ANBU appeared before them, making his presence known immediately.

"Naruto Uzumaki, Mei-sama requires your presence," the ANBU stated in a cold and professional tone.

"She does? Oh well, better not to make her wait," Naruto said with a shrug as he accompanied the ANBU.

Hinata and Haku noticed their sensei tensing up when the ANBU made his request.

"Kurenai-sensei? Everything okay?" Hinata asked.

"I'd like to think that it is, but I'm not so sure," Kurenai uneasily replied.

"It seems that you know something we aren't aware of," Haku pointed out.

Kurenai sighed, and nodded. "I know why Mei wants to see Naruto. She's going to tell him about a special mission he has to do during the invasion."

"A special mission? Is it dangerous?" Hinata asked, a bit worried.

Kurenai nodded once again. "Mei wants Naruto to help her take down the Mizukage in combat."

...

Later that day, the sun was starting to set. Mei had ordered everybody to go to sleep early, since they would attack before dawn, and she wanted every one of her troops to be as rested as possible. So far, the only people not resting were the night watchers, who wouldn't take part in the attack for obvious reasons.

After having so many meetings and planning the last details of the invasion, the Mizukage aspirant was beyond exhausted. Then again, she doubt she would be able to sleep, given that she had to face Yagura himself in combat. If she and Naruto failed, then the whole invasion would be for naught.

Going to her private tent, Mei noticed that there was somebody else awake besides the sentries. The captain of her swordsmen, Zabuza Momochi, was sitting on the grass, at the edge of their camp, sharpening most of his weapons. Mei walked towards him.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" the redhead asked.

Zabuza stopped sharpening his kunai, turned his head to shot Mei a brief glare, before returning to his job at hand.

"I could ask the same thing to you," Zabuza retorted.

"The burden of leadership," was Mei's answer, before she decided to elaborate. "I had to give the plan the last touches before we're good to go. I was going to get some sleep, but then I saw you here. You know, you're one of my strongest soldiers, and I want you to be in your top condition for tomorrow."

"I'll go to sleep when I feel I have to. I don't know the rest of your cronies, but I don't sleep on being ordered," Zabuza replied.

Mei raised an eyebrow, before she sat down beside him. "Your attitude is not something I approve. But your performance so far has met my expectations, so I think I'm going to let this insubordination slip."

Zabuza grumbled something inaudible, and continued sharpening his weapons. He then stopped upon noticing that Mei was still there, sitting beside him. Their eyes met, and Mei shot him a friendly smile that left him completely unnerved.

"Well? Aren't you going to sleep?" an annoyed Zabuza asked.

"I was, but I realized that we didn't have a chance to be acquainted with each other a bit better, and this is a good chance, don't you think so?" Mei asked, in the same friendly tone.

"I agreed to fight for you and the rest of your naïve, goody-two shoes followers, not to befriend you. So scram," Zabuza grumbled.

"Now, now, that's not a way to talk to your superior," Mei replied, using a tone a mother would employ on a misbehaving child. "And naïve goody two-shoes? Seriously?"

"I'm telling things the way they are. You are a fool if you ever think that you and your merry friends will change anything," Zabuza replied.

"So far, we've been doing pretty good. What, you think Yagura and his forces are too much for us?" Mei asked.

"You're not fighting a war against Yagura, but against reality itself. This world is a cold and merciless place, where only the strong survive. Trying to pretend otherwise is to delude yourself," Zabuza said.

Mei frowned a little. "Now I want to think is the Blood Mist that's actually talking, and not you. I know that deep down, you aren't like that."

"Even if you read my profile in the bingo book, you know much less about me than what you think, woman," Zabuza harshly replied.

"I know you better than you give me credit for, Zabuza-kun," Mei said as she shot him one of her irritating smiles. "I'm not that much younger than you, we probably went through the same things. What I do know, though, is that beneath all your talk about the world being nothing but misery and death, and the only way to survive is being the top predator, there's a man that cares."

"You really think those Konoha tree huggers tainted me that much? That's insulting," Zabuza spat.

Mei chuckled, and shook her head. "No, I think that Konoha merely brought out your true self. For example, I know how you rescued and

took care of that boy of the Yuki clan. An unempathic killer would have never done that."

"I only took Haku under my wing because of his unique abilities, not because I cared about his wellbeing. Do you have any idea how many other orphans I crossed paths with?" Zabuza retorted.

"Many, I'm sure. But even if your reasons to take Haku were selfish, it doesn't take a genius to see that the years you spend together, both traveling and in Konoha, you developed a bond with the boy, not unlike how a father would see his son," Mei countered.

"That's the biggest..." Zabuza tried to reply, but stopped. He wanted to say that Haku meant nothing to him, other than an useful underling. But for some reason, he couldn't. A battle of conflicting feelings started to take place inside of him, not for the first time.

Zabuza's pride wanted him to admit that no, there was no kind of emotional attachment to the boy. He didn't want to be seen as a softie. But there was another part of him that tried to refute that, and wanted him to admit that yes, he did love Haku as if he was his son. His inner battle continued as he remained silent, something Mei took little time to notice.

The redhead kunoichi's smile widened. "Did I hit a nerve, Zabuza-kun? Thought so. I know your parents were monsters, and raised you to be one. You were weak, and they despised weakness. That's why you did such a number on the Academy, and swore to never be weak again. But here's a little thing that will give you some much needed perspective: love isn't a weakness. Love is a source of strength, the biggest of them all. Because when you fight to protect somebody you care for, you're able to tap into a strength greater than any Bloodline Limit."

"Oh Kami, not you too..." the masked man groaned.

"Why do you think I have so many followers? Because I'm strong? Well yes, I'd lie if I said my power played no part in helping me lead

the rebellion," Mei admitted. "But it only played a part. People don't want to live in a world of blood and fear, and will follow anybody that promises them something better. I like to think it's my conviction that plays the biggest role in making me a good leader. The fact that my ninja know that I'd die for any of them just like any of them would die for me."

Zabuza glared at her in disgust. "You sound exactly like those tree huggers. If Kiri under you is going to be like that, I might as well commit seppuku and save me the suffering."

Mei let out a laugh at Zabuza's statement. "Oh Zabuza-kun, you're so melodramatic, it's hilarious."

Zabuza narrowed his eyes at her. "Don't dare mock me."

"Then don't make it so easy," Mei replied with a shrug. "But seriously, it's quite obvious that there's something that's upsetting you. Something about Haku, I might add. So you'd better sort that out before the battle begins."

Zabuza inwardly sighed in relief when the rebel leader got up and walked to her private tent. However, rather than bring him relief, he felt even more uneasy than before. He wanted to shake off Mei's words about he and Haku, but found himself unable to.

"Haku... what I'm going to do with you?"

...

When Mei returned to her private tent, she saw that there was somebody in front of it, presumably waiting for her: Kurenai Yuhi. She clearly wanted to talk with her, probably about Naruto, and she was really not in the mood.

"Hello, Mei-san. I know it's late, but there's something I wish to talk with you," Kurenai told her.

Mei let out a weary sigh. "Listen, I know you're worried for Naruto, but you must understand-"

"You didn't even let me begin! And that wasn't what I wanted to talk about!" Kurenai protested, silencing the rebel leader. "Though yes, it's about Naruto. Here, take this."

Kurenai handed Mei something. Mei saw they were several sealing tags she was unable to identify.

"What is this?" Mei asked the red eyed Jonin.

"If you plan to have Naruto fight Yagura, he will more than likely be forced to use the Nine Tails' chakra. However, Naruto's control over the beast's power is very limited, and the demon may take control over him. That's why Hokage-sama created those tags. If such thing happens, slap one of them on him, and they will suppress the Nine Tails' chakra."

Mei studied the sealing tags in her hand, before nodding. "Got it. I wished you told me about it earlier, but thanks. I'll keep what you told me in mind."

"You should also know that the tags aren't infallible. If Naruto has more than four tails' worth of chakra, they won't work, so use them the moment he starts losing control," Kurenai told her.

"Again, thanks a lot for this. But now we should both go to sleep. Tomorrow we will have to face a daunting task."

...

Akatsuki Hideout, Unknown Location

Inside a dark, underground cavernous chamber there was a massive, grotesque statue, composed by a huge head with nine closed eyes and wide open mouth, and two arms separated from it. On each fingertip there was a shadowy figure, distorted and

translucid, almost as if it was actually an spectral avatar rather than an actual person.

Floating in front of the statue was a large man in a red clad armor. There was a red colored stream of energy coming from the man's mouth and flowing into the statue's, as if it was draining the man's very soul. And even if it wasn't the case, the man would be dead once the process was complete, which happened in a few minutes.

The flow of energy ceased, and the man's lifeless body fell to the ground. Then, one of the statue's closed eyes opened.

"The first Tailed Beast has been successfully extracted and sealed into the statue," the leader of the group said. "But this is nothing but the beginning. There are eight other Jinchuriki that need to be captured and their Beasts harvested."

"Regarding that, we have news that might be of interest," Zetsu's white half interceded. "The Kirigakure rebels are going to invade the village. It's more than likely that they will try to kill Yagura."

"If that's the case, then we need to evacuate him as soon as possible. We can't afford letting any jinchuriki die," the leader replied.

"Kirigakure, you say? I volunteer to go, then. It will be nice see how my former village is doing," a tall man with a sharp grin mentioned.

"You know Kirigakure the best out of us, Kisame, so I find your request acceptable," the leader then looked at a feminine looking man whose hair was styled in a ponytail. "Deidara, you'll accompany him for this mission. Your air support will be necessary for this mission to succeed."

"Alright then. It would be a great chance to show my art to those Mist whackos," Deidara replied, grinning widely.

"If nobody has anything else to say, then the meeting is over. We will gather again once the Jinchuriki of the Three Tails is safe and secure

within our grasp," the leader declared.

Then, all ten figures vanished, and the statue disappeared in a puff of smoke.

OMAKE #1: ZABUZA'S NOT A VERY NICE GUEST

After successfully bringing Tazuna to his home in the Land of the Waves, Zabuza was now staying at the bridge builder's house, since his job wouldn't be done until the bridge was finished and completed.

"Thank you for protecting my father, Zabuza-san," Tsunami said, as she placed a cup of tea in front of the swordsman. "You're helping this country immensely."

Zabuza snorted, as he lowered his mask to drink the tea. "Don't thank me. This is just a job, and I'll make sure it's finished."

"Yeah, sure. All will you make is getting all of us killed," a new, high pitched voice whined.

Zabuza turned around, and saw a kid, no older than ten, glaring at him with his arms crossed.

"The hell did you say, brat?" Zabuza snarled at the boy.

"Inari! Don't be so rude to Zabuza-san! He's going to protect all of us!" Tsunami chided the kid. "I'm sorry Zabuza-san, this whole situation affected my son way too much, and he doesn't feel that good..."

"Why are you even trying? Nobody can oppose Gato! Everybody who does ends up dead!" Inari insisted once again. "Not only you will die, but you will get all of us killed too!"

Suddenly, the entire room was flooded by a vicious killing intent. It was mostly focused on Inari, but it was so intense, Tazuna and Tsunami could feel it as well. Inari felt an oppressive force gripping his heart, as he was invaded by a sense of dread unlike any other. Clutching his chest, he looked at Zabuza, who stared back at him with bloodshot eyes. For some reason, there was an aura around the swordsman that made him look inhuman, demonic even.

"Tell me, brat," Zabuza's voice sounded like he was death itself.
"DO YOU THINK GATO IS WORSE THAN I AM!?"

"Ah... ahh... WAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" Inari couldn't take it anymore, and ran upstairs while crying loudly, as tears of pure terror streamed down his cheeks.

Zabuza dispelled the killing intent, and went to drink from his cup of tea. "Your tea is excellent, Tsunami-san. Might I have another cup?" Zabuza asked, while he realized the way Tazuna and Tsunami were glaring at him. "What? What did I do?"

OMAKE #2: MEI AND KURENAI'S MEETING - ALTERNATE ENDING

"Hello, Mei-san. I know it's late, but there's something I wish to talk with you," Kurenai told her.

Mei let out a weary sigh. "Listen, I know you're worried for Naruto, but you must understand-"

"You didn't even let me begin! And that wasn't what I wanted to talk about!" Kurenai protested, silencing the rebel leader. She then looked away, and blushed a little. "There's something I need to take out of my chest. Listen, Mei-san... I like you. I like you a lot."

The rebel leader was taken aback. "You what?"

"There, I said it. Sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, but I couldn't take it anymore..." Kurenai said as she started to leave.

"Kurenai, wait!" Mei said, grabbing her hand. "The truth is... I like you too!"

"Seriously?" Kurenai asked.

"I thought I was only into men, but seeing such a radiant beauty as yourself, who's also a magnificent kunoichi... I feel that we're bound to be together."

"Oh, Mei-chan!" Kurenai squealed, as the two women embraced and shared a kiss in their lips.

Giggling, Mei grabbed Kurenai's hand, and the two of them headed towards the former's private tent, where they spend the night exploring each other's body, and opening themselves to a new world of beautiful feelings of carnal pleasure unlike any others...

...

"... that would only be the beginning of their road together," Jiraiya said, finishing writing the scene. Putting down the pencil, he looked at his latest work, and smiled. "Boy, I outdid myself with this one. *Icha Icha Civil War* will sell like crazy!" Jiraiya then frowned as he reread the scenes leading to that moment. "... I should better change Mei and Kurenai's names. I have the feeling that being Hokage won't deter them from trying to make me horrible things if they find out what I wrote about them..." the Sannin decided, as he erased the Kunoichi's names and replaced them with something else.

Author's Note: Yeah, I know, it was a slow chapter, but the story needed a moment of calmness between the assault on the Crimson Citadel, and the invasion of Kirigakure. Which will begin the next chapter, and I'm confident it will be epic. And

don't worry, we're now on the home stretch of this arc, since I know some readers aren't enjoying this arc as much as past ones. Besides, the best of this arc is yet to come ;)

Boy, I really like writing scenes with Zabuza and Mei together. They have a lot of chemistry and bounce off each other pretty well, don't you think so? Too bad I can't write their impending relationship in more depth without bringing the story's pace to a screeching halt. Thankfully this arc won't be the last time these two will appear.

And yeah, Tenten isn't breaking up with Haku even if that means moving to Kiri. I'm going to say this now: once a couple forms, it's here to stay, so no, there aren't going to be any breakups. I don't want romantic drama to overshadow the mostly adventure-oriented plot of this fanfic.

As for the omakes, the first is canon. The second one... perhaps? XD

Onto the first omake, well, everybody knows how much I dislike the Wave Arc, not because of the arc itself, but how often it's copy-pasted into fanfics. And from that arc, Inari is the character I like the least, and I don't think my sanity can withstand seeing him being a little bitch for the billionth time. So yeah, I'd found funny the idea of Inari doing his little pessimistic speech to somebody like Zabuza, which, well, didn't end as he expected XD

Thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

Anyway, the ending of the Kirigakure Civil War arc is even closer now, and Akatsuki joins the fray, with Deidara and Kisame (remember that I said all seven swords would be featured in this arc) chosen to capture Yagura, and Naruto if they see him. How will the invasion end? Find out in two weeks. In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Invasion of Kirigakure, Part I

Author's Note: So, after much buildup, here we are. The invasion of Kirigakure is about to begin! Both this and the next part are two of the most action filled chapters I've written so far. I hope you enjoy them:

Chapter 48:

The Invasion of Kirigakure, Part I

or

Clash of the Seven Swordsmen

After many preparations, today was it. The day the rebels would march over Kirigakure and liberate it from its bloodthirsty and more than likely manipulated Kage. While the morale was high, most of them were rather nervous. Assaulting a Great Village would fall under what was considered major warfare. The battle wouldn't be easy.

As they approached, the mist became more and more dense. The Kiri ninja explained to their Konoha allies that they kept a permanent mist barrier surrounding the village for defensive purposes. But while said mist would hinder Konoha ninja, it would do little to stop other Kiri ninja. And after some time walking, they could see the village gates through the mist. Mei, heading the march, stopped and held one hand, and the rebel army stopped as well.

"Bring me our siege specialist," Mei commanded one of her ANBU.

The masked ninja nodded and vanished. A minute later, he reappeared alongside Sasuke Uchiha.

"There's the gate, Sasuke-kun. You think you can take it down on your own?" Mei asked, a bit skeptical.

Sasuke glared at the rebel leader, his Sharingan flaring to life. "Don't underestimate the Uchiha Clan."

Sasuke took a few steps forward, and got ready. He started to gather his chakra, as his normal Sharingan morphed into the Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan, and flinched when he was forced to relive the time he believed he had killed Naruto. Even if he knew the loudmouth blond was alive, the anguish felt very real.

He started to glow with a purple aura, as a purple, ghostly ribcage appeared around him. More bones started appearing as it formed the upper half of a giant humanoid skeleton, which was then covered in flesh, and then an armor. The chakra construct raised its left arm, and a bow was generated on its wrist. Pulling the string with the other arm, a huge arrow covered in black flames was generated.

"Infernal Release: Susanoo Black Fire Bolt!"

Sasuke released the arrow, which pierced the gate with such force it tore it off of its hinges, leaving a wide entrance for the rebels to get into the city.

His job done, Sasuke dispelled the chakra construct and fell on his knees, panting heavily. His teammates quickly rushed to check him.

"Sasuke-kun, are you okay?" Shizune asked. "Do you need healing?"

Sasuke shook his head and got back on his feet again. "No, I'm okay. Using Susanoo is very taxing, but I will be fine in a couple minutes."

"Even then, try to take it easy," Shizune advised.

After seeing Sasuke's attack, Mei was a bit stunned at such display of power. "Wow, and here I thought he was exaggerating. Worth every ryo indeed." She then turned to her troops. "The gates are down! Everybody move out! Kirigakure is ours for the taking! Today, the world will see the end of the Blood Mist!" she yelled as she charged forwards.

Her words were replied by a loud chorus of war cries as the rest of the rebels rushed into the village behind their leader

Meanwhile, as the bulk of the army rushed into the city, two lone figures hidden nearby cautiously watched.

"So, how long until they notice that's a clone?" Naruto asked his partner.

As opposed to her usual elegant blue dress, the Mizukage candidate was wearing the Kirigakure ANBU uniform, with a happuri-shaped Kirigakure forehead protector instead of a white and red mask, but with the standard sword, even if Mei's skill with such weapon was less than zero. Her extremely long hair was now tied into a more manageable braid that fell down her back.

"My Earth Clones are very durable, can last days if undamaged, and can even use some jutsu of moderate intensity. How about you, are you ready?" Mei asked.

Before taking one last glance at the two clones sitting in the lotus position, Naruto gave Mei a thumbs up as well as a confident grin.

"Shouldn't you activate your Sage Mode already? Remember that we're going to face a Kage who happens to be a perfect Jinchuriki," Mei reminded him.

"But... Sage Mode is active!" Naruto told her.

Mei raised an eyebrow. "That's it? Some yellow eyes and orange eye-shadow? When you told me about it you made it sounded far

more impressive."

"It might not look much on the outside now, but once you see what can I do in Sage Mode, you'll change your mind," Naruto told her.

"I'll take your word for it. Now come on, let's see if we can get into the Mizukage's Palace without drawing much attention," Mei replied as she and Naruto sneaked into the village.

...

Mizukage's Palace

Oblivious to the chaos that was about to be unleashed on his village, Yagura was in his office, doing the paperwork his job usually entailed. He thought it would be a day like any other, when the doors of his office were burst open. A kunoichi with short blond hair entered the room, flanked by two ANBU. She looked rather shaken.

"Yagura, the rebels are here! They took down the gates as if they were nothing, and are pouring into the village!" the woman almost screamed.

Yagura calmly stopped doing paperwork, got up from his chair, and fixed a stare on the woman. "Calm down, Aiko-chan. You're a ninja, please behave like one. When did the attack happen?"

"About five minutes ago. What are your orders?" she asked, still visibly restless.

Yagura let out a sigh. "So, Mei finally made her move. She came sooner than I expected. Tell me, Aiko-chan, was she spotted among the invaders?"

"Yes, she was spearheading them. What about it?" Aiko replied.

"Then this attack is just a distraction. According to the messages we got from the Crimson Citadel, they managed to break in by sending a team of infiltrators in order to open the dock gates. I believe she will

try the same trick. Send half our forces to meet them, and send reinforcements to the dock. I wouldn't discard infiltrators working to neutralize the defenses of our docks as we speak," Yagura told her.

Aiko appeared a bit more calmed now, though she was still uneasy. "What if the rebels won't attack the docks?"

"Then moving our troops from the docks to wherever they're needed won't be hard. It's a small village after all. Just in case, I'll activate the Chakra Golems. But truth be told, the fight for the village is worthless," Yagura cryptically said.

"What do you mean?" Aiko replied.

"Mei will use the ongoing battle as a cover to sneak a team of assassins into the palace and murder me. Knowing her, she'll lead the group herself. All we have to do is wait for her here, and kill her. With their leader dead, the rebellion will be easy to dismantle," Yagura explained.

"Sounds risky, but looks like our best bet. But first, I need to make sure Dagura is safe," Aiko replied.

"Do not worry for our son. The rebels aren't after him. Besides, he's also a ninja. The battleground is where he needs to be," Yagura chided his wife.

Aiko bit her lip. "But... okay, yes, you're right."

"Besides, I'm going to need you here when that redheaded whore and her assassins arrive," Yagura told her.

...

The initial onslaught managed to push the first wave of Kirigakure defenders with relative ease. However, as it happened during the assault on the Crimson Citadel, the moment the rebel forces started

to spread out, their advance was considerably slowed down as the ensuing battles became more even for both sides.

Zabuza had asked Mei to be assigned to the same group as Haku, so the two of them could fight this battle together.

"Here I am, again, trying to take over Kirigakure, even if I won't be the next Mizukage if we succeed," Zabuza thought, as he brutally fought the opposition. "Though even then, I'll be closer to being Mizukage than I've ever been. Plus this time, it seems that I will be on the winning side!"

Haku was not only fighting for the man who had given him a second chance at life, but for himself as well. It was thanks to Kirigakure and Yagura that he lost his family, and people with Bloodline Limits were seen in the Land of Water as monsters to hunt down. Besides helping Zabuza achieve his ambitions, he was also making sure no other child like him would have to go through the same thing he did.

"Ice Release: Ice Dragon Crystal Blast!"

Haku conjured a dragon made of ice from his hands, which flew towards a cluster of red clad Kirigakure ninja, dashing towards them. The dragon crashed against the group, shattering in a multitude of razor sharp ice shards that flew in all directions.

"They have an Ice Release User! I thought all of them were killed!" A Kirigakure defender shouted in disbelief.

"Not all of them, obviously. Anyway, let's finish the job ourselves!" another ninja replied.

"Yes, I'm the last of the Yuki clan. But you're truly foolish if you believe that my clan will disappear today," Haku coldly replied as he made several hand seals. "Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!"

This time, Haku made a rather large spear made of ice, which flew at the group of ninjas. However, this time he wouldn't catch them off

guard, since one of them was making hand seals.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

The Kiri defender slammed his palms into the ground, raising a thick stone wall that blocked the ice jutsu.

"They can use Earth Release, which can counter my jutsu," Haku said to nobody in particular. He then looked at Hinata, who was dispatching another Kiri ninja. "Hinata-san, think you can crack that wall?"

After she was done, Hinata looked back at Haku and smiled. "Leave that to me." The young Hyuga's hands flew through hand seals, before casting both hands forward.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Fang!"

Hinata's hands crackled with electricity as she released a mass of lightning from them. The shapeless mass soon took the form of a giant lion head. The lightning lion opened its mouth, letting out a metallic sounding roar before crashing against the wall, blowing it up to pieces.

Taking advantage of the opening, Zabuza dashed towards the cluster of enemies and started to engage them all at once. Despite the numerical advantage, they were having a hard time keeping up with the Demon of the Hidden Mist.

"The hell? Zabuza's back!" a Kiri ninja shouted.

"Indeed I am. I came here to finish what I started so many years ago. Now you can do the smart thing and run with your lives, or die pointlessly against me. I personally find the second option more amusing," Zabuza coolly told them.

"You traitorous bastard! You don't deserve that-" a Kiri ninja was about to say, but he was interrupted when something happened.

Suddenly, circular sealing patterns started to appear across the village. The rebels have already seen this once, they knew what was going to happen.

"Everybody, get ready! Here they come!" Kurenai shouted.

And as expected, after a brief burst of smoke, large Chakra Golems were summoned by the sealing patterns. The machines instantly activated with a metallic hum, and they quickly began to search for the invaders and end their lives.

"These golems are probably bound to the Mizukage. Hopefully Naruto and Mei will finish their mission before we suffer too many losses," Kurenai hoped as she prepared to fight an incoming golem.

...

Not far from there, Naruto and Mei were moving through the village as silently as possible. Naruto felt the need to join his fellow Konoha ninja in the battlefield, especially those who were having a hard time against the golems, but in deep down he knew doing so would endanger more lives than it would save them.

"How long until we reach the palace?" an impatient Naruto asked.

"I think we're halfway there. If we keep this pace, it shouldn't take us more than half an hour to get there." Mei replied.

"I see. In that case-" Naruto then stopped and perked up. "I think somebody saw us. I'm sensing a group of four ninja getting closer. All of them Jonin level."

Mei raised an eyebrow. "You didn't tell me you were also a sensor."

"Normally I'm not, but Sage Mode also gives its user sensing abilities," Naruto explained. "Should we hide?"

"No. They know we're here. Better take them out now than let them warn Yagura that we're going after him," Mei replied. Then again,

she knew Yagura would be expecting her and would prepare accordingly.

"And here they come."

And just like Naruto said, four red-clad ninja landed in front of them and unsheathed their katanas at once. Judging by their uniforms and older faces, it was easy to tell they were Jonin even if Naruto wasn't there to gauge their power.

"Mei Terumi. What's a pretty traitor like you doing here, accompanied by a Konoha child?" one of the Jonin asked, a tall muscular man with short brown hair.

"Yagura said he wanted you alive," another one said, this one being slimmer, with black hair tied in a slipknot. "But he also said that he'll understand if you have to die."

"Which means we don't have to hold back!" a third one, a burly man with a large nose and a soul patch, said in delight as he charged towards the duo. "DIE!"

Naruto met the man's charge with one of his own, and sank his fist on the man's gut, much to his disbelief.

"H-How...?" he babbled.

Naruto smirked, and delivered a punch with his other arm, sending the Kiri ninja flying into the horizon, much to everybody's amazement.

"Kyoko!" the black haired Kiri ninja cried.

"How... how that kid was able to do that? Such strength..." the fourth ninja, a younger man with light blue hair stammered.

"Snap out of it, you cowards!" the muscular man yelled, as he made hand seals. "And don't let your guard down! Earth Release: Mountain Hammer!"

The muscular ninja pulled out a gigantic hammer made of stone from the ground and swung it at Naruto from above. The blond Sage merely raised a hand, which was enough to block the strike. The hammer's wielder was left speechless.

"Impossible!"

"Sorry, that word isn't in my vocabulary," Naruto casually said as he snatched the hammer from his hands and swung it at the muscular ninja, sending him flying against a building.

"That boy's too strong! Fall back!"

The other two ninja attempted to flee, but they found that Mei was cutting their escape.

"Aw, you don't plan to leave without letting me have my share of fun, right?" Mei cooed as she made several hand seals. "Water Release: All Devouring Maelstrom!"

The two remaining Kiri ninja found themselves inside a violent water tornado which sent them flying in different directions.

"Good job," Naruto told her.

"You too. You were right, Sage Mode is way more impressive than it looks at first glance," Mei admitted.

Naruto couldn't help but smirk. "Trust me, you haven't seen anything yet."

"In that case, we better get going. I'd hate to keep Yagura waiting," Mei replied.

Naruto nodded, and the two of them headed towards the now visible Mizukage Palace.

...

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Shikamaru's shadow successfully trapped two Chakra Golems, freezing them on the spot. But the mechanical monsters' strength put a strain on the Nara, who struggled to keep them contained.

"Come on Choji! It won't last much longer!" Shikamaru urged.

Choji rushed towards the golems, and clapped his hands together.
"Partial Multi Size Jutsu!"

Choji's arms swelled up, tripling in size. The Akimichi Clan heir smashed one of the trapped golems with a powerful punch before smashing the remaining one to bits. Shikamaru was allowed to cancel his family's signature jutsu and fell on his butt, panting.

"I don't think I'll be able to do that too many times..." the lazy Nara complained.

"Shikamaru, watch out!" Ino called out.

Suddenly, two Kiri ANBU were leaping at Shikamaru, their katanas unsheathed. The Nara quickly got up and pulled out two kunai in a hopeless attempt to parry the two incoming strikes, but fortunately for him, something else took care of that.

In less than a second, a redheaded woman stood between him and his attackers, parrying their blows with her own swords, resulting in a loud CLANG. The woman, Ameyuri, struggled against the attackers in a double blade lock.

"Goddammit Pineapple Head, get your head out of the clouds!" Ameyuri complained, before the two red clad Kiri ninja overwhelmed her and pushed her back.

"Troublesome woman. I'd like to see you trying to take on those golems..." Shikamaru murmured.

"More enemies incoming!" Ino warned.

And true to her words, a batch of Kiri defenders arrived the scene. Some unsheathed their swords, while others made several hand seals.

"We'll take care of them. Shikamaru, Choji, with me!" Asuma said as he started to make hand seals of his own. "Fire Release: Ash Pile Burning!"

The youngest son of the Third Hokage spewed a cloud of gunpowder from his mouth, while Shikamaru and Choji prepared another jutsu.

"Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!"

Both Shikamaru and Choji expelled a large stream of flames from their mouth directly into the cloud of gunpowder, igniting it instantly, resulting in a massive explosion that shielded them from the barrage of water jutsu aimed at them.

"Good work, but we need to-URK!"

Suddenly, what appeared to be a gigantic needle with ninja wire attached to it came out of the ensuing cloud of smoke, impaling Asuma through the shoulder. Somebody pulled the wire backwards, making the sword to fly back as well. An extremely tall and lanky man wearing an ANBU mask flew out of the cloud, caught the sword-needle and fast as lightning, wrapped Asuma in ninja wire, leaving him completely immobilized.

"Asuma-sensei!" Shikamaru cried.

"You must have a death wish coming here," the masked man said in a cold tone as he raised his strange weapon above Asuma. "Let me grant you that wish then!"

However, before he had the chance to kill he Tactical Squad's sensei, a pair of spinning swords coated in electricity flew at him.

"Shit!" the man cursed as he jumped back in order to avoid the swords, thus being forced to release Asuma.

Upon missing their mark, the swords returned to Ameyuri's hands.

"Leave that man alone, Kushimaru. It's me whom you have to fight," Ameyuri declared, as she took a step forward.

"You know him?" Ino asked.

Ameyuri nodded. "Kushimaru Kuriare. ANBU Captain, and one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. The two remaining ones still loyal to Yagura."

"So that giant needle is one of the Seven Swords then?" Ino asked again.

"It might not look like much, but in the hands of an expert, it's a deadly weapon. And I'm afraid Kushimaru more than qualifies as an 'expert'," Ameyuri explained.

"Yeah, you got that right. And if you think I'm going to lower myself into a duel with you, then you're even crazier than your traitorous friends! Just because you have Raiga's swords doesn't mean you're part of the Seven, little girl!" Kushimaru retorted.

Ameyuri's face contorted with rage. "Little girl!? I'm eighteen, you asshole! That's it, you're going down!"

"I have no time to deal with brats with delusions of grandeur! Everybody, kill that girl, and take back the swords!" Kushimaru ordered his men.

A chorus of "yes, sir!" replied to the masked swordsman's order.

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"Medic!" an injured Kiri rebel cried in anguish.

"Incoming! Sasuke-kun, cover us!" Sakura called.

"You've got it," Sasuke coolly replied as his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke poured as much chakra as he could into the attack, and expelled a massive fireball towards the group of red clad Kiri ninja. Unfortunately, a golem blocked the attack, and absorbed it into its body.

"Those walking pieces of scrap are going to be trouble..." Sasuke grumbled.

"Not so boastful anymore, I see," Suigetsu chuckled, as he casually engaged an enemy ninja.

"Those things are hard to take down. And I didn't see you defeat one either," Sasuke snapped back. "Sakura would be able to bring them down in one punch, but she's busy tending the injured."

"Sakura's not the only one able to do that!" Karin protested, as she rushed forward while making a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Five Karin clones popped into existence besides the original, and ran towards the golem in a tight formation. "I'd like to see Sakura doing this! Six Fists of Fury!"

Karin and her five clones leaped at a golem, their fists reared back, and wreathed in an intense, fire-like glow. The six punches connected, instantly shattering the mechanical construct. The original Karin wiped her hands, and her mouth curved into a confident grin, not unlike certain blond.

"Ha! What about-"

But Karin's gloats were interrupted by a chain of massive explosions engulfing her, that shook the ground and send burst of winds into every direction.

"KARIN!" multiple Konoha ninja cried, her teammates among the loudest.

But when the smoke dispelled, all what was left were the charred remains of a log.

"Whew, that was a close one! Better not get distracted like that," the real Karin said, panting heavily, as she walked towards Sasuke and Suigetsu. "Did you see where the explosions came from?"

"I'm almost sure they came from that guy," Suigetsu said, pointing out to the direction of the explosion.

Flanked by multiple red clad Kiri ninja, there was a man wearing a loose, pin striped light brown shirt, black pants and striped leg warmers. He had a brown beard tied into two braids, thick lips, and one of his eyes was covered by an eye patch. He was carrying a rather weird looking sword.

"Damn, it's been a while since somebody managed to avoid my explosion jutsu. Just for that, I'll make sure your death is extra painful, girl," the weird man threatened. He then looked at the white haired boy near her, and the one eyed man smiled wickedly. "Suigetsu! Wasn't expecting to see you again. Still in the losing side, as I can see."

"Who's this man?" Sasuke asked, as he cautiously eyed the new enemy. "A Swordsman of the Mist?"

"Yes, he's Jinpachi Munashi, wielder of the Splatter. His sword is also a scroll of self replicating explosive tags. With it, he can create an infinite number of explosions," Suigetsu explained, before he fixed his eyes on the swordsman, and snarled. "Shut your trap, Jinpachi! I am where I have to be."

"Really? Because somebody like you would fit better with us in the Blood Mist, than with that deluded woman. I mean, I can understand Zabuza siding with her being an even earlier traitor, but you? There's

nothing that you love most than the smell of blood impregnating the air," Jinin replied.

"And you think I'll join the side that killed my brother?" Suigetsu incredulously asked.

Jinpachi merely shrugged. "Hey, he got it coming. He thought that being the best Swordsman who ever lived gave him free reign to do what he pleased. We simply proved him wrong," Jinpachi then frowned. "And it seems that you're going to follow his footsteps to an early grave."

"You think so? Let's see who's going to who's funeral!" the young swordsman shouted as he charged forward.

"Suigetsu, wait!" Another Kiri ninja called, to no avail.

Jinpachi's smirk widened as he adopted a fighting stance. "Blastsword Ninja Art: Exploding Piledriver!"

Jinpachi slammed his sword into the ground, creating a line of explosions towards Suigetsu. The explosions caught the white haired boy, who was launched backwards before slamming back into the ground. Or at least, what was left of him.

"Oh Kami, that explosion liquefied him!" Karin screamed in a mix of horror and disgust.

"I'm... I'm not dead!" Suigetsu exclaimed as his head reformed from the liquid. The rest of his body started to reform as well. "It takes more than that to take me out!"

"Oh, I have more than that, trust me. Yet I know that the moment you lack the chakra to sustain your Hydrification Jutsu, you'll be as good as dead," Jinpachi laughed. Looking around, he noticed two Chakra Golems walking closer, and an idea formed on his mind. "In fact, let's test how strong is that ability. Golems, focus on Suigetsu!"

While they didn't make any kind of acknowledgement, the golems started to walk towards the white haired swordsman, now fully reformed, who instinctively took a couple steps backwards.

"Man, this ain't look good..." Suigetsu whimpered. The golems then raised their respective arms with wrist mounted cannons, and released two streams of fire at the Hozuki younger brother. "IT LOOKS WORSE THAN BAD!" Suigetsu yelled as he tried to avoid the streams of fire aimed at him.

Karin took a step forward, and made a hand seal.

"Adamatine Sealing Chains!"

Chains made of pure chakra shot from Karin's back, and wrapped themselves around one of the Golems, immobilizing it. The chakra absorbing seals started to flicker, but they did not activate.

"Whoa, it's not absorbing your jutsu? What gives?" Suigetsu asked.

"These chains are able to bind the chakra of those wrapped around them, even mechanical monsters like these ones!" Karin explained, as she struggled to keep the golem in check. "Now go and deal with the other!"

Suigetsu didn't have to be told twice, as the other mechanical construct stomped at him. It raised its arm cannon once again.

"Oh no, you won't!" Suigetsu raised an arm as well and a huge water sphere started to form. "Water Release: Water Missile!"

Suigetsu fired the water blast, which collided against the stream of fire, resulting in an explosion of steam. Before the golem had any time to react, Suigetsu was already leaping at it, his fist reared back.

"Take this, you walking piece of scrap! Water Release: Great Water Arm Jutsu!"

Suigetsu's right arm swelled up, becoming unnaturally large and muscular, and used it to deliver a devastating punch to the golem, which broke apart upon absorbing the impact. The golem done for, Suigetsu's arm returned to normal, and the boy started to pant heavily.

"Aw man, this is going to hurt a lot tomorrow," Suigetsu complained.

"Ew. That was so gross," Karin mentioned as she used her super strength to tear the golem to pieces with her chains.

Suigetsu looked at Karin and shot her a devious smirk. "Yeah, you say that, but deep down I know you only say it to mask how badly you want this body," Suigetsu said as he made a pose.

"I have a boyfriend!" Karin protested. "And stop being a creep, we have a battle to win, you moron!"

"Are all Konoha girls this bitchy, or just you?" Suigetsu asked as he shrugged.

While Karin and Suigetsu argued as they faced more enemy Kiri ninja, Sasuke decided to face Jinpachi, after identifying him as the bigger threat. Something Jinpachi himself took no time to notice.

"So, what's with you, pretty guy? Think you can take me on?" Jinpachi asked in a mocking tone.

Sasuke's Sharingan flared to life as he fixed a glare on the Kiri Swordsman. "It would be possible. It all depends on how much of your power comes from your sword, and how much comes from you."

"An Uchiha, I see," Jinpachi said, noticing the Sharingan. "I've always wanted to fight one of you, but your clan being wiped out made that rather improbable. Yet here you are! Fate seems to be smiling upon me today."

Sasuke frowned, as he tightly gripped the handle of his katana.
"Let's see if you think your fate favors you after you got to fight me."

"You seem to be pretty confident in your ability. Typical of your clan. That's why you guys thought you could pull a coup d'état in your village, yet look at what happened," Jinpachi replied in a mocking tone. "And trust me, the result is going to be the same here."

In the past, Sasuke would have let out a savage cry and mindlessly charge at the one eyed swordsman for bringing up such a sore and sensitive topic. But after the Chunin Exams incident, Shizune and Shisui pretty much forced him to learn how to keep his anger in check and not be carried away by it. So this time, Sasuke merely deepened his frown.

"Did I touch a nerve? Bohoohoo!" Jinpachi replied in a mock childish tone, before he smirked wickedly. "When I kill you, I'll gouge out your eyes. But I won't use them to replace my missing eye, or even sell them. No, I'll keep them in a jar, and will be displayed as a trophy. How does that sound?"

"You assume you can take my eyes!" Sasuke replied as he charged forward, tired of exchanging words with the bearded swordsman.
"Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Sasuke's blade was wreathed in flames. Jinpachi chuckled upon seeing it.

"Not bad. But nowhere near enough to help you," Jinpachi said as he prepared to attack. "Blastsword Ninja Art: Exploding Piledriver!"

Jinpachi slammed his sword forward, creating a line of explosions. Sasuke already guessed he would do that, given it was what he did when Suigetsu charged at him. However, Sasuke was ready, and used a couple of Body Flickers to dodge the line of explosions, and appeared behind him. He had noticed that, while powerful, Jinpachi was vulnerable the seconds after he attacked, and that's when Sasuke would deliver the killing blow.

"Got you!" Sasuke thought as he sunk his fire sword into Jinpachi's unprotected back. However, Jinpachi then did something that Sasuke wasn't expecting.

He exploded.

His Sharingan noticed less than a second before his body detonated what was going to happen, which allowed him to reinforce his whole body with chakra in order to survive the explosion, but even then, the explosion did a lot of damage, as he was violently flung against a wall.

"Didn't your Sharigan catch that, pretty boy?" Jinpachi asked in the same mocking tone, as he was standing in the roof of a nearby one story house. "You've been fighting an Exploding Clone all this time. As you can see, my mastery of explosives goes beyond the Splatter. Now let's end this already. Blastword Ninja Art: Bombardment Wave! "

Jinpachi delivered a wide swing, releasing a multitude of explosive notes at Sasuke, which flew at him at a much faster speed than they should despite being made of paper. The Uchiha wasted no time and made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke expelled a multitude of fireballs, that he directed towards the incoming explosive notes. The two attacks collided, creating a multitude of explosions, which resulted in a rather large cloud of smoke forming between the two.

"Not bad, Uchiha, not bad. But once again, not good enough!" Jinpachi chuckled behind the wall of smoke.

"I'm getting tired of his explosions..." Sasuke grumbled, as he thought of a way to counter them. He was tempted to activate his Burning Man, but realized that being covered in fire when fighting a guy that uses explosions wasn't the most sound of strategies. He

also refused to use the Mangekyo Sharingan a second time. Not just because of the mental and physical strain, but just like Itachi had challenged him, he wanted to see how far he could go before he was forced to rely on such a power.

"No time to sleep!" Jinchichi yelled as he jumped out of the cloud of smoke. He swung his sword once again. "Blastsword Ninja Art: Blasting Bridle Repeating Death!"

The explosive scroll unraveled, and surrounded Sasuke in a wide area around him, cutting off any escape route. He doubted he could activate Susanoo in time in order to avoid an untimely end.

"Now die already!"

However, before the chain of explosions could reduce him to ashes, Sasuke felt a familiar chain wrapping around his body and pulling him up, saving him from the ring of explosions. When his feet touched the floor again, he was in a roof of a nearby building, surrounded by his team, and a bunch of Kiri ninja.

"Good one, Karin. That was a close one," Shizune complimented the redhead.

"Sasuke-kun, are you okay?" Sakura asked and started to heal Sasuke before he could reply.

"You thought you could take Jinchichi on? You crazy bastard..." Suigetsu chuckled, shaking his head.

"Well, that's exactly what you tried to do not long ago!" Karin fired back on Sasuke's behalf. "So you're not the best one to talk."

"Regardless of that, Suigetsu isn't entirely wrong. Trying to fight a much experienced ninja without proper intel on his abilities was foolish, Sasuke-kun," Shizune stated in a mildly chastising tone.

"I know..." Sasuke begrudgingly admitted.

"Then again, you must have learned something about that guy, right?" Sakura inquired.

"He has a sword that can produce infinite explosive tags that he can use in a variety of ways. However, his power isn't limited to that sword either, as it has several explosive jutsu of his own," Sasuke explained. "While his offensive power is formidable, I find his defenses lacking, since he's left wide open whenever he attacks. I tried to exploit that, but I was unsuccessful."

"Maybe not on your own, but together we can bring that man down," Shizune told him. "Alright, listen everybody, this is the plan."

...

"Alright, this zone it's clear. We should move to the next," Kurenai stated, as she saw the few defenders left falling back.

"It's not!" Hinata quickly replied. "I'm seeing reinforcements coming this way!"

"Let them come, and I shall reward their bravery with a swift death," Zabuza said as he held his Executioner's Blade in front of his eyes.

"Any golems with them?" Kurenai asked.

Hinata shook her head. "Thankfully none."

"Good. This should make things a bit easier," Kurenai said, a bit relieved.

But that relief didn't last long when the defenders' reinforcements arrived, and the attackers found themselves once again outnumbered. Leading the group of regular ninja and ANBU, there was a young man with dull brown hair and, oddly enough, bright pink eyes.

"You managed to reach deep into our village, invaders, but you won't advance any further," the commander claimed in an almost theatrical

tone as he pulled out a pair of sais. "As long as I, Dagura Karatachi, son of the Fourth Mizukage, is here to stop you!"

Dagura's men cheered in unison at his short but inspiring boast.

"Attack!" he ordered.

"Everybody, meet them on! Send them to hell!" Zabuza ordered his own troops. "I'll take on his leader!"

Zabuza then felt a hand touching his shoulder. Turning around, he saw it was Haku.

"Actually, I'd wish if you let me fight Dagura-san, instead," Haku suggested.

"This is no time for games, Haku. Dagura is the Mizukage's son. If we capture him alive, we will have a valuable hostage that might help us make Yagura surrender," Zabuza explained.

"I know that, but this is something I need to do," Haku insisted. "Don't worry, I won't kill him. Besides, you trained me, Zabuza-sama. That should be enough."

Zabuza couldn't help but smirk under his mask. "Using my pride against me? That's low. And something I'd approve. Now go, but be careful. I'm sure that guy's a Jonin."

Haku smiled in return. "Don't worry, Zabuza-sama, everything will turn out fine."

The Ice Ninja headed towards the enemy commander, Yagura's son, who was fighting a random Kiri rebel. Haku made a couple of hand seals.

"Ice Release: Thousand Needles of Death!"

Haku formed multiple ice needles from the air's moisture, and flew at Dagura. The whistle they made as they move alerted the Mizukage's

son, who noticed the incoming attack, disengaged the opponent he was fighting, and expertly parried all the projectiles with his sais as he jumped back. Haku then jumped in front of him.

"Hello, Dagura-san. My name is Haku Yuki, and I will be your opponent," Haku said in an overly polite tone.

"I don't care who you are! You're just another rebel that needs to be put down!" Dagura replied as he made several hand seals. "Winged Nightmare Jutsu!"

Motioning his hands forward, Dagura released a massive flock of bats that flew at Haku, making disgusting chirping noises. Though the Ice Ninja was far from its only target, as the bats also attacked nearby Konoha and Kiri rebels.

Not letting the bats distract him, Haku prepared his counterattack. "Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

Haku unleashed a multitude of long and sharp ice spikes from his body, impaling most the bats -which poofed into tiny clouds of smoke- which were attacking him. This drew Dagura's attention.

"An Ice Release User. Interesting, I thought all of you had been wiped out," Dagura observed.

"I do get that a lot. Not to my pleasure, might I add," Haku replied. "And do you know why I'm the last of my kind?"

"Like I said before, I don't care," Dagura dismissed as he prepared to attack again.

"Too bad, because you're going to hear it anyway," Haku cut him off, as he continued talking. "Because of your father's policies and way to run Kirigakure. Thanks to the Blood Mist, ninjas are seen as little more than blood thirsty murderers and barbarians in the eyes of the citizens of the Land of Water, as well as the rest of the Elemental Nations."

"So what? We never cared what other villages think about us! Kirigakure was on its dead bed after the Third War, and my father renewed its strength!" Dagura replied.

"You should care, given that this invasion is a direct product of your barbaric practices," Haku replied. "And do you know what else was a direct product of your father's ruling? The Bloodline Purges. Ninja are heavily feared and distrusted among the common people, and those with Bloodline Limits even more. That's why my mother was killed by the same people she called friends and family, with me barely surviving."

"And you think that your family's loss was my father's fault somehow? Ha!" Dagura replied, making more hand seals again. "Soundwave Jutsu!"

"Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

Haku slammed his hands into the ground, erecting an ice wall between himself and his current enemy. While the sound waves shattered it, the jutsu used all of its power to take it down, leaving Haku unharmed.

"My family was far from the only one which was lost to the madness your father is perpetuating. That's why he needs to be removed from power, one way or another," Haku calmly said.

"Lies! All you want to do is depose my father so you can rule Kirigakure yourselves! And I'd die before seeing it in the control of traitors and their Konoha scum allies!" Dagura then cut the palm of his hand, and made several hand seals, before slamming them on the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

After the initial smoke explosion, Haku saw that Dagura was now riding a gigantic bat, almost as big as Sasuke's hawk summons.

"You shall not destroy what my family has fought so hard to build!" Dagura declared.

Haku let out a defeated sigh. "Guess there's no way to convince you of your wrong ways. In that case, I won't hold back anymore," Haku ominously said as he made a hand seal. Suddenly, a burst of icy winds came from his body, as he was surrounded by a blue and white aura that sparkled with the rays of sunlight. The ground around him started to freeze at a fast pace." Ice Release: Walking Winter!"

...

"Longsword Ninja Art: Wire Crucifixion!"

Kushimaru's tactic was a wicked one. He'd trap everybody with his jutsu involving the Sewing Needle and ninja wire, while his troops stopped anybody who attempted to cut the wire in order to release their allies.

"And the monster's leaving them alive, just to savor their suffering. He won't even give them an honorable death," Ameyuri thought in disgust. "Alright, time to end this nonsense! Thundersword Ninja Art: Eye of the Storm!"

Ameyuri crossed her swords in front of her face in an X, producing a white electric flash. The red headed kunoichi began to rapidly spin with her arms spread forward, turning into a deadly electrical spinning top. Several enemy ninja tried to stop her.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Multiple water projectiles flew at her. However, Ameyuri managed to dodge them without stopping her spinning. She was aware that she was left wide open when using that jutsu, that's why she developed a way to dodge attacks even if she was spinning. And while most enemies managed to avoid her deadly slashes, her true target, the ninja wire, did not. When several of the wires were cut, most of Kushimaru's victims were released.

"Bring some medics here, now!" Ameyuri ordered.

So far, Ino was one of the very few medics supporting that division, and right now, she was busy healing Asuma's shoulder wound.

"Are you feeling better, Asuma-sensei?" Ino asked, just as she finished healing the wound.

"Yes. I don't think the pain will go away completely for the time being, but I think I can fight," Asuma said as he stood up.

"We need to take out that swordsman. With their commander gone, dealing with the rest shouldn't be hard," Shikamaru suggested.

"Easier said than done. Any plan, Shikamaru?" Asuma hopefully asked.

Shikamaru shot his sensei a confident smirk.

Meanwhile, Ameyuri continued to fight Kushimaru. Or better said, Ameyuri fought off the red clad Kiri ninja who got in her way as she made her way to the tall, masked swordsman. Her already scant patience was reaching its limit.

"Stop throwing this rabble at me and face me in a duel, you coward!" Ameyuri angrily shouted as she dispatched an enemy Kiri Chunin.

"I might, given that you're starting to get on my nerves. Not to mention your daring to defile Raiga's swords," Kushimaru replied as he pierced a rebel with the Sewing Needle.

"Raiga's? These are MY swords! I earned them! And I'm way better than that fish lipped psycho obsessed with funerals!" Ameyuri protested.

Finally, Kushimaru ignored the rest of the Konoha and Kiri rebels, and focused his attention on Ameyuri.

"In that case, show me that you're worthy of them," Kushimaru taunted.

Ameyuri grinned in anticipation. "I'm more than happy to oblige," she said as she crossed her blades in an X. "Lightning Release: Lightning Fang!"

From the intersection of the crossed swords, several bolts of lightning flew towards the masked swordsmen, finding its mark. The electric blast produced an explosion, but when the smoke dispelled, all what was left was a charred log.

"Body Replacement? Dammit!" Ameyuri cursed as she looked around. "Enough of these tricks! Show yourself already!"

Suddenly, the Sewing Needle burst from underground below her, piercing her lower body.

"URK!" she choked, spitting blood, and forcing her to drop her swords. "Still, bad move," Ameyuri said as she made a hand seal, and her hands started to crackle with electricity.

"Like hell I'm going to let you!" Kushimaru said as he motioned his sword. "Longsword Secret Art: Wire Crucifixion!"

More ninja wire wrapped around Ameyuri's arms, forcing them apart, stopping her from making hand seals, and thus using ninjutsu. She struggled to break free, but the wire was wrapped really tight around her.

"See how easy it was to defeat you, pretender?" Kushimaru mocked, as he walked towards her. "Now, let's recover what belongs to our village."

"Human Bullet Tank!"

A huge shadow loomed over Kushimaru as he saw what appeared to be a gigantic red sphere falling towards him. However, he was fast enough to avoid being crushed to pulp. The human boulder wasn't done, as it rolled at the masked swordsman at high speed. He

tossed his sword at it, but much to his chagrin, it bounced back, forcing him to dodge the incoming bulldozing sphere as well.

While Kushimaru was busy, Asuma got closer to Ameyuri and cut the ninja wire trapping her.

"Are you okay?" Asuma asked as he helped the younger ninja stand up.

"I've been better," Ameyuri sourly replied.

"Don't worry, Ino will patch you up. But first, we need to deal with that guy," Asuma pointed out. "My students are on it. Let's make sure nobody else gets in the way of their fight."

"I admit that, from what I've seen, they're good, but are they good enough to take out a member of the Seven Swordsmen who's also a veteran of the Third Ninja War?" Ameyuri asked, not being able to repress a sense of shared pride with their enemy.

Asuma just smirked. "Wait and see."

Back to the battle, Choji had returned to his normal shape, and moved to attack the masked swordsman.

"Partial Multi-Size Jutsu!" Choji's arm grew in size once again, and clenching his fist, he tried to smash Kushimaru under it.

However, the tall ninja proved to be too nimble for such an imprecise attack, and easily dodged it.

"Too slow!" Kushimaru mocked. He jumped over the still enlarged arm, and ran towards Choji as he threw the Sewing Needle at him.

But much to his confusion, Choji smirked. He then enlarged his other arm, and used it to catch the flying sword. It graced his skin a little, but it was nothing major.

"Guys, I have it! I got his weapon! Go for it!" Choji happily said.

"You're so naïve, kid," Kushimaru said with a chuckle as he rushed towards Choji. He pulled the ninja wire still attached to the sword, but thanks to Choji's increased strength, he was unable to retrieve it. Choji in return pulled back with even greater force, launching Kushimaru forward... just like the swordsman wanted. He then used the momentum to spin around Choji, wrapping him in ninja wire, and forcing him to drop the Sewing Needle, which Kushimaru easily recovered. "What do you say now, kid?"

"Mind Body Disturbance Jutsu!"

Kushimaru jumped out of the way just as Ino casted one of her family's most used jutsu. The masked swordsman looked at Ino, still holding that ridiculous pose, and laughed.

"If it's not becoming clear by now, I fought your clans during the Third Ninja War. I know how to counter all of your jutsu," Kushimaru boasted. "Plus I'm older and more experienced. My instincts and senses can't be fooled."

"Counter this then! Shadow Imitation Jutsu!" Shikamaru said, as he once again used his family's signature ability.

Kushimaru just shook his head. "You know, some people would have some qualms about kill or even just seriously harm children. Unfortunately for you, I'm not one of them."

As the shadow came close to him, Kushimaru rushed towards the Nara Chunin, who constantly redirected the jutsu in an effort to catch him, but once again he proved to be too fast. When he was close enough, he prepared his sword to impale Shikamaru.

"Die!" he shouted as he threw his weapon as if it were a javelin. At that distance, the Nara wouldn't be able to dodge it.

Then, something unthinkable happened. A Kiri ninja jumped in the way, getting promptly impaled by the Sewing Needle. However, it

wasn't a rebel who tried to selflessly save Shikamaru's life, but one of the red-clan Kiri ninja fighting under Kushimaru's orders.

"What the hell are you doing, you idiot!?" Kushimaru bellowed.

"I... I don't know! My body moved on its own!" the poor impaled ninja cried, while coughing blood.

"Moved on its own? But how...?" Kushimaru wondered, and then remembered Ino's attack. "That blonde bitch! That jutsu wasn't aimed at me, but at one of my men!"

"That's correct. And now that you're that close to me, there's no way for you to escape my jutsu!" Shikamaru claimed, as he used the Shadow Imitation Jutsu once again.

"That's what you think!" Kushimaru said as he jumped backwards, pulling the ninja wire in order to retrieve the sewing needle. At that distance, he was sure he could avoid Shikamaru's jutsu. His keen senses would allow him to detect any kind of danger his eyes didn't see. "From this distance-!"

"I still caught you," Shikamaru flatly said.

"What!?" Kushimaru indignantly cried. Much to his shock, Shikamaru's shadow had touched his, and thus he was unable to move. "How? That's impossible!"

"The ninja wire your sword uses also projects a shadow, which I can use as a conductor for my jutsu," Shikamaru explained, as he shot the masked ninja a smug smile.

"You thought that just because you fought our parents, you already had us figured out, don't you?" Ino asked Kushimaru. "You should know that the new generation will always surpass the one that came before!"

"Hold him still!" Ameyuri called, as she held her swords up in the air, which started to crackle with electricity. "Thunder sword Ninja Art: Lightning Redirection!"

A lightning bolt fell from the skies, which was absorbed by Ameyuri's swords. She then motioned the Thunder swords in Kushimaru's direction, releasing all the stored electricity. The blast was powerful enough to end his life in a matter of seconds, and Kushimaru's lifeless, smoking body fell forward with a thud, releasing the Sewing Needle.

"We did it!" Choji cried in joy.

"Yay, go Tactical Squad!" Ino squealed, pumping her fist in the air.

"Don't celebrate it yet, brats! We might have taken out one of the commanders, but this battle is still far from over!" Ameyuri called out.

"Ameyuri-san is right. We need to continue pushing forward. And don't let your guard down," Asuma added.

The three Chunin nodded, and rejoined the rest of the rebel army in their onslaught.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, another fight with a Swordsman of the Mist continued. Sasuke, this time aided by the rest of his team, as well as many other Kiri rebels, were trying to take down Jinpachi Munashi.

"Blastsword Ninja Art: Blast Wave!"

Jinpachi slammed his sword into the ground, creating several waves of explosions that spread outwards. Some of them even hit his own men.

"Jinpachi-samaaaaaaaaaa... !" an unfortunate Kiri ninja cried after being caught in an explosion.

"If you get in the way, don't cry to me because you get hurt!" Jinchichi chided the wounded ninja.

"If you treat your own men like that, then your defeat is all but assured," Shizune told the swordsman.

Jinchichi chuckled. "Those who let themselves be killed are weak, and there's no room in Kirigakure for the weak!"

"Even if it's you who killed them?" Shizune fired back.

"If he was unable to dodge my attack, then he deserves to die, as so do all of you foreign invaders!" Jinchichi shouted as he charged forwards.

Shizune made several hand seals. "Water Release: Water Formation Wall!"

Tsunade's first apprentice released a torrent of water from her mouth, stopping Jinchichi on his tracks, and pushing him backwards.

"Sasuke-kun, Sakura, now!" Shizune called.

Sasuke and Sakura jumped from the sides, Sasuke holding his fire wreathed katana, and Sakura's fist surrounded by fiery blue chakra. However, before they could attack, Jinchichi unfurled more explosive tag roll and enveloped himself with it.

"Blastsword Ninja Art: Exploding Barricade!"

"Karin, your turn!" Shizune called.

Jinchichi realized that they were expecting him to do that, but it was too late. The explosions went off, but before they could catch Sasuke and Sakura, Karin pulled them out with her chakra chains. Shizune, meanwhile, proceeded on the offensive again.

"I have something your little explosions won't be able to protect you from! Poison Mist!"

Shizune released a purple colored, poisonous cloud from her mouth, which quickly moved towards Jinpachi cursed, and jumped backwards. Shizune jumped inside her own poisonous cloud, and a second later she came out of it, kunai in both hands ready to engage the swordsman.

"You're immune to your own poison. Oh, I see your plan. You want to stall me here and wait until the poison cloud reaches us. You'll be fine, but I will more than likely die," Jinpachi deduced.

"It seems that there's a brain under that skull. Not that guessing my strategy will be of any help," Shizune replied, as she engaged Jinpachi in a duel.

"We'll see about that! Blastsword Ninja Art: Exploding Piledriver!" Jinpachi motioned slammed his sword into the ground, generating a line of explosions. *"From this distance, she won't be able to dodge them!"*

"Sasuke, Sakura, attack again!" Shizune said as she was engulfed by an explosion.

"What!?" Jinpachi said in shock. 'So she goaded me to attack her in order to be left wide open!'

Sasuke and Sakura tried to attack again, but even if Jinpachi couldn't use his blast sword again like he did before, he managed to jump back, avoiding being gutted by flaming sword, and seeing how Sakura's punch opened a large crater in the ground.

"You almost got me there, you brats! Your sensei died for nothing! But you'll need something more than-!"

"Water Release: Great Water Arm Jutsu!"

A gigantic fist, not unlike a certain Akimichi's, connected with Jinpachi's one eyed face, sending him crashing against the ground, dropping the Splatter as well.

"That was for my brother, you one eyed son of a bitch!" Suigetsu spat.

"I'll take care of this," Karin said as she caught the explosive sword.

"Not killing your allies has a lot of advantages, as you can see," Sakura told the downed swordsman in a mocking tone.

Despite the immense pain, Jinpachi tried to stand back, but when he tried to, he was pelted by a rain of senbon, much to his surprise thrown by Shizune.

"What? How can you be alive? Nobody survives my explosions!" Jinpachi protested.

"True, but you didn't kill the real me. While I was hidden in my poison mist, I created a Shadow Clone and sent it to fight you in my place, while I remained unseen," Shizune explained.

"You... YOU BITCH!" Jinpachi cried in anger.

Shizune smiled in a condescending way. "Stick and stones, Jinpachi, stick and stones. Now, Sasuke-kun, Sakura, would you kindly finish this off?"

Sasuke and Sakura nodded, placed themselves at the opposite sides of Jinpachi, and made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullets!"

Sasuke's fireball and Sakura's flammable mud bullets crashed against Jinpachi, engulfing him in a multitude of explosions, and the swordsman ceased to be.

A fitting end for one of the Splatter's most infamous wielders.

...

They finally did it. After sneaking through plenty of battles, forcing Naruto and Mei to repress their urges to help their comrades, they had finally reached the Mizukage's palace.

The palace was a three story building, whose architectonic style was much refined than most of the village's buildings. To complement its beauty, it was surrounded by patches of green grass, as well multiple fountains. It had a giant kanji of "Water" drawn on it on the façade. There were several ninja standing guard on the outside.

Since the battles were still far away from the palace, these ninja weren't expecting an attack anytime soon. Naruto and Mei were about to prove them wrong. Hidden behind a fountain, the two of them inspected the zone.

"Okay Naruto, from this point on, stealth is no longer necessary. But before we attack, can you feel Yagura inside the palace?" Mei asked the blond Sage.

Naruto closed his eyes for a second, and nodded. "Yes, I'm sensing Tailed Beast Chakra inside the palace. It has to be Yagura."

"Can you sense how many guards are inside?"

Naruto checked once again. "Besides Yagura, I'm counting about twelve or so people. Their chakra is strong, but they shouldn't be a problem."

"They're the Mizukage's personal guard. While not the Seven Swordsmen, they're still elite ninja. Even so, we shouldn't waste much energy with them, or else Yagura will crush us," Mei instructed.

"Do you have a plan?" Naruto asked.

Mei bit a finger and started making hand seals. "We lure them out, dispatch them, break into the palace, and kill Yagura. Much easier said than done, but that's the best I have. Summoning Jutsu!"

Mei slammed her hand into the ground, and both she and Naruto found themselves standing on a massive sea squid.

"What the hell?" one of the guards asked, before he was snatched by a tentacle. His partners followed the same fate.

Wasting no time, Mei made more hand seals. "Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

Mei took a deep breath, and released a massive stream of fire right at the palace's façade, opening a hole in its second floor.

"Ikamaru-san, take care of the guards! Naruto-kun, follow me!" Mei ordered both her summon and Naruto.

Naruto nodded and both she and Mei infiltrated the palace through the hole she had opened. Mei let Naruto lead her to where Yagura was no doubt waiting for them. A couple Jonin cut them off.

"Stop right there!" one of the Jonin called.

Mei replied by making more hand seals. "Boil Release: Skilled Mist Jutsu!"

Once again, Mei breathed a cloud of highly acidic mist at the two enemy ninja. However, one of them was ready to counter it.

"Water Release: Water Wave!"

The Kiri Jonin expelled a stream of water that quickly dispelled the acid mist.

"Smart. Since Boil Release is a combination of water and fire, it's still weak to water. Oh well, this changes nothing," Mei confidently thought.

Naruto pulled out and activated his Wind Blade, which projected a white, flame-like chakra blade. One of the Jonin unsheathed his katana, and went to meet Naruto in combat.

"You pretend to defeat a Kiri ninja in a sword fighting duel? Such arrogance!" the Jonin laughed as he and Naruto fought. However, the moment their blades clashed, Naruto's cut his as if it was made of butter. "WHAT!?"

"I'm not pretending. I'm doing it," Naruto said with a confident smirk. He then punched at the Kiri ninja, who dodged his fist by moving aside.

But much to his shock, he felt as if the fist had connected even if he clearly had avoided it. And it packed such force, he was knocked unconscious.

"Kademaru!" the other ninja cried. "Who the hell are you!?"

"Lava Release: Lava Shuriken!"

The other ninja was so focused on Naruto, he didn't notice Mei, and that proved to be fatal. His life came to an end the moment three shuriken made of burning lava embedded into his body, burning it from the inside out.

"Good work, Naruto-kun," Mei praised.

Naruto grinned at her. "Hehe, thanks. It was a nice warm-up." His face became serious again. "Yagura just went to the roof. He's not alone. I think he's waiting for us."

Mei's expression hardened, as she nodded. "In that case, let's not keep him waiting."

Unimpeded, Naruto and Mei climbed the stairs to the roof of the palace where, true to Naruto's word, Yagura was there, alongside some blonde woman. The Mizukage was watching the battles that were taking place still far from the palace. It appeared that he didn't notice the two newcomers.

"Hello, Mei-san. I was expecting you," Yagura said, without turning around.

"Let's cut the formalisms, Yagura. You know why I'm here," Mei firmly said as she crossed her arms.

"It's Mizukage-sama, you traitorous bitch!" the kunoichi snapped at Mei.

Yagura then held her hand. "Relax, Aiko-chan. Fretting over such thing is a waste of energy."

"Who's that woman?" Naruto whispered Mei.

"Aiko, Yagura's wife. While not as strong as him, we shouldn't underestimate her either. She's a Jonin," Mei told the blond Jinchuriki.

Yagura turned around, and looked at the two rebels, while at the same time allowing Naruto to get a good look at him.

"What? But... he's a child! A child is the Mizukage? And he's married to an older woman?" Naruto asked in shock.

"Despite my appearance, I'm not a child, you brat," Yagura said in a dark tone. He then glared at Mei. "I'm seriously hoping you brought something more than this slow-minded kid to take me down, Mei-san."

"You talk about not judging people by their appearances, yet you have no problem doing the same," Mei retorted. "Despite his young age, Naruto-kun here is one of the strongest ninja Konoha has to offer."

"She's not lying, dear. His chakra is both immense and very strong. I believe he may be a Jinchuriki," Aiko warned her husband.

"You failed to seduce Uzakata, so you went to Konoha and begged them to loan you their jinchuriki in a vain attempt to depose me."

Pitiful," Yagura spat. "What did they make you promise them in return? Some of the Seven Swords? All of them? Secret techniques? Clan secrets? Our resources? Or will you simply turn Kirigakure into Konoha's lapdog?"

"Even if that were true, it would still be better than what Kirigakure is now," Mei spat back. "Listen, no more blood needs to be spilled today. It may sound unbelievable, but we have reasons to believe that somebody has been messing with your mind. You're under somebody else's mind control."

"Lies! If that were true, I would have noticed it! I'm his wife, on top of a sensor!" Aiko protested.

"That's the thing, you don't notice anything!" Naruto countered, "I've been mind controlled before, and it makes you think that everything's fine. But it's not. Deep down, you know there's something wrong, but you don't know what it is."

"You are right. It sounds unbelievable, as well as stupid. A desperate bid to avoid a fight you know you can't win," Yagura told her.

"I know I can defeat you, Yagura. I just simply don't want to kill a man that's just a victim of somebody else's crimes," Mei sorrowfully said.

"I think I've heard enough," Yagura said, as he and Aiko prepared to fight. "Try not to die too soon, and give me an entertaining fight."

Likewise, Mei and Naruto prepared for battle, knowing that they were going to face an opponent unlike any other.

The future of Kirigakure would be decided on the outcome of this battle.

Author's Note: And thus, the invasion has begun. Sorry for those who were expecting Naruto and Mei to fight against

Yagura already, but I felt that that fight deserved to have its own chapter. Besides, I wanted to have more fights besides that one, among them, the two remaining swordsmen, as well as Yagura's son Dagura. And yes, I made him up, so he's a quasi-OC. But given that the *Boruto* anime gives us his grandson Kagura, I thought it would be appropriate to show his son, and that way I could have an enemy that's not a random faceless elite ninja or ANBU.

These fights also had the double purpose of give some spotlight to some of the other teams, namely Team Shizune and Team Asuma. Don't worry, Team Kakashi and Team Gai will have their spotlight as well in following arcs once we reach Shippuden, *especially* Team Kakashi.

Thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading.

So yeah, next time in Son of the Sannin, the much awaited clash between Naruto, Mei and Yagura (and Aiko, I guess)! And not just that, but Deidara and Kisame will join the fray! One way or another, the Kirigakure Civil War WILL end next chapter, but HOW will it end? In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Invasion of Kirigakure, Part II

Author's Notes: Welp, here it is. The moment you've been waiting for so long. The climax of this rather long arc. Naruto and Mei finally facing Yagura. Hope you enjoy it:

Chapter 49:

The Invasion of Kirigakure, Part II

or

The Shadows in the Water

...

"I won't be the one dying today, Yagura. I won't rest until the Blood Mist becomes a thing of the past, and such thing can't happen as long as you're Mizukage," Mei said as she started making hand seals. "Boil Release: Skilled Mist Jutsu!"

Mei opened the fight with one of her two Bloodline Limits, releasing a cloud of corrosive mist at the opposing duo. Yagura took a step forward, positioning himself between the attack and his wife, as he made hand seals of his own.

"Stand back, Aiko-chan," Yagura took a deep breath. "Wind Release: Passing Typhoon!"

Yagura blew a powerful gust of wind that easily dispelled Mei's attack. It had such force that Mei and Naruto were nearly blown away. Aiko took the chance to attack as well. She made a hand seal.

"Water Release: Famine Mist!"

A thin mist started to envelop the roof of the palace. However, unlike other times Naruto had seen a mist jutsu (mostly from Haku), the mist wasn't thick enough to block vision.

"Naruto, this isn't the usual mist jutsu," Mei warned him, as if reading his thoughts. "I don't know what it does, but stay alert just in case."

"Then the best solution will be dispel it as soon as possible!" Naruto reasoned as his hands ran through hand seals. "Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto thrust his hand forward, casting an horizontal tornado. However, Naruto noticed that the jutsu was weaker than usual, and only succeeded in stirring the mist, which quickly reformed.

"The hell?" Naruto indignantly asked.

"You foolish child! This mist dampens the ninjutsu used by the enemy, while at the same time enhances mine!" Aiko gloated as she made several hand seals. "Water Release: Water Gun!"

Aiko expelled a powerful torrent from her mouth at the duo. Instinctively, Mei reacted by using a jutsu of her own.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

A wall emerged, getting in the way between Mei and Aiko's attack, but much to the rebel leader's surprise, Aiko's water jutsu tore through Mei's earth wall, before the attack blasted her backwards. Fortunately, the wall at least had absorbed some of the jutsu's original power, and it didn't make as much damage as it could.

"Didn't you hear what I said? My ninjutsu is stronger while yours is weaker! Elemental weaknesses become irrelevant!" Aiko stated.

Thanks to his Sage Mode, Naruto could sense that Aiko was supporting the mist with her own chakra. Even then, the chakra consumption rate was very low, and Aiko had a respectable chakra

pool. Waiting until she ran out of chakra wasn't an option. They had to take her down first if they wanted to have any chance against Yagura.

"Mei! If we take out Aiko, the mist will banish! We have to focus on her first!" Naruto shouted as he pulled out his trusty Wind Blade. Upon channeling his chakra, the weapon projected a white, flame like energy blade. "Let's hope the mist doesn't affect my Wind Blade either!"

Now armed, Naruto dashed towards the female Jonin but he was intercepted by the Mizukage. Naruto's wind blade clashed against what appeared to be a rather large black club with uneven sized hooks on its ends, and oddly enough, a green flower on the larger hook. Much to his surprise, the club resisted the wind blade's swipe.

"You're more foolish than I thought if you think I'm going to let you get my wife," Yagura replied in a threatening tone.

Naruto ignored Yagura's words and focused on the staff. 'He's channeling chakra through it. That's why he manages to make it durable enough to resist my wind blade. Boy, this is getting harder by the second. And the mist may weaken my sword as well.'

Still, thanks to his senjutsu enhanced strength, Naruto was able to overpower Yagura and push him backwards. Naruto then ran past him and headed for the kunoichi.

"I'm not afraid of you, Konoha scum!" Aiko challenged as she prepared to fight.

Yagura, however, wasn't planning to go back on what he said a second earlier. "Get away from her!"

"Earth Release: Mud Trap!"

Much to his shock, the ground around him turned into mud, rendering him immobile as his feet were stuck on it. He struggled to

get out of it.

"Naruto, now!" Mei called.

Naruto didn't need to be told twice, and prepared to strike the Mizukage's wife down. Aiko unsheathed her katana and used it to parry Naruto's swing, but unlike Yagura, she didn't channel chakra through her weapon to make it stronger, and the Wind Blade cut through her katana as if it was made of butter.

"What?" Aiko asked in shock.

Naruto attacked once, again, and this time, Aiko was forced to dodge the swing, lest she fall prey to its ridiculous cutting power. Despite the power of such weapon, Aiko noticed the boy's swings were unrefined and slightly brutish. He more than likely didn't have anything more than basic sword fighting training.

Aiko pulled out a few shuriken from her tool pouch and tossed them at Naruto. As she was expecting, Naruto used his Wind Blade to parry them away, and she used that window of opportunity to attack. Rushing at Naruto, she extended her hand.

"Water Release: Water Blade!"

Like the name of the jutsu implied, a sword of water materialized in her extended hand, and ran her makeshift weapon into Naruto's gut.

"You're dead!" Aiko shouted before, much to her shock, she saw her sword breaking upon hitting the blond, almost as if he was made of steel. "WHAT?"

Naruto took advantage of the woman's astonishment and kicked her in the chest with such force that she was sent flying away before she fell onto the roof of another building. Even if she wasn't moving, Naruto sensed that she was still alive.

The mist dispelled instantly.

"Good work Naruto! One less problem!" Mei cheered, just as Yagura overpowered her Mud Trap. With Aiko out of the fight, taking out Yagura would be much easier.

"That was a mistake," Yagura said in an icy tone.

"Your wife is still alive. She's just unconscious," Naruto tried to reassure him.

But it was too late. Orange chakra started to form around Yagura, enveloping him in a fiery aura. The aura vaguely took the shape of a turtle with three long tails.

"Get ready, Naruto. Even if we got rid of Aiko, the fight had become much harder," the rebel leader grimly noted.

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In another part of Kirigakure, Chojuro and Kumori were leading an offensive against what their intelligence believed it was Kiri's Chakra Golem factory, hidden under a mere textile workshop. They were doing a good job so far, but the arrival of reinforcements forced them to fall back.

"Where did these reinforcements come from?" Chojuro asked as he engaged a rather skilled ANBU.

"These ninja were probably guarding the docks. By this point, they must have realized that we don't plan to attack the docks in any way, so they're moving their remaining forces here," Kumori explained as he engaged another red-clad Yagura loyalist.

"We need some time to fall back and regroup, Kumori-san. Do you think you can provide it to us?" Chojuro asked the hooded ninja.

Kumori smirked under his mask. "Just leave that to me," he said, as he started to make hand seals. "Demonic Illusion: Shattered Reality!"

Suddenly, all the Kirigakure defenders saw how the village, its houses, streets, roads, everything, started to crumble and disappear into an endless void below. Naturally, plenty of them fell prey to panic.

"What the hell's going on?" a ninja asked.

"I've never seen anything like this!" another one cried.

"You idiots, it's a genjutsu, dispel it!" a more veteran ninja warned the others.

Even if his illusion was identified, it send the enemy troops into disarray for enough time to allow the rebels to disengage and safely retreat to a more secured position from which they could strike back.

In the rear guard of the division, many medics, Rin Nohara among them, were working tirelessly to heal the wounded rebels. Many of them were too wounded to continue fighting and had to be taken out of the village, but fortunately there were as many who could continue fighting after being patched up.

Among the ninja protecting the medics were Kakashi's Animal Squad, who were positioned close to Rin, as well as other medics.

"How it is going, Rin?" Kakashi asked.

"I'm working as fast as I can, yet I have the feeling that I could do more," Rin replied, as she focused on healing a wounded rebel.

"Even if the situation may not allow it, it's best not to let yourself be carried away by the stress, or else you'll do a worse job than intended," Shino told her.

"Yeah, don't get so worked up. We're here to keep you safe," Tamaki added with a tender smile.

"I know, but still..." Rin insisted. "I think I have enough chakra now to learn the Shadow Clone Jutsu. That way I could heal multiple people

at once."

"While risky, it's an intelligent idea," Shino commended.

"Unfortunately, most people don't have the necessary chakra reserves to carry it out."

"That's why I said that I think-AAAAAAHHH!" Rin yelled as she clutched her body.

"Rin!" an alarmed Kakashi yelled as he rushed to her side.

"What's happening?" Kiba asked, mildly panicked.

"The... the Three-Tails..." Rin panted. "It's the Three Tails... it's unleashing its power right now!"

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Despite his small size, the Tailed Beast chakra cloak made Yagura look rather intimidating. His look of pure fury and anger at the rebel leader and her Konoha ally only made it worse.

"Very few people push me far enough to make me use the Three Tails' power. However, such accomplishment will do you no good," Yagura darkly stated.

The Fourth Mizukage leaped forward, his hooked staff raised above his head. A mass of water formed around the hook. Naruto tried to parry the incoming blow with his Wind Blade, but the water exploded outwards, forming a small torrent that blasted both Mei and him backwards. He then raised a hand, forming a massive orb of water.

"Water Release: Great Water Missile!"

Both Naruto and Mei wasted no time to made hand seals in order to counter Yagura's jutsu.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

"Lava Release: Volcanic Roar!"

The mass of water met a powerful gust of wind as well as a stream of burning hot molten rocks, resulting in a explosion of a multitude of elements. Yagura, however, wasn't going to be deterred, and slammed his staff into the ground.

"Coral Ripples Rising!"

Yagura generated a long row of coral spikes to rise out of the ground. Mei's eyes were wide open.

"Naruto, jump! Don't let those corals touch you!" Mei cried in an uncharacteristic panicky tone.

"Why? What's so bad about them?" the blond asked, unable to repress his curiosity.

"No time to explain! Just trust me on this one! You don't want those corals to touch you," Mei vehemently warned her ally.

"You made your homework after all, Mei. It seems that you have a brain under that pretty face," Yagura complimented. "Too bad no amount of brainpower will save either of you from being crushed by the sheer power I possess!" Yagura brought his hands together, and formed a hand seal. "Water Release: Three Headed Water Dragon!"

Yagura created three massive blobs of water that moved forward when the Mizukage motioned his hands in the same direction. The blobs quickly took the shape of three roaring dragons. Mei was already preparing a defensive measure.

"Earth Release: Double Earth Style Wall!"

Mei slammed her hands into the ground, erecting two large stone walls between her and Yagura. However, much to her shock, her walls proved to be ineffective as the water dragons merely jumped above them, and crashed against the two rebels, exploding into a

torrent of water that blasted the two of them high into the air before falling into a nearby empty street.

"Uggggh..." Naruto groaned as he tried to get himself back on his feet. "Mei? Are you alright...?"

"Y-Yes," the rebel leader said, before coughing some blood. "I never imagined Yagura was this strong. And from what I know, he isn't even using his full strength yet..."

"We've been in the defensive all the time. We're not going to do anything like this, we need to attack!" Naruto claimed.

"I know. But we're an even bigger disadvantage now. It won't be long before some of Yagura's troops spot us and join the fray," Mei told him.

Yagura landed in front of them with a loud crash, leaving several cracks in the ground.

"Does it look like I need help to deal with you two?" Yagura mockingly asked. "You're on your last legs, while I'm pretty much untouched. Some help you got there, Mei."

Yagura's taunting had the desired effect on Naruto, who gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes at the Three Tails jinchuriki. Naruto extended a hand, and formed a Rasengan.

"Let's see how you like this help!" Naruto shouted as he charged at the Mizukage, who smirked.

"Naruto, wait!" Mei called him.

But it was too late. Yagura motioned his free hand in a circle. "Water Release: Water Mirror Jutsu."

Yagura created a flat, circular pool of water of reflective surface, almost like a mirror, showing a perfect reflection of Naruto. A replica of Naruto came out of the mirror, dashing to meet the original.

"Rasengan!"

Both attacks clashed against each other, but original Naruto's attack was more powerful, destroying the clone, which dissolved into a puddle of water.

"You... you overpowered my jutsu," Yagura noted, genuinely impressed. "How? Is because of your Sage Mode? Yes, it has to be that. Senjutsu can't be replicated."

"Still thinking I'm of little help?" Naruto asked.

"Yes. You might provide a slightly greater challenge than I had originally imagined, but in the end the result will be the same," Yagura confidently said. "Senjutsu is still inferior to the power of a perfect Jinchuriki."

"Naruto, don't try a frontal attack like that again, much less on your own. We're two against one, let's use that to our advantage as long as it last," Mei told him.

"Right, sorry," Naruto replied as he tried to calm down.

"How long until Sage Mode runs out?" Mei whispered the blond.

"It won't until I start using my strongest jutsu. I'm trying to save them for the right moment," Naruto whispered back.

Mei nodded. "Well thought. I'll try to create one such moment shortly."

With that, Naruto and Mei spread out a bit so Yagura couldn't target the two of them at once. The Mizukage noticed that they were making hand seals, Naruto just once, while Mei did several.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

"Fire Release: Burning Whip!"

Two clones appeared at Naruto's side, while a lash made of flames appeared on Mei's hand. Yagura realized that Mei would try to distract him so he'd be wide open for whatever Naruto was going to prepare. He wasn't going to let such thing happen.

Just as he predicted, Mei rushed forward and used her fiery whip to attack Yagura. The Mizukage parried the blows with his water-enhanced club, all while never taking his eyes away from Naruto.

"I'm your enemy! You have no time to look away!" Mei shouted as she pressed her attack. A second whip made of flames appeared on her other hand, and she continued her onslaught, successfully pushing Yagura back.

The Mizukage frowned and channeled even more water chakra into his hooked club. He swung it at Mei, creating a watery explosion that put out Mei's fire lashes. Mei, however, jumped in time in order to avoid the water attack. Suddenly, a loud, high pitched noise could be heard, coming from Naruto.

"Naruto, now!" Mei shouted.

Yagura looked at Naruto and saw that the blond was holding in his raised hand what appeared to be a huge shuriken made of pure chakra and wind. Wasting no time, Naruto threw it at Yagura.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Upon seeing the chakra shuriken flying at him, Yagura was overtaken by a fear of the like he never experienced before. If he let that jutsu hit him, it would be the end. Not even the Three Tails' chakra cloak could save him. At least not the first version. Fortunately for him, he hoped there would be a jutsu that could save his skin right now. He made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Mirror Jutsu!"

Yagura motioned his hand in a circle, creating another mirror of water between himself and the deadly attack, successfully blocking it. Now a second Rasenshuriken, would pop out of the mirror, counter the first one even if it was weaker due the lack of nature energy. Then, the unthinkable happened

The Rasenshuriken tore the mirror apart and exploded into a massive wind vortex. Even if the explosion didn't catch him, the shockwave was powerful enough to blast the Mizukage backwards, being painfully slammed against the floor.

"Ugh..." Yagura groaned as he slowly got up. He raised his head, shooting a look of fury to where Naruto was standing. "You finally show your true-"

But Yagura's words were cut by the unsettling sight of a second Rasenshuriken flying at him. He had learned that blocking them wasn't going to work, he had to dodge it. As fast as he could, he made a hand seal before slamming his hand into the ground, creating a burst of water that propelled him upwards, successfully dodging the Rasenshuriken, which crashed against a nearby building, reducing it to rubble in a few seconds.

"Let's hope those houses were empty, since the collateral damage of this fight alone is going to be colossal," Mei grimly thought.

The rebel leader then looked at Naruto, and noticed that his eyes had returned to normal, meaning that his Sage Mode had run out. Then, he looked at Yagura, and her face became extremely pale.

"Naruto-kun?" Mei asked, a bit panicky. "Can you go back into Sage Mode?"

"Yeah. I have two clones nearby gathering nature energy for me. I only need to dispel one of them and that energy will be mine," Naruto explained.

"Good, because you're going to need it," Mei said, still staring at the coming Yagura.

Naruto looked at Yagura, and was taken aback. "Uh, what's with him? Why does he look like that all of sudden?"

Yagura had turned into a completely different being. He looked now like turtle-man hybrid with three tails, arms ended in claws and spikes on his shell and shoulders. His body was covered by a thick cloak of dark red chakra, and his eyes had become two glowing white dots.

"Naruto, get ready. Yagura is about to unleash the full power of the Three Tails upon us..." a slightly fearful Mei warned, as she knew the real fight against Yagura was about to begin.

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Haku stood on guard as he saw the bat flying in circles about him. At any time, the bat would swoop down at Haku, and Dagura would attack him from the top of his flying summon, before returning once again to the safety of the skies. While not very effective from an offensive point of view, it kept Dagura safe from Haku's attacks.

This time, he was taking his sweet time to attack. Haku was waiting for him to attack at any moment, and delaying his move would get the Ice Ninja on the edge. However, Haku was somebody blessed with near infinite patience. Especially for battle. That's how he managed to become so good.

He had to be this good. Zabuza wouldn't deserve any less.

Not being able to reach Dagura in close combat, Haku had deactivated his Walking Winter jutsu, since it would be a senseless waste of chakra. He needed to be careful if he wanted to defeat this opponent. The Mizukage's son had to be somebody powerful

Finally, it was Dagura who got impatient, and commanded his giant bat to dive at the Ice Ninja. The flying mammal let out a high pitched cry as it swooped down once again. Both ninja prepared to trade attacks once again.

"Soundwave Jutsu!"

"Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!"

When the attacks collided, Dagura's jutsu shattered Haku's, and still had enough power to push forward. The Ice Ninja jumped sideways, barely dodging the sonic attack, which created a small crater on the ground upon hitting it.

"My Ice Jutsu is ineffective against his sonic attacks. I have to change my tactic, or else he'll beat me," Haku thought as he saw Dagura return to the sky. *"Guess it's about time to test that new jutsu."*

Haku made several hand seals before clapping his hands together.

"Ice Release: Crystal Bird!"

Ice particles started to gather in front of him, growing into a mass of frost that soon took the shape of a medium sized bird. The Crystal Bird let out a cry, and flew towards Dagura. The Mizukage's son noticed the frozen avian flying at him. He didn't know what it was, but he knew it couldn't be good.

"Better get rid of that as soon as possible," Dagura said to no one in particular as he pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it and tossed it at the bird.

However, much to his shock, the bird nimbly dodged the explosive kunai and continued its flight towards Dagura unimpeded. The Mizukage's son started to panic a little. The ice bird was dangerously close.

"I'll give you something you won't be able to dodge!" Dagura shouted as he made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

Dagura breathed a wide stream of fire that, true to his word, engulfed the ice bird in a torrent of flames, and it instantly melted, much to Dagura's relief. But his relief was short lived when the fire dispelled and saw that Haku was nowhere to be seen. He was alerted to a creaking sound coming from above, accompanied by an odd cold breeze.

"What the...?" Dagura looked up and saw Haku coming from what appeared to be a mirror made of ice. He made a hand seal.

"Ice Release: Thousand Needles of Death!"

The mirror above him shattered into a hundred shards, which elongated and turned into needles and rained upon Dagura and his summon. The bat was too large, and was unable to move in time in order to avoid the rain of razor sharp ice shards, dealing enough damage to undo the summon, and causing Dagura to fall below.

Despite being caught off guard, the Mizukage's son managed to land on his feet and one hand, leaving a crack on the floor due the force of the impact. Haku landed softly in front of him, as if carried by gentle winds.

"You're good, Yuki, getting rid of my summon like that. Too bad you're fighting for the wrong side, Kirigakure has a constant need of strong ninja," Dagura praised.

"Did you not hear what I said before? I'm not going to side with the village that cost me my family," Haku stoically replied with some repressed anger seeping into his words. He made a hand seal and raised a foot. "For more bloodshed to be prevented, your father and his supporters need to be removed from power by any means. Ice Release: Crystal Blade Field!"

Haku slammed his foot into the ground, creating a row of large ice spikes towards Dagura. Dagura jumped backwards, pulled out a couple of explosive kunai, and tossed them at the incoming ice spikes. While it successfully halted their advance, it was a temporary solution as the spikes reformed and continued advancing towards him.

"Don't focus on the jutsu, focus on the ninja who cast it," Dagura reminded himself as he jumped back even further while making hand seals. "Fire Release: Blazing Nightmare!"

Dagura summoned another flock of bats, though these one appeared to be made of fire, and following Dagura's hand motion, they all flew at Haku, letting out annoying screeches. Haku, however, merely made a hand seal with a single hand.

"Ice Release: Walking Winter!"

Haku's ice aura was reactivated just as the fire bats were close to him. Making another hand seal, the aura expanded, creating harsh, cold winds that pushed the burning fliers away, some of them even being put out by the freezing gusts.

"You can't win this fight. Your father created far too many enemies during his bloodstained reign. Even if we fail today, another group will raise in the future to finish what we started," Haku told Dagura as he walked forward, freezing the ground as he moved.

"Then we will crush them again! That's how the ninja world rolls! Only the strongest are able to survive!" Dagura replied.

"Then you won't mind if I kill you, right? Since so far, I'm proving to be the strongest of the two," Haku fired back. He made several hand seals. "Ice Release: Never ending Winter!"

Haku's freezing aura started to grow around him, blowing with more intensity, freezing everything around him. But it didn't stop there. The cold became more and more intense. All the nearby buildings and

Kiri loyalists were covered in frost and snow, until they were completely frozen. The ice spread as far as their eyes could see.

"No!" Dagura made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

The Mizukage's son breathed a massive stream of fire around, hoping to melt some of the ice, but it was useless. The ice was so strong that it was impervious to his fire attacks. Soon, the cold also caught Dagura, as ice began to grow all around him. His body started to feel numb, and his movements slowed down.

"No... this... can't..." Dagura said before freezing completely.

What Dagura didn't know is that Haku wasn't really freezing the village, the Kiri ninja, or anyone for that matter. He had caught him in a genjutsu, which made him fall into a harmless coma. Being the son of the Mizukage, Haku thought of a way to disable him without killing or even hurting him much. He hoped keeping Dagura alive would smooth the transition.

A shadow passed over the ice ninja, alerting him. Looking up, he saw two large, strange looking birds flying above him. One of the birds dropped something. It was too small to notice, but there were many things.

The street Haku and other rebels were fighting Kiri loyalist was then engulfed by a massive chain of explosions.

...

"Woohoo! What do you think about my art, you uncultured swines?" one of the men riding the giant bird yelled. He was a young, girly looking man with long blond hair styled in a ponytail, with a bang covering one of his eyes. He was wearing a black cloak with red clouds. He then looked at his partner, and asked: "Hey, Kisame, you don't mind if I share some of my art with your village, do you?"

The man's partner, riding the other bird, merely shrugged. He was a tall, blue haired man with blue skin, small and sunken eyes, what appeared to be gills under them, and sharp teeth, which gave him a shark like appearance. He was carrying a massive sword covered in bandages on his back. "Do as you please. This village has its days numbered one way or another. Just make sure you don't drop your 'art' where the Jinchuriki is," Kisame warned him.

"Don't worry, he should be in the palace, right?" Deidara asked, as he saw the Mizukage's Palace in the distance. "It seems like there was a battle there. I better check that they didn't kill the jinchuriki before we can nail it, hn!"

"Well thought. I'll stay back, and make sure nobody gets in the way," Kisame said, as he prepared to jump off the giant bird.

Deidara grinned at him. "Liar! You only want to have some fun killing those idiots!"

Kisame grinned back, and shrugged. "I'm not lying. Those two things aren't mutually exclusive," the shark-like man said before jumping.

While he was falling, Kisame made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Exploding Water Colliding Wave!"

While mid air, Kisame expelled a massive amount of water from his mouth into the ground, which safely cushioned his fall. Unfortunately, his jutsu drowned a few ninja, rebels and loyalists aside, that were fighting at the moment. While on the mass of water, Kisame then bit his finger, and made more hand seals before slamming his hand into the water.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

A trio of sharks appeared inside the mass of water, which quickly tore the unfortunate ninja caught inside Kisame's previous jutsu.

"Look at that! It's Kisame Hoshigaki!" a red clad loyalist said.

"What is he doing here?" a rebel asked.

"Is he with us or with Yagura?" another rebel wondered.

Kisame couldn't help but chuckle at the rebel's rather naïve question.

"What makes you think that I'm on either side, brat?" Kisame answered, letting out a small laugh. "Now, my pets are a bit hungry and all the blood being spilled around us really got them on edge. And unfortunately for you, they really have a thing for human meat."

Kisame motioned his bandaged sword forward, and the mass of water moved in that direction as if it had life of its own. Most of the ninja there stopped fighting and tried to run away. Some of them managed to avoid Kisame, less fortunate ones were caught by the wave and were devoured by the sharks in a matter of seconds.

"Ah... it's good to be home."

...

In another part of the village, Ao was leading a group of rebel ANBU, when he received a rather distressing news through his radio. His men noticed his expression.

"Sir, is everything alright?" a masked ANBU asked.

"Our men are reporting that Kisame Hoshigaki has been spotted in the village and has joined the fight," Ao gravely replied.

"Is he fighting for Yagura?" another ANBU asked.

"It seems that he's killing indiscriminately rebels and Yagura's men alike. I think I may have an idea as for why he's here, and it's not good," Ao replied. He then tapped his earpiece before relaying his orders. "Attention everybody, according to recent reports, Kisame Hoshigaki has been seen in the Trade District! Zabuza, Ameyuri,

Chojuro, move there and engage him before he causes more loses! Everybody else, stay away from him! Kisame is an S-Rank ninja, and only Mei-sama or our Swordsmen would have any chance against him!"

"Ao-sama, do you think Zabuza and the others will be able to beat Kisame?" a female ANBU asked.

Ao sighed. "I hope they can. If they don't, the damage he can do could be catastrophic."

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Kisame was many things, but subtle wasn't one of them. In just a few minutes, he had killed dozens of ninja of both sides, and brought down half a dozen buildings. He started to notice that most ninja, rebel and loyalists aside, were staring to flee on him the moment he appeared.

"Aw come on, don't leave so soon!" Kisame whined in a painfully fake hurt tone. "Don't you want to play with me?"

"How about if I play with you, you fucker?" a female voice said.

Ameyuri Ringo landed in front of him, her Thunder swords crackling with electricity, as she fixed a determined stare on the missing nin.

"They gave Raiga's sword to a little girl?" Kisame shook his head. "You know, you guys are giving me more and more reasons not to regret defecting."

"I'M NOT A LITTLE GIRL!" Ameyuri roared as she stomped her foot into the ground.

"But then again, if you at least have the courage to face me, maybe then you're worthy of having those swords," Kisame added, almost in an approving tone, as he adopted a fighting stance. "Are you ready then...?"

"A-Ameyuri-san won't fight alone!" a new voice stammered as Chojuro landed besides her.

Kisame raised an eyebrow. "Another one? And this one has Mangetsu's preferred blade. Oh well, the more the merrier, as they usually say."

"If that's the case, then you won't mind if I join them," a third voice said as Zabuza landed in front of them, his Executioner's Blade in hand.

"My, my, Zabuza Momochi! Such a surprise seeing you here! I can't believe that you ended up joining Mei-chan's ragtag group. I thought you had a little more self-respect," Kisame told him.

"Mei is stronger than you think, Kisame. Anyway, it's a fortunate coincidence that you decided to drop by. That way, we can finally collect all of the seven swords," Zabuza pointed out.

"What? You guys killed Jinin, Jinpachi and Kushimaru?" Kisame asked in disbelief, then he smirked. "Even if that's true, it won't change anything. Those three, while strong, were still nowhere near my level. I will send you to hell with them, and I'll take your swords with me."

The three rebel swordsmen tensed up as they felt the killing intent Kisame was releasing. Zabuza needed for them to keep their cool, or else they would be dead.

"Listen, brats, I know we fought and defeated other swordsmen, but Kisame's more than capable of backing those boasts. I can't defeat him alone, but with the three of us working together, we might have a chance. However, you two must not give into the fear, and do everything I say, understood?"

"Y-Yes, Zabuza-taicho!" Chojuro stammered.

"Sure, whatever!" an antsy Ameyuri replied as she crossed her swords and aimed them towards the sky. "I'll finish this with one move! I can call down a lightning bolt from the sky and fry both him and his fishes!"

"Don't!" Zabuza warned as he forced Ameyuri to lower the swords down. "Kisame's sword, Samehada, is able to absorb chakra and ninjutsu attacks and funnel that chakra to Kisame. Using ninjutsu will only make him stronger."

"So... we can't use ninjutsu? Only our swords?" Chojuro asked.

"You're part of the Seven Swordsmen, brat. That should be enough," Zabuza chastised.

"I know, but so is he," an unsure Chojuro replied, pointing at Kisame.

The rogue swordsman adopted a fighting stance, moving his sword to the front, as the sharks under him became visibly restless.

"As much as I love a nice conversation with my fellow Swordsmen, my pets are still hungry. Time to fight!" Kisame shouted as he motioned his sword forward.

The mass of water, that was completely still, turned into a massive torrent, ready to add Zabuza, Ameyuri and Chojuro the list of victims it had already swallowed. Fortunately, the three rebel swordsmen were fast enough to avoid the incoming wave, and jumped out of the way before being crushed by tons of water.

Unfortunately for them, though, Kisame had already planned for that. Without even having to give them a command, verbal or otherwise, the sharks swimming under Kisame leaped out of the water, their jaws full of sharp teeth wide open, ready to taste fresh blood. Too bad their targets were much too close to being predators rather than prey, and mowed down the attacking animals when they got too close, undoing the summon.

"Aw, why did you do that to my pets? You guys must hate animals," Kisame said as he shook his head.

"Don't worry, you'll go next!" Ameyuri shouted as she leaped at him, bringing down the Thunder swords upon him in a vertical swing.

Kisame raised his sword with just one hand, and easily blocked Ameyuri's attack. Heeding Zabuza's words, she wasn't channeling any chakra through them, lest it feed Samehada.

"Come on girl, that's the best you can do? I'm only using one hand!" Kisame laughed.

While Kisame was busy dealing with Ameyuri, Chojuro landed behind him with a splash, ready to cut Kisame open as he reared back his Hiramekarei.

"Too slow!" Kisame said as he easily kicked Chojuro away, while still keeping Ameyuri at bay.

Ameyuri then removed one of her swords and tried to use it to slash Kisame's legs. The shark-like man, however, reacted in time, disengaged her and jumped backwards. However, before he could counterattack, Zabuza appeared before him, and delivered a flurry of swings with his Executioner's Blade, which Kisame parried with great expertise.

"Ah, I always regretted not being able to cross my blade with you, Zabuza-san. Of all the swordsmen of our generation, I always thought you were the least pathetic," Kisame chuckled as he defended from Zabuza's attack.

"You shouldn't have come back, Kisame. You're alone, all sides of this conflict are your enemies, you have no allies to rely on. You died the moment you set your feet here!" Zabuza told him as he pressed the attack.

Kisame couldn't help but laugh uproariously.

"When did you develop a sense of humor, Zabuza-san? Trust me, there's no ninja, either rebel or a servant of Yagura, that's a threat to me, no matter their number. The few ninja that could be a challenge are far away fighting each other. In fact, the only ones they dared to send against me were you three!" Kisame countered, as he pushed Zabuza backwards with a mighty tackle. He then made several hand seals. "Three versus one is not very fair, let's even the odds! Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

Four water clones of Kisame emerged from the mass of water the original was standing on, all of them also carrying a copy of Samehada, before he directed them at the two youngest swordsmen. Chojuro audibly gulped, while Ameyuri growled at them, and prepared to fight.

"Now that the kids have somebody to keep them busy, how about a duel, just the two of us, Zabuza-san?" Kisame asked as he grinned evilly.

"Alright, but no swords. You carry the strongest of the Seven Swords, but how much of that strength is yours, and how much is Samehada's? Prove you're better than me," Zabuza said, as he extended his right hand, ready to drop his Executioner's Blade, hoping Kisame would do the same.

Kisame, however, replied with a mocking laugh again.

"Do you really think my ego is so fragile that I'm willing to discard my most powerful asset?" Kisame asked incredulously. "You disappoint me, Zabuza-san, resorting to such foolish tactics. I have nothing to prove, and much less to the likes of you."

Zabuza said nothing in return. Kisame had won this round. All he could do is try to best his fellow swordsman in a fight, as impossible as it looked.

"Snap out of it, Zabuza. Don't you want to become Mizukage? You never will with that attitude," the masked swordsman chastised

himself, as his expression grew more determined, and adopted a fighting stance.

"I see you stopped fooling around," Kisame said, noticing Zabuza's change of attitude. "Much better. It wouldn't be fun otherwise!"

Kisame then launched himself at Zabuza, Samehada raised above his head. Taken aback by Kisame's deceptive speed, Zabuza raised his sword to parry the incoming hit. He struggled against the shark-like man as their swords were locked against each other, when said man noticed a disturbance in the water.

And indeed, two Zabuza water clones came up from the water they were in, and tried to hack Kisame, forcing him to disengage and fall back. He grinned widely at Zabuza and his clones.

"Not bad, Zabuza-san. Not bad," Kisame praised.

"You forgot I'm also a Water Release user. Even if it was you who summoned all this water, there's nothing that stops me from using it!" Zabuza replied as he directed his two clones to attack Kisame.

"It's you who forgot who's the better Water Release user here, Zabuza-san. The terrain is way more to my advantage than it is to yours," the shark-like ninja confidently replied as he watched the clones approach.

After easily dodging the first one, he smashed it with Samehada, not only destroying it, but absorbing its chakra as well. The second soon followed. The sound of a third splashing footsteps warned Kisame that those clones were merely a distraction to leave him wide open to the original. He wasn't going to let Zabuza catch him off guard like that.

Much to Kisame's surprise, Zabuza pulled out a few shuriken from his ninja tool pouch, and tossed them at Kisame, who he easily blocked them with Samehada. The Akatsuki laughed.

"You weren't very fond of shuriken back then, if I remember correctly. And if that amateurish throw is any indication, you aren't much fond of them now," Kisame replied as he dashed towards Zabuza as well.

Displaying a deceptively fast speed and agility, Kisame dodged Zabuza's rather slow diagonal swing, and smashed Samehada against him. With a hit like that, victory was assured.

Then, much to his surprise, Zabuza dissolved into water, just like the other clones did.

"What...?" Kisame said, mildly surprised. He didn't remember Zabuza creating a third clone. Then he remembered that when he raised Samehada to block Zabuza's shuriken, his view of his enemy was momentarily blocked. *"Shit! Those shuriken were just a distraction!"*

That brief moment of surprise was the window of opportunity Zabuza needed. Waiting from underwater for the best moment to strike, the Demon of the Hidden Mist rose to the surface, delivering a wide swing upwards. Kisame was able to notice the disturbance in the water and jump away, but not fast enough to avoid a slash to the chest. Kisame's hand was instinctively brought to the wounded area, as he slid backwards.

"You... you made me bleed!" Kisame said, outraged, as he looked at the blood on his hand.

"I already warned you that I could use your water against you, but you didn't listen," Zabuza said, grinning under his mask. "Samehada is a powerful sword indeed, but counting on that much power has dulled your abilities. I don't know what kind of opponents you're used to fighting, but keep in mind that you're against another Swordsman of Kirigakure!"

Surprisingly, Kisame's anger was brief, and the shark-like ninja shot Zabuza an unnerving grin.

"Yes, I admit I probably grew a bit confident in fighting you. Trust me, not only you won't be able to touch me again, but this wound will remain here very little," Kisame replied.

"We'll see about that!" Zabuza retorted as he charged against Kisame once again.

Meanwhile, Ameyuri and Chojuro were fighting the four Kisame clones. Despite being weaker than the original, they were still pretty tough, and their Samehada's retained the original's chakra absorption ability.

The two younger swordsmen were back to back, fighting the Kisame clones, two of them each. However, when they tried to attack, one of the clones would parry the attack, while the other would take advantage and strike them, forcing them to fall back.

"Goddamn it Chojuro, tell me we are not being cornered by goddamned clones!" Ameyuri complained as she dodged a swipe from one of her enemies.

"T-They very strong! Way stronger than normal Water Clones!" Chojuro replied, as he blocked a swipe with Hiraamekarei.

"I have an idea. When I tell you, bend forwards!" Ameyuri told him.

"What? What do you plan to-?"

"Don't question me, goddamn it, just do it!" Ameyuri angrily snapped, cutting Chojuro off.

"Y-Yes!"

They kept going like that for some time, until the red headed swordswoman finally saw the opening she was waiting for.

"Chojuro, now!" she yelled.

After pushing a Kisame clone backwards, Chojuro bent forward, placing his back perpendicular to the ground. Then, much to his confusion, Ameyuri jumped on his horizontal back as she dodged another attack as well. The two Kisame clones attempted to strike her once again, but she leaped above them, channeled lightning chakra through her blades, and slashed their backs as she landed.

"Way to go, Ameyuri-san!" Chojuro praised, jubilant that they were finally making some progress.

"Don't get distracted!" Ameyuri warned, as she ran past him, and parried an attack from a Kisame clone.

This time, Chojuro's resolve didn't waver, and slashed the clone across the chest as Ameyuri held it in place, which dissolved into a puddle of water. After that, the two eyed the remaining clone and lunged at it at the first time. The clone was unable to defend himself from both ninja and fell prey to their blades as well.

"We did it!" Chojuro yelled in joy.

"Don't let that get to your head. We only killed a bunch of clones. Come on, Zabuza-taicho needs our help," Ameyuri told him.

Chojuro nodded and the two young swordsmen joined their captain in his fight against the real Kisame.

...

Meanwhile, far from there, Naruto, Mei and Yagura continued their duel. The two parties eyed each other, Mei and Naruto looking cautious and pensive, while Yagura's new visage shot them a terrifying grin.

"Naruto-kun seems to be okay, but I already used a good chunk my chakra. Now that Yagura is using his jinchuriki powers to their fullest, I need to be careful with how I spend my remaining chakra," Mei warily thought.

Yagura didn't wait, and made the first move.

"Water Release: Oceanic Bullet!"

Yagura opened its mouth, and released a huge water missile at Naruto and Mei. The two of them jumped away in opposite directions. However, Yagura wasn't done. Much to their shock, he kept firing watery projectiles nonstop at the two of them. Naruto made several hand seals while running to avoid them.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Naruto blew a powerful gust of wind at the incoming water missile. It spun mid air for a few seconds, trying to overpower Naruto's attacks, before it ran out of momentum, and fell to the ground with a splash. Yagura, however, chuckled, and fired a volley of more water missiles at Naruto.

"Now's my chance to strike!" Mei thought as she made several hand seals. "Lava Release: Melting Apparition Jutsu!"

Mei expelled a stream of lava from her mouth and hit Yagura in the side. The transformed jinchuriki let out a scream of pain as he looked at Mei with hate filled eyes.

"You'll pay for that," he darkly said, before he curled into a ball. "Shadow Stroke!"

Yagura then rolled into Mei at a quick pace, trying to bulldoze her. Mei was agile enough to dodge him, but much to her surprise, after passing her, Yagura spun around and charged back at her. The process was repeated several times.

"Naruto-kun, I could use some help here! I don't know how long I will last!" Mei called, in an almost pleading tone.

"I'm almost there! Bring him closer!" Naruto said as he was preparing his strongest attack, helped by a clone.

Mei nodded, and started to run towards Naruto as fast as she could. Yagura, however, was much faster, and would catch her in no time.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto tossed the chakra shuriken at Mei, followed by Yagura. Mei was fast enough to jump out of the way. However, Yagura's speed was turned against him when he saw that he had build so much momentum he couldn't maneuver properly, and thus, the attack connected.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRGHHH!" Yagura screamed as he was engulfed by a vortex of extremely powerful and razor sharp winds.

"Finally!" Naruto said, happy to see that his jutsu had connected.

"Will he survive?" Mei asked a bit worried, as she watched Yagura in pain, as the wind currents tore him apart.

"I don't know. A normal human shouldn't. But given the control he has over his Tailed Beast. He might," Naruto said, placing a finger under his chin. "Even then, he won't be in any shape to fight after that."

"Alright then. Let's get ready to... what?" Mei asked, her eyes looking at Yagura once again.

Yagura was completely immobile. His skin had been covered by a coral-like armor that protected him from the razor winds. When the vortex subsided, the coral armor shattered, revealing a very angry Yagura. He was grumbling and moaning in pain, though there was no visible injury on his body. Even then, the Three Tails' chakra would heal them over time.

"That jutsu..." Yagura replied, panting, as his arms and legs trembled. "For the first time in a long time, you, Konoha jinchuriki, made me feel fear..." Yagura said, as if it was an unforgivable

offense. "That was your strongest jutsu, right? In that case, let me show you mine!"

Yagura raised his head, and opened his mouth. Red and blue Chakra particles started to gather, forming a dark purple chakra orb that continually grew in size. Mei paled in horror, while Naruto looked worried.

"Naruto-kun, Yagura's charging a Tailed Beast Ball. That's a Tailed Beast's most powerful move. If he hit us with that, we're as good as dead," Mei ominously warned. "Your Rasenshuriken is powerful, maybe enough to stop it?"

"You think so?" Naruto asked, unsure, but realized there was no time to waste asking questions. "O-Okay!"

Naruto and his clone started to work on a second Rasenshuriken as fast as they could. Mei, meanwhile, looked at the forming jutsu with interest.

"So you spin your chakra into a spiraling sphere, then channel elemental chakra through it, right?" Mei said, after a quick glance.

"Pretty much. You're pretty smart if you guessed it after seeing it just once," Naruto praised. Mei didn't say anything, walked close to him, and placed her hands above the jutsu. "Uh? What are you doing?"

"Increasing our chances. Do you think it can handle a second element?" Mei asked, and before Naruto could answer, she started to pump fire chakra into the jutsu.

"We'll see it soon enough," Naruto said as he warily looked at Yagura. The orb in his mouth had reached a worrying size.

"NOW TASTE DESPAIR!" Yagura yelled as he launched the ball forward. "TAILED BEAST BALL!"

"Scorch Release: Spiraling Burning Wind!"

Mei and Naruto tossed the burning chakra shuriken as well, and both attacks met in the middle. The combination attack expanded into a vortex of raging flames powered by powerful winds, while the Tailed Beast Ball tried to power through. Still, Yagura's attack was unable to push forward, ending it in a massive explosion. When the resulting smoke of both attacks dispelled, there was a massive crater in front of them.

"We did it!" Naruto cheered.

"Yes, but don't celebrate it yet. That Tailed Beast Ball wasn't very powerful," Mei told Naruto. "My guess is that Yagura is holding himself back due not wanting to level his village, but that may change soon."

"Damn..." Naruto muttered. Noticing that he was no longer in Sage Mode, he dispelled his last clone. "I have no more clones gathering nature energy. Once all my current nature energy runs out, I will be useless, so we have to finish this now."

"I think that we'll need Tailed Beast power to match his," Mei said, shooting a meaningful look at Naruto.

Understanding what the rebel meant, Naruto looked downwards. "I know but... I still can't control it. Is that a good idea? It can only create even more trouble."

"I know, but may have no choice. And don't worry if you lose control, your sensei gave me..." Mei's hand reached into her ninja tool pouch, to make sure the suppressing seals were there. And the moment her fingers touched them, an idea dawned upon her. "Of course, that's it! I can't believe I didn't think of this earlier!"

"Huh? What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"Your sensei gave me some sealing tags that would suppress the Nine Tails' chakra in case you lose control," Mei explained.

"Ah, yes. My dad made them so I don't endanger my friends if the fox goes out of control," Naruto continued.

"And if he works on the Nine Tails, do you think it will work on one of its siblings?" Mei asked, as she looked at the approaching Yagura.

Naruto slapped his forehead. "Oh damn! I can't believe we didn't think of that!"

"Do not fret. It's not too late to carry the idea out. Alright Naruto, I need you to distract Yagura. He must not suspect anything," Mei instructed him.

"Alright. Since I don't have clones gathering nature energy, now I can use as many shadow clones as I want, so this shouldn't be hard," Naruto said, as he prepared to face Yagura once again.

Meanwhile, not far away from there, the unconscious Aiko started to stir, as her consciousness slowly returned to her. Blinking a couple times until her eyes adjusted to the light, the Mizukage's wife saw a medic-nin using the Mystic Palm Healing jutsu on her.

"Ah, you're awake, Aiko-sama! Don't worry, I treated all your injuries, you'll be fine in an instant," the medic-nin assured with a reassuring smile.

The blonde woman looked around, and saw a bunch of other Kiri ninja surrounding her. Some looking at her, others looking at something she couldn't see. It was then when she realized of something important.

"What are you doing here!? That rebel whore is trying to assassinate my husband! Go and help him!" Aiko commanded.

"We tried, Aiko-sama, but the scale of the battle is greater than us. I'm afraid that we'd be more of a hindrance for Mizukage-sama than actual help," a Kiri jonin pointed out.

"You were part of that battle, right? That's how you ended up like this," the medic-nin guessed. "If we follow your example, we'll only get caught in the crossfire and become collateral damage."

"You lot of cowards! When this is over, I won't forget this! Now get out of the way, my husband needs me!" Aiko said as she tried to stand up, but winced when a wave of pain surged through her body.

"Easy there, Aiko-sama, I haven't finished with you yet," the medic-nin said as he forced her to remain lying down in the ground.

"Don't worry, we won't plan to let Mizukage-sama die against the rebels. We'll wait for the best moment to strike," a masked ANBU assured her.

...

"Is everybody okay?" Haku asked the people around him.

There were both rebel and loyalist Kiri ninja, and a couple of Konoha ninja as well. All of them equally confused, no longer fighting. Dagura was still in the ground, unconscious. If it wasn't for Haku, all of them would likely be dead.

Haku looked up, and saw his almost destroyed, two-layered ice dome. He saw a strange looking bird dropping something on them. Even if he didn't know what it was, the Ice Ninja had a bad feeling, and tried to protect both him and his allies from the incoming danger. And Haku himself wasn't sure if his ice barriers could resist all those explosions. It was close, but they did.

In all honestly he didn't care about the enemy ninjas, but it was either save everybody, or no one. Though even then, Haku was a bit grateful that he had avoided unnecessary deaths, even from the side he was fighting against.

Looking at the sky, Haku saw the strange bird flying away. Now he could see there was a figure riding it. Dread started to set in as the

ice ninja realized that the bird and his rider were heading towards the Mizukage's palace, where Naruto and Mei were fighting Yagura.

"Naruto-kun... please be safe..."

...

"Rasengan Barrage!"

Yagura saw multiple Narutos leaping at him, a Rasengan on hand each. Yagura grinned. While this was a formidable attack, for a ninja of his caliber this would be still insufficient. The transformed jinchuriki once again curled into a ball.

"Shadow Stroke!"

Yagura used the same attack he had employed on Mei, and dashed towards the blond. He plowed into the clones at such speed they were unable to strike him with their chakra spheres. He took advantage of both his building momentum and the rebound to freely bounce from one cluster of clones to another, easily destroying them all.

"That's the best you can do?" Yagura taunted.

"How about this?" The other clones replied as they surrounded Yagura from different directions. "Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Yagura was assaulted by multiple tornados coming from different directions. The resulting clash ended up forming one massive tornado, so brutal it threw Yagura into the air.

"Mei, now!" Naruto jumped.

Yagura saw a red and blue blur leap into the tornado, and use its currents to fly at him. Whatever they were planned, it couldn't be good. Even if he doubted they could do any real damage to him, he'd better not take any chance. He opened his mouth and started to gather Tailed Beast chakra on it.

"Die, you traitor!" Yagura bellowed as he swallowed the small energy ball. "Tailed Beast Wave!"

Upon opening his mouth, Yagura released a destructive wave of chakra that hit Mei full on, almost instantly vaporizing her. The attack also managed to dispel the tornado, and Yagura landed on the ground with a loud thud. He couldn't help but rejoice at the thought of Mei finally dying. His attack had wiped her off of the face of the planet so fast... and that was exactly what tipped Yagura that there something off.

"Wait a second, that wasn't Mei, but a clone!" Yagura said, looking around. "Where's the real one? What are you planning?"

The ground at Yagura's feet cracked, and the real Mei burst from underground. Before Yagura had time to react, she slapped the sealing tag onto the jinchuriki's forehead, as she made a hand seal while pumping chakra into it.

"Suppressing Seal... activate!"

The seal started glow, as tendrils of blue chakra formed from it and began to wrap around Yagura.

"AAAAAARGGHH! WHAT IS THIS!? WHAT IS THIS!?" The jinchuriki roared as he tried to pull it away, to no avail.

Naruto and Mei watched carefully as the Tailed Beast chakra started to fade, little by little. Yagura eventually regressed into his human form, with a chakra cloak that it too started to vanish. Once there was no more Tailed Beast chakra, the seal instantly burned in a flash.

The experience had left the Mizukage completely drained and exhausted. He tried to call the Three Tails' chakra again, but found himself unable to. He didn't know if it was because of the seal or his current state, but he didn't care. Those bastards had deprived him of

his greatest asset, and he would make them pay. That's it, if the rest of his body didn't hurt so much.

"You... you..." Yagura groaned as he tried to get back on his feet.

"It's over, Yagura. You've lost. Surrender so no more lives have to be wasted in this war," Mei told him.

"Like hell it's over! For you, you betraying whore!" a vaguely familiar female voice said.

At that moment, Aiko and a group of Kiri ninja landed around Yagura, Mei and Naruto. Aiko quickly went to check Yagura, and helped him back on his feet.

"Are you okay, dear?" A concerned Aiko asked.

"Much better now that you're here, and you're okay," Yagura smiled at her. Then, he turned at Mei and Naruto, and smirked. "You may have defeated me, but even if you won this battle, you're about to lose the war! My loyal ninja, execute these traitors immediately!"

Mei and Naruto tensed up, and adopted fighting stances as the Kiri ninja unsheathed their weapons and came closer. Mei gritted her teeth at the sight of the current situation. She has been so close to defeating Yagura, and now the tables had been turned. Would her and Naruto, tired as they were, be able to fight Yagura's ninja, and finish the fight before the Mizukage fled? Well, on the bright side, Naruto had still Sage mode.

Said blond then took his eyes from the current enemies to look at something in the sky.

"Hey, what's that?" Naruto asked.

Aiko, being a sensor, realized that Naruto wasn't lying and something was flying above them. Looking up, she saw a giant white bird dropping something on them. A bad feeling washed over her.

"Everybody, duck and cover!" she cried.

But it was too late, and the entire area was engulfed by explosions. While the explosions weren't strong enough to kill them, they did their job and left them temporarily disabled for the bomber to do his job.

The giant white bird landed, and everybody saw a long haired blond man wearing a black cloak with red clouds. While such attire didn't mean anything for most people there, there was one person who paled in horror upon seeing it.

"Akatsuki!" Naruto cried. "Yagura, you need to leave! That man has come for you!"

Yagura didn't hear Naruto. The explosion had sent him to the ground again, and was trying to get back on his feet. Aiko, however, did, and placed herself between her husband and the new threat.

"If you want to get the Mizukage, you'll have to get through me first!" she defiantly yelled.

"While a tempting offer, it won't be necessary," the Akatsuki said, before clearing his throat. "There were nine, but now there's just one!"

The Akatsuki then waited expectantly for something to happen, but everything remained the same.

"Wasn't that the line?" he asked. "Oh, right! It was 'Let's the nine be one now!'"

But again, nothing happened. Everybody looked at each other awkwardly.

"What the hell, those weren't the words either?" the Akatsuki indignantly asked. He then started to search through his cloak. "Where did I put the cheat sheet...?"

Yagura got on his feet, and glanced at his men.

"Execute this idiot too as well," he ordered.

His ninja nodded, and moved to attack the Akatsuki. However, at that point, the Akatsuki pulled a crumbled paper out, and read its contents.

"The time has come for the nine to become one!"

The effect was instant. Yagura clutched his head as he fell to his knees. His ninja forgot about his orders, and went into the Mizukage's aid.

"Yagura, what's happening!?" Aiko asked.

"Mizukage-sama, are you okay!?" a worried Kiri ninja asked.

The, Yagura stopped screaming. He stopped clutching his head and rose back on his feet. He didn't look to be in pain anymore.

"What are your orders, master?" Yagura asked the Akatsuki.

The blond man grinned. "I've been sent to pick you up, so get over here and let's get going," he said, as he pointed at his artificial bird.

"Right," Yagura nodded as he started to walk towards the Akatsuki, much to the everybody else's shock.

"Yagura, what are you doing?" Aiko asked as she grabbed Yagura's arm.

Yagura wordlessly shook her arm off of his, and pushed his wife back.

"That's it. The definitive proof he was under someone else's mind control," Mei thought.

"We can't let this man kidnap Mizukage-sama! Everybody, attack!" a Kiri Jonin said. His comrades snapped, nodded, and prepared to attack.

"Naruto, let's join them! We can't let Akatsuki take Yagura away!" Mei told the blond jinchuriki, whom nodded in return.

"Ah, trying to stop me? That's not good," the Akatsuki said, shaking his head, before he made a hand seal. "Then again, I'm more than happy to have a chance to show off my art!"

A second artificial bird dived from above, releasing more bombs over the group. The Kiri ninja were forced to abort the rescue attempt and run to find some cover. Using the explosions as a smokescreen, the Akatsuki and Yagura took off and flew high into the sky.

"NO! Yagura, come back! YAGURA!" Aiko impotently screamed as she saw her husband being spirited away by the Akatsuki. She fell on her knees and continued screaming as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Author's Note: So there you have it. Akatsuki ends up abducting Yagura. I know it's not the ending some of you were expecting, since you were hoping for him to live, but I can't just spare everybody. Akatsuki needs to score some victories, or they would come off as rather ineffective villains. And boy, poor Aiko. Seeing her husband flying to his death shortly after finding about his brainwashing.

Anyway, I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and all its fights. Naturally, the one I liked to write the most was the main event with Mei and Yagura, but I also loved to do the Zabuza, Chojuro and Ameuri vs Kisame. That's one fight I always loved to do, since unlike Mei vs Yagura, I didn't see anybody doing it, and hope that you liked it as much. Also, this won't be the last time Zabuza and Kisame clash in the battlefield ;)

If anybody is wondering, yeah, the war has finally come to an end. The next chapter will be the last one of this arc, it will feature the reunification of Kirigakure, Mei finally becoming Mizukage, and will wrap up all the remaining loose threads, such as what will happen with Zabuza and Haku. I know that this arc has been rather long (way longer than I had anticipated) and some of you want this story to adapt Shippuden already. To those who think like that, just bear with this a little more, just one more chapter.

Thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

End of the Civil War

Author's Note: And with this chapter, not only does the Kirigakure Arc come to an end, but we also reach the 50th chapter milestone! Let's see how much the story has grown upon this point:

607066 views

1903 favorites

2283 alerts

and 1654 reviews!

Thanks a lot to everybody who reads, favorites, follows and reviews this story. It wouldn't be the same without you.

Boy, 50 chapters already. Time surely flies, doesn't it? Wonder how much it will take until we reach chapter number 100. Anyway, enjoy the end of the current arc:

Chapter 50:

End of the Civil War

or

And Here Ends the Detour

...

"NO! Yagura, come back! YAGURA!" Aiko screamed as she saw her husband being spirited away by the Akatsuki.

Mei looked on as the artificial bird flew away. While some of her Konoha allies could summon flying animals, by the time she managed to contact either of them, the Akatsuki would be far away, probably even beyond the Land of Water's borders.

The rebel leader couldn't help but feel a tinge of sympathy for Aiko. The blonde kunoichi had been her mortal enemy not even a minute ago, yet in that minute, her whole world had crumbled. However, it was no time to feel sorry. Mei walked towards the kneeled Aiko, still crying her eyes out. The Kiri ninja besides her looked at Mei apprehensively, but didn't try to stop her. Mei placed a comforting hand on Aiko's shoulder.

"Aiko-san, what has happened here is tragic, but this isn't over," Mei began. "There are fights going on all around the village. We have to stop them before more lives are senselessly wasted. Being the Mizukage's wife, they'll listen to you."

Aiko fought back the tears, tried to compose herself, and stood back on her feet. She tried to gave Mei a determined stare, but she was unable to hide her sadness.

"Y-Yes," Aiko replied. "It's just... I can't believe you were right..."

"It's okay, Aiko-san. There may still be time. We can still send a squad of Hunter-nin to track down Yagura," Mei told her in a reassuring tone, though deep down, she doubted they could save Yagura. "But not before stopping the fighting first."

"If I cooperate, do I have your word that my men will be spared?" she asked.

Mei nodded in return. "You have my word they will. It would be unbelievably cruel of me to punish them for just defending their village."

Aiko nodded, and turned towards her men. "Everybody, spread and tell our forces to stop fighting, and surrender to the rebels."

...

Meanwhile, back in the streets of Kirigakure, the fights went on. Among those, one of the most intense was the clash between Kisame and the three rebel Swordsmen. Despite the numerical disadvantage, it was obvious that Kisame had the upper hand. Despite the wound caused by Zabuza earlier, it had already closed and fully healed thanks to the chakra absorbed by the living sword Samehada.

"Water Release: Multiple Water Shark Bullet!"

Several watery shark-shaped missiles came from the mass of water, and flew towards the rebel swordsmen with their jaws wide open. Zabuza's hand flew through hand seals as he prepared a counterattack.

"Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Using that same water, Zabuza created a huge, serpentine dragon, But rather than directing it towards Kisame, he made it coil around the three swordsmen, blocking them from Kisame's attack. Ameyuri and Chojuro then took the opportunity to leap at Kisame and attack.

"He may not be able to use ninjutsu directly against me, but he knows how to use it in a defensive manner. Not bad, Zabuza-san. Not bad," Kisame observed, before he directed his attention towards the incoming youths.

"Die already, you walking fish!" Ameyuri angrily shouted as she brought down her two swords.

Kisame raised his own sword, easily parrying both her and Chojuro's attack. He looked at Ameyuri, and laughed. "Walking fish? That's the best you can come up with, girl?"

While he was struggling, Zabuza Body Flickered behind him, and raised his sword for the kill. Unfortunately for him, Kisame had

noticed the masked swordsman's tactic, and prepared a countermeasure accordingly. As Zabuza was about to attack, a Water Clone formed between the two senior Swordsmen, parrying the attack.

"Come on Chojuro, it's two versus one! We should be able to overpower him!" Ameyuri said, as she tried to push harder.

"You should also count Samehada as your enemy too, girl. It's not like the rest of the swords," Kisame chuckled as he overpowered Ameyuri and Chojuro, pushing them back. "Now-!"

"Hey, Kisame!" a voice shouted from the sky.

Recognizing his temporary partner, Kisame disengaged the young swordsmen and jumped backwards in order to put some safety distance between him and his foes. Two artificial birds flew towards him, one of them being ridden by his temporary partner and the jinchuriki they came to find.

"The package is safe and ready to deliver! We need to go, now!" Deidara urged him.

"Awwww, so soon? I was having so much fun..." Kisame said in a mock sad tone, before jumping onto the second bird. "Guess work comes before pleasure. Alright then, let's go!"

Of course, it took no time for the rebels to realize that Yagura was with the Akatsuki, and much to their confusion, he wasn't restrained nor unconscious. Then again, that didn't matter, their mission was to either capture or kill Yagura. Letting him escape wasn't an option.

"Is that... Yagura?" Chojuro pointed out as he adjusted his glasses.

"We can't let them escape!" Ameyuri said as she spread her arms forward, with the tip of her swords pointing to the sky. "This attack will drain all my chakra, but it'll be worth it! I doubt that blond guy can absorb ninjutsu too. Thundersword Ninja Art: Thunder Gate!"

Ameyuri's swords send bolts of electricity towards the sky. In a few seconds, all the gathered electricity would be redirected towards the blond Akatsuki and Yagura in the form of a devastating and impossible to avoid lightning bolt. Too bad she won't be able to complete the jutsu in time.

"And before we leave, let's give this boring village another taste of my art as a goodbye gift!" Deidara said as he dropped several of his clay figurines from above.

Zabuza's eyes widened as he realized what was going to happen. "Ameyuri, cancel the attack! Everybody, duck and cover!"

Thankfully, the younger swordsmen didn't waste precious time asking him what was going on, and followed their captain's orders. Their curiosity, however, was sated when several explosions rocked the area, explosions that would have engulfed them if they didn't do as Zabuza told them and found a safe place to hide. They spent hidden a few more moments, until they made sure the Akatsuki won't feel like finishing them off.

However, once they came out of their hiding spots, they saw that the Akatsuki were far into the sky, with Yagura in their power. This cast a doubt over what would be of their rebellion now.

"That was a close one. Thanks, Zabuza-taicho," Ameyuri told the senior swordsman. "It seems you were familiar with his jutsu. Did you met that Akatsuki before?"

Zabuza shook his head. "No, but he appears in my bingo book. Deidara, a missing-nin who formerly served Iwa, and one of the best masters of the Explosion Release despite his young age."

"That was very knowledgeable of you, Zabuza-taicho," Chojuro praised.

Zabuza huffed in response. "Of course! Being a ninja isn't just a matter of knowing jutsu or even killing people. Knowledge of your

potential enemies is always a must."

"Alright, and now that Yagura has fled, what do we do now? Do we keep fighting?" Ameyuri asked.

"For the time being, yes. Though I presume that, with Yagura gone, the battle should end soon. From now on, let's disperse and support our allies across the village," Zabuza stated.

"Yes, sir!" Ameyuri and Chojuro said at once, before leaping away in different directions.

...

With Aiko's help, all the Kirigakure defenders were told to surrender to the rebels. She told everybody that the rebels were right, Yagura was a pawn of the Akatsuki brainwashed to weaken the village from the inside, and had been abducted in order to extract his Tailed Beast once his uselessness had come to an end.

Many took the orders with a decent amount of skepticism, but all of them complied in the end, since they did see the Akatsuki flying on white artificial birds made of clay (the explosives those birds dropped as they flew by were pretty hard to miss).

The first one to stop fighting weren't the ninja, but the Chakra Golems. As most rebels guessed and every loyalist knew, the golems were bound to Yagura, so the moment the Mizukage was too far away from the village, the link was broken and the machines became inert.

Thankfully, despite the invasion, the village ended up much less damaged than both invaders and defenders feared. The area with the most damage was, ironically, the one with the least people fighting. But when said people were two jinchuriki, one of them a Kage, and the Rebel Leader, it was only logical.

The two days following the invasion were the more chaotic. While the loyalist ninja were briefly incarcerated, it didn't last long since they needed all the available hands to help with the reconstruction effort. And when they heard from Aiko's own mouth that yes, the Mizukage had been brainwashed by the Akatsuki, they had no qualms working under the rebels. Some of them even volunteered to be part of Yagura's search and rescue team.

The fact that the rebels managed to save Yagura's son from a certain death definitely helped to ease the tensions a lot.

And after two days, they decided it was time for a new Kage to take the hat. While the palace wasn't completely repaired, it was good enough for the ceremony to be held. A large crowd formed in front of the palace, composed of mostly civilians, Kirigakure ninja -all of them wearing the rebel blue uniform, since the red one has been discarded- and Konoha ninja. The six Swordsmen were proudly standing at the front. Miyako could finally show her Helmet Splitter, while Suigetsu and Kumori were given the Sewing Needle and the Splatter, respectively.

"Whoa, she did have a boyfriend!" Suigetsu exclaimed to himself, as when he got sight of Karin holding hands with Neji. "And a hot one to boot! How did that redheaded nerd get to date such a guy outside her league?" the white haired teen asked, before being shushed by Ameyuri.

Ao appeared in the palace's central balcony, and addressed the crowd.

"People of Kirigakure, friends of Konoha, without further ado, meet Kirigakure's Fifth Mizukage, Mei Terumi!" Ao announced, as he took a step back.

Wearing her usual clothes, with the Mizukage's hat covering her head, Mei walked into the balcony, and gazed at the crowd below.

"For a long time, Kirigakure had been nothing but a pawn of a terrorist organization, and locked in a civil war. But that time is over! Today, a new era begins! An era in which civilians and foreigners won't fear us nor think of us as bloodthirsty savages, but admire us for our strength and unbreakable resolve!" Mei shouted, and her speech was met with a huge uproar. "There are still many things to do. We need to rebuild our beautiful village. And healing the wounds caused over the past years on both sides will be a long and hard process. But I have faith that together, we will be able to do it!"

...

Naruto and his friends were among the crowd, clapping and cheering for Mei. They were happy that, after such a brutal battle, the civil war had finally ended, and Kirigakure would enter a new, better age.

"So, how was fighting the Mizukage, Naruto?" Kurenai asked the blond.

Naruto sighed upon remembering the battle, but then grinned. "The most brutal fight ever! There were times I thought I was a goner, but not even a perfect jinchuriki can stand before my awesomeness!" Naruto boasted.

"I'd wish I was there to help you, Naruto-kun," Hinata told him, as she held his hand. "The thought of you having to fight such an opponent with no help other than Mei-san was distressing."

"Aw, you don't have to worry for me, Hinata-hime. Besides, I don't think I would have been able to focus properly if you were there. Yagura was a tough opponent, and you could have been seriously hurt," Naruto told her.

"I know," Hinata said, not without resignation. "This made me realize that I have to be stronger if I ever want to fight alongside you."

"Don't feel bad for not being able to measure to a Kage, Hinata-san," Haku reassured her. "Zabuza-sama is a strong and skilled ninja, and

he was no match for Yagura either."

"Speaking of the devil," Kurenai mentioned, as she nodded forward.

The group then noticed that Zabuza was heading towards them. It was obvious what he wanted. Wordlessly, Haku walked towards the swordsman, while the rest of his team stayed behind, but carefully watched the scene.

"Zabuza-sama," Haku greeted him.

"Haku, there's something I need to talk you about," Zabuza began. "Since the day I took you in, you've been my greatest asset. Skilled, obedient, and incredibly loyal. Not only you helped me during countless dangerous situations, but your mere presence even spared me from being executed when the Uchiha Insurrection failed. And when the time came to bring the fight back to Yagura, you were by my side. I could have never asked for a better tool to fulfill my ambitions."

"I'm happy to hear that, Zabuza-sama," Haku said with a slight head bow. "I live to fight for you, and always will."

"That's the problem, Haku," Zabuza said, much to the Ice Ninja's shock.

"What? Zabuza-sama, is there something wrong?" Haku tilted his head in confusion.

"Even if I'm not Mizukage yet, I'm the closest I've ever been to fulfill my ambitions. Being the captain of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist grants me the best chance to become Mizukage, and I know that Mei won't hold onto the hat forever. However, what remains of the path, I can walk it alone. I have no more use for you, Haku. Your usefulness has come to an end," Zabuza coldly stated.

Despite the harshness those words were coated in, Haku's heart was filled with rejoice, as he gasped in pleasant surprise.

"Zabuza-sama, does that mean...?" Haku dared to ask.

Zabuza nodded. "Yes. Since I do not require your help anymore, you can stay in Konoha if you wish to do so."

Haku didn't say anything, just remained there, silent, and motionless. Despite being a native of the Land of Water and loving Zabuza like a father, he didn't want to leave Konoha. He had grown there, and grew to see it as his home. In fact, he had already prepared to leave his life behind in order to continue working under Zabuza. Yet now, he was told that he wouldn't have to give that up.

Overwhelmed with joy, Haku jumped forward and wrapped his arms around Zabuza. While startled at first, Zabuza hugged his protégé back, this time without anybody having to tell him to.

"Thank you, Zabuza-sama. Thank you for everything..." Haku softly said as tears started to come from his eyes.

"It's okay, kid. You did a good job. Consider this is your reward," Zabuza said as he himself was fighting back the tears.

They broke the embrace, and looked at each other in the eye.

"If you ever need me, Zabuza-sama, you can always call me. I'll never turn down a request from you," Haku said.

Zabuza smirked under his mask. "For the time being, that won't be necessary, but I'll keep that in mind."

"HAKU!" Naruto shouted as he glomped his teammate. "You're staying! That's so great!"

"Indeed it is. When a team loses a member, it never goes back to the way it used to be, even with a replacement," Kurenai said.

"Thank you for letting Haku stay with us, Zabuza-san. I know you must have grown to love Haku like a son, and it must be really hard for you to let him go," Hinata thanked Zabuza as he made a bow.

"Like a son...? What nonsense are you talking about, girl!?" Zabuza asked, visibly nervous. "Haku is nothing but a tool to me, no more!"

Both Kurenai and Hinata couldn't help but giggle in amusement, while Haku smiled knowingly. They decided it would probably be for the best not to tease the swordsman too much.

"Well, I think everything that had to be said has been said already. Before you leave, Haku, Mei wants to have one last talk with you, so follow me," Zabuza said as he turned around and walked towards the palace.

"Hey, Zabuza, wait a second!" Naruto called.

Zabuza turned around and glared at the blond. "What do you want, brat?"

"I just remembered something. I need to talk with Mei, I mean, with the Mizukage, too, about an important issue," Naruto began.

"Say no more, brat. Follow me," Zabuza said as he continued walking towards the palace, with Naruto and Haku behind.

...

Mizukage's Palace

While Naruto had been in the Mizukage's Palace not even a week ago when he stormed it alongside Mei, he didn't have the time to admire it. Unlike the Hokage's Tower, which has a rather plain and utilitarian design on the inside, the Mizukage's Palace had much more emphasis on decoration. The floors were covered in beautiful rugs, plenty of pictures of the Land of Water's landscape, alongside portraits of some of Kirigakure's most prominent past ninja. Multiple weapons also decorated the walls.

The trio eventually reached a double door, which Naruto guessed it would be the palace's council room. His guess was proven right

when Zabuza opened the door, and they saw Mei talking with some of her ninja, and some civilians. When Mei looked at the newcomers, she smiled.

"Oh, good, you're here," Mei then turned towards the people she was talking to. "Can we continue this discussion later? I need to discuss something with these Konoha ninja before they leave."

"Of course, Mizukage-sama," one of the ninja replied, before he and the rest of them left Mei alone with Zabuza, Haku, and Naruto.

"Here is Haku," Zabuza announced. "Naruto wanted to tag along. Said he had something important to discuss with you. I guessed you could spend some time hearing him before he leaves."

"Of course. Thanks for being so swift, Zabuza-kun. You can leave now," Mei politely dismissed him.

"Mizukage-sama," Zabuza replied with a slight bow, before leaving quietly.

"Wow. I never thought I'd see Zabuza acting so... submissive towards anybody," Haku noticed, rather surprised. "You certainly made an impression when you fought against him, Mizukage-sama."

Mei smile grew. "Zabuza-kun needs a strong woman that can set him straight and put him in his place. He also needs a woman so he can blow some steam, if you know what I mean," Mei replied, as she winked at both Haku and Naruto. Both boys started to blush like crazy and smile awkwardly. Mei's smile vanished, and let out a weary sigh. "And I need to blow some steam too, and I'm not talking about my Bloodline Limit. Kami knows when was the last time I had some action..."

"With all due respect, Mizukage-sama, but I presume you didn't call me to talk about your more intimate aspects of your personal life, right?" Haku asked, hoping the answer would be 'no'.

"Oh, right, sorry. Guess I got a bit carried away, hehe," Mei chuckled as well. "You see, thanks to Konoha's help, we managed to oust Yagura and unite Kirigakure. Given how valuable allies they turned out to be, I'm planning a series of measures to strengthen our bonds. Among them, is the establishment of an embassy in Konoha. Naturally, Konoha can also establish an embassy here if the Hokage wishes to," Mei said, looking at Naruto.

The blond got the hint. "Right! I'll tell dad when we arrive home."

"That's an excellent idea, but may I ask what it has to do with me?" Haku asked.

Mei chuckled again. "It isn't obvious, Haku-kun? I want you to become Kiri's ambassador in Konoha. You will be the link that keeps the two villages together."

"While I'm honored to see you want me to take such a position, I don't think I may be the most appropriate candidate. I'm not even a Kiri ninja," Haku countered.

"I know. But you're a Land of Water native. And don't forget that, besides the training you got from Konoha, you were also instructed by my current captain of the Seven Swordsmen. So in a way, that makes you both a Konoha and a Kiri ninja. And that makes you the ideal candidate to become our ambassador," Mei explained.

"I guess I can't argue against such arguments. Therefore, I accept being Kirigakure's ambassador in Konoha," Haku said, as he bowed politely.

"Good, I knew we'd reach an understanding. This yours, by the way," Mei said, as he handed Haku a Kirigakure forehead protector. "You can wear it alongside your Konoha one, if you choose to."

"I will wear it with pride, Mizukage-sama," Haku replied.

"Good. You can leave if you wish. And now that's settled..." Mei then turned towards Naruto, who was waiting for her to be done with Haku. "I believe Zabuza-kun said there was something you need to discuss with me?"

"Indeed it is," Naruto replied. "Remember those golems we had to fight during the war?"

"Hard to forget them. Something that can absorb ninjutsu like that is my natural enemy," Mei chuckled. "What about those?"

"The seals they used to power up the golems, their ninjutsu-absorption abilities... they were all Uzumaki seals," Naruto pointed out.

"Oh..." Mei replied in realization.

"I know those seals were the spoils of a war that happened before the two of us were even born, but since you want to improve the relationship between our villages even further, it would be nice if you returned the stolen sealing knowledge to their original owners. The Uzumaki clan still exists in Konoha, even if we're just three people," Naruto explained.

Once again, Mei smiled tenderly at Naruto. "Of course, Naruto-kun. Having not one, but two Bloodline Limits myself, I know better than anybody the importance of a clan treasure. I'll order the original scrolls and books that were plundered from Kirigakure to be handed to you before you leave."

Naruto earnestly smiled in joy. "You mean it?"

"You have my word. It's the least I can do, given how much you helped me against Yagura," Mei told him.

"Really? Thanks a lot! I'd thought you'd be more resistant to give them back, but I'm glad you weren't! Anyway, that's all what you

wanted to tell you! Good luck with the whole Mizukage thing! One day, I'll be your equal as the Hokage!" Naruto cheerfully said.

Mei laughed softly. "I'm sure you will, Naruto-kun. Have a nice trip back."

Naruto nodded and left the council room. Once she was alone, Mei allowed herself to smile. Oh, children were so naive and easily to trick. Sure, she was going to return the original scrolls and books to the Uzumaki Clan. After all what Konoha did for her, that would have been extremely rude, not to mention foolish.

Too bad Naruto didn't say anything about all the *copies* the previous Mizukage had made of such sealing knowledge...

...

With everything said and done, there was nothing left for the Konoha ninja to do in Kiri, so they decided it was time for them to return home. Most Konoha ninja had already boarded the ship that would take them back to the Land of Fire. Only a few of them remained. Among them, Haku Yuki.

The Ice Ninja was about to say goodbye to the most important person in his life, Zabuza. Mei was also there to bid the Konoha ninja goodbye.

"Well, kid, this is it. From now onwards, our paths will diverge," Zabuza said, his voice having a tinge of melancholy.

"I know I said this already, but if you ever need me, don't hesitate to send me a message," Haku insisted. "Thanks for everything, Zabuza-sama. It was thanks to you that I got a second chance at life, and I'll never forget what you did for me."

"I'll never forget what you did for me, either," Zabuza replied. "But don't be so down. I'm sure we will meet again, sooner than you expect."

Haku nodded. He then turned at Mei, and in front of her, he pulled out the Kirigakure forehead protector, and wore it on his neck like Hinata did, since he was already wearing the Konoha forehead protector there, like Naruto and most Konoha ninja did.

"Thank you to you as well, Mizukage-sama. I'll keep working on making Konoha and Kiri's bond even stronger," Haku promised her.

"I have no doubt you will," Mei smiled tenderly at him. "Now you better get into the ship. All your friends are already on board, and I'm sure all of you want to get back home."

"Indeed. Goodbye then," Haku said, before making a polite bow, and got into the ship.

As the last Konoha ninja boarded, the access stairs were removed, and the ship started to move. Wordlessly, Zabuza turned around and started to walk. Mei walked besides him.

"You did the right thing, Zabuza-kun," Mei reassured, as he patted the swordsman in the shoulder. "The kid will be better in Konoha."

Zabuza sighed. "In moments like this, I miss the times in which I wasn't ruled by any kind of moral compass."

For a split second, Mei could have sworn she saw tears forming on Zabuza's eyes.

...

Haku was leaning against the ship's railing, watching Kirigakure become smaller and smaller as the ship departed. Zabuza has been there to bid him a goodbye. It was short and to the point, like most of the time he opened his mouth.

"Everything all right, Haku?"

Haku noticed that Naruto and Hinata were besides him. Haku smiled a little, and nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine, don't worry," Haku reassured them.

"Come on Haku, we can see something troubles you," Hinata insisted.

"It's not much. It's that... well, I never imagined the day Zabuza-sama and I would part ways," Haku confessed. "I thought I would always be at his side, and if there was a time in which we wouldn't be together it would be because one of us wouldn't be among the living."

"It has to be hard, leaving somebody like him behind. Despite his rough exterior, he really cared about you," Hinata replied.

"Indeed it is. But I know Zabuza-sama will be fine without me. And one day in the future, we'll hear the news about how he has become the Sixth Mizukage," Haku hopefully guessed.

"Let's hope this time around he tries a less violent method, hehe," Naruto joked. "Anyway, did you tell Tenten about the news?"

"It was the first thing I did after I left the Mizukage's Palace. She couldn't be happier. Despite her promise to move to Kiri if I stayed here, I can tell she really didn't want to go with it. Konoha is her home. And truth be told, it's also mine," Haku admitted.

"We're also really glad that you're staying with us. If you left and they forced some new chump into our team... gah! That would be so lame! Thank goodness it's never going to happen!" Naruto said.

The three of them laughed merrily at the idea. No, their team would remain solid and stable until the three of them retired as ninja. Or at least, that's what they hoped.

"There you are, Naruto," a new voice said. The Assault Squad turned around, and saw Sasuke looking at them. "May I talk with you?"

Before Naruto could reply, Haku and Hinata decided to leave the deck, leaving the two of them alone.

"We'll go to the dining room to eat something. We'll wait you there, Naruto-kun," Hinata told him as he left.

Naruto nodded, and then turned at Sasuke. "So, what do you want to talk about?"

"You fought against Yagura alongside Mei." Sasuke stated. "Was he really mind controlled like they said?"

Sadness began to crept Naruto's face, as he regretfully nodded. "Yes."

"Judging by your mood, I presume you weren't successful in breaking the mind control," the Uchiha inquired, though it was pretty much a statement.

"No. Akatsuki got in the way before we could. At this point, the poor guy has to be dead," Naruto replied, as he let out a weary sigh. "Why do you ask? Does it remind you of the time I was mind controlled."

"Indeed," Sasuke laconically answered. "There's not a single day in which I don't ask myself what would have happened if I failed to break the mind control. That was the most intense fight I ever had, and even if in the future I-"

"Sorry for being rude but... what is your point?" Naruto interrupted. "This is not something I like to wallow in, given my failure."

"Sorry, guess I digressed" Sasuke replied, his tone unchanged. "I was going to say that, if you want to talk with someone about it, you can tell me."

Naruto was taken aback by Sasuke's sudden... openness. Usually, the Uchiha wasn't the most social or welcoming person.

"What?" Sasuke asked, noticing Naruto's reaction. "You think I won't understand?"

"No, it's not that. It's that..." Naruto began, trying to find the best way to word it. "It's just that... well, you're not the kind of person to offer emotional support to others, you know?"

Sasuke scowled a bit. "Hn," he grumbled, as he fixed a stare at Naruto, who chuckled awkwardly. "I know I never valued personal relationships much before. But then again, you were one of the few who offered me his support after my clan rebelled, and I'd like to return you the favor."

"Oh. Well, thanks. It means a lot to me," Naruto sincerely replied.

"Yagura... since he was also a jinchuriki, did you feel any kind of kinship towards him?" Sasuke asked.

"Yeah. He... he didn't deserve this," Naruto said. "He got a target on his back the moment he was made a jinchuriki, whenever it was, just like it happened with me. Hell, did you know that the whole Uchiha Insurrection was orchestrated by Obito just to create a smokescreen in order to get into the village and kidnap me? And I'm sure Orochimaru's invasion served a similar purpose. That's not even getting to my biological parents," Naruto bitterly recounted. "Despite we technically won, it really didn't feel like a victory. The only ones who won were the Akatsuki. Kirigakure may be at peace now, but they lost plenty of their ninja in a senseless conflict, their Kage among them."

Sasuke didn't say anything, just kept listening to the blond. He always found him so upbeat and optimist to the point of obnoxiousness, so seeing Naruto showing such an unknown side of him was a sight to behold. Not that it made anything he said any less true.

"There will always be scumbags like Obito and his Akatsuki pals who won't rest until they can get their hands on us, or better said, our

Tailed Beasts, for whatever purposes they may have," Naruto continued. "And do you know what's the worst part? All the collateral damage. All the people who die and suffer that have nothing to do with this."

Sasuke looked pensive. He then opened his mouth. "That makes me think that there may be other turmoil in foreign villages regarding their jinchuriki that we may not even be aware of," the Uchiha pointed out.

Naruto opened his eyes in realization. "Whoa, you're right!" he said.

"Too bad there's nothing we can do about them," Sasuke replied.

Naruto scowled at the Uchiha. "Says you!"

"No, say international borders. Naruto, I know that protecting the remaining jinchuriki is important, but we can't meddle into other village's affairs because we feel like it," Sasuke explained.

"Then I won't rest until dad talks with other Kage and form some sort of plan or coalition," Naruto suggested.

"Not to sound like a contrarian, but that might be way harder than you think," Sasuke warned Naruto. "Such action might be seen as Konoha trying to meddle with other villages' affairs. And from what Itachi and Shisui told me, they can be rather touchy when it comes to jinchuriki."

"I know, but I can't just sit down and do nothing. I can't let what happened with Yagura to happen again," a determined Naruto said. "So far, I know Gaara from Suna, and Fu from Taki. Kumo also had that weird rapping guy. Besides Yagura, there are other four jinchuriki we know nothing about their whereabouts."

"Whatever you plan to do, you can count me in," Sasuke told him.

Naruto smiled sincerely at the Uchiha. "Thanks a lot Sasuke. That means a lot."

In a rare display, Sasuke smiled back.

...

Konoha, a few days later

"Hokage-sama, the group sent to Kirigakure has returned to the village a few minutes ago," an owl masked ANBU told Jiraiya.

The Sannin was busy as usual with the never ending paperwork when an ANBU appeared to deliver the news. Jiraiya often wondered how they were doing in Kirigakure. That is, until he got a letter in which he was told that Yagura was no longer Mizukage, and that Mei Terumi had been recently inaugurated. That told him almost everything he needed to know, and knew that his ninja would come home any time now.

"Good. Did all of them make it back?" Jiraiya asked.

The ANBU shook his head. "Negative, sir. We had reported eleven casualties. Eight Chunin and three Jonin," the ANBU informed.

Jiraiya weighed those words. While the Konoha casualties were less than ten percent of the group that left with Mei, it was still disheartening to hear about them.

"Understood. Tell me their names so I can write a proper condolence letter to their families," Jiraiya instructed. "Also, I want to have a meeting with all the Jonin to hear from them how the campaign went."

"As you command, Hokage-sama," the ANBU said, but he didn't leave just yet. "One more thing, your son is here. He wishes to speak with you."

Jiraiya smiled upon seeing this. "Ah, good! So nice of Naruto to drop to see his old man, hehe! Tell him to come in!"

The ANBU nodded, and left the office. A couple seconds later, the Hokage's adoptive son walked in.

"Hey, dad," Naruto softly greeted.

"Naruto, it's so great to have you back!" Jiraiya happily greeted his son back. "Take a seat. Come on, tell me everything! How was the mission?"

"It was good," Naruto said as he sat down in front of the Sannin. "Yagura's reign of terror came to an end, and Mei is now Mizukage. Kirigakure is no longer embroiled in a civil war."

Despite the good news, Jiraiya frowned. He knew Naruto far too well to know that there was something more to those news. Naruto looked far way too subdued, to the point of sounding melancholic. There was something wrong going on that was eating him from the inside.

"But not everything went as good as you make it look, right?" Jiraiya guessed. "Did something bad happen? Was any of the deceased close to you?"

"Yes. Well, no. I mean, yes, but not in that way," Naruto was starting to get confused. "You see, the fight against Yagura didn't go as planned."

"But Yagura was ousted. Did you kill him?" Jiraiya asked. "Listen, I know that it had to be hard to kill a fellow jinchuriki, but sometimes-"

"No, it's not that. Yagura is probably dead right now, but I didn't kill him. Akatsuki did," Naruto said.

Those words took Jiraiya aback. The Sannin raised an eyebrow, as he fixed a questioning stare on his godson. "Come again?"

"You see, Mei and I were fighting against Yagura, right? And things were going fine. Turn out those seals you made to keep the Nine Tails in check worked with the Three Tails too, so we were able to nullify his power. Anyway, the thing is, an Akatsuki appeared and got involved. We were pretty exhausted, so we weren't able to put much of a fight against him. He took Yagura away, and left," Naruto said, summarizing the turns of events as good as he could. "Turns out he was mind controlled. That Akatsuki said something weird, and Yagura became his puppet. That's how he was able to spirit him away so easily."

"That is... troubling news indeed," Jiraiya gravely said, as he weighed down Naruto's words. "Did he try to capture you as well?"

Naruto shook his head once again. "No. He didn't pay me any attention. Guess he didn't know who I was, or else he would have tried to kill two birds with one stone. Then again, I wish he did try to capture me. I was still in Sage Mode, and I think I could have freed Yagura before he could fly away."

"The Akatsuki... flew away?" Jiraiya asked.

Naruto nodded. "The guy had some weird-ass bloodline limit that could create figures of clay that exploded. He used a giant clay bird to fly."

"Clay? Explosions?" Jiraiya asked, as he opened a drawer on his desk and pulled out a Bingo Book. He quickly flipped through the pages, until he found the one he was looking for. "Was this the man?"

Naruto took a look at the profile, and upon seeing the picture, he nodded. "Yeah, that's him! So, his name's Deidara? You know about him?"

"I heard about him, but never met him in person. A young prodigy of Iwa that liked explosions too much for his own good. He defected from Iwa after stealing some forbidden knowledge regarding

explosion jutsu. He then became a freelance mercenary, and worked for several terrorist groups," Jiraiya explained. "Though I never imagine that he'd join Akatsuki. While troubling, at least we have some more intelligence on the enemy."

"He wasn't alone. He brought another Akatsuki. I think his name is... Kasumi? No, that's a girl name. Kisame? Yeah, Kisame! He also has one of Kiri's Seven Swords."

This time, the news didn't shock him as much, since he knew from Mei what Kisame was doing now.

"Anyway, the thing is, Yagura was captured by the Akatsuki, and now they probably have the Three Tails," Naruto then fixed an intense stare on his father. "Dad, we need to make sure this doesn't happen again. Akatsuki can't have more jinchuriki."

"Don't worry son. I have extensive data on all current jinchuriki. Though sadly, I guess that information on Yagura won't be of much importance in the future," Jiraiya said. "Our allies of Suna and Taki are already aware of the Akatsuki threat. From what I know, two of the jinchuriki are from Iwa, and the other two from Kumo. I'll try to contact them and see if we can work together on this issue."

"What about the remaining one?" Naruto asked.

"You must be talking about Utakata. That's going to be a little trickier, since he doesn't work under any village, despite hailing from Kirigakure. He's a vagrant and a wanderer, and given his condition, he'll try to keep a low profile," Jiraiya explained. "Then again, while that might work against us, it will also make Akatsuki's job all the harder. But don't worry, once Itachi comes back from his mission, I'll tell him to work on this."

Naruto smiled in relief. "Thank you, dad. That's what I wanted to hear. While I know it's mostly a matter of security, protecting the other jinchuriki means a lot to me."

"Don't sweat it, son," Jiraiya replied.

"By the way, is anybody at home? Mom, the twins?" Naruto asked.

"Tsunade-hime is in the hospital, working, and I guess your siblings are still in the Academy. So I think the house is going to be a bit empty until it's lunchtime," Jiraiya told him.

"Alright then. I'll hang out with Hinata-hime a bit more then. See you later!" Naruto replied, as he walked out of the office.

"Same. Good to see you made it back in one piece, kid."

...

Root Lair, somewhere under Konoha

Inside a dark instance illuminated by a few oil lamps, Danzo and some of his most loyal agents were gathered. While the elderly leader of Root was standing in front of a kneeling boy, the rest of his men inspected several large scrolls.

"Uzumaki knowledge that was thought to be lost forever, including the schematics for Chakra Golems," Danzo said. "Sending you to take part in the Civil War was a good decision, Sai. You made a good job."

"Thanks, Danzo-sama. I live only to serve Konoha," Sai stated.

During the journey back home, Sai had infiltrated the ship's cargo, and made copies of all the fuinjutsu scrolls and books he could. Sai was somebody that rarely stood out, so almost nobody noticed his prolonged absence. His lack of friends or meaningful connections also worked in his favor, since nobody really missed him. Even Sasuke and Sakura, the ones who openly showed distrust of him, seemed to pay him no mind.

"Were you able to obtain one of the Chakra Golems so we could reverse engineer them?" Danzo asked, sounding a bit disappointed.

"Unfortunately, we were only able to take with us a limited number of them. If one of them disappeared, somebody would have noticed it rather soon," Sai explained. "So I decide to follow my judgment and not steal one of those."

"I can't find anything wrong with that line of thinking, so you're excused this time. Guess the blueprints will have to do for now," Danzo decided.

"However, I also brought something else that it might be very helpful, Danzo-sama," Sai said, as he pulled out a small sealing scroll from his pocket, and handed it to his superior.

Danzo took the scroll, and unsealing its contents. A lone, severed finger appeared before him.

"Explain," the one eyed man demanded.

"That finger belongs to Rin Nohara, the one who came back from the dead, and has now the power of the Wood Release. I thought it was something you'd want to have," Sai replied.

Danzo sealed the finger back again into the scroll, and put it under the folds of his robe.

"Indeed I do, Sai. You did good work. Now, leave. You're dismissed," Danzo said.

Sai nodded. "As you wish, Danzo-sama."

And the pale boy left, leaving the elder alone.

Danzo couldn't believe his luck. He had been trying to gather some DNA sample from Rin since the moment his agents revealed the way she had been revived and the abilities she possessed now. So far, all his men could gather were hair strands, but that wasn't enough. Now, Sai had brought him a sample of flesh, blood and bone in

perfect state. Yes, this would make great strides in his research regarding Hashirama's power.

Soon, Danzo would have enough strength to become the leader he was always meant to be, and nobody would get in his way.

...

Forests of the Land of Fire

A new day arrived for the inhabitants of the green ocean of leaves and branches known as the Land of Fire. As nocturnal animals returned to their lairs, diurnal ones exited theirs and took their place. Herbivores started to eat from the green grass and green leaves from the many lush trees, while predators stalked what would be their daily meals.

However, today it wasn't going to be a normal day in the forest. Today, the forests would receive a new inhabitant, if briefly.

Wind started to blow. Softly at first, but stronger over time. It didn't come from the clash of cold and hot air currents, as normal wind does, but from a certain point in the forest. A clear among the trees, that became much bigger thanks to a clash between several human ninja. Yes, in that clear, more than a year ago, Jiraiya and Anko fought against the resurrected Minato Namikaze and Kushina Uzumaki. Fortunately, Minato and Kushina's love for their son gave them a sense of closure, and were able to return to the afterlife. Back then, it looked like it was the end of their battle.

What neither Jiraiya, nor Minato, nor even Orochimaru knew, is that such action brought back somebody else from the guts of the Reaper.

The wind continued to blow out, this time with more intensity. The animals that were wandering the area stopped what they were doing, and ran away, no matter the direction. Their instincts told them that something was about to happen, and they shouldn't be there.

After a few seconds, red threads of chakra started to gather in the clear. More and more red chakra gathered, forming a red sphere. The sphere started to grow as it became whole. Then, once the process was complete, the sphere changed shape, and took the form of an animal.

A fox.

A gigantic fox.

A gigantic fox with nine tails.

The beast opened his eyes, and looked around, confused. He tried to remember, but he couldn't. He didn't know anything. Who he was, where he was, what he was supposed to do.

Oh well, he could always find out for himself.

As the fox left, a white Zetsu emerged from the grass.

"This is a... most interesting turn of events," he said to no one in particular. "I should warn the boss about this."

And the Zetsu sank back into the grass.

Author's Note: So there you have. Kirigakure is now at peace, and the Konoha ninjas return home. Given the number of reviews, it seems that this arc wasn't as interesting as the ones that came before, which sadly, seems to be a thing with all my original arcs, for some reason, they get a more lukewarm reception than those adapted from the manga/anime. Even then, I don't regret writing this arc (even if it ended up way longer than I expected), since it allowed me to write and focus on both an event I found mostly interesting, characters I like a lot, really cool battles, and flesh out a village beyond what little we saw in canon.

Yes, Zabuza is staying in Kiri. It was always the plan from the very beginning. Many stories that feature a redeemed Zabuza had him stay in Konoha permanently, but even if I don't have anything against those, to me it didn't feel natural. It's as if Naruto decided he wants to be Raikage rather than Hokage. Zabuza being closer than ever to realize his ambition of being Mizukage is a nice way to end his character arc. And to all Zabuza fans there, don't worry! I assure you this is not even close to the last time you'll see the Demon of the Hidden Mist again, as well as Mei, Suigetsu, Ameyuri and the rest of the Kirigakure gang ;)

On the other hand, Haku is staying. Unlike Zabuza, most of his life is in Konoha, so it makes sense that he'd choose to stay, even if it'd mean not being alongside Zabuza anymore. Some people were worried that given that both his potential leave coincided with Sai's introduction, I planned to replace him with Sai, kinda like how Sai replaced Sasuke in canon. HA! Haku is one of my favorite characters of the manga (he isn't Naruto and Hinata's third teammate for no reason) while I'm not very fond of Sai. Hell, the only reason I introduced Sai is for him to be Ino's love interest, and because I need him for a future arc focused on Danzo and ROOT. Otherwise, I wouldn't even have bothered with him to begin with (and on top of that, he's proving to be super hard to write for). Though that doesn't mean that I'm going to bash him or anything. I don't have a very high opinion on authors that indulge in bashing, and there's no room for such thing in this story.

And regarding the end of the chapter... how many of you saw that coming? Yeah, I didn't forget about the Kyubi's half sealed inside Minato, which died the moment Minato's edo tensei body was destroyed. However, Tailed Beasts are immortal, and after some time, they reform in the place they died. And unfortunately for the newborn half Kyubi and the good guys, Akatsuki now know about this. How this development will affect the story? Not in a good way for the heroes, that's for sure.

Thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter

Well, next chapter, we will finally enter Shippuden with the Gaara Rescue Arc! Yay, since I was dying to bring the Sand Siblings back into the story at last! In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Wind Stops Blowing

Author's Note: And with this chapter, we officially entered Shippuden! Yay!

This chapter finally feature the return of the Sand Siblings, not seen since the end of the Chunin Exam arcs. And boy, did I miss writing for them, all three of them. Oh, and unlike the canon Kazekage Rescue Arc, rest assured that Kankuro and Temari are NOT going to be pushed away to put Chiyo in their place. All arcs that focus on Suna in some way should have them front and center.

Anyway, enjoy the chapter!

Chapter 51

The Wind Stops Blowing

or

When the Sand Explodes

Fifteen and a Half Years since the Nine Tails attacked

A year had passed since the Kirigakure Civil War came to an end, thanks to Mei Terumi recruiting Konoha ninja to her side. After she was inaugurated as the Fifth Mizukage, she and Jiraiya wasted no time in formalizing an alliance treaty. With both Suna and Kiri as its allies, the future seemed bright for Konoha.

Seemed being the key word.

Turns out Suna hated Kiri with a passion. During the previous war, they sent Pakura, one of Suna's strongest ninja, and a hero the village looked up, to formalize an alliance with them. However, the

Kiri ninja betrayed Suna and ambushed Pakura and her squad, revealing that their intention was to kill one of Suna's greatest ninja. Suna never forgot such transgression.

So naturally, when the news of Konoha's alliance with Kiri reached Suna, the Kazekage wasted no time and expressed his thoughts in a rather... colorful letter to the Hokage. Jiraiya learned at least five swear words he wasn't even aware they existed after reading that letter.

It took almost a whole year to smooth things up, in which multiple negotiations and diplomatic visits had to be made. Jiraiya was really thankful for keeping his old sensei around as an advisor, as Sarutobi's diplomatic skills saved his skin multiple times. Even then, it took giving Rasa a few Chakra Golems -with Naruto and Karin's explicit permission- to satisfy him. The fact that Kirigakure was under new leadership helped to alleviate some of the tensions between Suna and Kiri.

Eventually, they did manage to convince the Kazekage to let go of the old hatred of Kiri, and form a three way alliance with them and Konoha. However, Kiri had to make quite a few concessions, some of them of the monetary kind, but in the end, everybody was happy.

Right now, the long, arduous process was finally coming to an end. The Kazekage had sent his own children to Konoha in order to deliver the final draft of the alliance treaty Jiraiya had to sign in order to make it effective. Rasa, however, had forced Mei to come to Suna to sign the treaty herself. Given the circumstances, she had no choice but to comply.

Right now, both parties were gathered at the Hokage's Tower Council Room. Jiraiya was surrounded by his four advisors, Sarutobi, Koharu, Homura and Danzo, with the document on the table in front of him. At the other side of the table were Gaara and Kankuro. Wordlessly, Jiraiya took out a pen, and signed the document.

"Alright then, this should be it," Jiraiya picked the document as he got up from his chair, walked towards Gaara, and handed him the piece of paper.

"That was... quicker than I expected," Gaara said, as he took the paper from Jiraiya's hands. "Don't you want to negotiate more?"

"I discussed this with my advisors, and we found your father's terms pretty reasonable. Even Danzo, and that should say something!" Jiraiya laughed as he looked at Danzo, who shot him a neutral stare with his one eye. "Besides, after this year, I'm pretty sick of negotiations."

"So send your father our regards, and tell him that Konoha will always be a friend of Suna," Sarutobi interjected.

"Don't worry, he already knows that, even if he doesn't really show it," Kankuro assured. "It's just... well, your alliance with Kiri really pissed him off. It's like if we decided to ally with Orochimaru without telling you first."

Jiraiya chuckled. "Honestly, I can't picture that. But yeah, I can empathize with him. Hopefully, we can put this mess behind us."

"Yes," Gaara agreed. "Well, as much as I'd like to stay more, Father wants us to deliver him the treaty as soon as it was signed. So we will pick Temari up and leave."

"Sad, but understandable," Jiraiya said. "Anyway, have a good trip back home."

"Thank you, Hokage-dono," Gaara said as he made a polite bow, before he and Kankuro left.

They walked outside of the tower, and saw Naruto and Hinata still there. The couple had walked with the brothers to the tower and told them they would wait for them when the meeting was over. Gaara

told them not to since it could last several hours, but in the end, it ended up being as short as Naruto had expected.

"So, I presume everything went alright?" Naruto asked with a hopeful grin.

Gaara nodded. "Indeed. I was expecting for Hokage-dono to try to negotiate better terms, but he's a far more generous leader than most."

"Heh, yes, dad knows the value of friends and allies," Naruto chuckled. "So, what now?"

"Now that the treaty is signed, we need to return to Suna as soon as possible and deliver it to Father," Gaara replied.

Naruto deflated a little. "Aw, shucks. I was hoping you guys would stay a little more. I feel I haven't seen you guys in forever."

"Don't worry, we'll return to see the Chunin Exams," Kankuro told them. "Temari is planning to enter her Genin team for the exams, so we'll come to help her."

"Ah, the Chunin Exams..." Naruto said, as he became a little nostalgic. "It feel like they were so long ago, given that all of us are Jonin now!"

"Well, I'm just Special Jonin, but hopefully I'll become one soon..." Hinata said, rubbing her arm. "Then again, so is Haku-kun."

"By the way, where is he?" Gaara asked. "I wanted to have a chance to talk with him as well, yet I didn't see him."

"Haku-kun is a bit busy now. Yugao-san and Hayate-san had a child recently, so Haku-kun is a bit busy helping them taking care of the little boy. His name's Seiichi, by the way," Hinata explained.

"In a way, I can understand him. Shizune-nee-chan also had a second child, and she sometimes calls me whenever she needs a

babysitter for her and Shiro," Naruto explained.

Shizune and Shisui had decided to call their daughter Shizuka. The name got even more groans and eye rolls when they decided on it.

"Speaking of the absent, where is Temari-san? I thought she would be present for the signing of the treaty," Hinata inquired.

Kankuro snorted dismissively. "She wanted to spend some time with Pineapple Head," Kankuro said, rolling his eyes. "I'm betting the two of them are having some fun while we are here stuck doing all the boring diplomatic chores."

...

Training Ground Ten

"I'm so NOT having fun right now!" Shikamaru cried as he barely avoided a powerful gust of wind, which shattered into splinters a tree stump.

"Really? Because I'm having a blast here," Temari laughed as she prepared her giant folding fan for another attack.

Shikamaru knew he had no one but himself to blame for this. He promised he'd give the Suna kunoichi the rematch she demanded since his first Chunin Exams. Whenever he would meet Temari -and he did meet with her A LOT during the past year- she would always bring that up, but Shikamaru wanted to leave it for the next time, arguing that he needed to train more in order to be a match for her. Which wasn't a complete lie either.

However, Temari couldn't wait anymore, and pretty much forced him to fight her before she would leave for Suna. Shikamaru realized he couldn't delay their clash for any longer, and decided to get over it already.

Feeling it was his time to attack, Shikamaru's hands flew through hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!"

Shikamaru took a deep breath, and exhaled a large stream of fire at Temari, which widened as it flew. Temari just shook her head, and smirked.

"Tsk, tsk, still thinking you can defeat me because your affinity beats mine," Temari confidently said as she wounded back her giant battle fan. "Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Temari motioned her fan forward, creating a powerful gust of wind that stopped the fire stream right on its tracks. The fire stream then burst into a multitude of embers, that set several parts of the battleground on fire. Temari smirked confidently as she stopped her opponent's attack, but her smile disappeared the moment a realization dawned upon her.

"Wait a minute, the flames, they're casting shad-" she started to realize.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

With all the shadows created by the small flames scattered across the battlefield, Shikamaru could expand and extend his shadow far beyond his usual limit, and catch Temari from a safe distance. The Suna kunoichi started to run and jump around, trying to avoid the multiple shadow threads attempting to bind her shadow. She did try to get closer to Shikamaru in order to counterattack, but the Nara was cleverly pushing her away from him with his jutsu.

"Enough!" Temari said as she reached for something inside her ninja tool pouch, before tossing it at her feet.

A cloud of smoke formed, hiding her from Shikamaru's eyes. He probed the cloud with his shadow threads, but was unable to find

Temari. And before he had time to keep probing, several shuriken flew out of the cloud of smoke towards him. Having no other option, Shikamaru cancelled the jutsu and jumped sideways in order to avoid them.

"Now's my chance!" Temari said as prepared to attack. She then motioned her giant folding fan downwards, creating a gust of wind under her. She then hopped onto her fan, and flew on it as if it was some sort of glider.

"This has to be a joke..."

Joke or not, Temari was coming from him from the air. He could barely jump and hit the dirt before Temari passed over him. Unfortunately, the danger wasn't over, since Temari maneuvered her fan to spin around, and glided at him once again, a sadistic smile on her lips.

"Troublesome woman," Shikamaru muttered as he rummaged through his ninja tool pouch, in order to find something that could save his ass. "Take this!"

Shikamaru tossed a handful of kunai and shuriken at the flying kunoichi. While it looked like a lame counterattack at first, it proved to be effective as Temari had nothing to protect herself with, and was forced to jump out of her fan, which fell to the ground a few meters from her

"Now that she's unarmed, this is my chance!" Shikamaru said as he pulled out several kunai with explosive tags attached to it, and tossed them to the intermediate space between Temari and her fan.

"Whatever you're planning, it won't work!" Temari declared as she boldly rushed through the improvised minefield. Explosions went off as she passed the tags, but she soldiered on. With one final leap, she landed besides her fan, and recovered her trusty weapon. "You failed, Shikamaru!"

"You think so?" Shikamaru's voice said behind the cloud of dirt and dust the explosions had created. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Once again, several shadow threads appeared from the vanishing cloud of dust, but Temari wasn't deterred.

"Trying to put me on the defensive again? Ha, fat chance!" Temari said as he blew her fan once again. "Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Temari made sure to put as much chakra into the attack as possible in order to give it enough power to reach and hit Shikamaru. She felt her body going stiff as Shikamaru's jutsu bind her shadow, but it would be temporary. The gust of wind caught the Nara, and violently hurled him against a tree.

"Yes!" she cheered.

However, there was something wrong. Despite cancelling the jutsu, Temari didn't recover her mobility. She looked down, and saw that the shadow thread was gone. Then how is that she couldn't move anymore? Was that a new jutsu that permanently left you paralyzed despite only touching your shadow for a few seconds?

Then, to answer her question, 'Shikamaru' disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Shadow Neck Binding Jutsu!"

A shadowy arm crept through Temari's body as it reached her throat, and put a slight pressure on it.

"And unless you think otherwise, I believe the fight goes to me," Shikamaru's voice said from behind.

Temari sighed. "Okay, okay, I admit defeat."

Shikamaru smirked in victory and undid the jutsu. She then walked towards Temari, hoping she wouldn't be too mad for the loss.

"So, was the fight to your liking?" Shikamaru asked.

Then, in a split second, Temari pushed Shikamaru backwards as she tripped his feet, making him fall on his back. Temari then sat on top of his chest, and pinned his arms to the ground.

"Ugh..." Shikamaru groaned, as she looked at Temari, staring into his eyes. "If I won, how is that I'm in the ground and you're on top?"

Temari smirked at him. "Because that's the way it should be."

Temari then closed her eyes, lowered her head, and planted a kiss on Shikamaru's lips. A kiss the lazy Nara happily welcomed.

"See? Just like I said, having fun with her boyfriend and leaving all the work to us," a new male voice complained.

Temari quickly broke the kiss, and realized that her brothers, Naruto and Hinata were staring at them. Gaara looked as stoic and unexpressive as usual, Kankuro was looking at them un-amused, Naruto was grinning widely, while Hinata was smiling at them. Temari blushed a little, quickly got on her feet, and helped Shikamaru on his.

"Um... what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the Hokage's Tower?" Temari awkwardly asked.

"We were. The meeting is over, and the treaty is signed. Time to go back home. Unless you want to spend more time here sucking face with Pineapple Head," Kankuro retorted.

"Why does everybody calls me that?" Shikamaru complained to no one in particular. Then he turned at Temari, and smiled sadly at her. "So, you're leaving then?"

Temari nodded, returning the sad smile. "Yeah. I was expecting that things would last longer. But oh well, I'll be back for the Chunin Exams."

"Well, I can still walk you to the gates then," Shikamaru offered.

"You better," Temari replied, as she and Shikamaru started walking with the others. "By the way, when did you learn the Shadow Clone jutsu? It requires a lot of chakra, and you don't look like having a big chakra pool to me."

"My mom taught it to me," Shikamaru replied. "After failing the first Chunin Exam, she pretty much ran me into the ground with training exercises until I had enough chakra to create a single clone. Then again, she wanted me to expand my chakra reserves. Learning the Shadow Clone was just an added bonus. Though I have to admit it's very useful. No wonder Naruto spam's it nonstop," Shikamaru mentioned, making Naruto chuckle a little.

"Your mom sounds like my kind of woman," Temari said, interested. "Speaking of which, how is that you never introduced me to your parents yet?"

"I don't think our relationship is in the appropriate stage for such thing to happen," Shikamaru uneasily replied, as he rubbed the back of his neck.

Temari frowned. "I'll be the one to decide that. Plus you met my father already."

"Yeeeeeeesh, and I'm trying to forget that day as hard as I can," Shikamaru replied.

"Why? It was hilarious!" Kankuro interjected, followed by a loud laugh. "I can't wait until Temari brings you to have dinner with all of us!"

Shikamaru let out a weary sigh, and realized that Kankuro's words would be true sooner or later. Why couldn't he just have dated an orphan...

...

A few minutes later, the group of six were heading towards the gates of Konoha, making some small talk among them, when suddenly, a brown blur passed in front of them at an almost imperceptible speed, causing the three Suna ninja to startle and get ready for a fight. Naruto, Hinata and Shikamaru though, didn't, since they were used to it.

"Boy, she did last a lot longer this time around," Naruto chuckled.

"Yes. Wonder who will be the unlucky ones tasked to catch her this time," Hinata giggled.

"What are you guys talking about?" Temari asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Somebody stop that cat!" a high pitched female voice yelled, answering both Hinata and Temari's questions.

The group of six saw Kaida, Hagane and Hanabi running from the same direction the blur had came from. The three of them were wearing Konoha headbands, indicating their status as ninja.

"Hey there, guys," Naruto greeted the trio. "So, you got the Tora mission?"

Hagane nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. This is the second time in a month that we got it. Honestly, this isn't what I was expecting when I graduated the Academy."

"I'm the closest thing Konoha has to a princess! I can't spend all my time chasing cats!" Kaida whined.

"Do you guys need some help?" Hinata offered.

Kaida's face beamed in response. "That would be-"

"No, thank you," Hanabi interrupted her. "We are now full-fledged ninja, we can't let others do our work for us."

Hinata smiled at her sister. "That's a very mature way of thinking, Hanabi-chan. I'm proud of that."

Hanabi smiled back at her older sister. Kaida, however, shot her a murderous glare.

"So, where did that damn cat go?" Hagane asked.

"I'll tell you right now. Byakugan!" Hanabi said as she activated her Bloodline Limit. "There! It's hidden behind a trashcan in that alley!"

"Good, that alley is a dead end!" Kaida said as she rushed towards the alley. "That damn cat is about to feel the power of the First Hokage!"

"Sister, wait... !" Hagane said as he and Hanabi trailed behind her.

"You have nowhere to run down, Tora! Nobody's going to save you!" the heard Kaida's voice yell. "Wood Release: Great For-
AAAAAAAHHHH!"

"MEOOOOOOOOWWWW!"

"STOP! STOP IT, YOU DAMN PEST! NOT IN THE FACE, NOT IN THE FACE! BROTHER, HANABI, SAVE ME!"

Eventually, between the three of them, they managed to subdue Tora. The cat was now trying to break from a wooden cage made by Kaida, as Hagane used medical ninjutsu to heal his sister's many, many, many scratch wounds. The Team's Jonin-Sensei, Tenzo, appeared shortly after in case they needed help.

"I hate that cat so much..." Kaida seethed.

"Good job catching Tora, kids," Tenzo congratulated them. "Madam Shijimi will be happy to have her beloved pet back."

"Why can't we just kill it and tell her she went to live to a farm?" Kaida protested. "I'm tired of having to catch that cat!"

"Sadly, we can't. Tora represents a fifteen percent of the village's mission income. It would be a huge blow to our economy," Tenzo explained to her. "Now let's go back to report that the mission has been a success."

As Team Tenzo left, Naruto, Hinata, Shikamaru and the Sand Siblings continued their way to the village's gates.

"I see you guys also have your own Emi," Kankuro noted.

"Emi?" Shikamaru asked, looking a bit confused.

"The Wind Lord's pet dwarf pig. It constantly tries to escape, and many Genin team are assigned to catch it. From what I heard, it's quite the nightmarish beast despite its small size," Temari explained. "Thank goodness we never had to catch him."

"How so?" Hinata asked.

"Being the Kazekage's kids has some perks, you know," Kankuro said with a wide grin.

"Well, I'm the Hokage's son and that never got me out of doing an awful mission," Naruto bitterly said.

"Come on, don't complain. None of us got to catch Tora when we were Genin," Shikamaru told him. "Thankfully so, I admit."

"Because we had Tamaki-san to summon her. But even Tamaki-san got tired of doing that all the time," Hinata interjected. "Not to mention that now that she's Chunin, there's no way for her to take that mission again."

Finally, they reached the gates, and the group stopped.

"Our stay in Konoha has been pleasant, but now we must leave," Gaara announced. "We'll come back for the Chunin Exams in a couple months, though."

"I'll be looking forward it, then!" Naruto happily said.

"Yeah, me too. Of all the women I ever met, you're the least annoying," Shikamaru told Temari.

Temari shot an un-amused look at her boyfriend. "You know, we'll need to work on your compliments a bit more."

"Come on, you know I'm just kidding," Shikamaru said with an earnest smile. "I'll be looking forward seeing you again."

"You can always visit me in Suna, you know," Temari suggested, placing her hands on her hips.

"I could but... crossing a desert sounds beyond troublesome..." Shikamaru whined.

"What!? You wouldn't cross a desert to see me? Some boyfriend you are!" Temari protested, before Kankuro grabbed her arm and dragged her out of Konoha.

"Enough of love quarrels, we need to go, now!" Kankuro told his sister.

"Don't think I'm ever going to forget this, Pineapple Head!" Temari said as she and her brothers headed back to Suna.

Shikamaru sighed. "Oh boy, I better prepare a good way to make up to her for that when she comes back. Man, sometimes I almost feel that girls are not worth the effort. Almost."

"Well, you weren't exactly very sensitive there, Shikamaru-san," Hinata told him.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Eh, it's who I am."

As the three Suna ninja disappeared behind a sea of trees, the three Konoha ninja headed back to their village. And unbeknownst to both groups, a White Zetsu emerged from the ground, and smirked.

"Yes, the Jinchuriki finally left Konoha, and has minimal protection. Time to warn the artists..." the Zetsu said as he sank back into the ground.

...

Sometime later, deep in the forests of the Land of Fire, the Sand Siblings continued their trek back home, leaping from one tree branch to the next as fast as they could.

"If we can keep this pace, we'll be home in less than two days," Gaara told his older siblings. "Father will be pleased when he hears the news of our early arrival."

"I don't know why we have to bring the treaty ourselves. Couldn't a courier bird do the trick?" Kankuro said, unhappy with the idea of being a courier himself.

"This treaty is far too important to trust an animal to carry it back home, Kankuro," Temari pointed out. "The fact that it has been trust to us of all Suna ninja should speak volumes of its importance."

Kankuro just rolled his eyes. "Whatever. I just want to go back to do real missions as soon as possible. I've been carving for some action recently."

Shortly after those words left Kankuro's lips, a set of explosions rocked the forest, engulfing the Sand Siblings in fire and shrapnel. Several birds that were calmly perched on nearby tree branches flew away, letting out caws of fear. A couple trees toppled down after the explosions shattered their trunks, and fell to the ground with a loud thump.

When the smoke and dust raised by the explosions, there were several craters in the ground, surrounding a large sand dome. The dome then dissolved into sand, which returned to Gaara's gourd on his back.

"Are you okay?" Gaara asked, as he looked around for whoever attacked them.

"Yes," Temari grumbled, before he glared at his hooded brother. "Way to go, Kankuro! Hope you're happy with all this 'action'!"

"Hey, how did I know something like this would happen?" Kankuro protested as he raised his arms in defense.

"Silence," Gaara said, softly but firmly. "We need to stay alert. Whoever attacked us is still there, and will strike again soon. There's no time for meaningless quarrels."

Temari and Kankuro nodded somewhat sheepishly, and prepared for the incoming fight. Temari unfolded her giant war fan, while Kankuro unfurled three scrolls before him. From the scrolls, three puppets were unsealed: Karasu, his very first puppet, and the one he had used in the Chunin Exams -to very little success-. The second one was similar to the first, only with a bulkier, barrel-shaped body, a bucket shaped face, and six arms instead of four. The third one, however, resembled a large mechanical lizard.

A minute passed, but the attack never came. Gaara managed to remain calm, but his older siblings were starting to grow antsy. That's it, until they saw a shadow quickly passing over them.

"Kankuro, up there!" Temari pointed somewhere in the sky.

Kankuro wasted no time and directed Karasu towards the spot the enemy has been seen, and directed it to attack. Raising its four arms, the puppet fired a barrage of senbon and kunai while moving its arms in an arc to cover a wider range.

The shadow appeared again, moving between the branches. This time, it wouldn't escape as Gaara prepared to attack.

"Wind Release: Sand Shuriken!"

Several sand projectiles fired towards the shadow, and a loud "ouch!" could be heard. Then emerging from the treetops, a large, artificial looking white bird appeared, with a blond young man wearing a black cloak with red clouds on it riding on top of it.

"Akatsuki. I knew it," Gaara said as he eyed his attacker.

"Dammit, so much for stealth," the Akatsuki grumbled.

"Wait a minute, I think I know this guy," Temari mentioned. "Konoha told us that two Akatsuki appeared in Kiri to abduct the Mizukage, and one of them fits your description. Are you Deidara, the missing-nin of Iwa?"

"You bet I am!" Deidara proudly confirmed. "And today, you three will have the luck to die by my magnificent art!"

"Gaara, he's coming after you. Stay behind us," Temari said, as she took a step forward, ready to face the Iwa missing nin.

"Actually, I don't believe he's alone. Akatsuki usually attack in pairs. His teammate must be close," Gaara warned his siblings.

"Here it comes!" Kankuro warned.

Deidara started to fly above them, close enough so they could be seen, but far enough so their attacks couldn't reach him. Reaching into his bag, the Akatsuki pulled out some explosive clay, and molded it with the mouths he had on the palm of her hands. After chewing the clay a bit, they spat it in the form of ugly looking birds.

"Let's start with something soft," Deidara said as he dropped his bombs as he flew above the trio of Suna ninjas. He then made a hand seal. "Boom!"

The clay birds exploded just before they were about to touch the ground. Kankuro and Temari jumped away in different directions to

avoid the explosions, while Gaara shielded himself once again with his sand.

"Scatter! If we're together, his explosions won't be able to reach us!" Kankuro suggested.

"No! That's what the Akatsuki wants! To drive us away from Gaara and leave him unprotected!" Temari argued back.

Gaara had to admit that both his siblings had a point. Remaining together would make them too vulnerable to Deidara's explosive attacks, but it was very clear that the Akatsuki were playing a divide and conquer strategy.

"Both of you are right. However, we can't play into the Akatsuki's hands. We need to be smarter than them," Gaara told them.

"What do you suggest, then?" Kankuro asked.

"Let's remain split apart, though close enough to provide help. The Akatsuki want me, so they'll focus their attacks on me. Of the three of us, I'm the one with the best defenses, so I'll be able to handle them better. Attack the Akatsuki when they're vulnerable," Gaara told them.

Both Kankuro and Temari admitted that it was a sound strategy, even if a little risky. But then again, they weren't in an advantageous position, so they'll have to work with what they had. The three Suna ninjas placed themselves in a triangular formation, with Gaara in the middle, as if tempting the Akatsuki to go and get them.

"You think you're so smart, do you?" Deidara said with a snarl. "But your little plan has a hole on it!"

The Sand siblings were alerted but multiple piercing whistles, as a multitude of equally piercing senbon flew towards them. Temari and Kankuro sprang into action. Placing herself in front of Gaara, she

fully unfolded her fan and hid behind it as if it was a shield. Kankuro, meanwhile, used his own puppets to parry the needles.

"You should look where you're stepping into, girl!" Deidara shouted from above.

"What the...?" Temari asked as she reflexively looked down, and much to her horror, she saw some of Deidara's clay animals emerging from underground. "OH SHIT!"

Deidara made a hand seal. "Boom!"

Once again, more explosions rocked the battlefield. Gaara was able to shield himself with the sand, but he wasn't fast enough to protect his siblings, which were painfully hurled into the air, before falling back into the ground, away from Gaara.

"Well, now that I got rid of those two, we can focus on the matter at hand, hm?" Deidara said with a wicked grin.

Gaara fixed a deadly glare on Deidara, as more sand started to pour from his gourd. "You will pay for that."

Far from being intimidated, Deidara grinned in response. "And how do you plan to do that, jinchuriki?"

"Sand Suspension."

With a hand motion, he gathered all his sand under his feet in the form of a platform, and with another gesture, the platform elevated him high into the air, above the trees below almost as high as Deidara's bird was.

"I don't think I've ever had to fight against an airborne opponent. Anyway, this going to be fun!" Deidara said with a glee as he threw something forward. Gaara could see there were tiny birds made of clay that flew towards him.

"More explosives. Better get rid of them as soon as possible," Gaara deduced before making another hand gesture. "Sand Bullets!"

Gaara formed bullets of super compressed sand and shot them towards the incoming explosive birds. The clay figurines detonated once the bullets impacted them, but being that far away from Gaara, the explosions were harmless.

Before the ensuing clouds of smoke could dispel, a few insects made of clay flew out of them, and dashed towards Gaara. The jinchuriki was unfazed, as with another hand motion, he prepared his defense.

"Wind Release: Infinite Sandstorm!"

Gaara blew a massive sandstorm forward. Deidara commanded his clay insects to dodge it, but the sand jutsu's range was way too wide, and the insects were caught, prematurely exploding once again.

"Okay, I think I have a good assessment on what this dude can do. Catching him off guard won't be easy, but there's no challenge my art can't overcome!" Deidara confidently thought.

"I can't let him push me into the defensive. If I want to win this, I have to attack," Gaara thought, and with a hand motion, he commanded the sand platform to fly closer to Deidara.

The blond Akatsuki noticed this and, flew away, trying to keep the distance, since he wouldn't be able to use his explosives on such a short distance. Well, technically he could, but his self preservation instincts told him otherwise.

As Gaara began his chase, he saw Kankuro and Temari in the ground from the corner on his eye. They were back on his feet and looked ready to fight, filling the redhead with relief.

"Oi, you don't have time to look around!" Deidara called him out, as if reading his mind. "Don't worry about your friends. My pal's down

there with them, and he will make sure that they enjoy a slow and agonizing death. Then again, that might be a reason to worry, don't you think so?" Deidara asked, shooting him an unnerving grin.

"Kankuro and Temari are far stronger than you think. Your partner is going to be for a rough time," Gaara fire back.

"I won't worry about him, just like you shouldn't worry about those two other kids. All you should worry... is my art!" Deidara said as he threw more explosive clay figurines at Gaara.

...

Meanwhile, down below, Kankuro and Temari were back on their feet. They were looking at the sky high battle above them, which filled them with a sense of uselessness upon realizing that there was nothing they could do to help their little brother.

"That guy's smart. They sent a fly-capable Akatsuki to deal with Gaara, knowing that Gaara can fly as well and thus forcing him to fight alone," Temari said, as she intently watched the fight.

"When this is over, I'm going to build a flying puppet," Kankuro said.

"Forget about the future. We need to find a way to help Gaara NOW!" Temari stated, stomping his foot for an added emphasis.

"I know, but what can we do, Temari? We have no jutsu that can reach that high!" Kankuro protested.

"Don't worry about not being able to help your brother, kids. I'll keep you busy in the meantime. After all, I know how tedious can be when somebody makes you wait," a new, deep and raspy voice said.

Temari and Kankuro quickly turned around, ready to fight however was there, and as expected, another Akatsuki was standing before them. Well, 'standing' might not be the right word.

In front of them was what appeared to be an extremely hunched man, almost looking like he was walking on all fours, wearing the standard black cloak with red clouds of the Akatsuki. The lower part of his face was covered by a piece of black cloth, obscuring his identity.

"Here's the other one," Temari said to no one in particular.

"What's with that guy? Is he even human?" Kankuro asked, taking note of the being's strange appearance.

The Akatsuki seemed to find Kankuro's question amusing, and let out a small laugh.

"Human? No. At least not anymore. Funny you ask that. You are right, though not for the reasons you're thinking," the Akatsuki chuckled.

"Well, human or not, you're about to become a corpse!" Temari said as she took a step forward, and wounded her fan back. "Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

However, before the ensuing gust of wind could blast the Akatsuki, it disappeared, shocking both siblings.

"He's fast!" Temari said in awe.

"Of course he is! If he was a weakling, I doubt he'll be part of Akatsuki!" Kankuro said, as he motioned his puppets to place themselves in a formation surrounding both he and Temari. "Get ready for his attack!"

"Your name is Kankuro, right? Or so I heard," the other Akatsuki asked. "I see you're a puppeteer. It's been a while since I met one. Do you mind if I test your abilities for a bit? Since I have nothing better to do until Deidara finishes the job."

"Show yourself, you coward!" Kankuro shouted back.

The Akatsuki chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes."

Multiple whistling sounds warned the two Sand Siblings of another attack, several senbon coming flying from a nearby group of bushes. Temari turned around, and swung her war fan once again.

"Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

A wall of wind stopped the barrage of senbon dead in their tracks, while clearing the area of small vegetation, leaving the weird looking Akatsuki in the open, though unaffected by Temari's wind attack. Meanwhile, Kankuro moved Karasu and Kuroari to attack their now uncovered enemy, and positioned them to make sure the Akatsuki wouldn't escape nor have space to evade them.

"Take this!" Kankuro yelled.

Karasu and Kuroari started to spin around the Akatsuki at high speed. Then, with a tiny flick of his finger, Kankuro triggered their hidden weapon mechanisms. Karasu fired several poison coated kunai, while Kuroari fired several senbon, also poisoned as well. The Akatsuki didn't move. He didn't need to, as a segmented, metallic tail ended in a triangular tip appeared from under him, and parried all the attacks at a break-necking speed.

"What the...?" Kankuro asked in shock.

It didn't finish there. The metal tail slammed into Kuroari, dismantling it to pieces, before it wrapped around Karasu, and lifted it above his body.

"Is this the best you can do, puppeteer?" the Akatsuki asked in his guttural voice. "Not only I'm not impressed. I'm disappointed even," he finished, before tossing Karasu against Kankuro and Temari.

Both of them jumped aside to avoid the incoming puppet, but soon they would find that was a mere distraction. The metal tail flew at Temari, ready to impale her. The kunoichi reacted in time, folded her

war fan, and used it to parry the blow. Still, she was unprepared for the amount of force the metallic tail was carrying, and she was hurled backwards.

"Ugh!" Temari groaned as her back hit a nearby tree.

"Temari!" Kankuro instinctively yelled, but forced himself to ignore his sister's predicament. "No! I have to take advantage now and attack while he's focused on Temari!"

Kankuro reassembled both Kuroari and Karasu, and send them again after the Akatsuki. It proved to be fruitless, as the black and red clad man... thing repelled the attack with another swing of his powerful tail.

"You bore me," the Akatsuki flatly said, before digging underground.

"For such a strange being, he doesn't lack in mobility," Kankuro said to no one in particular, as he gathered his puppets around him, waiting for the inevitable attack.

It didn't take long before the iron tail burst from underground and lunged at Kankuro. The Suna Jonin quickly moved Sanshouo between him and the impending attack. The lizard shaped puppet deployed an iron shield above its head, which successfully parried the attack.

"You won't be able to pierce Sanshouo's iron hard defense!" Kankuro boasted. "Now, let's get you back into the open!"

With another hand motion, Karasu fired a barrage of kunai with explosive notes attached to them at the area where the tail came from, creating multiple explosions. Predictably, the Akatsuki was forced out in the open. The strange-shaped being chuckled.

"Heh, maybe you have-"

"Wind Release. Wind Pillar!"

A powerful gust of wind hurled the Akatsuki into the air, much to his surprise.

"Don't dare forget about me!" Temari called.

"Good job, sister. Karasu and Kuroari will finish this now!" Kankuro said, as he moved Kuroari where the Akatsuki would fall.

The puppet then opened its barrel like stomach, revealing a large empty space inside. The Akatsuki fell inside, and in a heartbeat, the compartment was closed. Meanwhile, Karasu disassembled into many body parts, all of them ended in sharp blades, which floated around Kuroari.

"Time to finish this," Kanuro said, making a hand motion.

...

Meanwhile, back above the trees, Deidara and Gaara continued their aerial duel, exchanging explosions and sand-based attacks.

"You're a tough nut to crack, I admit that," Deidara said. "Say, let's make a deal: you come with us in piece, and you dear siblings will be spared. What do you say, hn?"

"You suppose my siblings will fall to that partner of yours. They're strong ninja, and those who underestimate them will pay for it dearly," Gaara stoically replied.

Deidara couldn't repress a smirk. "I'd knew you'll turn down that deal, that's why I offered it in the first place. It won't be no fun if you gave up like that. Then again, I'm afraid it's you who's underestimating Sasori."

The name seemed to resonate with the redheaded Jinchuriki.
"Sasori? As in... Sasori of the Red Sands?"

Deidara chuckled. "Do you know any other Sasori? Besides, that guy's from the same turf as you are, hn?"

Gaara never met Sasori, but he heard about him multiple times. Sasori of the Red Sands was probably Suna's greatest puppeteer, as well as one of deadliest ninja the village ever produced. Almost nothing was known about him after his defection. But if what Deidara said was true, then his siblings were in grave danger.

"I have to help them!"

On instinct, Gaara turned around and headed down once again, but Deidara got in the way.

"Where are you going, kid? Don't forget that I'm your opponent!" Deidara shouted, sounding almost indignant.

Gaara's face formed a dangerous scowl. "Then I'll take you out of the picture."

Deidara grinned widely. "That's the spirit! You're the kind of opponent I love to unleash my best art against!"

Gaara prepared to resume the fight. It was one thing when it was just his life was on the stakes. But if he wanted to save his siblings, he'll have to fight like he never did before. He made a hand seal.

"Wind Release: Multiple Sand Dragon Bullets!"

The sand floating around Gaara took the shape of multiple serpentine dragons, who all launched themselves at Deidara, their jaws wide open ready to chomp the Akatsuki to bits. Deidara cursed under his breath, and maneuvered his giant clay bird to evade the incoming attack. He tried to make the dragons to crash against each other, however, they would easily rebuild themselves in no time, and continue the chase.

"Okay, let's see what he thinks of this then," Deidara mused as he molded more explosive clay with the mouth on his palms.

He produced what appeared to be an insect with a bloated body. He tossed it forward, and after a smoke explosion, it grew to the same size of its bird. At its bigger size, Gaara could appreciate it was a crudely made bee that carried a large egg sack on its abdomen.

"Let's see what you do about the Explosive Clay Hive Queen, hn!" Deidara boasted, as the giant clay insect flew forward.

The Hive Queen opened its jaws and spat two clay balls that quickly took the form of clay insects that flew towards him. The redhead stopped directing the sand dragons, and sent a barrage of sand projectiles towards the clay insects, causing them to prematurely detonate. The Hive Queen pressed the attack, this time spitting four explosive insects. When Gaara tried the same tactic, the insects skillfully maneuvered around the sand projectiles. Gaara put an end to them with a wide ranged sandstorm.

Gaara's sand reacted on his own and formed a protective dome above him. Several explosions shattered the dome, but absorbed most of the impact, protecting the jinchuriki. Taking a quick glance upwards, Gaara saw Deidara flying above him in circles.

Gaara realized that Deidara's plan was to force him to divert his attention to something else so he could attack when the jinchuriki was distracted, yet this knowledge wasn't of much help.

"Come on, Gaara, think!" Gaara chided himself as he tried to focus on both Deidara and the Explosive Hive Queen.

Speaking of which, the latter released four more clay insects at him. Gaara decided to fight fire with fire, and tried something he had never done before. He formed four globs of sand, shaped them like bats, and sent them after the explosive insects.

"Sand Flying Ambush!"

Each of the bats focused on the targets, which tried to evade them, but unlike previous attacks, this one was homing, and even if the

bats didn't catch the insects, they would keep them on the run pretty much forever.

"Now is when the Akatsuki would try to attack me," Gaara thought as he looked upwards, but saw nobody above him. "Where did he-?"

Suddenly, an explosion from below knocked him out of the sand cloud, and fell to the ground below. Fortunately, his sand reacted in time, and formed a sledge that allowed him to slide to the ground safely.

"The bastard attacked from below this time around," Gaara said in realization, far too late.

"Oi! No time to get distracted!" Deidara mocked from above.

Not forgetting about the other enemy, Gaara turned around to see the Explosive Hive Queen flying towards him once again. It spat four more globs of clay that turned into clay insects.

"If I have to fight two enemies at once, I might as well split in two," Gaara said as he made a hand seal. "Sand Clone Jutsu!"

Part of his sand gathered and formed a humanoid shape, that quickly morphed into an almost perfect replica of Gaara. Both Gaara and the clone summoned sand clouds once again, and hopped onto them in order to return to the aerial fight.

"So, a clone. You must think you're pretty smart," Deidara said in a taunting tone. "Too bad that by doing so, you cut the amount of sand you can use in half."

"That's all what I need to defeat you, Akatsuki. And if it's not, I can assure you that getting more sand is not a problem to begin with," Gaara retorted as he made a hand motion. "Wind Release: Sand Shuriken!"

A large barrage of star-shaped sand projectiles flew at Deidara. The Akatsuki maneuvered his bird with great skill to avoid the deadly projectiles, but the amount of them were too many this time, and some of them ended up finding its mark, producing multiple cuts across his skin, some of them rather deep.

"ARGH! So, you like to play rough, hn? Well, so do I!" Deidara said as he made a hand seal. "Explosion Release: Swarm of Fire!"

The Explosive Hive Queen, who was dealing with the sand clone, start to spat globs of clay like crazy until it emptied its egg sack. The globs quickly took the shape of flying insects. With a loud buzz that sounded more like a roar due the sheer intensity, the insects charged forward. Their first target was the Gaara clone, who, being much weaker than the original, perished instantly upon being engulfed by a chain of explosions, obliterating it. The remaining of the swarm set their sights on Gaara, and began the chase.

Gaara frowned upon seeing the swarm approaching. He made a single hand seal with both hands.

"Wind Release: Infinite Sandstorm!"

Gaara gathered all the sand he could, and directed it at the incoming swarm in the form of a devastating sandstorm. The winds were so powerful it successfully halted their advance, some of the clay insects.

Unfortunately, that left him wide open for Deidara to attack, and the Akatsuki sent two explosive clay birds at him. Seeing that if he remained in the air, the insects would have more ways to attack him, Gaara descended upon the ground, and formed several layers of sand domes around him in order to protect himself against the incoming swarm.

"Let's hope this will be enough," Gaara inwardly pleaded.

He was soon about to find out, as multiple explosions rained upon him and his makeshift bunker.

...

Back to Temari and Kankuro, the hooded Suna ninja was about finish Sasori off.

"Black Secret Move: Iron Maiden!"

The improvised swords that were Karasu's limbs inserted into the slits around Kuroari's torso, impaling the Akatsuki inside.

"... and done!" Kankuro said, with a triumphant smirk.

Temari, however, wasn't so optimistic. "No blood spilled. I have a bad feeling about this. Open up. I want to make sure the bastard's dead," Temari asked as she got her giant fan ready.

Kankuro nodded, and with a pull of his finger, he opened Kuroari's stomach. And much to his shock and anger, there was a log in the Akatsuki's place, impaled by the improvised blades.

"The hell? Where did he go?" Kankuro indignantly asked.

"Goddammit Kankuro, he fooled us! Get your puppets back to normal before we're attacked!" Temari urged him.

"Too late for that," the Akatsuki's raspy voice said, as his metallic tail burst from behind a nearby bush, and stabbed into Kankuro's stomach.

"Kankuro!" Temari screamed.

Kankuro grunted in pain, before he wrapped one of his arms around the metallic tail. Then, he created several chakra threads with the other, and tied those threads to nearby branches. When the Akatsuki tried to pull his tail back, he found unable to.

"I got him, Temari! Go for the kill!" Kankuro cried, as he spat some blood.

Temari nodded and rushed towards the Akatsuki. She folded her fan, and hoisted it over her head. Once the Akatsuki appeared before her, she got ready to attack. The Akatsuki, however, opened his mouth, and fired a barrage of senbon that sank into Temari's flesh. The kunoichi ignored the sharp pain and smashed her fan against the Akatsuki's head with all her might.

The effect was instant. Temari had put so much strength into her swipe, that the Akatsuki shattered instantly as if he was made of wood, metal and plastic. And, upon closer inspection, that was the case, much to the Suna kunoichi's bewilderment.

A hooded man wearing the Akatsuki cloak came out of the shattered construct. Pulling his hood back, he revealed to be a very young man with soft facial features and short red hair, not unlike Gaara's.

"Congratulations, you destroyed Hiruko," the Akatsuki said, his voice no longer sounding deep and raspy, but soft and youthful. "Too bad you did it at the cost of your lives."

"Wait a minute, that thing... it was a puppet!" Kankuro said in realization, before he winced and brought one hand to his wounded gut.

"Yes, it was. Not that it would have been of much help had you realized of that earlier," the Akatsuki replied in a bored tone. "The weapons I hurt you with are coated in a lethal, slow acting poison. You might not notice it now, but trust me, you're already dead."

"Who the hell are you!?" an enraged Kankuro asked.

The redhead smirked. "I am what you strive to be. I am the strongest ninja Suna ever produced, as well as its most skilled puppeteer. The hilariously outdated puppets you tried to use against me were some

of my earliest creations. Though, to your credit, I'll admit that you handled them with mastery.

"My name is Sasori of the Red Sands. You might have heard of me."

Kankuro paled. If this man was who he said it was, then no wonder he defeated them so easily. But there was something that didn't make sense. Sasori disappeared from Suna twenty years ago, back during the Third Ninja War, when he was just fifteen. Yet the young man in front of him couldn't be older than eighteen.

"You lie!" Kankuro called him out. "If you were really Sasori-"

At that moment, a long chain of explosions happened nearby, raising powerful winds and several clouds of smoke and dirt.

"And it seems that my partner is done. Just in time. Good, since I hate waiting," the redhead said with a smirk.

...

"Hmmm... I think I overdid it..." Deidara wondered, as his bird began to fly in circles around the clouds of dirt and smoke product of the explosions. He then smiled and added: "Nah! It was epic! One of my best jobs!"

As the dust started to clear, among a field of craters, Deidara could see his prey: the redheaded jinchuriki, lying on the ground, motionless. His clothes were torn apart, and his body was covered in burns and bruises. A bad feeling started to creep through the Iwa missing-nin's back, and grimaced in result.

"Boy, I may have overdone it there..." Deidara mumbled as he got off his bird, and started to walk towards Gaara. "If I killed the jinchuriki, then I... no, better check before jumping to conclusions. Oi, are you alive, hn?" Deidara asked as he kicked Gaara's body.

Then, "Gaara" dissolved into a mound of sand, much to Deidara's shock.

"Another clone!" Deidara said in realization, as he looked around trying to find the real deal.

But it was too late. Sand started to burst from underground with the same power as a geyser. The sand then started to form thick tendrils which took no time to wrap themselves around the Akatsuki, leaving him immobilized.

"What the hell is this!?" Deidara screamed as he futilely tried to break free.

"A decoy. They're widely used by ninja around the world," Gaara's voice said from behind as he walked towards the trapped Deidara. "Don't bother, you won't be able to break free of that sand prison. Now, we're going to head towards your partner, and you'll tell him to leave, or else I'll turn your bones and organs into pudding."

"And you'll kill me afterwards. You think I'm an idiot?" Deidara retorted.

"You won't die. At least, not yet. A live Akatsuki member is too valuable. That's why I'll bring you back to my village, where our Torture & Interrogation department will make you spill everything you know about Akatsuki. If you cooperate, you might live."

"So, you want to know Akatsuki's secrets, hehehe..." Deidara laughed mischievously, before shooting Gaara a taunting look. "I think I might share one of those secrets right now with you..."

"I'm all ears. And that would be...?"

"That's not the real me, but a clone," Deidara's voice said from behind.

Gaara instinctively turned around and saw the real Deidara standing there. Startled, Gaara prepared to attack the real one before he could and that proved to be a fatal mistake. The clone behind him gathered its chakra and released it in the form of yet another explosion that engulfed Gaara. The sand trapping the clone tried to move towards Gaara in order to protect him, but it was too late.

After the explosion ceased, Gaara laid there, motionless, just like his clone had been just a few minutes ago.

"I think you're not a clone this time, are you?" Deidara mockingly asked. He then pulled out what appeared to be a compass. The needle in the compass moved a little at a constant pace. "And you're not dead. Alright, our job here is done!"

Deidara jumped onto his giant clay bird, who proceed to catch Gaara with its talons, before it flew to the concurrent battleground. There, he saw Sasori, no longer inside his puppet, with the other two Suna ninja at his feet.

"Oi, Sasori, I already beat him! Shall we move or what, hn?" Deidara asked.

"Gaara..." Temari whispered, disheartened upon seeing her defeated brother being held by that clay bird.

"You did? Nice," Sasori said, before turning to the fallen Suna nin. "The poison inside your bodies will kill you in three days. You will experience the most excruciating pain any human being has ever felt. By the end of the second day, you'll try to kill yourselves. The merciful thing would be to kill you right here and right now," Sasori concluded, shooting them a painfully fake sympathetic smile. "But you destroyed Hiruko, one of my dearest puppets. It's beyond repair, which means I'll have to rebuild it from scratch. And thus, I don't feel especially merciful. So enjoy your last three days of your existence, if you can, that is."

Sasori then turned around, and jumped onto Deidara's bird. The artificial creature flapped its wings vigorously to gain altitude, and started to fly towards the west.

Once the Akatsuki were no longer visible, Temari gathered what little strength she had, and using her folded war fan as support, she got back on her feet.

"Kankuro... get up! We're going to... make those bastards... regret leaving us... alive," Temari said, as she started to cough.

"You aren't thinking in... going after them...?" Kankuro weakly asked.

"Of course not! We need to look for help... for both Gaara and ourselves..." Temari replied.

"We're too far away from Suna..."

"But we're still close to Konoha!" Temari energetically said, as she helped his little brother back on his feet. "Come on Kankuro! Tsunade-sama can... heal us, and then Konoha will help us to... to save Gaara..."

And with the knowledge that not only their lives, but their little brother's life was at stake, the two fallen Suna ninja proceeded to move towards Konoha, as fast as their weakened bodies allowed them to.

Author's Note: And the Gaara Rescue Arc begins! Will Temari and Kankuro reach Konoha in time to save both their lives, as well as Gaara? I think the answer is pretty obvious, not only because if they didn't there would be no arc, but there's no way I'm going to kill the Sand Siblings. You NEVER kill the Sand Siblings. Only villains do that.

And yeah, Shikamaru and Temari are an item already, which happened offscreen during the second time skip. Sorry if it feels rushed, but if I gave all couples the same focus as Naruto and Hinata, the story's pace would be brought to a screeching halt. Romance is good and all that, but it's secondary to the main plot. Also, you enjoyed their rematch. Some people were unsatisfied with their short match in the Chunin Exams preliminaries, so hope this serves to convince you that no, I don't have a grudge against Shikamaru.

Hope you enjoyed the Sand Siblings versus Akatsuki fight. Like I said in the note at the beginning, Chiyo won't upstage Kankuro and Temari from what should have been their rightful place in this arc, and they will get their revenge match against Sasori and Deidara.

BTW, I'm going to leave here a list of rank progression of all the characters of Naruto's age group:

Konoha:

Naruto : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Special Jonin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Jonin (Part II)

Hinata : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Special Jonin (Part II)

Haku : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Special Jonin (Part II)

Sasuke : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Special Jonin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Jonin (Part II)

Sakura : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Karin : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Shikamaru : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Ino : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Choji : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Kiba : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Shino : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Tamaki : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Chunin (Part II)

Neji : Genin (Part I), Special Jonin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Jonin (Part II)

Tenten : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Special Jonin (Part II)

Lee : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Kiri Civil War Interlude), Special Jonin (Part II)

Hanabi : Academy Student (Part I), Genin (Part II)

Kaida : Academy Student (Part I), Genin (Part II)

Hagane : Academy Student (Part I), Genin (Part II)

Suna:

Gaara : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Jonin (Part II)

Kankuro : Genin (Part I), Jonin (Part II)

Temari : Genin (Part I), Jonin (Part II)

Taki:

Fu : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Jonin (Part II)

Kumo:

Karui : Genin-Chunin (Part I), Chunin (Part II) :

Omoi : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Part II)

T : Genin (Part I), Chunin (Part II)

Thanks ato gio08 for betareading the chapter.

Anyway, with this the Gaara Rescue Arc, and Shippuden, have officially begun! I hope that with all the changes I'm going to make, you end up enjoying it better than the original! Tell me your thoughts via review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Gaara's Rescue Team

Author's Note: Well, the beginning of Shippuden got an overall much better reception than the Kiri Civil War arc. Guess that people really wanted to see the Sand Siblings back. Anyway, enjoy the second part:

Chapter 52

Gaara's Rescue Party

or

Snakes in the Grass

"Did I ever tell you how much I hate gate duty?" Kiba asked his teammates.

"Many times. And doing so doesn't make our job here any less tedious," Shino fired back.

"You know, I heard that if you get promoted to Special Jonin, you no longer have to do these kind of chores," Tamaki replied. "Problem is, I have no idea what could I do to get that promotion."

"I plan on specializing as a tracker, just like my mom did," Kiba replied. "Tracking missions are always fun."

Tamaki noticed that a faint light was starting to appear in the horizon, and little by little, the forest around Konoha started to become clearer.

"The sun is rising," the Cat Kunoichi said as she stifled a yawn. "That means the day shift will soon come, and we can go home and sleep a little."

Akamaru then started to sniff the air. He walked closer to the wall's edge and started to loudly bark at something below.

"What is it buddy, did you find something?" Kiba said, and soon he also got wind of a foreign smell coming closer.

Tamaki narrowed her eyes, and saw two figures slowly approaching the gates. "Hey, down there! Two people are coming!"

"Can you see who they are?" Shino asked.

"Their smell... I think they're Suna ninja. And not just Suna ninja, but I think they're Gaara's older siblings!" Kiba pointed out.

"Are you sure about that?" Shino asked, as he tried to get a better view of the incoming strangers.

Then, the two figures dropped to the ground, and laid there, motionless.

"Oh shit!" Tamaki said.

"Kiba, go warn somebody about the situation at hand! I'll go down and see if I can heal them. Tamaki, guard my back in case it's a trap," Shino quickly commanded.

"Right!"

"You got it!"

Kiba and Akamaru quickly dashed towards the Hokage's tower, while Shino and Tamaki jumped from the wall, landing on the ground with a 'thud', as they cautiously approached the two fallen Suna ninja.

...

Land of the Rivers

A couple hours after Kankuro and Temari had arrived to Konoha, so did Deidara and Sasori to the designated Akatsuki lair in the Land of the Rivers. While they could have arrived there much earlier, they decided to stop for the night and rest, since neither of them came out unscathed from their clash with the Sand Siblings.

They reached the main door, a massive boulder with a seal attached to it. Deidara made a hand seal, and the boulder elevated above the ground, revealing a cave entrance. The two Akatsuki, with their captured jinchuriki hoisted on Deidara's shoulder, entered the cave, and the boulder slammed down as soon as they were inside.

Deidara walked forward and tossed Gaara's unconscious body in front of him.

"So, I see that you were successful in your endeavor, Deidara, Sasori," a deep, distorted voice said above them.

Both Akatsuki looked upwards and saw eight astral projections, each of them belonging to the other Akatsuki members.

"Of course! When did I fail Akatsuki?" Deidara asked, indignantly. "That's two for two, need I remind you!"

"You shouldn't count Yagura, given that all you had to do was to activate the trigger phrase I implanted inside his mind," Obito dismissively said.

Deidara angrily glared at the Uchiha. "I'd like to see YOU getting into a warzone and take a jinchuriki out of it alive, hn!"

"Then again, we shouldn't dismiss their accomplishments like that, should we?" Orochimaru chuckled. "After all, Sasori lost his beloved Hiruko in order to bring us this jinchuriki."

This time, it was Sasori who frowned at Orochimaru. He hated how that man was able to give praise and diss insults in the same breath.

Still, the best thing to do was not to dignify that gratuitous jab with a response.

"Enough of that. Time is of the essence. We need to extract the Tailed Beast from its host," the leader said as he made five hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

A massive statue emerged from the ground. The statue had an extremely ugly visage, composed of a large, open mouth full of teeth and nine eyes, two of whom were opened. Disconnected from the statue were two arms with their fingers pointing forward. Each Akatsuki placed themselves on one of the fingers.

"The extraction process will take three days, so make sure you're ready," the Leader advised, before making another hand seal. "Sealing Art: Phantom Dragon Nine Consumption Seal!"

Nine ghostly dragons emerged from the statue's mouth and engulfed Gaara, lifting the young jinchuriki above the ground. A stream of red energy started to flow from Gaara's mouth into the statue. The extraction process had begun, and if it wasn't interrupted, Gaara would lose the One Tail. But most importantly, he would also lose his life.

...

Konoha Hospital

When Tsunade crossed the doors of the hospital like she did every other day, she expected to have a day like every other. Sure, medical emergencies happen every day, but nothing she or her qualified and in some cases, personally trained staff wouldn't be able to handle.

What she didn't expect, though, was a medical emergency not even five minutes after she sat on her desk in her office. A nurse immediately requested her to come down, as two people of utmost importance were on the verge of death, and they needed her help as

soon as possible. Tsunade's surprise was gigantic when she saw who the patients were.

"Temari and Kankuro? What are these two doing here?" Tsunade asked as she helped the other medic-nin to stabilize them.

"We don't know. The Chunin of Team Kakashi were about to finish their night shift at the gates when they saw them coming," a medic nin explained. "We can ask them when they're awake."

"What's their status?" Tsunade asked.

"Their wounds suggest that they've been in a battle recently. But that's not the reason of their current state," another medic-nin said. "We detected a powerful poison coursing through their bodies. If we don't eliminate the poison, they might not last long."

Tsunade knew what she had to do. "Quickly, fetch my apprentices! We'll need them if we want these two to live!"

She did not mention Shino. He was in her mind, being her apprentice and all, but after being all night awake, he would be way too sleepy to be of help. And for their task ahead, they needed to be as focused as possible.

...

Training Ground Eight

Kurenai's Assault Squad had gathered at their usual training spot, and were about to begin their morning training routine. Since all of them were either Jonin or Special Jonin, none of them were bound to the extra duties all Chunin had, such as guarding the gates, or patrolling the city. And thus, they usually spend the morning training until they were called for a mission.

And unbeknownst to them, today would be one of those days.

"Okay, since we're all here, let us begin," Kurenai said. "I have a good feeling that if we keep this training regime, in a few months you two will get that promotion to Jonin," Kurenai told Haku and Hinata.

"Today I suggested Kurenai-sensei that you should fight me in Sage Mode. I won't go all out on you, but it will be good practice," Naruto said. "You won't find many enemies that are stronger than a master of Senjutsu like yours truly, hehe."

"Alright, Naruto-kun, I'm ready," Hinata confidently said.

"Me too. Besides, that way we can go all out without worrying about causing you irreparable harm," Haku added.

"In that case, get into position. I'll watch and-" Kurenai was saying before she noticed an ANBU pretty much appearing between them. "Huh?"

Haku immediately recognized the ANBU, not just for her cat-shaped mask, but also for her bright purple hair. "Yugao-san?"

The ANBU nodded and removed her mask, revealing her face. "Hinata Hyuga, Tsunade-sama requests your presence at the hospital. You need to assist her with two gravely injured patients of utmost importance."

"I will go immediately," Hinata nodded as she started running towards the hospital.

"Yugao, do you know who are those patients?" Kurenai asked the purplette.

"Yes. Temari and Kankuro, from Sunagakure. We don't know what happened to them since they're unconscious, but we presume they've been attacked," Yugao explained.

Naruto felt his heart sink. He had talked to them not even a day ago. Then, much to his horror, he noticed that Yugao didn't mention a

certain somebody. "What about Gaara? He left with Kankuro and Temari. Is he alright!?"

Yugao just shook her head. "We know nothing about him. What we know it's that Temari and Kankuro appeared before the gates of the village shortly after sunrise. It's possible that he managed to run away and return to Suna?"

"No, that doesn't sound like Gaara. He would have never abandoned his siblings like that. I have a very bad feeling about this. I think I'm going to the hospital as well," Naruto said.

"Let's go all then," Kurenai suggested.

Yugao merely nodded, put her mask back on, and Body Flickered out of there.

"Gaara, Temari and Kankuro left yesterday afternoon, and today the latter two show up, badly wounded, without the former," Haku mentioned. "Do you think this is the work of Akatsuki?"

Naruto shot the Ice Ninja a grave look. "That's what I'm afraid of."

...

When Hinata arrived at the room where Kankuro and Temari were being treated, she was greeted by the sight of her master in the medical arts, as well as her fellow medic-nin Ino. Tsunade was studying something under a microscope, while Ino helped other medics to stabilize the wounded Sand Siblings.

"Tsunade-sama, Hinata is here!" a nurse announced.

"Good. Hinata go help Ino, now!" she barked at the Hyuga. "What about Shizune's Medical Squad?"

"It seems they left yesterday for a mission. Nobody knows when they will be back," the nurse replied.

"Drats. I could have really used their help here," Tsunade cursed, as she went back to the microscope.

"Any progress on the poison, Tsunade-sama?" Ino asked as she continuously healed Temari.

"I think I saw something similar in the past. It looks a lot like the poisons Chiyo of Suna used way back during the Second Ninja War," Tsunade told her. "Except this one seems far more advanced. Fortunately, nobody has ever created a poison I can't neutralize, and this won't be an exception."

Suddenly, Kankuro started to tremble violently as he screamed in pain.

"What's wrong with him?" a panicked Ino said as she moved to heal him.

"Byakugan!" Hinata's Bloodline Limit activated, and with it she was able to immediately see the problem. "His liver! The poison is damaging it!"

Ino nodded and focused the Mystical Palm Jutsu on that area. Soon, Kankuro relaxed and became more stable, even if he was still unconscious. Hinata then scanned what organs were the most damaged so she, Ino and the other medics could focus on healing those first.

"Good job you two. Work on keeping them stable while I finish the antidote," Tsunade told them.

"When Temari-san and Kankuro-san left, Gaara-san was with them. Do we know anything about him?" Hinata asked. Like Naruto and Haku, she was afraid Akatsuki would be behind this.

Ino shook her head. "No. We don't know about him. At least not unless these two wake up first."

"Could you probe their minds?" Hinata suggested.

"Guess I could. Though try to keep them stable. If another violent episode happens, the sympathetic damage could break my mind," Ino advised Hinata as she placed both her index fingers on Kankuro and Temari's forehead.

The Yamanaka heiress only needed to see their latest memories before she found the answer she was looking for.

"Got it!" Ino said. "It seems that two Akatsuki attacked them and took Gaara away. Their names are Sasori and Deidara."

Hinata let out a weary sigh. "I dreaded it. We need to inform both Hokage-sama and Sunagakure."

"Let somebody else do that. We have a work to finish here," Tsunade told her, before something Ino said registered in her brain. "Wait a minute, you said Sasori?"

"Yes, that's the name I heard in both their minds. It can't be a coincidence," Ino confirmed. "Why?"

"Sasori is Chiyo's grandson. He disappeared twenty years ago, and nobody has seen him since. Guess that solves both that mystery and why this poison felt so familiar," Tsunade said.

"When Naruto learns of this, there won't be anything to stop him from going to rescue Gaara himself," Hinata mentioned.

"I know," Tsunade sighed in defeat. "That's why I'm counting on you to make sure that boneheaded son of mine comes back alive."

Hinata nodded with determination. "You can trust him to me, Tsunade-sama."

...

An indeterminate amount of time later, Temari stirred as she slowly opened her eyes. She had to blink a couple times, in order for her eyes to get used to the initially bright light of the early morning. Standing up, she groaned as she looked around, finding the surroundings worryingly unfamiliar.

"Ugh..." she groaned.

"Huh?" a female voice said besides her. "You're awake?"

Temari looked at the blue haired, pale skinned girl sitting beside her. "H-Hinata?"

"Temari-san? You're awake!" Hinata said visibly happy. She then walked outside the hospital room, and said to somebody outside: "Naruto-kun, she's finally awake!"

Unsurprisingly, Naruto rushed into the room with an excited, but visibly not overjoyed expression.

"Finally! We were so worried!" Naruto loudly said.

"Shhhhh! We're in a hospital!" Hinata chided her boyfriend.

Naruto acknowledged Hinata with a sheepish nod. "Yeah, sorry..."

Naruto's loud outburst caused Kankuro to awake from his sleep as well. His reaction was the same as Temari's.

"Who the hell is yelling...?" Kankuro complained in a whisper, as confusion started to dawn once he realized where he was. "What... where am I?"

"It's safe to assume we made it to Konoha. But more importantly," Temari interrupted, now more awake. "How long have we been here?"

Temari could feel the tension in the atmosphere growing thicker, which made her dread the answer ever more.

"You've been here for almost a day," Hinata gravely said. "We know about Gaara. Ino-san scanned your minds while you were unconscious."

"What!?" Kankuro indignantly asked.

"Sorry for invading your privacy like that, but we needed to know what happened in order to prepare accordingly," Hinata explained. "Besides, Ino-san only probed the last few hours' worth of memories, so it's nothing you should worry about."

"Now I'm guessing you want to go and look for Gaara, right?" Naruto asked.

Both Temari and Kankuro scowled at such obvious question. "Do we really need to answer?" Temari asked.

"Thought so. If you feel better, get dressed and come with us to the Hokage's tower. We need to prepare for a few things before we leave," Naruto said.

Kankuro and Temari nodded.

...

Hokage's Tower, Half an Hour Later

Inside the Council Room were gathered Jiraiya, all four members of Kurenai's Assault Squad, Temari and Kankuro.

"While I'm willing to lend you my best ninja to help with Gaara's rescue, we have a problem," Jiraiya stated. "We don't know where did they took Gaara, and even if we put our best trackers to work, we'd still need something with Gaara's or his captor's scent, which we don't have."

"Besides, we still don't know if Gaara is still alive," Kurenai intervened, before sending the Sand Siblings an apologetic look.

"Sorry if I'm being pessimist, but it's a possibility we must take into account."

"Fortunately, we have the solution to both problems right here," Temari said as she pulled out a compass from the folders of her robe.

"A... compass?" Hinata asked, tilting her head in slight confusion.

"Not a normal compass. This compass was made with special fuinjutsu, and is attuned to Gaara's chakra signature. The needle marks the direction Gaara is, and the fact that it needle still moves means that he's still alive."

Jiraiya opened his eyes wide in shock. "But... that's extremely dangerous! If it fell in the wrong hands, such artifact would make hunting Gaara trivially easy!"

"We're aware of that. That's why only four of this compasses were made. Temari and I carry two of them, and the other two are under our father's watch," Kankuro explained. "We decided to make them in case something like this happened, which as you can see, it did. All what we need to do is follow the compass and rescue Gaara."

"Speaking of which, how much time do we have?" Haku asked. "Because no doubt the Akatsuki will try to extract Gaara's Beast as soon as possible."

"Not just that, but they also need to seal it in another container, either a human or something else," Jiraiya added. "According to my available knowledge, it's a long and exhausting process. Though between ten people, they can accelerate the process. My estimate is that we have three days until the Tailed Beast is removed and Gaara dies."

A deafening silence fell upon the room, as everybody weighed down the Hokage's words.

"Three days. That's a very narrow window," Hinata said, almost in a whimper.

"Less than three days," Temari corrected them. "We spent a whole day here, recovering. We only have two days at best to do it. Let's hope they didn't take him too far."

"If they want to start the extraction process as soon as possible, they'll have to be somewhere near the place you were attacked. My best bet would be the Land of the Rivers, since it's a small country with no ninja village. The best place to set a hideout," Jiraiya suggested.

Kankuro checked his compass. "The needle does point in the direction of the Land of the Rivers. I don't think they would go any further, or else they'd go into the Land of Wind. Akatsuki wouldn't dare to set a base there."

"Sadly, they would, so don't be so quick to discard that possibility," Naruto pointed out. "Anyway, I think we've talked long enough, can we go now?"

Jiraiya nodded. "Indeed. However, be careful, Naruto. Remember Akatsuki is also after you."

"Don't sweat it, dad. I'll give up ramen before letting such thing happen," Naruto said, with his trademark confident grin.

"Meanwhile, I'll send a toad messenger to Sunagakure in order to warn them about what happened. Hopefully, they will provide them with reinforcements," Jiraiya told them. "Good luck to all of you."

All of them nodded and left the Council Room, ready to leave the village and look for Gaara as soon as possible.

...

A few hours later, the group of six were traversing the forests of the Land of Fire as fast as they could, leaping from one tree branch into the next. From time to time, Temari or Kankuro would take a look at their compasses, not just to check they were in the right direction, but to see if Gaara was still alive. So far, the needle still moved. They might arrive in time yet.

"Kankuro, Temari," Kurenai broke the silence. "Tell us about the Akatsuki who attacked you. We'll have to face them more than likely."

Both Kankuro and Temari nodded, before the latter started to speak.

"The one Kankuro and I fought against is a master puppeteer, who claimed to be Sasori of the Red Sands, one of Suna's most skilled ninja," Temari said.

"That puppet he used to fight us... hell, I even feel unworthy of calling myself a puppeteer. And I'm sure he has others way more dangerous than that," Kankuro bitterly said, gritting his teeth.

"Is Sasori related to one of your village elders, the one named Chiyo?" Hinata asked.

Temari looked at the Hyuga, mildly confused. "Yeah, that's true. How is that relevant?"

"When Tsunade-sama analyzed the poison, she said it was similar to the ones Chiyo used to concoct back in the Second Ninja War. Though this one was far more advanced," Hinata pointed out.

"That's too much of a coincidence to discard. Though those are really bad news if that guy was really Sasori," Temari said, with a shiver.

"Why do you say that?" Haku asked.

"Sasori alone managed to stop Iwa's forces from entering the Land of the Wind. If it wasn't for him, Suna could have come out of the war in even worse shape than we did," Kankuro explained. "In fact, the 'red sands' part of his name is because whenever he was in the battlefield, the sand of the desert ended up dyed in red due the all blood spilled by his puppets."

The Konoha ninja grew uneasy at the fearsome reputation just one of their potential enemies had. Even if they already knew this, they only had very few information on its members and their past exploits.

"What about the other guy?" Haku asked.

"That was the one who fought and defeated Gaara," Kankuro continued. "It was a blonde... well, I dunno. I couldn't tell if it was a guy or a girl, honestly. I mean, it sounded like a man but looked like a girl. Kinda like you, Haku."

Haku raised an eyebrow in annoyance, while Temari snickered a little.

Something clicked within Naruto's minds, and the jinchuriki opened his mouth to speak. "Did that guy fight with explosives, while flying on top of a weird giant bird?"

"Yes, precisely!" Temari said. "Do you know this man?"

Naruto nodded, and his expression darkened. "I met him before. His name is Deidara. He appeared during the Kirigakure invasion to abduct Yagura. Unfortunately, both Mei and I were far too exhausted to stop him that moment. And now, that asshole returned to do the same thing to Gaara."

Hinata noticed Naruto's anger and jumped close to him.

"Don't worry, Naruto-kun. We'll stop both him and the rest of Akatsuki, so they won't hunt any more jinchuriki," Hinata reassured him.

Naruto's frown vanished, and smiled a little at his girlfriend's support.

"Deidara nearly killed me as well during the battle of Kirigakure," Haku interjected. "Had I been a second slower, both me, Dagura-san, as well as many Kiri ninja would have perished, engulfed by the fire of his explosives."

"Kurenai-sensei, do you carry a bingo book?" Naruto asked. The raven haired woman nodded, before the blond continued. "I know Deidara has a profile there. We should take a look before we engage him."

"Indeed. Even if we know he uses some sort of explosive jutsu, getting more information won't hurt," Kurenai agreed.

The group of six continued their trek discussing among each other possible strategies and ways to take down the two Akatsuki. And unbeknownst to them, an inhuman being watched them as they moved.

...

Meanwhile, back at the Akatsuki hideout, the ten missing-nin continued the extraction process. That is, until Zetsu was startled by the new information that reached his brain. Something that didn't go unnoticed by the leader.

"Zetsu, don't falter. We still have a long way to go until the extraction process is complete," the leader said, as he fixed his rippled eyes on the plant man.

"It's not that, boss. One of my clones saw a force of Konoha ninja heading towards the hideout's direction," the white half of Zetsu informed. "I think they're coming to the jinchuriki's rescue."

"How do you know they're coming for us? The location of this hideout is a secret," the only female of the Akatsuki said.

"Yeah. They could be a squad of ninja going on an unrelated mission," Kakuzu suggested.

"For starters, the Nine Tails Jinchuriki is in the group, and looked agitated. And second, two Suna ninja were with them. The jinchuriki's siblings, to be precise," White Zetsu said.

Naturally, this drew Sasori's attention. "That's impossible. I poisoned them. No one has been able to make an antidote to my poisons, and even if by some chance somebody was able to, there's no way they could have done it in such little time!"

"It's obvious what happened, Sasori-san," Orochimaru intervened. "If they came from Konoha's direction, it means they were able to reach the village. Remember that Tsunade-hime is in Konoha, and to her, making an antidote for your poison would have been trivially easy."

Sasori frowned once again at Orochimaru's dig. For all his quarrels with Deidara, he preferred the psychotic blond over the smug Sannin as a partner. He didn't miss the days in which the two of them were part of the same two-man team.

"Even then, there's no way for them to know we're here, right?" Deidara asked.

"They can, if they do use the same compass we used to track the jinchuriki," Sasori replied. "As long as the jinchuriki is alive, they'll be able to track his position."

"How long until they reach this place, Zetsu?" the leader asked.

"I'd say less than a day. They're moving really fast. In a few hours, they'll reach the border between the Land of Fire and the Land of Rivers," the plant man informed.

"We can't afford taking such a big risk. Somebody needs to go there and delay them until the extraction is complete," the leader stated.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," Orochimaru offered. "I placed some of my minions close to the lair in case something like this happened. While I doubt they will be able to defeat Naruto-kun and his allies, they'll buy us enough time to complete the ritual. Not to mention, they'll be far more exhausted once they arrive to rescue their little friend."

"Good, and once they reach this lair, we'll kill two birds with one stone and capture the Nine Tails' jinchuriki," the female Akatsuki said.

Obito didn't say anything, as he carefully listened to the whole exchange.

"Orochimaru, every day you grow more dangerous, but you still prove to be too useful to eliminate yet," Obito thought. One could say that the solution to his problem was to use Shisui's eye's mind controlling powers on the Sannin. Which he already did, but Orochimaru somehow managed to shrug the genjutsu off. He found later that Orochimaru's skull is carved with protective seals to stop enemies from probing or tampering with his mind, a measure he originally developed in case he was at the mercy of the Yamanaka working at Konoha's T&I department. *"But one day, your usefulness will come to an end. And without the Akatsuki to cover your back and provide you with resources, your other enemies won't take long to wipe you out..."*

...

Back to the forests of the Land of Fire, the group of six continued jumping from one branch to the other, mentally preparing themselves for the battle that no doubt would happen in a few hours. However, they weren't prepared for the battle that was about to happen in a few seconds.

Without any kind of warning, a giant snake emerged out of nowhere, its jaws wide open, ready to swallow Hinata in one go. Fortunately, while startled, the bluenette's sharp reflexes didn't fail to save her.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Hinata turned into a spinning sphere of chakra the moment the snake's giant jaws closed upon her. The force of the spinning caused the snake to recoil, hissing in pain. With another thundering racket, another snake, just as big as the first one, burst through the trees, this time aiming for Haku. The Ice Ninja nimbly jumped aside, dodging the attack, as he made several hand seals.

"Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Haku breathed an extremely powerful gust of frozen wind that covered the giant snake in frost. The reptile hissed in pain as well, as it quickly slithered away.

"Where the hell these things came from?" Temari shouted as she prepared to attack in case more of them came.

"There are only two snake summoners we're aware of. One of them is Anko, a ninja loyal to Konoha. The other one is Orochimaru," Kurenai explained.

"Does that mean that Orochimaru is here!?" Naruto asked as worry began to creep through his back.

"Orochimaru-sama doesn't have the time to deal with insignificant vermin like you. That's why we're here," a new voice said. The group of six saw a man wearing an armored version Otogakure uniform landing on a tree branch in front of them. A large broadsword was hanging on his back. His hands quickly ran through hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Snake Thunder!"

The man's arm started to crackle with yellow electricity, as the lightning gathered and formed into a snake, which lunged at the group. Hinata jumped forward.

"Byakugan!" after activating her Bloodline Limit, she also ran through hand seals. "Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Hinata gave a swipe with one of her electricity imbued hands, deflecting the snake-shaped lightning bolt aside. At that moment, Temari step forward, war fan already unfolded.

"Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

With a single blow of her fan, Temari produced a brutal gale-force wind, which tore nearby tree branches free of leaves, and hurled the Oto ninja backwards.

"Watch out, there's another one ready to attack!" Hinata warned, as she pointed to her left.

"Not bad, girl," a female voice said, and another Otogakure ninja showed up. She started to make hand seals. "But we don't need the element of surprise to deal with you! Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

"What!?" Naruto asked in shock.

From the ground, a serpentine dragon emerged, and let out a powerful roar before it lunged at the Konoha and Suna ninja.

"Just as we feared, Orochimaru managed to successfully grant somebody the First Hokage's abilities," Kurenai realized. "Hinata, can you take a good look at their appearance?"

The Hyuga nodded, and focused their Byakugan on their faces. She gasped upon seeing how they looked behind those balaclavas.

"Hinata?" Naruto worriedly asked, no affectionate honorific this time.

The first thing the Hyuga saw was that two Oto ninja were pretty much twins, given how much they resembled each other. They had pale skin and short white hair, the female being a little longer than the male's, and pretty faces with soft features. Both of them had bright yellow eyes.

"Their faces... they all look a lot like your little siblings, if they were adults!" Hinata said in shock.

"WHAT!?" Naruto loudly asked as he tried to make sense of what the Hyuga said. "How...?"

"Guess they're clones. It seems Orochimaru managed to get some DNA samples of them before we rescued them," Haku guessed.

"It doesn't matter who they are! They're enemies who are blocking us from reaching Gaara!" Temari shouted, putting an end to the discussion, and forcing everybody to focus on the battle at hand.

"Naruto, the man is a Lightning Release user, so you'll be the best suited to fight him. I'll go with you as well," Kurenai asked.

"In that case, I'll join you two, given that I'm a Wind Release user as well," Temari offered. However, Kankuro placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "Huh?"

"Let me go instead. Your wind attacks can clear all the trees that girl can summon, while my puppet won't be that good against her," Kankuro told her.

"I thought Sasori had destroyed all your puppets," Temari said.

Kankuro shook his head. "Not all of them. I still have one with me. I didn't use it because it isn't properly tested yet, but guess I have no other option. This will have to be the test run."

Temari didn't find any holes in his brother's logic, and nodded. "Alright then. Be careful."

"You too," Kankuro replied, as he followed Naruto and Kurenai, while he pulled a scroll from underneath his robe.

Temari then turned at Hinata and Haku, ready to fight the mysterious woman who could wield the fabled Bloodline Limit of the first Hokage.

"Ready, Temari-san?" Hinata asked.

Temari nodded, before dangerously scowling at their enemy. "You guys are going to regret getting in our way."

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"Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Two clones appeared besides Naruto. "You know what to do."

The clones merely nodded, and leaped away in different directions. Before Kurenai had the chance to ask what he was planning -and confirming her guesses- Kankuro joined them.

"Kankuro, you're going to fight with us?" Kurenai asked.

"Without puppets?" Naruto added.

"While I can fight without puppets, I still have one in reserve," Kankuro replied, as he unfurled the scroll he was carrying in front of him.

From a burst of smoke, a puppet appeared. It had the same dull brown and black color scheme of Kankuro's other puppets, albeit this one was different from the others. It was rather bulky, with a stout main body, thick arms, short legs, and a head that looked like an ancient helmet. On its right hand it was carrying a massive rectangular shield. Numerous seals were carved alongside its plating and shield.

"Does this look familiar, Naruto?" Kankuro asked with a smirk, as he attached the puppet with some chakra threads.

"It looks like... an Uzumaki War Golem!" Naruto said in realization.

"Indeed. After you guys gave us a couple golems, father allowed me to study one. And well, let's say I made a lot of breakthroughs in the art of puppet crafting," Kankuro proudly said. "So all of you, meet Tamotsu, my newest puppet!"

Naruto smirked in return. "Alright then, let's see how the union of Uzumaki fuinjutsu and Suna's puppets do against this enemy," the blond said as he eyed the man in front of him. In less than a second, Naruto's chakra sword appeared on his hand, projecting a blue colored blade of pure chakra. "Let's go!"

The blond jinchuriki dashed forward, ready to engage the new enemy. The Oto ninja unsheathed his broadsword and used it to parry Naruto's initial strike. The fact that his sword didn't break, and the almost unnoticeable faint blue glow made Naruto realize his enemy was also channeling chakra through his sword in order to make it stronger.

They did trade a few blows. Naruto managed to parry and dodge all the attacks from his opponent, but then again, he was also unable to land a strike on his opponent.

"Alright then," Naruto said as he disengaged. His sword's blade started to burn with a white light, showing that he was now channeling wind chakra through it. "Let's see what you do against this!"

Naruto slammed his Wind Blade into the ground, releasing a powerful gust of razor wind that cracked the ground as it flew towards the Oto ninja. Said man stabbed his sword into the ground, as he made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Breath of God!"

The masked ninja blew a tornado to counter Naruto's attack. The tornado grew bigger as it advanced, cracking the ground as well, and sucking some dirt and grass leaves as it advanced. Finally, both attacks met each other, resulting in a blast of wind blowing in every direction.

"Earth Release: Mud Trap!"

Suddenly, the ground beneath the Oto ninja's feet turned into mud, quickly sinking him into the ground until the level of his knees.

"Shit!" the Oto ninja yelled.

"No, it's just mud. That would be disgusting," Kurenai's voice said behind him. A kunai appeared on her hand. "Now die."

The Oto ninja managed to quickly make a hand seal, and blew a gust of wind to the ground, propelling himself upwards while narrowly avoiding Kurenai's strike. He made several hand seals as he descended.

"Lightning Release: Golden Storm!"

Yellow lightning started to crackle around the Oto ninja's body, before he was enveloped into a bright coat of yellow electricity. Lightning bolts started to fly around, some of them aimless, most of them, towards the trio of ninjas in front of him.

"My turn!" Kankuro called, as he positioned Tamotsu between them and the enemy. "Mechanical Great Light Shield Block!"

Tamotsu raised its massive shield, and one of the seals carved on it started to glow. It then projected a blue cone of chakra that covered the Kankuro and his two Konoha allies. The lightning bolts harmlessly crashed against the chakra shield.

"Now, time to counterattack!" Kankuro said, as he made a finger motion.

Tamotsu lowered its shield, and aimed its other arm at the Oto ninja. Its hand split in two, revealing a small cannon inside. From the canon fired a stream of flames. The Oto ninja merely tossed a smoke grenade at his feet, and when the fire stream reached the ensued smokescreen, he was nowhere to be seen. They noticed a hole in the spot when he was a second ago, surrounded by small flames caused by the puppet's flamethrower.

"Watch out, he used a Headhunter Jutsu! He'll attack from below!" Kurenai warned the boys.

And true to her words, the earth started to shake shortly afterwards. However, the Oto ninja didn't attack. In his place, the same snake it attacked them before burst from underground, forcing the three ninja to jump in different directions.

"Ugh, I can't believe I forgot about the giant snake," Kurenai said, sounding more annoyed than worried.

"In that case, then maybe we should equate the balance," Naruto said, as he made several hand seals, before biting his thumb. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, a massive toad appeared. It was magenta colored, with black markings on his face, arms and legs. He wore a black kimono with a white sash and mesh armor underneath. On his hands there were a sakazuki-like shield a sasumata.

"Hello, Naruto-san," the toad politely greeted his summoner.

"Hi there, Gamaken. Think you can help us to deal with that guy and his pet snake?" Naruto asked.

Gamaken took a glance as said Oto ninja, and then at the giant snake, which dangerously slithered towards them. "I think I can be of assistance. Though I should warn you, I'm rather clumsy."

Naruto gently smiled at the humble toad. "I think you'll do fine."

Upon seeing its natural prey in front of it, the giant snake instantly lunged towards Gamaken. Gamaken raised his shield to protect himself from the attack, as it counterattacked with the sasumata.

At that point, the Oto ninja decided to go onto the offensive as well. As he rushed, he thrust an arm forward.

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

As its name suggested, a multitude of snakes appeared from under the Oto ninja's sleeve, and all of them lunged at Naruto, letting out high pitched hisses. Naruto merely beheaded those snakes with a swipe of his Wind Blade, as he rushed to attack his now wide open enemy. Or that's what he thought, as the masked man quickly thrust his other arm, releasing more snakes at Naruto, forcing him to break his charge, and take a step back.

"Got you!" Kankuro said as he motioned his hands down.

A shadow loomed over the masked ninja, who looked up too late to see the large frame of Tamotsu descending upon him. The puppet's large shield slammed against him first, before the rest of the weight added to the impact power, causing the Oto ninja to burst through the sheer force of the hit. Though rather than blood and guts, the burst was of even more snakes.

"What?" Kankuro asked, confused.

"A snake clone. Anko uses them too. These guys are more than mere pawns of Orochimaru if he taught them how to use snake-related jutsu," Kurenai explained.

"Watch out!" Kankuro called as he quickly turned around, placing Tamotsu in front of him.

Naruto and Kurenai turned around as well, and saw Tamotsu barely intercepting a sword strike that was intended for Kankuro. Even if the puppet had activated its chakra shield, the arm holding it was torn apart from the main body by the sheer force of the impact, which also hurled the damaged puppet backwards.

"Dammit, not this one too!" the puppeteer complained, as he rushed to check his downed puppet.

"I can't believe I have to resort to this," the Oto ninja said. The Konoha ninja noticed that there was a faint white glow pulsing from his body, a glow Naruto was worriedly familiar with. "But then again,

Orochimaru-sama already warned us that your power far exceeded that of the enemies we faced in the past."

"So it is true. He made you with my sibling's DNA," Naruto sadly concluded, as he recognized the power his enemy was now using. He slipped into a fighting stance, as his mouth curved into a confident grin. "Too bad your master sent you to fight against the one person who knows exactly how your power works!"

...

Meanwhile, on the branches above, Hinata, Haku and Temari were engaging the female Oto ninja that could use Wood Release.

"Wood Release: Great Forest Jutsu!"

The masked kunoichi's arms turned into a mass of thick wooden vines ended in sharp edges, that spread in a wide area, and lunged at the three ninja, which promptly jumped back to avoid being skewered. Temari reared her battle fan back.

"Hinata, Haku, move aside!" the Suna kunoichi yelled, before swinging her weapon of choice forward. "Great Weasel Sickle Jutsu!"

Temari blew a powerful current of razor sharp wind that shredded the incoming wooden vines, as well as nearby tree branches, and still pack enough power to push the Oto kunoichi backwards. Hinata decided this was the best moment to attack, as she leaped forward while making several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Twin Thunder Lion Fists!"

Hinata's hands were covered in chakra blue flames, that quickly took the shape of lion heads. Said heads started to crackle with electricity. Upon landing on the thick branch her enemy was perched on, Hinata began a flurry of strikes at the Oto kunoichi, who did her best to dodge Hinata. However, the Hyuga's jutsu had a far greater range

than one would judge at first sight, and even if dodged, the masked kunoichi ended up receiving a lot of electricity-imbued hits.

"SHIT!" the masked kunoichi yelled, as she barely avoided another hit by Hinata. She jumped back into the ground, as she made more hand seals. "If I let her hit me with that, I'm done. Wood Release: Ironwood Armor!"

A green aura flared around the Oto kunoichi, followed by a small burst of smoke. After that, she was completely covered in an armor that appeared to be made of wood, leaving only her yellow eyes exposed.

Hinata was undeterred, and pressed the attack. Her armored enemy seemed more confident, fighting in a more offensive manner. Sharp spikes grew all over the armor, the ones on her knees and forearms being the longest, and used them to attack the Hyuga. Hinata expertly parried her blows, while returning her own. One of them managed to land on the armored kunoichi's shoulder, shattering the wooden armor protecting that zone.

Hissing, she jumped onto a higher branch, as she held the damaged shoulder on her hand. In a few seconds, the wooden armor grew back, covering it once again.

"That armor won't protect you. Wood is a combination of water and earth, both of which are vulnerable towards lightning," Hinata explained.

"Enough!" she yelled, as she pulled out a flash grenade, and tossed it down to the branch she was perched onto, producing a sudden flash of bright light.

"MY EYES!" Hinata screamed as she dispelled her jutsu and instinctively brought her hands to her eyes.

"Alright then," the Oto kunoichi said as a sharp wooden spear appeared on her hand. She raised the spear above the blinded

Hinata. "Say good-"

"Ice Release: Thousand Needles of Death!"

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe Jutsu!"

The Wood Release user was assaulted by a storm of ice flechettes, followed by several crescent shaped blades of wind, forcing her to move in order to dodge those attacks.

"Don't forget about us!" Temari shouted at her.

Haku walked towards her teammate. "Hinata, are you okay?"

Hinata nodded, wordlessly. Haku then noticed that the Hyuga wasn't just covering her eyes, since her hands glowed with a faint green light. She then removed her hands from her eyes, and opened them, adjusting to the light with no problem.

"You're outnumbered, surrender already!" Temari shouted.

"I'm not as outnumbered as you think. Don't forget about my allies!" the Oto kunoichi said, as she stomped her foot.

The Konoha and Suna ninjas heard a loud rustle, followed by the sound of several branches breaking, and one of the giant snakes that ambushed them before appeared seemingly out of nowhere, lunging at Haku. The Ice Ninja, however, was hardly fazed, as he jumped backwards while making several hand seals.

"Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Haku blew a gust of frozen air at the incoming snake, which took the brunt of the attack. As a result, the snake's jaws were encased in a block of ice, preventing it to open its mouth.

"Sorry, but that's what you get for trying to eat us," Haku said with a smirk.

The snake didn't appreciate Haku's taunt, and even with its jaws sealed, the reptile lunged at the Ice Ninja with murderous intentions in its eyes.

"Guess I was being too optimistic when I thought that would be enough to get rid of you," Haku said, before jumping over the snake, as he prepared his next jutsu. "Alright then. You're not going to enjoy this."

Meanwhile, Hinata had already recovered from her temporary blindness, and she and Temari were about to engage the masked kunoichi once again.

"Even if my snake got rid of that annoying Ice Release user, I still have to contend with you two," the Oto kunoichi observed. "Alright then, let's invert the number advantage. Wood Release: Wood Clone Jutsu!"

Four vine sprouts grew around the Oto kunoichi, quickly taking her form and shape. All of them adopted fighting stances.

"Go!"

The Wood Release user and her clones leaped at the two kunoichi.

"I'll take care of the original. Can you get the clones out of my back?" Hinata asked Temari.

The Suna kunoichi smirked. "Consider it done."

As Temari blasted with gusts of wind the clones that tried to approach her or her Konoha ally, Hinata rushed towards the original, making the same hand seals as before.

"Lightning Release: Twin Thunder Lion Fists!"

As before, chakra lion heads covered in electricity appeared on Hinata's hands as she got ready to fight. The kunoichi groaned, as she prepared her counterattack.

"Not that jutsu again. Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

The Oto kunoichi projected a growing wood dragon from her interlocked hands, which flew at Hinata as it let out a loud roar. The Hyuga was undaunted, as she thrust an arm forward towards the incoming dragon head. The effect was instant, and its head was immediately shattered. A blow with the other hand ensured that the rest of its serpentine body met the same fate.

Hinata landed in front of her, her feared jutsu still active.

"Your Wood Release it's impressive, but it won't be enough to overcome us," Hinata told her, as she walked towards the armored Oto kunoichi.

"Wood Release is much more than a mere combination of two basic elements, Hyuga. It's the power of life itself!" the kunoichi replied as she slammed her hands into the ground.

The ground started to shake, and multiple wooden vines emerged around Hinata. Said vines tried to impale or wrap around her, but the Hyuga gracefully dodged them before destroying them with an accurate strike. More and more vines started to emerge, to the point that Hinata was starting to feel overwhelmed.

"You can't win against me, since you're fighting against nature itself!" the Oto kunoichi boasted.

Fortunately, Hinata had the perfect counter for an overwhelming attack from every side. The moment she had a window of a single second, she quickly started to spin.

"Lightning Release: Heavenly Thunderstorm!"

Hinata turned into a dome of spinning electricity, which blasted all the vines around her into tiny splinters. Lightning bolts and chakra blasts shot into every direction, cracking the ground, burning the grass, and sending dust, wind and pebbles in a wide area.

"Storms are also part of nature," Hinata firmly replied as her spinning ceased. She spread her arms, and the lightning chakra lion heads reappeared once again, before dashing towards her enemy.

Then, she stopped when they heard an explosion not far away from there. More specifically, where Naruto and the others were fighting. The armored kunoichi let out an audible gasp.

"Brother!"

...

With Kankuro's puppet damaged, Naruto and Kurenai were on their own against the Oto ninja. Thanks to the nature energy he was collecting, he moved much faster, displayed more resistance, and his blows were far more powerful. This time, Naruto and Kurenai decided to attack the two of them at the same time.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Naruto thrust his interlocked hands forward, projecting a powerful horizontal cyclone. Kurenai summoned several rocks above them, and tossed them into Naruto's attack, creating a tornado of flying rocks.

"You think you're so clever, combining both attacks," the Oto ninja sneered, as he made several hand seals. "But elemental weaknesses are meaningless in the face of the power I possess! Lightning Release: Golden Storm!"

Once again, a golden aura flared around the masked ninja, as yellow lightning bolts flew from his body towards the incoming elemental attack. The three jutsu clashed into an explosion, raising a cloud of dirt and dust. Then, a looming shadow was cast over him, and the Oto ninja barely avoided the incoming Gamaken falling on top of him. Gamaken tried to hit him with his sasumata, but the Oto ninja

was too fast. He then launched himself at the giant toad, and delivered such a powerful flying kick to the amphibious' face, that it made him topple on his back.

"UGH!" the toad croaked as he hit the ground.

"Gamaken!" Naruto cried before turning his eyes at his opponent, Wind Sword in hand, and sped after him. The Oto ninja raised his broadsword to parry the incoming blow, and much to his surprise, he found himself being pushed back by the sheer force of the attack.

"Your strength has increased," the masked ninja noted. "Your sword strikes didn't pack such power before. What did you...?"

It was then when he noticed that Naruto's eyes were now yellow with horizontal pupils, and had orange markings around them. The blond grinned.

"Think you're the only one who can use nature energy?" Naruto asked, keeping his smirk.

"How...? Nature energy is impossible to gather unless you're still! Only my ability can overcome such obstacle!" the masked ninja asked, in shock.

"I'm tempted to tell you, but I think I prefer to see you try to guess it yourself," Naruto replied as he pulled out a second Wind Blade from his ninja tool pouch, and activated it. "Now get ready!"

Having two weapons now, Naruto's fighting style drastically changed. He now delivered a flurry of quick strikes from one arm each, forcing his opponent into the defensive. Seeing that sword fighting wasn't working, the Oto ninja tried a different approach. He tossed his broadsword at Naruto, before thrusting his arms forward.

"Multiple Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Right after swiping the broadsword away, Naruto saw a multitude of snakes emerging from under his enemy's sleeves. Their trajectory seemed a bit off, and too late the blonde realized that they weren't lunging at his body, but at his hands. The snakes sank their multiple fangs onto the blonde's forearms, forcing him to drop his trusty weapons.

"AAAARGGH!" Naruto screamed as he fell on his knees.

The Oto ninja smirked under his mask, as he directed some of his snakes to wrap around Naruto's neck. "Not so cocky now, huh?" he taunted. "Any last words before I end your miserable life?"

"Y-yes..." Naruto said weakly, before smirking at him. "Don't forget about... Kurenai-sensei..."

Then, "Naruto" burst into a flock of butterflies.

"What the-" the confused masked man stammered. "Wait a minute, this is a genjutsu! I have to-"

"RASENGAN!"

In a split second, the Oto ninja saw Naruto slamming a spiraling sphere of chakra into his gut. It had the side effect of dispelling the genjutsu, but it didn't matter since the illusion made its job. The sphere expanded, before it exploded, violently hurling the Oto ninja away.

"Good job with that genjutsu, Kurenai-sensei," Naruto praised his teacher.

"It was thanks to sparring you in Sage Mode that I managed to perfect them so much, Naruto, so don't give up your part of the credit," Kurenai smiled back.

The two of them walked towards the downed Oto ninja. He was still alive, since Naruto could sense his chakra. Crouching besides him,

Naruto removed his balaclava in order to take a better look at him. Just like Hinata said, his face was what Hagane would like if he were a young adult. Naruto stayed silent for a few seconds, before he let out a weary sigh.

"Naruto...?" Kurenai asked.

"We should try to bring them to the village," Naruto suggested.

"However, we still need to rescue Gaara, and there's no way we can do that while keeping these guys around."

"Maybe we could send a message to the village and ask to send somebody else to take care of them?" Kurenai suggested.

Before Naruto had any chance to reply, wooden roots emerged from the ground, and lunged at the two Konoha Jonin, who quickly jumped back.

"DON'T DARE TOUCH MY BROTHER!" a female voice said.

The other Oto ninja landed besides her fallen comrade, and helped him on his feet.

"Hebimaru, are you okay?" the woman asked.

"He... Hebiko... I..." the man, apparently named Hebimaru, weakly replied.

"Don't talk, I'll take care of you," Hebiko replied. She then threw a smoke bomb at her feet, creating a curtain of smoke.

When Naruto rushed forward, they weren't there anymore. Thanks to his temporary sensing abilities, Naruto knew she had Body Flickered into the forest, but decided not to chase them.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata's voice said from behind.

Naruto and Kurenai turned around, and saw Hinata, Haku and Temari running towards them. Kankuro, who had picked up the

pieces of his puppet, walked towards them as well.

"Where did the enemies go?" Temari asked.

"The woman picked the guy up and disappeared," Naruto told them.

Gamaken slowly walked towards his summoner.

"I'm sorry for not being enough of help. I'll try to work on my clumsiness for the next time you decide to summon me," Gamaken apologized with a polite bow.

Naruto earnestly smiled at the toad. "Hey, you did fine! Even if those guys got away, you got rid of that snake, and provided me for an opening to attack."

"I'm glad that I was of some assistance," Gamaken replied. "Since the battle is over, I shall now return to Myoboku. See you the next time you want my help, Naruto-san."

And with that, Gamaken disappeared in a poof of smoke.

"It doesn't matter, they weren't our target," Temari said, as she pulled out her special compass. "Come on, we need to continue. The more time we waste, the lower the chances of saving Gaara."

"Actually..." Hinata began, rubbing her arm a bit. "Can't we rest for a bit? I spent a better portion of my chakra fighting that woman."

"Same here," Haku said. "That snake was tough opponent, and I'm a bit exhausted."

"And I need to fix my puppet," Kankuro chimed in. "Thankfully, the damage done isn't beyond repair."

"What!? Gaara's life is in peril! There's no time to rest!" Temari insisted.

"Temari-san," Kurenai called her. "I understand your concerns. But keep in mind that once we arrive their hideout, we'll have to fight against those Akatsuki that captured Gaara. And I wouldn't discount more being there. We shouldn't try to confront them if we aren't in top condition to fight."

Temari tried to protest, but her brain was unable to come up with a good counter to Kurenai's arguments. She sighed in return.

"How long until the extraction is complete?" the blonde kunoichi asked.

"As far as we think, one day," Kurenai replied.

"Okay, we'll rest for a few hours, but not any longer! Understood?" she told them.

Everybody nodded. The first order of business was to set up a campsite that they could use to rest and recover from the fight they just had.

...

Akatsuki Hideout

"Good news, everyone," Zetsu spoke, breaking the silence that had reigned for the past hours. "Orochimaru's minions did their job. My clones informed me that the rescue group has been forced to stop and rest."

"I knew those kids wouldn't disappoint me, kukuku..." Orochimaru chuckled.

"Good, that bought us some precious time," the leader said. "I presume there's still twenty hours until the extraction process is complete. We'll be finished before they arrive."

Everybody nodded, and kept focusing on the extraction process. The red stream of energy that flowed from Gaara's mouth into the

statue's not only continued unimpeded, but it was starting to become thinner with each hour...

Author's Notes: So, the group consisting on Kurenai's Assault Squad plus Kankuro and Temari head to rescue Gaara. Though they won't be alone for long, since they will get some reinforcements from Suna shortly before facing the Akatsuki.

Also, what do you think of Hebimaru and Hebiko? Yeah, they're clones of Hagane and Kaida artificially aged into adulthood, and brainwashed to serve their "father" no matter what. While not terribly important in the plot overall, they will play a major role in future arcs revolving around Orochimaru. They also exist as a way to form a new incarnation of the Sound Five that will be featured in said future arcs, alongside the two surviving members of the previous incarnation, Tayuya and Kimimaro, the latter retaining his position as leader, with the fifth member being Juugo (man, i'm so glad that I found a way to bring him into the story. Most AU authors have no trouble including Karin and Suigetsu, but Juugo is much trickier since we know almost nothing of his past).

Anyway, after two action heavy chapter, the next one is going to be more calm. But it will also allow me to flesh out Kankuro and Temari's personality and background a lot, so I'm sure you're going to enjoy it as well.

Thanks to gio08 for beta-reading this chapter.

I'm hoping that you're liking so far my take on the Kazekage's Rescue Arc. I'm doing my best to make it better than the original. Tell me if I'm right or wrong via review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

A Failed Rescue?

Author's Note: I'd like to give a shout out to FoxBlueReaver for making the first fanart of this fanfic, a really cute picture of Shisui and Shizune. Thanks a lot, pal!

With this chapter, we reach the middle point of the arc (most arcs of shippuden won't be as long as the Kiri Civil War, so don't worry about the story dragging on), which also introduces a few characters from Suna I do like a lot. Enjoy!

Chapter 53

A Failed Rescue...?

or

Delaying Tactics Are Nothing to Sneeze at

...

Sunagakure, Kazekage's State

As the sun started to set in the desert village, Rasa was about conclude a meeting he had with Suna's Council of Elders regarding both the village affairs, and the new treaty with Konoha and Kiri. Tensions were high, since a good deal of the councilors barely tolerated an alliance with their longtime allies of Konoha to begin with, they found the idea of an alliance with one of their worst enemies outrageous.

"I still can't see why you're against this alliance, Chiyo-baasama," the Kazekage told one of the female councilors. "So far, we've gained a lot from it, and it's not even settled."

Chiyo was an elderly woman with black eyes, wrinkled face, and dull lavender hair tied in a bun, with two bangs that framed her face. She has been the most prominent dissident to the idea of an alliance.

"Suna should be strong on its own, not depend on the charity of other villages. Next thing I know you'll replace our proud puppeteering corps with those mechanical abominations from Uzushio," Chiyo scoffed.

"Sister, please, don't insult Kazekage-sama in such a way," another councilor, an elderly man with shadowed eyes and thick grey eyebrows told her. "No Kazekage in his right mind would dismantle Sunagakure's pride and joy."

"No Kazekage in his right mind should make us depend so much on foreign powers, Ebizo," Chiyo told her brother.

Rasa groaned and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Listen, either with or without your support, this alliance will have my approval and will continue until the very end. So just for once, try to make things easier for me and-"

Then, at that moment, a small, goggle-wearing toad carrying a scroll on his back appeared from a cloud of smoke in the middle of the table the Kazekage and the councilors were sitting around. The ninja guarding the room immediately drew out their kunai and other weapons, in any case it was an assassination attempt on the Kazekage or the councilors.

"What's the meaning of this!?" Rasa bellowed.

"Hello there. My name is Kosuke. Are you the Kazekage?" the small toad asked. "Jiraiya-san said that the Kazekage was a man that sucked the joy of living out of you by being in the same room as him, and out of all the people here, you fit the description the best."

"So Jiraiya told you that..." Rasa said, his eye twitching a bit. "Did that white haired idiot send you here? With what purpose?"

"Yes, he did! He said he had an urgent message for you," Kosuke replied before handing the scroll to the Kazekage.

"For your sake, someone better be dying," Rasa fumed as he unfurled the scroll. As he read it, color started to disappear from his face.

"Kazekage-sama?" a councilor asked.

Rasa didn't say anything. He then burst out of the council room, leaving the elders flabbergasted. Running as fast as his legs could carry him, the Kazekage slammed the door of his office open and entered the room. He started rummaging under his desk until he finally found what he was looking for, a hidden switch that revealed a secret compartment.

Opening the compartment, Rasa checked its contents, and his worst fears were confirmed. One of the special compasses designed to track Gaara down was missing.

...

Forests of the Land of Fire, close to the border with the Land of Rivers

At the same time, the group of six decided to make camp and rest for a bit. It was decided that they would be on the move an hour before the sunrise, since they have no time to spare. After a light meal, all of them decided to go to sleep. Kankuro, who still had to repair his puppet, volunteered to make the first watch. Naruto left a clone for him as company, and to help him guard the camp.

For the best part of an hour, the Suna Jonin and the clone stayed silent, the latter watching the former diligently working on his puppet. Then, the Naruto clone decided to break the silence.

"So, how it's going?" the clone asked the hooded ninja.

"Almost done," Kankuro replied, not taking his eyes from the puppet. "Though once all this mess is over and we go back home, I'm going to make Tamotsu even stronger than it was. After that fight with the white haired guy, I have a good assessment of Tamotsu's capabilities and weaknesses."

"Boy, being a puppeteer sounds like it's even more work than I first imagined," the Naruto clone said, scratching the back of his head.

"Make no mistake, it is! But the payoff makes it worth it. Puppeteers are among Suna's most feared ninja for a reason," Kankuro proudly claimed.

"I know. That's why Uzushio tried to take advantage of that," the Naruto clone said.

This drew the hooded ninja's attention, which for the first time took his eyes from Tamotsu, and eyed the Naruto clone. "What? What do you mean?"

"The chakra golems," the clone replied. "Didn't you notice the similarities? Yeah, the Uzumaki Clan saw your puppeteers in action during the First War, and thought that maybe they could take the puppets and improve them."

"How? By making them move autonomous?" Kankuro asked.

The clone nodded. "Ever heard the saying 'the weakest part of a sword it's its wielder'? Well, Uzumaki seal masters worked on that principle. They tried to create a kind of puppet that could move and act on its own, removing the need of having a ninja controlling it all the time," the clone explained. "That way, they could be used to bolster an army's numbers, act as shock troops, defend human ninja, and more."

"Not a bad idea, I must admit," Kankuro said as he went back to work on his puppet.

"Not bad an idea? It was an awesome idea! Hell, I don't even know why you decided to convert those golems into a puppet in the first place," the clone groaned.

Kankuro looked at the clone again, and grinned. "It seems to me that both you and your deceased clansmen forgot another important saying: 'a sword is only as good as the one who wields it'. While it's true that the way your clan designed the golems would impress Monzaemon himself-

"Who?" Naruto interrupted.

"The inventor of puppet ninjutsu. His puppets were rudimentary for today's standards, but truly works of art in their time," Kankuro explained, before retailing the conversation. "What I mean is, no matter how powerful you make those golems, they will never replace the need of the human element."

"You seem very sure of that," the clone said, crossing his arms.

"Because I am. Tell me, you fought against those golems in Kiri, right?" the blond nodded. "Then answer me this: what was their attack pattern?"

Placing a finger under his chin, the clone tried to remember Naruto's time in Kiri over a year ago. Soon, it came with an answer. "Well, they mostly relied on brute strength. They were big and packed a mean punch. They also had some weapons such as flamethrowers and hidden blades in their arms. Some also had kunai launchers."

"Doesn't sound very sophisticated, does it?" Kankuro asked. "In fact, that's why the golems are so big and bulky. They need to be, in order to compensate for their lack of intelligence and inability to come with complex plans and strategies. You already saw me in action, and saw what puppets are capable of. Do you think a golem could do the same things I can do with my puppets?"

"To be honest... no," the clone admitted in defeat.

Kankuro grinned. "Thought so. But then again, this doesn't mean that I think the golems are worthless. The way they're capable of moving on their own is fascinating, and the supplementary seals are sure something. That's why I'm planning to create a new generation of puppets that will encompass the best of both worlds. It's a work in progress, but I have faith in my abilities."

Naruto nodded. "Hey, Kankuro, might I ask you something?"

"Sure," the puppeteer replied.

"What moved you to become a puppeteer?" Naruto asked. "I mean, it sounds something quite daunting."

"Again, it is," Kankuro replied. "As for what moved to me to take that path... well, I guess the desire to stand out. I think you have siblings, right, Naruto?" Kankuro asked.

The clone nodded. "A brother and a sister. The two of them younger. They're twins, actually."

"So, you're the oldest then," Kankuro said. "Temari was the only girl, and the oldest of the three. Gaara was the youngest, and a Jinchuriki. And there was me, the middle child with nothing that made me stand out. And my father is the Kazekage, so of course everybody had a lot of high expectations placed on us, myself included. When I realized that Ninja Puppeteers are considered among the deadliest and most skilled in our village, I decided to become one.

"Though the more I trained and the better I got, the more I loved it. Eventually my initial motivation faded away, and simply decided to throw myself into what I knew was my calling. Not that I'm not going to enjoy being admired for what I love doing, hehe," the puppeteer admitted.

"Heh, I can relate to that too. At first, I wanted to be Hokage so people would admire me and wouldn't fear me for being a

jinchuriki, you know?" the clone began. "But as I grow up, I'm starting to find better reasons to become Hokage than my own ego. Such as ending all the misery of this world, and bring us closer to a peaceful future."

"Sounds quite nice, even if a bit utopic," Kankuro replied.

"Hey, if we all just do nothing under the excuse that 'it's just an utopia', of course things will never get better!" Naruto protested.

Kankuro chuckled. "Guess you got a point there. I wouldn't have become the ninja I am today if I let the difficulty of being a puppeteer discourage me from being one."

"See? All we need to do is keep trying until things get better," the clone stated.

...

Later, Kankuro finished his shift and went to bed, while Naruto's clone was dispelled. He was then followed by the blonde's real self, Haku, Kurenai, Temari, and lastly, Hinata. The Hyuga spent some time watching alone, until the blonde kunoichi left her sleeping bag, and went to make her company.

"Temari-san? Shouldn't you be sleeping? You already finished your shift," Hinata pointed out.

Temari sighed. "I don't think I'll be able to get anymore sleep. The sun will rise in a couple hours. Plus I'm quite worried for Gaara," Temari said as she checked the compass. The needle still fluttered a little, indicating that Gaara was still alive.

"I know how you feel," Hinata replied. "I have a little sister. If she was in Gaara-san's place... I don't know what I would do. But don't worry, we will save him. Don't doubt about that for a second."

Temari smiled at her weakly. "Thanks. I wish I could have your optimism right now. Though then again, dwelling in worst case scenarios isn't going to be of any help."

"I know. We were once in a similar situation with Naruto-kun. In the end, everything worked out in our favor, though we just barely rescued Naruto-kun from his kidnappers," Hinata recalled.

"Are you talking about that time Orochimaru invaded your village?" Temari asked.

Hinata nodded. "Turns out, it was just a smokescreen to kidnap Naruto-kun and the Hokage's children. Even if we rescued them, it's not that they came out of that unscathed."

Temari chuckled. "No matter how much hell Konoha takes, you guys always manage to endure. My father doesn't want anybody to know this, but he's kind of jealous of you guys, and wished Suna could be as strong as Konoha."

"I'm sure Suna is strong too, Temari-san," Hinata insisted.

Temari chuckled again, though this time it sounded more like a dismissive snort. "Oh please. Come on Hinata, I'm almost an adult, you don't have to lie to me like that. I'm more than aware that our village is the weakest of the Great Five. Hell, we resemble more a minor village than a great one. That's why our father has been determined to the point of obsession of making Suna as strong as possible. He's aware that we managed to survive so long thanks to Konoha's help, and while we appreciate our alliance, it's rather humiliating to think that we're so dependent on others."

"I remember Gaara-san winning the Chunin Exams Finals when they took place in Konoha. I'm sure that that helped to improve your village's reputation," Hinata pointed out.

"It did. For some time. But we can't just hold onto Gaara's victory forever. There are Chunin Exams every year, each with their

respective victor," Temari said. "Hell, I'm sure that if we returned to Suna, our medics wouldn't have been able to find a cure for Sasori's poison. Yet you did it in less than a day."

"Well, you can thank Tsunade-sama for that. If she never returned to the village, our medical knowledge and skill wouldn't be nowhere near as advanced. As an apprentice of hers, I can tell you that," Hinata pointed out.

"That's the thing, we don't have a Tsunade of our own to speak of. Which is why our father did everything in his hand to strengthen the village, which culminated into Gaara," Temari replied.

"That's why he was made a jinchuriki?" Hinata asked.

"That's why Gaara exists to begin with," Temari replied, making Hinata look at her quizzically. "Ah, yes, I forgot you didn't even know the whole story. Do you know why Gaara was chosen to be a jinchuriki, despite being the youngest? Did you even wonder why Kankuro and I were passed over?"

"Now that you mention it... no, I never thought about that," Hinata admitted.

"When I was born, my father was already planning to make me the jinchuriki of the One Tail. But lucky me, I wasn't compatible due some chakra type bullshit I don't fully understand to this day," Temari began. "So my parents went for another baby, and turns out, Kankuro wasn't compatible either. Turns out, there were complications during Kankuro's birth. The medics told my father that he shouldn't try for more children, since the risk of our mother not being able to make it was too high. But my father didn't listen to them, Gaara was born, and to my father's joy, he turned out to be compatible. However, the medics turned out to be right, and our mother died shortly after giving birth to him."

"I'm... I'm sorry to hear that, Temari-san. I know how painful losing a parent so young can be," Hinata empathically said. She then

adopted a pensive expression, as her gaze shifted from Temari.

"It's okay. It happened a long time ago, and I'm over that already," Temari replied.

"You know, that reminds a bit of how Naruto-kun became a jinchuriki," Hinata began. "You see, the Nine Tails can't be sealed into anyone. As far as we know, only those of the Uzumaki clan can hold it inside them, and Naruto-kun was the only Uzumaki back then."

"Guess that's why Naruto and Gaara clicked so easily. They have similarities not even they're aware of," Temari chuckled.

"However, there's something I don't understand," Hinata said. "Why did the jinchuriki had to be a child of the Kazekage? Did he feel it was morally wrong to pick somebody else?"

Temari let out a mirthless laugh. "My father thinking that something's 'morally wrong', now that's a good one. No, it's not because of that. He wanted the jinchuriki to be somebody close to him, somebody he could mold into a loyal asset to the village. In fact, it's a frequented practice in all Great Villages. I mean, take a look at Naruto," Temari said, as her and Hinata's eyes rested on the blonde's sleeping form. "The man who ended up adopting him became the Hokage. And even if he didn't, his wife could have been a good candidate. You can't chalk that to coincidences."

"I see," was Hinata's answer as she absorbed the information Temari had explained. Other than Naruto, Gaara, and that green haired girl from Taki, Hinata hadn't had much contact with jinchuriki, so she didn't know much about them. She also remembered Yagura, who pretty much removed the middleman and became Mizukage himself.

"But enough talking about them. I think I don't know that much about you. Do you have any goals you want to accomplish?" Temari asked.

Hinata didn't reply. She placed a finger under her chin and started to think. "Well... I want to be a strong ninja, to make my family proud, and one day being able to lead my clan and heal its rift. I like to think I'm getting a little closer to that goal with each day."

"Have you ever thought about having Genin?" Temari asked. "It's mostly Jonin who take them, but some Special Jonin are allowed to do it as well. At least in Suna."

"You'd think I'll make a good sensei?" Hinata asked, a little flushed.

"You look like a patient and kind person, not to mention quite strong. The ideal combination for a Jonin-sensei," Temari said. "At first I was rather reluctant when I was told about it, since I thought it would be like taking care of my little brothers all over again but... it's a rather rewarding experience. Plus the time I spend taking care of said brothers prepared me for the job."

"Where are they now?" Hinata asked.

"They should be in Suna. I left them a training routine for them to do while I was away doing this mission. Hopefully, I'll be able to whip them into shape for the next Chunin Exams in your village," Temari said.

Hinata smiled. "Hanabi-chan, my sister, also plans to enter alongside her team. Maybe her team and yours will clash in the exam?"

Temari grimaced a little, but chuckled. "If your sister is half as good as you are, I hope not for my Genin's sake. But then again, it might be good for them to face some strong opponents."

"Yes. The more prepared they are, the better. I'm sure you want them to get a promotion as soon as possible, but it's better to wait until they're ready," Hinata replied, then she looked downward. "You know, when I was promoted, I felt I wasn't ready for the new rank, since my fighting style still had some rather glaring flaws I was barely able to hide."

"So far, I never noticed any flaw in your fighting style when we fought against those Oto ninja," Temari complimented.

"Because I trained a lot after that. Guilt can be quite the motivator, hehe" Hinata chuckled awkwardly. "You were pretty nice too. You're possibly the strongest kunoichi of my age group I've ever met."

"Thanks. I did train a lot from a very early age in order to become the very best," Temari proudly replied, before she cast her sight down. "Though not as good, given how easily those Akatsuki kicked my butt."

Hinata placed a comforting hand on Temari's shoulder. "Don't beat yourself up for losing against Akatsuki. They're S-Rank criminals for a reason. But don't worry, with our help, you'll be able to pay them back in kind for what they did to both you and your siblings."

Temari smirked confidently, and nodded.

...

Just as they planned, the group of six got up an hour before dawn and continued their journey towards the Land of the Rivers. Much to their relief, the compass still worked, meaning that there was still hope to save Gaara. But given how much time they were forced to spend resting, they knew Gaara could die at any moment.

Hinata kept her Byakugan active at all times, just in case Akatsuki decided to throw more enemies to delay them: It was decided that if such thing happened, only two or three will stay behind to fight, while the rest could continue forward. They couldn't afford to waste anymore time. Fortunately for them, it wasn't the case, as no enemy came to fight them.

An hour after the sun rose, they reached the Land of the Rivers. It was then when Hinata saw something.

"There's a group of ninja ahead of us. They're in front of a cave blocked by a large boulder," Hinata informed her teammates. "I believe it's the Akatsuki hideout."

"Are those guys Akatsuki?" Haku asked.

Hinata shook her head. "All of them are wearing Suna's ninja uniforms and forehead protectors."

"They could be Akatsuki under a transformation, ready to ambush us," Kankuro conjectured.

Hinata shook her head once again. "The Byakugan can see through transformations. They're actual Suna ninja."

Temari let out a sigh. "Even if they're just four, we could use some reinforcements."

The four Konoha ninjas and two Sand Siblings landed in front of the group of four Suna ninja. They were led by an adult woman with purple facial markings and a turban covering her head, a woman Naruto had seen before. Her subordinates were a girl with shoulder length brown hair and black eyes, a boy with short spiky hair and glasses, and a smiling, friendly looking girl with long black hair. The three of them were wearing the standard Sunagakure uniform, with the two young girls also wearing metallic arm guards. The adult woman took a step forward.

"Temari-sama, Kankuro-sama, it's a pleasure to see you're alright," the woman said in a courteous tone.

"As are we, Maki-san. You can thank Konoha for our recovery," Temari told the Jonin.

Maki nodded and turned at the Konoha ninja. "On Suna's behalf, I thank you for your assistance," she then looked at Naruto, and smiled. "Hello again, Naruto-kun. You surely grew a lot since the last time I saw you."

"Hey, I remember you! You were there that time I visited Suna with dad so many years ago!" Naruto said, in realization. "Man, time sure flies..."

Maki nodded before her expression darkened. "It does. I just wish our meeting again was under better circumstances. By the way, these are my students, Matsuri, Mikoshi, and Yukata."

Matsuri and Mikoshi made a polite bow when they were introduced. Yukata happily smiled and waved at the Konoha ninja. Kurenai took a step forward to do the same.

"My name's Kurenai Yuhi. These two are Hinata Hyuga and Haku Yuki. You already know Naruto," Kurenai introduced both herself and her team. "Do not take this the wrong way, but are you the only reinforcements Suna has sent?"

Maki sighed and nodded at the Genjutsu Mistress. "Sadly, yes. Most of our ninja are away doing missions, plus the Council fear that with our jinchuriki abducted, other villages might get some ideas and try to attack us taking advantage of this, so most of the reserve ninja have been put on patrol border duty."

"Guess we'll have to do with what we have," a resigned Temari said. "I presume you found this place with one of the other two compasses?"

"Yes. However, Temari-san, I do bring grave news. One of the compasses was stolen. That's how Akatsuki managed to locate and ambush you," Maki explained.

"Dammit! Our father kept those compasses under his watch himself! Hell, their mere existence was a secret to pretty much everybody sans a few ninjas whose loyalty to Suna was pretty much unquestionable! To think that there was a traitor among them..." Kankuro angrily seethed.

"While the presence of spies in Suna is sure troubling, we have to rescue Gaara-sama as soon as possible," Matsuri spoke up for the first time. "Gaara-sama might not have much time left..."

"Damn right you are!" Naruto agreed, before he looked at the large boulder blocking the entrance. "So, Gaara is behind that rock, right?"

Maki nodded. "Yes. However, the boulder is just part of the problem. It has a seal on it that made it pretty much indestructible."

"And we did use quite a lot of explosives!" Yukata pointed out.

"Hey, I know a lot about seals! Let me take a look, I'm sure I can find a way to disable it," Naruto offered as he walked to the boulder and began to inspect the seal slapped into it.

"Hinata-san, use your Byakugan to scout the area. We need to know Gaara's state, as well as the number of enemies we're going to face. I wouldn't count past more Akatsuki being there besides Deidara and Sasori," Maki told the Hyuga.

Hinata nodded. In an instant, bulged veins appeared around her eyes as her Bloodline Limit came to life. However, when she directed her sight towards the cave, the result wasn't the one the Hyuga was expecting.

"I... I can't see," Hinata muttered. "The seal formed a chakra barrier that obscures my enhanced vision. Sorry."

Kankuro muttered a curse under his breath. "Which means we won't be able to do jack shit until we get rid of that seal first. Naruto, do you think-"

"YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME!" the blond angrily shouted, causing a few nearby birds to fly away scared.

"Naruto? Is there a problem with the seal?" Kurenai asked a bit concerned, as she and the rest of the group got closer to him.

"I know this seal! It's a Five-Seal Barrier!" Naruto explained, his anger coating each word.

"If you know the seal, where's the problem?" Mikoshi asked.

"This is an Uzumaki Seal!" Naruto exclaimed, outraged. "Not just Kiri, but it seems that Akatsuki as well profited from my clan's downfall!" the blond shouted as he punched the seal, to no effect.

Haku placed a comforting hand on the enraged blonde's shoulder. "That's... distressing to hear, Naruto-kun. But right now we have more pressing concerns. We need to know how to disable the seal."

Realizing his teammate was right. Naruto took a deep breath, as he forced himself to calm down. Gaara needed him now.

"Yes. The Five Seal Barrier, as the name implies, is a barrier formed by five seals. One seal is the core, and the others form the barrier around it. I presume this seal here is the core seal. The other four have to be scattered not too far away. Otherwise, the barrier wouldn't work."

"Leave that to me. Byakugan!" Hinata activated her doujutsu once again, and in a few seconds, she managed to find all four seals, since they had a strong chakra signature. "Found them!"

"To disable the barrier, the five seals must be removed at the same time. Otherwise, it won't work," Naruto finished his explanation.

"Well, sounds easy enough!" Yukata happily chirped.

"Too easy, if you ask me," a suspicious Temari said. "Naruto, is there a way for the seals to be booby trapped?"

"I wouldn't count that out. In fact, this seal is almost tailor made to force a group to split in order to disable it," Naruto guessed.

"But, what options do we have then? Is there another way to disable it that doesn't force half of us to split? Our time is running out!"

Temari urged, as both her fists clenched.

"I think I can disable it," Naruto stated, as he kneeled down, and unsealed his sealing tools from a scroll.

"How long will you take, Naruto?" Kankuro asked.

"Five minutes, give or take," Naruto confidently stated as he started to work on the seal.

"I'm one of Suna's best seal-masters. I'll lend you a hand," Maki offered as she joined the blond.

"Okay, while Naruto and Maki-san work, the rest of us gather around here and listen to me as I told you about the enemies we're about to face. They're S-Class criminals, so stay sharp," Temari began. "One of them hails from our own village. Sasori of the Red Sands," when those words left her lips, Maki and Mikoshi instantly gasped, while Yukata looked a bit confused.

"Do you guys know him? Because that name doesn't ring any bell," Yukata asked.

Temari sighed. "Yukata, I like you, but you need to pay more attention about important stuff like this."

"Aw, I like you too, Temari-sama!" Yukata happily replied. "So, about this Sasori guy...?"

Temari held back another sigh. "Sasori is the greatest and most dangerous puppet master Suna has ever produced. So far, we don't know what kind of puppets he'll use against us, but expect all of them to be weapons of mass destruction of their own. Also, beware of the bladed weapons and projectiles of his puppets, since they're coated in a deadly poison. Hinata-san, fortunately, made an antidote."

"We weren't able to make much before we left. All I have are three capsules," Hinata said, as she showed the three vials to everybody. "This antidote will not only neutralize the effects of the poison once applied, but it will continue to do so for the next three minutes. However, like Temari-san said, try to be careful."

"The other one is a missing-nin from Iwa named Deidara. He can animate sculptures out of clay and turn said sculptures into deadly explosives. His main method of attack is to drop explosives from above as he flies on an artificial bird made of clay, so long range is our only option. Be careful when dealing with him as well, since this guy alone managed to defeat Gaara," Temari explained.

"Okay, done!" Naruto replied, satisfied with his quick work.

Everybody looked at the seal, and saw that Naruto and Maki had written other seals in a circular pattern around it. True to his word, the blond took less than five minutes.

"Let's hope it works," Maki said.

"We'll see right now," Naruto replied, as he placed a hand on the seal, and pumped chakra into it. "Sealing Art: Void Touch Seal!"

The Five Barrier Seal started to glow in retaliation, followed shortly after by the counter-seal written around it. Naruto removed his hands as both seals started to fight each other. Eventually, the Barrier Seal lost, and it burst into flames.

"Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked, looking at his girlfriend.

Hinata nodded, and activated her Bloodline Limit for the third and last time that day. "Yes, the barrier is down! I can see them! Both Gaara and the Akatsuki! There are only two of them, I believe they're Deidara and Sasori," Hinata informed them. "Gaara's still alive, but just barely!"

"In that case, we need to get rid of this rock as soon as possible!" Matsuri urged.

"It's pretty big, and looks sturdy. How many explosives do you think we'll need?" Mikoshi asked, as he walked closer to inspect the boulder.

Naruto smirked. "We won't need explosives. My girlfriend will be more than enough. Right, hime?" Naruto asked, giving Hinata a knowing look.

Hinata smiled back, nodded, and clenched her fist. Blue chakra flames burst around it, as electricity started to crackle around it for additional power. She took a few step backwards, as she moved her fist back. "You might want to keep some distance."

...

Meanwhile, at the other side of the cave, the Akatsuki continued with the extraction ritual, which was on the home stretch already.

"Our enemies are at the gates of this lair," Zetsu's black half spoke up. "They disabled the barrier, and will break in any second."

"I know. I felt the barrier being dispelled," the low pitched voice of the leader said. "But they're too late, the ritual is almost finished."

"That's not all. The jinchuriki of the Nine Tails is among the rescue group as well," White Zetsu replied. "This could be a golden chance to capture the Nine Tails' other half."

"Indeed. Deidara, Sasori, get ready for the incoming fight. Your enemies outnumber you five to one, but I have faith that won't be a problem," the leader stated.

"You're right, it won't be one. Let them come, their confidence in their superior numbers will make their fall all the sweeter," Sasori replied.

"Aw yeah! With this one, it will be three out of three! Nobody in Akatsuki will beat my perfect record, hn!" Deidara loudly cheered.

"You shouldn't fall prey to overconfidence either, Deidara," Obito pointed out. "This jinchuriki is a prey tougher than most."

Deidara snickered. "Hey, just because you and that snake failed so many times to snatch a single brat, doesn't mean that I'm going to follow your path, haha!"

"I'll keep your words in mind once we see the result of this fight, Deidara," Obito dangerously said.

Suddenly, the boulder blocking the entrance was blown up in thousands of tiny shards.

...

After seeing Hinata's sheer destructive display, all Suna ninja were left with their eyes wide open and their mouths agape.

"Good work, Hinata-hime!" Naruto praised, giving his girlfriend a thumbs up. Hinata giggled in return.

"Everybody, follow me inside! We have to rescue Gaara!" Temari called as she prepared her war fan and rushed inside.

Temari's orders seem to snap the rest of the Suna ninja from their stupor, who nodded and alongside their Konoha allies, broke into the cave. None of them knew what to expect once they got inside, but the image before them wasn't definitely in their minds.

The group of ten saw a massive statue, formed by a head, and two arms with their hands pointing upwards. There were nine eyes on the statue's face, two of them opened. On each hand there was an Akatsuki, but eight of them appeared to be mirages or illusions, with only Deidara and Sasori appearing to be really there.

"Gaara-sama!" Matsuri cried.

It didn't take them long to see Gaara floating in mid air, being held by a mass of chakra coming from the statue's monstrous open mouth. There were wisps of red chakra coming from his mouth and flowing into the statue.

"Gaara-sama... is he...?" Mikoshi stammered.

"He's still alive, but just barely! We need to act now!" Hinata urged the others.

Seeing Gaara in such a state filled Naruto's heart with a rage unlike any other. So this is what the Akatsuki did to Yagura? Harvest his Tailed Beast, then toss him away as if he was an empty husk? He wasn't going to stand for it.

"Hey there, brat, good to see you again, hn!" Deidara said in a mocking tone to Naruto. "Though you came here in vain. You couldn't save Yagura back in Kiri, and you came too late to save this other brat, haha!"

Deidara's taunting didn't improve the blonde's mood. However, Naruto didn't just hate the Akatsuki, since there was something that pushed him to hate something else on top of them. He hated that statue as if it was his natural enemy. If his state of mind was clearer, he would realize that he was experiencing the Nine Tails' feelings. Either way, it was going to work in his favor.

"That statue!" Naruto yelled, his voice sounded a bit deeper. His eyes turned red, and the marks on his cheeks became bolder. "Everybody, focus your attacks on that statue!"

Everybody nodded and those with ranged jutsu started to make hand seals.

"Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

"Lightning Release: Thunder Fang!"

Temari's gust of wind, Matsuri's wind blade, Yukata's stream of fire and Hinata's lion-shaped lightning blast all flew towards the statue's face, exploding upon making contact. The statue let out an horrifying, bone chilling scream as the chakra field that held Gaara mid air vanished, dropping the jinchuriki down below. Fortunately, Naruto was there to catch his friend.

"The ritual has been interrupted!" the only female Akatsuki worriedly stated.

"It doesn't matter, we sealed most of the One Tail, look!" the leader pointed out. And at that moment, one of the statue's eyes slowly opened.

"Were we too late...?" a disheartened Temari asked.

"No, Gaara is still alive!" Hinata informed the others. "But he won't last much longer unless we get him some medical treatment!"

"In that case, let's take him out of here!" Kankuro stated.

Everybody nodded, and proceeded to rush outside the cave. The leader saw this, and wasn't going to let this happen.

"Sasori, Deidara, don't let them escape! Capture the jinchuriki, kill everybody else!" the Akatsuki leader commanded, as he unsummoned the statue, which disappeared in a poof of smoke.

"I'll cover your exit!" Kurenai said as she made several hand seals. "Earth Release: Multiple Earth Style Walls!"

The Genjutsu Mistress slammed her hands into the ground, and several layers of rock walls emerged from the ground, making the cavern tremble when they slammed against the ceiling, separating the Akatsuki from the retreating Konoha and Suna ninja.

"Well, guess this walls will be a pretty good warm-up for the fight to come," Deidara cheerily said as he prepared some of his bombs. "Which one is the jinchurki, by the way?"

"The angry brat you just taunted," Obito mentioned. "Which by the way, seems that you know each other. Care to explain that?"

"Wait, that brat was the jinchuriki!?" Deidara asked in shock. "He was there when I went to fetch the Mizukage!"

"You had another jinchuriki in your grasp, and you let him go?" Sasori asked, his tone between disappointed and taunting. "Hardly unbelievable."

"Shut it, hn! Should I remind you that I captured two of the three jinchuriki so far? I'm the only one here with a perfect record! Two out of two! And soon, it will be three out of three!"

"We hope you're speaking the truth, Deidara. I'll be waiting your report," the leader said, before his spectral avatar vanished, followed by the avatars of the other seven Akatsuki not being there.

With a well aimed set of explosions, the first wall was down. Deidara then prepared another set of explosive clay figurines, while Sasori started to think about something he didn't pay much attention before.

"So it was true. The jinchuriki's siblings were in that group. How? They should be dead by now. And far from that, they were in good enough condition to fight. How did they manage to create an antidote for my poison? No medic-nin on this world should be able to do that... was Orochimaru right?"

...

Meanwhile, on the shallow river outside the cave, everybody else was gathered around Gaara, lying on the wet floor, with Hinata kneeled before him, healing him as best as he could, Byakugan active.

"How is he? Will you be able to save him?" Kankuro asked, biting his lip.

"I'll try! He's still alive, but his chakra network is quickly breaking down! Even if he still has some traces of Tailed Beast chakra inside his body, the damage caused by the extraction was too much!"

"What can we do, then?" a concerned Temari asked.

Hinata looked at her boyfriend. "Naruto-kun, he needs a chakra transfer!"

"Alright!" the blond nodded and kneeled besides Gaara as well before touching the redhead's midsection and started pouring his own chakra into him.

"Hey, you don't know if you-" Temari was about to ask before Hinata interrupted her.

"Naruto-kun is an universal chakra donor! Besides, with his massive chakra reserves, there won't be a problem for the donor to risk chakra exhaustion!" Hinata quickly replied.

The exchange was brought to a halt by a massive explosion coming from inside the sealed cave, that made the area around it tremble. A wave of dust and dirt was expelled from the cave's mouth, indicating that the Akatsuki had finally broken Kurenai's multiple layered barrier. From the cloud of dust emerged Deidara and Sasori, the former on top of a large clay bird, the latter on foot.

"I don't think we'll be able to run away with those two here," Maki grimly noted. "How much time do you need until Gaara is out of danger?"

"I don't know how long it will take us. As much time as you can!" Hinata pleaded.

Maki nodded, and alongside the rest of the group, prepared for the immediate clash with the Akatsuki.

"I don't know how you two are still alive," Sasori said, his eyes focused on Temari and Kankuro, while he pulled out a scroll from underneath his cloak. "But I'm going to correct that mistake right now."

"Yes! You're about to witness such an epic art display, it will blow you away!" Deidara added with a loud snicker.

And with that horrible, horrible pun, the second clash against Sasori and Deidara began.

Author's Note: This chapter, a bit shorter than usual, was mostly to flesh out Temari and Kankuro's character a bit, which I felt they were rather shortchanged not only in this arc, but in the series as a whole. Hope you enjoyed this little digging into their character and backstories. I really enjoyed the little bonding moment between Hinata and Temari.

Some people guessed that Chiyo would be among the Suna reinforcements, but no, I already stated that she wasn't going to play a major role in this arc as in canon. No, the characters I was talking about were Matsuri and her anime-only teammates Yukata and Mikoshi. It was never shown who their sensei was, so I decided to make Maki, another Suna character I like a lot, to fill that spot, and thus I can kill two birds in one stone.

Thanks a lot to gio08 for betareading this chapter.

So, the climax of the arc begins! While Naruto and Hinata try to save Gaara, the rest have to face Deidara and Sasori. How will the fights be? They will be very different from canon, that's for sure, given that the only one from the original arc still there is Naruto. Tell me your thoughts on this chapter and expectations

**for the next one in a review! Reviews make me really, really,
really happy!**

Battle of the Artists

Author's Note: First of all, I'd like to give a shout out to tzionsinned, who took my Shattered Team Seven challenge. His fanfic is called "The Shattered Path". You can find it in my favorites. So go, read it and give the author your support!

Chapter 54

Battle of the Artists

or

Artists that can't take criticism

For a moment, time froze as both parties stared at each other. Naruto and Hinata kept focused on keeping Gaara alive, while the rest of his Konoha and Suna friends placed themselves around them in a protective formation. The Akatsuki's intentions were very easy to read. Not that it would help them anyway. Deidara grinned, and time continued flowing normally.

"I'll go for the jinchuriki! Sasori, take care of the trash!" Deidara said as his bird started to fly faster around the blond ninja.

"Why I'm always the one who has to deal with the others? I'd like to fight a jinchuriki myself just once," the rogue puppeteer sighed.

"Shit, Naruto and Hinata are like sitting ducks, I have to keep this Akatsuki away from them!" Kurenai thought as she frantically started to make hand seals.

"Oh come on, you're pretty good at keeping them at bay," Deidara replied as he formed several smaller clay birds from the mouths in his hands. "Let's start this!"

However, before he could drop his bombs on the targets below, several massive snakes burst from the ground around them and lunged at the flying Akatsuki with their jaws wide open, their large fangs dripping poison.

"SHIT!" Deidara loudly yelled as he maneuvered his bird to avoid the out of nowhere giant reptiles. "Where did these things came from!? I didn't see anybody summon... hey, wait a minute!"

The blond Akatsuki made a hand seal and with a burst of chakra, Kurenai's quick genjutsu was undone. Deidara looked rather pissed for falling for such a trick.

"Push the Akatsuki away from Naruto and Hinata!" Kurenai shouted.

"Ha! I'd like to see you try!" Deidara boasted. However, unbeknownst to him, the genjutsu, while short lived, had already made its job and created an opening. A cold wind started to blow from above. "What the-?"

Looking above, he saw Haku coming from what appeared to be a portal made of ice floating in mid air. His hands were grabbing a bunch of senbon each and tossed at the Akatsuki as he fell. From such short distance, all of them found their mark.

"AAAARRGH!" Deidara screamed in pain. "You son of a bitch!"

Haku gracefully landed on the clay bird, forcing Deidara to take a step back.

"You almost killed both me and lots of innocents in Kirigakure a year ago. I'm here to repay you in kind," Haku firmly stated, as an ice sword formed on his right hand.

"Well, thanks you for telling me that. I hate to leave a piece of art incomplete!" Deidara said, thrusting his arm forward.

A small insect made of clay flew from under his sleeve towards Haku. The Ice Ninja instinctively jumped backwards, just as the insect exploded, engulfing him in a small but nevertheless lethal explosion.

"Haku!" Kurenai cried.

But much to the Jonin's relief, a mirror made of ice formed besides her and Haku stepped out of it.

"That was close," Haku breathed in relief. "We must be careful, that guy is even more dangerous than I remember."

"Understood. Both you, Temari and Maki's students should try to bring him down with ranged jutsu. Maki, Kankuro and myself will face Sasori," Kurenai stated, as she looked at the rest of the group, looking for their approval. All of them nodded in agreement. "Alright then, in that case, let's go!"

...

As the group split, Kurenai, Maki and Kankuro prepared to fight Sasori, who looked rather nonchalant and even relaxed. He fixed his eyes on Kankuro, ignoring the two women.

"You should be dead," Sasori repeated. "Before I'll kill you, I'll make you say how did you manage to counter my poison."

"Guess now you regret not killing us when you had the chance, right?" Kankuro replied, as he reached for scroll underneath his clothes, and unsealed Tamotsu. "It's time for round two!"

Sasori cast a curious glance on Kankuro's shield-wielding puppet.

"Hmmm. I've never seen that puppet in my life. A creation of yours?" Sasori asked, but didn't give Kankuro the chance to answer. "You see, one does not reach true mastery of puppetry ninjutsu until you create your own puppet. When I was your age, I had already created

dozens of them, and my collection just expanded ever since. But yes, now that you finally stopped using those outdated puppets I created so long ago, you might become a worthwhile challenge."

"Don't forget about us!" Kurenai called, upset at being ignored.

"I'd never think in doing that," Sasori said with a painfully fake smile, as he held up the scroll he had pulled out earlier. "Now, prepare to see one of my most cherished creations. I don't use it that much, so consider yourselves lucky to see it, before I use it to send you to hell."

Sasori unsealed the puppet, who appeared to be one with a vaguely human looking face, whose entire body was covered in a long, dull brown coat. Maki gasped upon seeing it, while Kankuro and Kurenai remained unfazed.

"I can't believe it..." Maki stammered.

"So, do you recognize him?" Sasori replied, as his grin grew wider. "Guess that the other two, one being so young, and the other not from Suna, it doesn't ring a bell. Why don't you enlighten them, kunoichi-san?"

"Yeah, what's with that puppet?" Kurenai asked, noticing her Suna counterpart growing pale.

"That's... the Third Kazekage..." Maki finally managed to say. Even if she didn't meet the man in person, she had seen numerous pictures of him in history books.

"Yes, he is. You could consider him the masterpiece of my art collection," Sasori replied, his voice consumed in delight. "He found about my defection, and personally came to confront me. He probably knew I was too powerful for anybody but him to fight. And he was right, to an extent, given the results, hehe. But enough talking, let's begin this already!"

Chakra threads shot from Sasori's fingers, attaching themselves to several points in the back of the Third Kazekage. With a hand motion, the puppet flew at an amazing speed towards Kurenai, who scrambled to adopt a defensive stance.

"You go first!" Sasori yelled, as he made a swift hand motion.

A cluster of blades appeared on the Kazekage's right arm, which were brought down onto the startled Genjutsu Mistress. However, they didn't sink into her flesh, but clashed against a hard, metallic surface of Tamotsu's large shield.

"Mechanical Light Shield Block!"

Tamotsu's chakra-enhanced shield struggled against the Kazekage's blades. Eventually, the former won, and with a burst of chakra, the latter puppet was pushed back.

"Not bad. Not bad at all," Sasori admitted, and with a flick of his pinky finger, a long, jagged katana appeared on the Kazekage's left hand. "Let's do it again!"

With a hand motion, the Kazekage skyrocketed forward, not choosing any target in particular. Sasori probably wanted to surprise his target at the last second and give them no chance to react. Kankuro, however, wasn't going to allow that.

"Like hell I'm gonna let you!" Kankuro replied, making a finger motion.

Tamotsu's shield horizontally split in two. The upper half split into two parts once again, and bended forward. From the resulting slot, a barrage of kunai with explosives attached to them fired forward. Sasori was forced to pull back his puppet in order to avoid the ensuing explosions.

"And that's not all!" Kankuro added, with another finger motion.

Tamotsu rose its other arm, and two small cannons appeared at its sides. The guns fired two kunai with ropes attached, that flew towards the retreating Kazekage in a wide arc. The kunai successfully tied themselves around the puppet's arms, immobilizing it.

"Come on, now!" Kankuro shouted. "Ignore the puppet! Attack Sasori!"

Kurenai and Maki nodded and rushed forward. Kurenai made hand seals, while Maki unfolded a large scroll made of cloth.

"Earth Release: Stone Dragon Jutsu!"

A giant serpentine dragon made of earth and stone burst from the ground, arching over the Third Kazekage and lunged at Sasori, with its jaws wide open. Sasori did the most logical thing, dropped his puppet and jumped to avoid the earth jutsu. However, while he was mid air, Maki choose that moment to attack.

"Cloth Binding Jutsu!"

As if it was alive, the cloth scroll unfurled on its own and flew towards Sasori. However, a blade appeared from the Akatsuki's sleeve and used it to slash the incoming cloth before it could wrap around him.

Realizing he was wide open, Kurenai and Kankuro moved to attack once again. However, Sasori's reflexes were faster than the two of them anticipated, as he shot chakra threads towards Tamotsu.

"Oh shit, not again!" Kankuro cursed, remembering his disastrous fight against Fu in Konoha's Chunin Exams.

However, Sasori wasn't interested in stealing Kankuro's puppet. With a hand motion, he forced the puppet to slam against the unsuspecting Kurenai, The Genjutsu Mistress crashed against the ground, making a splash upon impacting against the shallow water. Wasting no time, Sasori regained control of the Third Kazekage, and

with a flick of his finger, he made his puppet to open its mouth, releasing a purple gas that quickly covered him completely.

"Watch out! Sasori's poison is something you don't want inside your body!" Kankuro warned the two kunoichi.

"How can he survive inside the toxic cloud?" Kurenai asked.

"Maybe he has an antidote. Or purposefully build immunity towards his own poisons in case they were used against him," Maki guessed. It was a common tactic employed by ninja who used poisoned weapons.

"He's using that poison cloud as a way to build time. Should I blow that poison away with a Wind Jutsu?" Kurenai suggested.

Kankuro shook his head. "If you do that, you'll spread the poison around. Let him have this round. We can use the small reprieve to regain our breath. Don't worry, the poison mist should dissipate soon"

...

Meanwhile, not far from there, the rest of the Konoha and Suna ninja were trying, without much success, fighting against the flying Deidara on the ground.

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

Matsuri crossed her arms, before spreading them in a wide arc, releasing a sharp wind blade at the aerial Akatsuki. This time, it graced one of the clay bird's wings.

"Not bad girlie! Keep trying, and maybe you'll hit me before I die of old age, hn!" Deidara mocked, as he prepared more of his clay figurines. "As a reward for your tenacity, you can enjoy my art!"

Deidara started to fly in a circle at a fast speed, dropping his clay figurines, which exploded upon hitting the ground.

"Let's wait until he flies close to the ground. That way, our chances to hit him will be greater," Mikoshi suggested.

"The problem is, he knows he has to keep some distance if he wants to retain his advantage," Haku replied. "He won't come down on his own."

"Then we will force to!" Temari energetically insisted. "Continue with the attack. Let's goad him into attacking us! I figured out a weakness to his jutsu."

"As you say, Temari-sama," Yukata obediently replied as she made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

The black haired kunoichi fired a wide volley of fireballs at the flying Akatsuki. Deidara was forced to actually maneuver to dodge them rather than casually fly aside. While he was busy doing that, Haku decided to attack.

"Ice Release: Piercing Icicle Shot!"

Using the shallow water that covered the ground, Haku created a spear made of ice, and lunged it at the dodging Deidara. Though rather than dodge the ice projectile, he opted to destroy it by tossing it an exploding clay figurine at it.

"Oh, getting bolder, are you?" Deidara asked, less amused than before. "Okay then, let me show you how below my level you bunch of nobodies are!"

Once again, Deidara dropped several of his explosive clay figurines as he swooped above the group of Konoha and Suna ninja. Just like Temari was expecting. The blonde kunoichi prepared her war fan for a counterattack.

"Now, feel my ar-"

"Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Temari blew her fan, creating a powerful gust of wind that flew upwards, and while it did so, pushed Deidara's clay bombs back towards him, which were about to explode.

"Oh shi-" the Akatsuki cursed, before his voice was muffled by a chain of explosions.

Temari watched expectantly from above, but much to her disappointment, the Akatsuki and his artificial flying steed came out from one of the clouds of smoke with only a few minor burns. A snarl of fury appeared on his previously confident face,

"You dare use my art against me!? Oh, such insult won't be left unanswered, you Suna bitch!" Deidara hollered from above, as he prepared his next move.

...

Meanwhile, Naruto and Hinata continued working on keeping Gaara alive, the former pumping his own chakra into Gaara's system, while the latter keeping his body from shutting down with the Mystical Palm Jutsu. Hinata was starting to grow desperate, something that didn't go unnoticed by her boyfriend.

"Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked. "Something wrong?"

"No matter how much I try, his body doesn't heal! While I can keep him alive, the moment we leave his side, he will die!" Hinata cried, much to Naruto's shock.

"But... but there has to be something we can do!" Naruto shouted back. "We managed to catch Gaara in time! Please don't tell me it was all for nothing!"

"I'm trying but... I don't know what to do! If Tsunade-sama was here..." Hinata moaned.

Naruto cursed under his breath. He was almost going to let go of the chakra flow, but managed to keep it steady. "We did interrupt the extraction... this shouldn't be happening..."

"Gaara still has some traces of Tailed Beast Chakra inside his system," Hinata pointed out. "But they're fading as we speak. If we could reinvigorate that chakra..."

"Do you think that if I use the Nine Tails' chakra, it would boost the One Tail's chakra and save Gaara?" Naruto asked, sounding now more hopeful.

Hinata took a few seconds to ponder the answer, before he finally nodded. "I don't know much about Tailed Beast's chakra, but if it's similar to our own, I think it could work."

"Alright then!" Naruto cheered, before closing his eyes. "This shouldn't take too long!"

After a second, Naruto opened his eyes, and he was no longer in the shallow river in front of the Akatsuki hideout, even if there was water at his feet. In front of him was the massive jail gate that kept the strongest of the Tailed Beasts trapped within his being.

"Hey, Kyubi!" Naruto shouted, but got no answer. "I know you're not asleep, so stop pretending you are!"

A loud grumble echoed through the chamber, as the sound of a massive body shifting and steps getting closer filled the area. Soon, Naruto saw the head of the fox behind the bars.

"What do you want, brat?" the Nine Tails asked.

"I need you to loan me some of your chakra, like, really quick!" Naruto demanded.

"Let me think about it..." The Kyubi pretended to consider his request. **"I thought about it. The answer is no. Now scram."**

"Come on!" Naruto insisted. "It's very important! A matter of life or death! If you don't give me some of your chakra, Gaara will die!"

The Nine Tails grumbled, as he rested his head over his crossed paws. **"The life of Shukaku's jinchuriki is of no concern to me."**

"Please!" Naruto begged, but the Nine Tails didn't reply. An idea then formed inside Naruto's head. It was a big gamble, but it was worth trying. "You know, I admit that I'm not the brightest person around..."

"Your honesty is touching, brat," the Kyubi snarked.

"But I'm not as dense to not realize what's going on with somebody who literally lives inside me," Naruto continued. "Just like I noticed your reaction to the Valley of the End... I also noticed the way you reacted when I saw the statue they were using to store captured Tailed Beasts."

The Kyubi's eyes were wide open for a split second, but Naruto noticed his guest's reaction, and grinned. It may work yet.

"You know what that statue is, do you?" Naruto asked the Kyubi, sounding bolder.

"That's none of your business!" the fox roared back.

"I also have the impression that, as much as you hate being inside me, you'd hate a million more times being sealed there, am I right?" Naruto asked.

"What is your point, brat!?" the Kyubi impatiently shouted.

"If you don't help me save Gaara, I'll hand myself to the Akatsuki," Naruto replied, and his grin grew wider upon seeing fear in the Kyubi's eyes. "And you'll be sealed there. How does that sound?"

"You... you wouldn't dare to do that!" the Kyubi shouted, sounding both angry and genuinely scared. **"If you do that, you'll die!"**

Naruto shrugged. "We all have to die someday. Well, at least, we humans do."

"It's a bluff! Nobody would be stupid enough to do something like that!" The Kyubi roared.

Naruto raised an eyebrow. "Is that a challenge?"

The Kyubi grit his sharp teeth, as it growled menacingly at Naruto, before deciding that it was better not to test the blond's idiocy.

"Alright... you win," the Nine Tails conceded. **"What do you need of me?"**

"Gaara still has some of his beast's chakra inside his body, but it's too weak. I need your chakra to reinvigorate it," Naruto explained.

A wave of red colored chakra came from within the cage, and washed over Naruto, who immediately felt the power of the fox coursing through his chakra system.

"That should be enough," the Kyubi snarled as he walked to the back of his cage. **"Now leave me alone!"**

However, Naruto didn't leave. Not just yet.

"Hey, Kyubi?" he called.

"WHAT!?" the Tailed Beast hollered back.

An earnest smile formed in the blonde's mouth. He gave the Kyubi a thumbs up. "Thanks a lot. I will never forget this."

The Kyubi remained silent for a few seconds, looking almost surprised by the blond's reaction. He quickly gave up trying to understand the human's reasoning, and returned to the darkness of his prison.

"Bah, whatever. Now disappear if you know what's good for you..."

...

A veil of fiery red chakra formed around Naruto, and that same chakra started to flow into Gaara as well. Rather than mold his own chakra to fit Gaara's, he molded the Kyubi's chakra to fit the One Tail's. In a few seconds, Gaara was covered in the same red cloak of pure energy as well.

"It's working!" an elated Hinata cried. "The Kyubi's chakra is boosting the One Tail's chakra as you guessed!"

As the process continued for a couple minutes, Hinata saw how Gaara's chakra network finally stabilized thanks to the few remaining bits of the One Tail's chakra, and his health returned back to normal. Confident with her work, Hinata stopped applying the Mystical Palm Jutsu. Taking that as a hint, Naruto also stopped the chakra transfer.

"Did we...?" Naruto tentatively asked.

Hinata smiled brightly, and nodded. "Yes. Gaara-san, while still weak, is out of danger now," she said, before an explosion rocked the entire place. "Or all the out of danger he can be with those two around."

"Even if I doubt Akatsuki still has any interest in Gaara, I'll take him somewhere safe. I'll return as soon as I can," Naruto stated as he tossed Gaara's unconscious form over his shoulder.

Hinata nodded. "I'll go help Kurenai-sensei with the puppet master. I doubt I'd be of much help against the flying one," she said as she watched her boyfriend leave with the unconscious Gaara.

Through her Byakugan, Hinata could see that in the fight against Sasori, the rogue puppeteer was dominating the battle, with the two Suna and one Konoha ninja mostly defending themselves from his

attacks rather than trying to attack. So far the Akatsuki was pretty focused on the combat, Hinata was sure he could deal a blow without him noticing. And sometimes, one blow it's all what it's needed to finish a battle.

Hinata looked down at the shallow water, and frowned. 'With all this water, I can't use Lightning Jutsu without a huge risk of harming the others. This is like fighting on those rice fields all over again. Gentle Fist only, I guess.'

Two blue flaming lions made of chakra appeared on Hinata's hands as she rushed towards the cloaked puppeteer. The splashes her steps were making when touching the water would make a stealthy attack impossible, but if she attacked from behind, it would force Sasori to address her and turn his back to her teammates, and use that window of opportunity to attack.

"Twin Lion Fists!"

As expected, Sasori already moved to dodge Hinata's attacks a couple seconds before the Hyuga was even close to hand to hand range.

However, Sasori didn't use his puppet to defend himself against Hinata, but merely sidestepped, and jumped back and to the side, so he could have all four ninja within his range of vision and attack. The redhead smiled at Hinata.

"Oh, a Hyuga," Sasori softly said, as his smile grew wider. "What a lucky find."

"Let me guess, you want my eyes, right?" Hinata asked as she adopted a fighting stance. "That's not going to happen."

Sasori just shook his head. "Oh, no, no, no. You misunderstood me. While your eyes are indeed very valuable, that's not the only thing that interests me. No, I want your whole body. That way, I can make a puppet out of you. I always love to make a puppet of my victims

that have a powerful Bloodline Limit, just like the Kazekage here. You'll make a fine addition to my collection."

"As... interesting as such offer sounds, I have to turn it down. I'm not planning on becoming one of your toys," Hinata replied. Though, as she focused on the Akatsuki in front of her, she noticed something she had overlooked at first. "Wait a minute, you... you aren't even human! You're a puppet too!"

Kurenai, Kankuro and Maki were a bit confused by such revelation. Sasori, meanwhile, chuckled lightly.

"The Byakugan is sure useful to spoil surprises," Sasori replied, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "But yes, I am a puppet. I have transcended my humanity, and become a form of art myself! A body that doesn't age, doesn't rot, is easy to repair..."

"Not all your body is a puppet. I do see living tissue," Hinata pointed out.

"Yes. Sadly, I can't become a full puppet without losing my ability to use chakra. That's why I had to keep a little piece of my former self untouched," the puppeteer mentioned.

"You're sick," Hinata replied in disgust. "Though whatever you wanted to accomplish by mutilating your body, it won't help you against us."

"We'll see then," Sasori said, making a finger motion. "Thousand Hands Manipulation Force!"

Several compartments opened on the Kazekage's left arm, revealing several storage seals. From said seals, a large number of long puppet arms emerged, all of them ready to smash Hinata. The Hyuga, however, had a fitting counter in her arsenal.

"Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!"

Hinata started to move her palms forward in a pushing manner, so fast they became blurry, releasing thin streams of chakra from the palm of her hands, effectively countering the incoming mechanical arms coming at her.

"Interesting ability..." Sasori praised, not realizing Maki rushing forward, scroll of cloth in her hands.

"Cloth Binding Jutsu!"

Once again, the cloth Maki was holding flew as if it had life on its own, and tightly wrapped itself against the mass of arms.

"Quickly, now!" the Suna kunoichi called.

Hinata and Kurenai nodded, and both rushed towards Sasori. Each one of them pulled several kunai with explosive notes attached to them, and ignoring the puppet, they tossed them at the redheaded Akatsuki.

With a flick of his finger, the mass of arms detached from the Kazekage, and both it and Sasori jumped backwards.

"Mechanical Light Shield Block!"

A shield of chakra formed around the Kazekage, protecting both the puppet and Sasori from the chain of explosions. Following that, several pipes emerged from the puppet's chest, tearing holes in the dull brown cloak it was wearing. The pipes fired multiple kunai, prompting all the women to jump aside.

"No! Deflect them, don't dodge!" Kankuro called out, using his puppet to protect himself from the projectiles.

"Too late," Sasori stated, with a confident smirk.

Like before, the kunai had ninja wire attached to them, and Sasori used it to maneuver around the three kunoichi. While Hinata and Kurenai were able to avoid or downright cut the wire before it

trapped them, Maki wasn't so lucky, and the wire wrapped itself around her legs.

"No... !" Maki cried, as she fell to the ground, while being pulled towards the puppet.

"Got you!" Sasori cheered, and his grin grew more sadistic as he made a couple of finger motions. "And the real fun beings now!"

Kurenai and Hinata were quick to help Maki, but were forced to stop and take a step back when they saw what Sasori did next. Another pipe burst from the puppet's chest, and expelled a stream of purple gas. Maki was soon engulfed by a purple poisonous cloud.

"Don't breathe that gas! It's a deadly poison!" Kankuro warned the Konoha kunoichi.

Hinata then pulled out something from her ninja tool box. Kankuro could see it was some sort of capsule with a yellow liquid on it. Hinata tossed it inside the cloud. Thanks to her Byakugan, he could see that Maki caught it.

"Maki-san, that's an antidote for Sasori's poison! Inject it into your bloodstream, and you'll be immune to the poison for the next three minutes!" Hinata told the Suna kunoichi.

"What!?" Sasori asked in shock. "You... you made an antidote for my poison? How? It couldn't be possible! No one can... it's impossible!"

Hinata couldn't help but smile a little at Sasori's shock. "Like Naruto-kun used to say, impossible only means it hasn't been done yet!"

A couple of soft snapping sounds signaled that Maki had finally cut the wires that were immobilizing her.

"Sealing Art: Cloth Binding Armor!"

"Huh?" Sasori dumbly asked.

Maki then jumped out of the cloud of poisonous gas. She was now covered in one long piece of cloth which wrapped around her body and limbs, leaving only her eyes exposed, which gave her the appearance of a mummy. While she was mid air, she made a single hand seal.

"Multiple Cloth Razor Whips!"

Like the name of the jutsu implied, many whips made of cloth emerged from under Maki's bandage, and lashed at both the Kazkeage puppet and Sasori. The redhead jumped aside, as he maneuvered his puppet into dodging or cutting the incoming cloth with the multiple blades on its right arm. However, Maki managed to wrap one of her cloth whips around the base of the arm, and pulled, leaving the puppet unable to move.

"How did you...?" a dumbstruck Sasori asked.

A buzz saw appeared on the puppet's left arm where its forearm used to be, and moved it to cut the binding cloth.

"Quickly, now!" Maki called.

Kankuro maneuvered Tamotsu forward, ready to smash Sasori's puppet with a brutal shield bash. However, the Kazekage's right arm detached from its body, allowing Sasori to move the puppet once again. Kankuro shot a thread of chakra at the discarded arm full of blades, and tossed it backwards as far as he could so the Akatsuki couldn't reattach it later.

The Kazekage fired several smoke bombs, covering the zone in one big, mist like grey cloud, while it moved towards Hinata, whom for some reason gave Sasori the feeling that she was the most dangerous of his four opponents. The arm with the buzz saw came down.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Hinata turned into a spinning blue dome of chakra, which incidentally raised gusts of wind that blew the smoke away, and splashing water around. When the buzz saw struck her, the force the Hyuga's jutsu blew the weapon away from the puppet's arm. Foiled, Sasori put some distance between him and his attackers. Having lost both its arms, it seemed that the Kazekage wouldn't be a threat anymore.

"Seemed" being the key word here.

Despite appearing to be on the losing side, Sasori's face sported a confident smirk. This didn't sit well with the Konoha and Suna ninjas, who were smart enough to realize that the Akatsuki wasn't simply overconfident.

"Well," Sasori began, sounding a bit tired. "I have to admit that the quality of my current opponents is, at the very least, worth of some respect. Guess I have no choice to use this, but once I do, your chances of winning will be close to zero."

Sasori made a hand seal, and the Kazekage opened its mouth with a mechanical click. Black sand started to pour out of it. Maki and Kankuro gasped, immediately recognizing what the puppet was doing, something that didn't go unnoticed by the Akatsuki.

"Being from Suna, it seems that you're familiar with this ability in particular, am I right?" Sasori said with a teasing grin. "Why don't you educate your Konoha collaborators, and let them know what they're against?"

"The Third Kazekage had a very rare Bloodline Limit called Magnet Release," Maki explained, growing more uneasy by the second. "Such Bloodline can be used to manipulate metals, but it's incredibly hard to master. The Kazekage, trying to imitate the One Tail's sand powers, used it to manipulate iron grinded into fine powder that was called Iron Sand. Such ability... made the Third Kazekage the strongest ninja Suna has ever seen."

"Yet Sasori was able to best him..." Hinata squeaked, with a gulp.

"Wait a minute, if the Kazekage is a puppet, how can he use a Bloodline Limit? It shouldn't be possible!" Kurenai pointed out.

"That's a good question. A short answer would be that I developed a special process in which the people I turn into puppets retain their special abilities. Otherwise, doing so would be pretty much useless. The process requires the person to be alive while the transformation takes place, which makes it... more difficult than it should be. But the results are definitely worth it.

"You three are worthless, so you won't have the honor to be included in my art collection," Sasori's eyes rested on Hinata, and glinted with a predatory glee. "But you, a Main House Hyuga... you'll make a lovely puppet. Oh, I can't wait until I can turn you into a work of art!"

"And I can't wait until I can turn you into... uh..." Hinata started to trail off. "Naruto-kun is much better at this than I am. Anyway, your art career will end today!"

"What's an artist who doesn't welcome some challenge?" Sasori asked no one in particular, as he made a hand seal. "Let's begin this. Magnet Release: Iron Sand Drizzle!"

The Third Kazekage tore part of his already ruined cloak, exposing its chest. A compartment on its left chest opened, revealing some sort of chakra-emitting apparatus. The iron sand floating around him started to gather and compress into hundreds of projectiles.

"I don't like where this is going," Kurenai said as she started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Multiple Earth Style Walls!"

Three walls emerged from the ground between the four Konoha and Suna ninja, and the Akatsuki and its puppet.

"I don't think that's going to be enough," Maki stated as she generated two long cloth whips from her hands. Hinata also took a step forward, ready to take the attack head on.

With a shout of "DIE!", Sasori launched a barrage of iron sand bullets forward. In no time, they shattered the first wall Kurenai had erected. Other two barrages, and the walls came down. The next barrage of bullets came soon.

"Double Cloth Helix!"

"Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!"

Maki's cloth whips started to spin at high speed, forming two cones in front of her that successfully deflected most of the bullets, while Hinata used her custom made technique to do the same.

"An impressive defense," Sasori praised, his confidence unwavering. "But how long can you keep it up?"

Kurenai and Kankuro noticed that while he fired the bullets, Sasori was also retrieving the iron sand from the ones he already fired, and compressed them into more bullets that he could fire. He was right, Sasori could go on forever, while Hinata and Maki couldn't. In fact, they were starting to show signs of exhaustion.

"Shit, I need to do something!" Kankuro seethed as he made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Puppet Jutsu!"

Two clones of Tamotsu appeared, and the hooded puppeteer took no time to attach chakra strings to them. With a swift motion of both hands, he positioned them in front of Hinata and Maki.

"Triple Mechanical Light Shield!"

Tamotsu and its two clones used the defensive jutsu in tandem, creating three chakra shields that quickly merged into a really big one, successfully blocking the barrage of attacks.

"This is your chance! Go while I'll cover you!" Kankuro stated, as he tried to keep the shield active as long as possible.

Maki nodded, and rushed forward, but she was met with an admittedly small barrage of bullets that forced her to step back behind the safety of Kankuro's puppets.

"Even with this cover, his puppet can attack in multiple directions," Maki said, panting a little.

"Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked, looking at the raven haired woman.

Kurenai nodded as she started to make hand seals. "I'll provide you a distraction."

Sasori saw Maki jumping from her hiding spot behind Kankuro's puppets, and rushed towards the Akatsuki once again. The redhead grinned as he made a hand seal.

"Quite the bold move," Sasori praised, as he formed iron sand into a spear, which dived at the mummy-looking woman, impaling her in the chest. "But foolish."

Then much to her shock, Maki burst into smoke, and two Makis took her place, which continued her dash towards the now startled Akatsuki. He repeated the process, nailing the two Makis, but it only caused them to split again, having four enemies to deal with.

"What kind of jutsu is this...?" the stupefied redhead wondered, until he realized what was going on. "Oh, a genjutsu. Turns out I'm still vulnerable to those."

Sasori brought his hands together to form a seal, and with a discharge of chakra, the illusion was broken. That didn't mean that all Makis disappeared, they were simply reduced to one, who was still charging at him, accompanied by Hinata. With a hand motion, he brought the Third Kazekage closer, and issued his next command.

"Magnet Release: Iron Sand Gathering Assault!"

The Iron Sand formed into multiple, long and thick nails, which rained upon the two Kunoichi, forcing them backwards. The attack didn't cease, since the Akatsuki wasn't going to let his enemies go on the offensive.

A few meters back, the Tamotsu clones disappeared, and Kankuro stopped channeling the protective jutsu through them and started panting heavily.

"I don't think I'll be able to do that anytime soon," Kankuro said between pants.

"Can you still fight?" Kurenai asked.

Kankuro smiled, and nodded. "Of course. I still have a few surprises that-" Kankuro, however, was taken aback when he found himself unable to move his puppet. "The hell? Tamotsu doesn't move! It's like... there's something jamming all its joints!"

"It has to be the Iron Sand," Kurenai deduced. "Guess that Sasori doesn't want you to interfere again."

"Goddamit..." the hooded man cursed, stomping his foot on the wet ground.

"Since the Iron Sand is connected to that puppet, if we destroy it, yours might be able to move again," the Genjutsu Mistress deduced.

"Let's hope we can do that. I'll try to help you as much as I can," Kankuro said, sadly discarding his now useless puppet.

Meanwhile, Sasori continued to bombard Hinata and Maki by dropping large and/or sharp Iron Sand constructs on them, forcing them to stay in the offensive. The two of them were forced to fall back where Kurenai and Kankuro were.

"This isn't working," Maki realized. "His Magnet Release is way too powerful. There's no way of getting close to Sasori as long as he has

the Kazekage!"

"Maybe we've approached this from the wrong perspective," Hinata thoughtfully said.

"What do you mean?" Kankuro asked.

"We focused on Sasori, because a puppet's weakest part is the ninja controlling it... but what if we focus on destroying the Kazekage first?"

"While it's a good idea, the result would be the same. Even if we focus our efforts on destroying that puppet, we have no way to surpass the power of the Magnet Release," Maki explained.

Kurenai smiled confidently, realizing what Hinata was suggesting to do. "We can, if Sasori thinks we're going to target him, just like we did so far until now."

Hinata smiled back, and nodded.

"Whatever you're planning, it won't work," Sasori said as he and his puppet came closer. "I'm already growing bored of this fight. Now, die."

The Iron Sand above him took the shape of several cubes and pyramids. With a hand motion, Sasori started to direct them at the four Konoha and Suna ninja.

"Come on, go!" Kurenai urged, as she started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullet!"

In front of Kurenai, a serpentine dragon made of earth and stone emerged, and lunged at the incoming Iron Sand block. Both constructs were shattered to pieces when they crashed. Undeterred, Sasori sent more constructs towards the incoming trio, but Kurenai kept repelling them with her Earth Release jutsu.

When she felt she was close enough, Maki made a couple hand seals and slammed her fists into the water-covered ground.

Feeling a tremor under his feet, Sasori jumped backwards just in time to avoid several sharp cloth whips emerging from underground. The Akatsuki smirked once again.

"Close, but you'll need to do better than-uh?" Sasori then realized that he was struggling to pull the Kazekage back. Much to his shock, he saw that Kankuro had attached his own chakra threads to him, and was pulling back.

"Nothing stops a puppeteer from trying to snatch somebody else's puppet. I learned this during my first Chunin Exams," Kankuro boasted, with a grin of satisfaction. "This is your chance, Hinata!"

The Hyuga dashed forward, as chakra lions covered her fists. A scowl formed on the Akatsuki's face as she passed the Kazekage.

"I'll admit that it was a good plan, but you won't catch me off guard," Sasori replied, making a hand seal, commanding the Kazekage to create a shield of Iron Sand around him, and waited for Hinata to get closer to skewer her alive.

However, Hinata didn't do that. Instead, she suddenly spun over her heels, and with a quick double palm strike, she shattered the Kazekage to pieces. It took a few seconds for Sasori to process what had happened, as the Iron Sand around him became inert, and fell to the ground.

"Yes! We did it! We destroyed the Kazekage!" Maki loudly cheered. It was something rare for the otherwise soft spoken woman.

"You were right, Kurenai-san! Tamotsu works once again!" Kankuro cheered as well, happy to recover his puppet.

While happy on the inside, Kurenai didn't share the Suna ninja's optimism. Sasori was angry, but he didn't look like somebody who

was just defeated.

"Hinata, fall back," the raven haired woman commanded. Hinata nodded, and did as she was told.

The group of four waited intently to see what Sasori would do next, now that his allegedly strongest puppet was nothing but pieces of scrap.

"I admit that it was quite the impressive tactic. Such teamwork in the heat of the battle is mostly unseen, especially from people belonging to different villages," Sasori genuinely praised, as he started to unbutton his cloak. "To think that you even destroyed the Third Kazekage... however, diverting my attention by making me think you're going after me and then destroy my puppet won't work with the next one..."

"Don't tell me he is going to..." Hinata began, becoming mildly distressed.

Sasori then discarded the cloak, confirming his initial suspicions. Everybody gasped. Even if the Hyuga had told them beforehand, seeing it with their own eyes was something else. Underneath the cloak, there was another puppet. Two poles emerged from the back of his hips, deploying five poison-dripped blades. His gut was open, revealing a thick steel cable coiled around a pole instead of intestines. He had four scrolls attached to a compartment in his back. On his chest was his core, the only living part of his body left, marked with several red kanji.

"... myself!" the Akatsuki proudly announced.

...

Meanwhile, not far from there, Deidara continued his fight against the Suna ninja and Haku. After realizing Temari's tactic of blowing his explosives back at him shortly before he detonated them, he had changed tactics, and opted to attack closer to the ground.

"I might be more vulnerable to their attacks, but this way, my attacks will have more chances to hit," Deidara thought as he commanded his bird to do a low swoop and prepared more explosive clay figurines. *" And they won't see THIS coming!"*

As Deidara approached the Suna ninja (and Haku), Yukata stepped forward and made several hand seals.

"I'll stop him before he has any chance to attack!" Yukata proudly stated as she prepared her jutsu. "Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Yukata breathed a stream of fire at the incoming Akatsuki. Deidara quickly tossed a clay figurine at the incoming inferno, which instantly exploded. From the ensuing cloud of smoke and dirt, multiple clay birds flew out in arches, most of them headed towards Yukata. The black haired girl yelped, as she jumped backwards multiple times, trying to avoid the incoming explosions.

Mikoshi grabbed a handful of kunai and shuriken tossed them forward, and made a hand seal.

"Manipulating Attack Blades!"

As if they had life of their own, the kunai and shuriken flew towards the clay birds, impaling most of them to the ground. Yukata was able to avoid the few that exploded, before she fell on her butt.

"Ow..." Yukata whimpered, panting heavily. Matsuri walked towards her friend and helped her back on her feet. "That was close. Thank you, Matsuri-chan, Mikoshi-kun."

Temari blew a small gust of wind with her fan to dispel the smoke of the explosions, and much to her annoyance, Deidara was nowhere to be seen.

"Where did he go?" Matsuri asked, gritting her teeth a little.

"He's possibly underground! Watch out from attacks from below!" Mikoshi warned.

"That can't be true! If he was underground, there would be a hole!" Matsuri protested.

True to the bespectacled boy's words, clay creatures started to pop from the ground, and launching themselves at the Suna and Konoha ninja.

"Watch out!" Haku shouted, tossing three senbon at a clay creature that was about to latch onto Matsuri, breaking its momentum, and exploding prematurely.

At first, they were able to fend off the creatures reasonably well, but the more they fought, the more they appeared. Haku and Temari realized that some of them didn't explode, got back on their feet, and tried to attack again.

"If Hinata was here, she could locate Deidara underground and see the creatures before they emerged," Haku thought, as he impaled a small clay creature to the ground with an ice spear. "And if Kurenai-sensei was here, she could bring Deidara out with an earth jutsu. But they aren't here. Come on Haku, think! What can you do that can be of help!"

"Everybody, to me!" Temari called as she reared her fan backward.

The trio of Suna Chunin and Haku all leaped towards her, with the explosive creatures waddling towards them, forming a large group. Just like Temari wanted.

"Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

With all enemies in one spot, Temari was able to blow them away with a powerful gale. However, that proved to be a temporary solution at best, since the creatures got back on their feet, and

charged once again. Worse, more creatures continued to pop from the ground. It was then when Haku noticed something.

"That's it! All the creatures appear around the same spot!" the Ice Ninja deduced. "That has to be where Deidara hides!"

"They keep coming! Matsuri-chan, what are we going to do?" Yukata cried.

Matsuri herself didn't look that confident about their chances either. "I... I don't know! Just keep fighting! He's bound to run out of these things sooner or later!"

"Temari-san, I think I have an idea!" Haku called, while casting a freezing blast at a group of small clay creatures, slowing them down. "They all come from the same spot! Push them against that spot!"

Temari gasped in realization, before she smirked, realizing what Haku was suggesting. "Alright then! Matsuri, I need your help! Use wind attacks to push the clay dolls from where they come from!"

"Understood, Temari-sama!" Matsuri obediently replied.

Both kunoichi jumped at opposite sides of the spawning spot so they could surround their enemies before pushing them back.

"Wind Release: Breakthrough!"

"Wind Release: Wind Raging Wall!"

As they pushed the clay creatures backwards, the clash of wind jutsu had the unintended effect of creating a tornado that kept them inside, pushing them backwards whenever they tried to walk towards Deidara's enemies.

"What do we do now?" Matsuri asked.

"Nothing! Keep blowing! Wait until more clay creatures emerge!" Temari ordered.

Haku smiled to himself. Temari had quickly realized what was his plan. As more clay creatures emerged, the tornado was having trouble keeping them trapped. The accumulated mass was starting to become too heavy for the current winds. That means it was the time.

"Matsuri, get away! Yukata, set those bastards on fire!" Temari hollered as she jumped backwards. "Haku, protect her from the explosion!"

Yukata nodded and made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Once again, Yukata breathed a stream of fire at the gathered clay creatures, causing all of them to detonate, producing a massive explosion that would have made Deidara proud. Haku managed to build around Yukata and himself a sturdy ice barrier that absorbed the shockwave of the explosion.

Just like Haku had predicted, Deidara was hidden underground under the spot where the clay monsters were emerging, and that explosion had forced him out, hurling him into the air before he fell with a thud a few meters away from them.

"This..." Deidara grumbled, as he got back on his feet as badly as he could. "This is... the second time... you use my art against me... how dare you... HOW DARE YOU!?"

The Suna ninja and Haku slipped into fighting stances as they watched the Akatsuki shambling towards him. Despite being badly bruised and having numerous burns across his body, none of them were foolish enough to think that he may have one last nasty ace in the hole.

"That's it, no more playing around! You're about to feel the full power of my art!" Deidara shouted as he tossed a clay figurine at his feet.

A cloud of smoke enveloped Deidara, and when it disappeared, the Akatsuki was riding another giant clay bird. However, this one was much bigger than the ones he had used before, especially its wingspan, which gave it a majestic appearance.

"Behold the C3 Clay Phoenix!" Deidara hollered as the clay bird flapped its wings, taking flight, gaining attitude in no time.

After quickly flying around in circles a couple times, the phoenix opened its long beak, releasing two balls of clay. In a poof of smoke, the balls of clay turned into smaller replicas of its progenitor, but still noticeably bigger than the ones used before.

"Oh, you still back to that?" Temari asked, as she readied her fan. "Yeah, I don't like your 'art', you can have it back!"

Temari blew a powerful gust of wind once again. However, unlike the other time, the clay creatures weren't pushed back. The artificial birds flapping their wings faster, pushing against the wind current blowing against them. The wind eventually ceased, and clay birds continued their descend. Temari grimaced. Deidara grinned.

"TAKE COVER!"

"Boom!" Deidara shouted, as he made a hand seal.

The clay birds exploded, producing a blast much more powerful than his other figurines. While narrowly avoiding the explosion, the Suna ninja and Haku were tossed into the ground by the ensuing shockwave.

"No time to sleep!" Deidara hollered, sending another duo of clay birds from his phoenix's beak.

"I'll stop them this time!" Yukata said, making hand seals. "Fire Release; Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

The black haired kunoichi breathed a volley of small fireballs from her mouth, that spread in a rather wide arc. The clay birds, however, expertly maneuvered through the fireballs as if there was an intelligence controlling them. However, while they did so, Mikoshi prepared his next move.

"Manipulating Attack Blades!"

A foursome of kunai with explosive tags attached to them flew towards the clay creatures. The clay birds managed to dodge them as well, but Mikoshi directed them back, and they found their mark. With a hand seal, the bespectacled Suna ninja detonated them, destroying their targets.

"Heh, not bad," Deidara said, as he prepared his next attack. "But the next one is going to be-"

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

A loud whirring screech interrupted Deidara's ramblings, and much to his surprise, he saw what appeared to be a shuriken made of pure chakra flying at him. His battle instincts screamed to get out of its way. Not having time to maneuver his clay phoenix into dodging it, Deidara opted to jump away. As he fell, he saw the shuriken crash against his clay phoenix, resulting in a massive explosion of wind and chakra.

"Wow... that was sure something..." as he fell, Deidara couldn't suppress a tinge of admiration for the ensuing blast the shuriken produced. Despite the height he fell from, he managed to land on his feet and eyed his opponents. He noticed that there was somebody there who wasn't before.

"You!" Deidara said, outraged. "The jinchuriki!"

"Yeah, that would be me," Naruto said with a smirk, flanked by a single clone. He then pointed upwards. "And that was my most

powerful jutsu so far. I still have enough nature energy for a second one. Except this time around, you won't be able to dodge it."

Naruto formed a rasengan, and his clone started to infuse it with wind chakra, taking the form of a shuriken as he did.

"Wait a minute, did he said nature energy? Is this fucker a sage?" Deidara asked, before noticing the coloration around Naruto's eyes, confirming his doubts. "Then there's no way I can defeat him like this, especially with all these people around!"

"Make sure he doesn't escape!" Naruto told the others as the jutsu slowly reached completion.

"It will be you who won't be able to escape!" Deidara fired back as he grabbed some of his explosive clay, and ate it with the mouth on his face, instead of the ones in his palms.

"I have a bad feeling about this..." Matsuri began.

Deidara then started to bloat as if he was balloon, while laughing maniacally.

"HAHAHAHA! Let's see how you stop this! There's no way to avoid this explosion!" Deidara boasted as he swelled up more and more. "Even if you avoid the initial blast, the shockwave will tear apart the land and cause a massive torrent!"

"Is that madman going to blow himself up?" Mikoshi asked in shock.

"I'll stop him before he explodes!" Naruto said as he prepared to toss his Rasenshuriken, which had reached completion.

"No! If you do that, you might trigger the explosion!" Haku stated.

"Then what do we do?" It was Matsuri who asked this time around.

Another idea dawned upon the Ice Ninja. "Send him high into the air with a wind jutsu! It might be the best way to avoid the aftereffects of

the explosion!"

"Good idea! Come on Naruto, Matsuri, let's do it!" Temari said.

The blond jinchuriki and brown haired girl nodded. Naruto undid the Rasenshuriken, and the three of them placed themselves around Deidara, surrounding him. Three wind jutsu came from three different directions, clashing against the bloating Akatsuki, producing a powerful tornado that hurled Deidara into the air.

"Keep going! He's still too close to the ground!" Haku urged.

The three wind ninja poured as much power into their jutsu as possible. However, thanks to Naruto's nature energy, he was able to give his the necessary boost to push Deidara much higher. And a couple second later, the Akatsuki exploded in a massive fireball, which started to quickly expand outwards.

"Everybody, get close to me!" Haku yelled as his hands flew through hand seals.

Thankfully, the Ice Ninja created a multi-layered ice barrier around the group in time, which thankfully protected them from the massive blast that Deidara's bloated body produced when it detonated.

"So, this may sound dumb, but... is he dead?" Mikoshi asked.

Naruto shook his head. "No. I'm afraid that was a decoy. I still sense the real Deidara, a kilometer or so to the north. He probably used Body Replacement with a clone without us noticing."

"As much as I'd wish to, there's no time to chase him," Haku stated, earning a nod of approval from Naruto. "We need to help the others against the other Akatsuki."

"Alright. This one won't escape," Temari said in determination as she and the rest of the group rushed towards the other battleground. "By the way, where is Gaara? Is he okay?"

"Gaara is fine. I left him in a safe place near here, with two clones watching over him. We'll get him back once we're done with the Akatsuki," Naruto stated.

"Whoa..." Yukata said in awe, stopping dead in his tracks. "What... what is that?"

The others stopped as well, catching what the black haired Suna girl had seen first: a mass of puppets, almost one hundred, floating above Hinata, Kurenai, Kankuro and Maki.

"I'll tell you what that is. Trouble. A big one," Temari deadpanned.

Author's Note: You know, I was hoping that I could do the fight against the Akatsuki in a single chapter, but damn, even after previously getting rid of Hiruko, Sasori has more phases than a World of Warcraft boss, and I was feeling that the chapter would drag on way too much. So the fight will end the next chapter. Now, a couple clarifications:

No, Sasori didn't go directly with the hundred puppets after the Kazekage was destroyed. Hinata and the others still fought his puppet form before that, it just happened at the same time Naruto and the others finished Deidara off. But don't worry, you'll get to see that side of the fight the next chapter.

Before you point out that Hinata's lightning jutsu could nullify Deidara's explosives and thus she should have fought against him and not Sasori, remember that Hinata didn't know this. Go and reread/rewatch the Sasuke vs Deidara fight, and you'll see that Sasuke didn't know this either. He came to the conclusion mid-fight, when he realized that the clay figurines he hit with his chidori didn't blow up, and even then, he still has to do more tests just to be sure. So, Hinata's train of thought is this: she's a melee specialist with a couple ranged jutsu, she clearly would be much more useful against groundbound opponent than an airborne one.

You know, rewatching the Suna Chunin Exams arc for Team Matsuri, I realized that none of them actually show any kind of jutsu, much to my huge disappointment, so I had to make their fighting styles up from scratch. Though it's confirmed that Matsuri has wind affinity.

Thanks to gio08 for betareading this chapter, even injured. Hope that by the time of this writing, you got better.

So the next chapter will be the conclusion of the fight against Sasori, and thus the end of the Suna arc! In the meantime, tell me your thoughts and impressions on this chapter via review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Wind Blows Again

Author's Note: Unfortunately, my betareader is unavailable for the time being, so I had to proofread the chapter myself. So sorry if the reader experience feels a bit worse. Still, hope you enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 55

The Wind Blows Again

or

The Akatsuki Mean Business

...

The group of four watched in horror the creature in front of them, half a puppet, half human, while at the same time being neither, blurring the line between human and machine. Sasori, however, continued to smirk.

"You have no words for my greatest piece of art?" Sasori asked, his voice showing some conceit. "I guess it's natural. Not every day one gets to see something like this."

"Greatest piece of art!? You perverted the noble art of puppetry, Sasori," Kankuro seethed, as he moved Tamotsu into an attacking position. "You've been Suna's greatest shame for too long. Today, we will get rid Suna of that shame!"

Sasori chuckled condescendingly. "Of course, those who want to break the mold and take art to new limits are branded as criminals. Good thing I stopped caring about that village you like so much long ago."

With a clicking noise, Sasori brought his arms forward, pointing their palms towards the Konoha and Suna ninjas. A pipe emerged from each palm. The uppermost scroll on his back briefly glowed with a blue light. Everybody adopted a defensive stance, ready to react to whatever Sasori was about to throw at them.

"Now... BECOME ASHES!"

Two streams of red hot fire shot from Sasori's palm cannons. Kankuro and Hinata moved to block the attacks.

"Mechanical Light Shield Block!"

"Vacuum Palm!"

Tamotsu raised its shield, creating a barrier of blue chakra that intercepted one of the fire streams. Hinata's vacuum shell also clashed against the second, but it managed to overpower it, and continue unimpeded. The Hyuga yelled as she jumped sideways in an attempt to avoid the red streams of fiery death.

Maki motioned her hands forward, shooting multiple cloth whips from her hands at Sasori. But predictably, they were burned to ashes.

"Hinata, let's surround him! He won't be able to attack all of us that way!" Kurenai suggested.

The Hyuga nodded, and the two women started to run towards Sasori, avoiding his streams of fire as good as possible. Once they were close enough they leaped above him, landing at opposite sides. Now the four of them were around him.

"Now you can only attack one of us at a time!" Maki taunted.

Sasori let out a bone-chilling cackle in return.

"And what makes you think that!?" Sasori replied.

The human puppet stopped his fire assault, and spread his arms to the side. Then, his whole upper body minus the head started to spin at a fast pace. It was truly a disturbing image to watch. However, it wasn't as disturbing as the implication of what this new ability entailed.

"BURN ALREADY!"

"Fall back!" a panicked Kurenai ordered.

Sasori ignited his palm flamethrowers again, releasing waves of flames in every direction. As he increased the spinning speed, the flames started to take the shape of a giant fiery tornado that slowly expanded outwards. The heat produced was so intense, the shallow water started to boil and evaporate, covering the area in steam.

The tornado of fire ceased. However, the steam covering the area made it impossible to anybody but Hinata to see what was going on. Hinata then started to notice a faint pulse of chakra coming from Sasori. She didn't have time to ponder what was it when she saw him raise his hand at Maki's position.

"Maki-san, watch out!" Hinata cried.

Maki jumped backwards, leaping into the air as she narrowly avoided a stream of fire. Another chakra pulse, and this time, the stream of fire was aimed at Hinata, who managed to dodge it.

"Wait a second... that chakra pulse... that's how he's locating us in the steam!" Hinata thought in realization. *"I'm the only one who can see him, so it falls on me to end this!"*

Another realization dawned upon the Hyuga. She saw that the ground was now completely dry. The heat produced by Sasori's attack had evaporated all the water in the zone. That means that there was no danger of harming her allies if she used a lightning jutsu. Something she was planning to do, since this situation called for a powerful ranged attack. Her hands flew through hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Fang!"

Thrusting both palms forward, Hinata released a mass of electricity that took the shape of a lion head. It let out a roar as it flew towards Sasori.

"Huh?"

Being so focused on offense, that attack caught Sasori completely off guard. On top of that, since nobody had used lightning jutsu so far, and the attack blasted him full.

"AAARRGH!" Sasori yelled, clutching the only organic side of his body. "Oh... it's been so long since the last time I felt pain... I don't like it."

"Well, prepare for more then, since there's more from where that came from!" Hinata defiantly stated, as she got ready for a second attack.

The steam started to dispel, allowing everybody without a Byakugan to clearly see Sasori. They noticed the uppermost scroll on his back was no longer there. The four Konoha and Suna ninjas allowed themselves a brief sigh of relief upon realizing that this means no more flamethrowers. Said relief, however, was short lived as the second scroll briefly glowed blue.

"I'm no stranger to lightning release either," Sasori said, as he pointed one hand at Hinata, and the other at Kurenai. "Now DIE!"

Two lightning bolts fired from each palm of his hands. Kurenai dodged the one aimed at her, while Hinata channeled lightning chakra into her hands, and swiped the blast away.

Kankuro decided he had been on the defensive for enough time, and moved Tamotsu to attack. Sasori noticed this, and fired an electric blast at the puppet. With a click, the puppet moved its shield forward, dispersing the electric blast. With another click, several slots

opened from the shield, and fired a volley of shuriken at the Akatsuki.

"Useless!" Sasori yelled, as he fired two lightning bolts to the ground, and used the resulting blast to launch himself into the air, above the puppet. He then fired his ventral cable at Kankuro. The puppeteer managed to dodge it, but still made a scratch on his torso, before it stabbed into the ground.

Kankuro fell on one knee, already feeling the weakening effects of the poison.

"This time I won't make the same mistake I did before!" Sasori hollered, as he retracted his cable, propelling himself towards Kankuro. His side blades started to spin like a buzzsaw, as the deranged rogue puppeteer dived at the loyal poisoned one. "DIE!"

However, when Sasori was about to tear Kankuro to shreds, something violently stopped him. Turning his head 180°, he could see that Maki had attached several cloth wips around the poles that held the spinning blades. Maki then, helped by Kurenai, pulled Sasori backwards, and the two women tossed the human puppet in the opposite direction, sending him flying.

With Sasori momentarily out of commission, Hinata rushed towards Kankuro, as she fished another antidote capsule from her ninja tool pouch. Wasting no time, she rolled Kankuro's right sleeve, and nailed the capsule into it.

"There. Now the poison shouldn't be any concern for the next three minutes," Hinata explained, before taking a better look at the puppeteer's wounds. "Let me heal that as well."

"Heh, thanks. This is the second time you save my life," Kankuro chuckled, as he watched Hinata healing him.

"Think nothing of it," Hinata said, smiling a little. "It's what we medics do."

"How many of those antidotes you have?" the puppeteer asked, mildly concerned.

"Just one. If more than one of us is poisoned... well, unless we can find the necessary ingredients to make more..."

Suddenly, there was a massive explosion in the sky, producing such intense light, it almost blinded everybody there for a split second.

"What... what was that?" Hinata asked in shock.

"Dammit, that other Akatsuki and his explosions!" Kankuro snarled. "If something happened to Temari... !"

"It seems that my idiot partner just blew himself up," Sasori replied, as he returned to the fight. "I knew this would happen sooner or later. Deidara never reacts well to being cornered. That means that now I'm all alone against both you and however survived the explosion from the other group."

"But something tells me you're not going to surrender, aren't you?" Maki asked.

Sasori's smirk was all the answer she needed.

"Haha, no. I killed a Kazekage, I know very well what will happen to me if I surrender," Sasori then used a chakra thread to get one of the two remaining scrolls on his back. "That means I'll have to end this fight right now. You should feel proud of yourselves, very few people have actually saw me using this. You can say it's my ultimate jutsu."

Sasori unfurled the scroll, and dozens upon dozens of puppets poured from it. Their number was so big, they almost blocked the sun. Lastly Sasori opened a compartment on the left side of his chest, and one hundred chakra threads shot from it, attaching to one puppet each. Needless to say, the four Konoha and Suna ninjas were taken aback by the magnitude of such display.

The puppets were more or less the same size, all of them human-like in shape and form, with a surprising amount of detail to their faces, sporting multiple facial features, hairstyles and even accessories, like nose rings. All of them were wearing long plain maroon cloaks, and were carrying at least some sort of long bladed weapon. Poisoned, no doubt about it.

"These puppets are my strongest weapon, which I used once to conquer a whole country," Sasori said, with that ever present smirk. "You ragtag foursome don't stand a chance against me now."

"This... this is unreal..." Kankuro stammered. "Monzaemon Chikamatsu was considered the best puppeteer who ever lived, and his limit was still ten puppets..."

"Don't falter. There's no way he can micromanage so many puppets at once. He'll send them in small numbers," Kurenai guessed.

"I'd like to know what you do define as 'small'," Sasori replied, his grin widening even further, looking even more psychotic. "Red Secret Technique: Performance of a Hundred Puppets!"

Everybody braced as the puppets descended upon them. And while Kurenai was right in that Sasori was unable to command all one hundred puppets at once, Sasori was still able to control quite a lot of them at once, between ten and sixteen.

"Scatter! He won't be able to focus on all four at once if we're not together!" Kurenai suggested. Her suggestion wasn't contested by Sasori this time around.

Contrary to the skill and minute precision Sasori had displayed when using the Third Kazekage, here it seemed that he wanted to use overwhelming force and numbers to crush the Konoha and Suna ninjas. The puppets attacked in an unrefined manner, blindly charging towards them while trying to skewer their enemies with their bladed weapons. A far cry from Sasori's previous puppets. But for

those massive numbers, he had to sacrifice complexity, or else they'd be too hard to manage.

Kurenai mostly relied on Earth and some Wind Release based jutsu to deal with any puppet that got close to her. Maki wrapped her cloth whips around them, and slamming them against each other. Kankuro fought defensively, cornering himself against a wall of stone so the puppets couldn't surround him, while letting his own puppet take the brunt of their attack.

Hinata, meanwhile, fought her way towards the redheaded Akatsuki,.

" There's no way we can win against so many enemies," Hinata reasoned. "This seems to be Sasori's last resort. If I can get close to him, the fight will be over."

Hinata pushed every thought out of her head other than fighting the puppets and pushing forward. While the puppets lacked organs or chakra network, the Byakugan allowed her to easily spot their weak spots, such as their joints or fragile internal mechanisms. She also saw several puppets dashing at her from different sides. Her whole body started to crackle with electricity.

"Lightning Release: Heavenly Thunderstorm!"

Hinata started to spin, becoming a tornado of lightning bolts that blasted the incoming puppets away, shattering most of them to pieces.

Sasori watched that display in awe.

" So, the Byakugan allows her to see any attack regardless of where it comes from. So ambushes will be useless," Sasori reasoned. "Still, one has to wonder how long can she last until her human body gives up."

Hinata continued to fight the incoming puppets as if there was no tomorrow. She was careful spending what chakra she still had, meaning that no more powerful attacks like the one she had used just a moment ago. Of course, such line of thought went down the drain the moment she saw a rain of swords falling upon her.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Hinata successfully deflected the incoming blades, scattering them around the area, with the added benefit of destroying a bunch of puppets near her. But the moment her spinning slowed down, more puppets swarmed her. The Hyuga heiress was pushed back as she deflected the incoming blows, careful they wouldn't cut her skin.

Hinata allowed herself a second to see how the others were doing. Kurenai and Maki were keeping their ground reasonably well. And Kankuro even managed to commandeer a couple of Sasori's puppets to form a better defense. In fact, it seemed that Sasori was only doing the bare minimum to keep them at bay, while focusing all his efforts in bringing her down.

"Listen everyone! I'm Sasori's main target! Try to push forward and end him already!" Hinata called.

"I don't think so!" Sasori replied.

As if on cue, more puppets joined the fight, attacking Kankuro, Kurenai and Maki with even more intensity than before, as if Sasori was trying to prove her wrong out of spite.

" *Sasori has lost a lot of puppets already. But the less he has, the more he can sharpen his focus and control all of them in a more efficient manner,*" Hinata reasoned, while dealing with a trio of puppets. *"If this continues, we won't be able to-"*

"Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

A gust of wind blew away a group of puppets that were coming towards Hinata from above, which she had seen but wasn't focused on. She also noticed the group of six people that had joined the fray, among them her two remaining teammates.

"Naruto-kun! Haku-kun!" Hinata called them in joy.

"Hi there. It seems that we came here just in time!" Naruto said.

"That other Akatsuki exhausted us a little, but I believe there's still enough fight in us to at least assist you," Haku added.

Hinata nodded. "We can't just waste more time and energy on these puppets. We need to get to Sasori and end this already!"

Naruto and Haku nodded, before the former said: "Leave that to us! We'll keep those puppets at bay, and open a way to him. Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Naruto created a multitude of clones, which charged forward upon coming into existence, drawing Sasori's attention. A mass of puppets went to greet them. While the puppets were far more durable than the clones, the latter ones did their job at keeping them busy.

"Ice Release: Multiple Piercing Icicle Shot!"

Haku created several ice spears that floated above him, and launched them whenever a puppet came close to either him or Hinata, impaling them to the ground or a wall of stone. The trio of Konoha ninjas were successfully getting closer to the Akatsuki, which was starting to grow desperate.

"Inconceivable. Me, Suna's greatest ninja, who managed to kill the Third Kazekage... cornered by these children? No, I won't allow it! This is not my end! My art is eternal, and so I am!"

Sasori extended both hands. His left hand fell off, and a long, sharp blade appeared in its place. He also shot a chakra thread from his

right hand to pull an axe from one of his already destroyed puppets. He then fired his ventral cable forward, prompting Hinata and Haku to jump sideways, while killing some Naruto clones, before stabbing himself into the ground. Retracting the cable, he launched himself forward towards Hinata.

"DIE!"

Hinata didn't to dodge this time. Displaying her agility and elasticity, the Hyuga Heiress nimbly avoided Sasori's poisoned blows, before taking a step forward, and softly poking Sasori's heart with her index finger.

That's all what she needed. The burst of chakra she sent through her fingertip made Sasori's last remnant of his human body to burst into chunky salsa, bringing his sordid life to an end. The chakra threads he was using to keep the puppet army disappeared, and the remaining puppets fell to the ground, motionless.

Nobody said anything. Everybody took a moment to to regain their breath, and make sure nobody was seriously hurt.

"Whoa! You guys did it! You killed Sasori!" Kankuro cheered, happy to see that the man who kidnapped his brother and brought both him and his sister to near death had finally ceased to be.

Hinata fell on her butt, and started panting heavily, as she felt all the accumulated stress and exhaustion washing over her body. Naruto wordlessly sat besides her, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. The Hyuga also saw Kurenai walking towards her.

"Congratulations, Hinata," despite her naturally happy attitude, the fight had also pushed the Genjutsu Mistress to her very limit. "You have the honor of being the first person to ever kill an Akatsuki."

"Yes! One down, nine more to go!" Naruto cheered, shaking Hinata a little.

"This will send a powerful message out there. Akatsuki isn't invincible," Haku agreed.

"Even then, underestimating them would be foolish. Just look how much damage just one of them can do," Temari said, looking around the battlefield. She then looked at her younger brother. "So, you are planning to scavenge these puppets, right?" Temari asked.

"You can bet on it," Kankuro replied, as he walked towards the deceased Sasori, and lifted his body. "Starting with this guy!"

"Are you planning to use Sasori's corpse as a puppet? That's morbid," Maki added, a bit disgusted, no longer wearing the Cloth Armor.

"It's not really his corpse. Plus it would be a waste," Kankuro replied, as he sealed Sasori's body inside an storage scroll.

"By the way, Naruto," Temari said, as she walked towards the blond. "Now that we took care about the Akatsuki... what about Gaara?"

"Oh right! I left him hidden between a bunch of trees and bushes not far away from here. I left a couple clones watching over him," Naruto made a hand seal. The others couldn't see it, but he was dispelling one of those clones in order to gain his memories. "Yup! Gaara's still there!"

"Go fetch him then. I want to take him home," Temari asked. Naruto nodded.

...

Gaara slowly opened his eyes. He blinked a few times when the sunlight proved to be too intense for his weary eyes. He found himself staring at several blurry figures that towered over him. As his eyes got used to the light, said figures became clearer, and the former jinchuriki could now see they were his siblings, Naruto and his teammates, and Maki and her students.

"Huh...?" Gaara mumbled, still sleepy. "What-?"

Gaara was interrupted when both Temari and Kankuro pretty much latched at him in a tight embrace. He could hear the two of them crying.

"Gaara..." Temari sobbed, almost in a whisper. "You have no idea how happy I am to see that you're okay!"

"Yeah man, you gave us quite the scare!" Kankuro said, as his tears ruined his face paint.

"What... what happened?" Gaara weakly asked. "I don't remember anything... after we fought those Akatsuki..."

"It doesn't matter, little bro. All that matters is that you're alive," Kankuro replied.

Gaara gently pushed his siblings back, and with their help, he stood back on his feet.

"Even then, I wish to know," Gaara's eyes then rested on Naruto. "Given all the people gathered here."

Maki took a step forward, and cleared her throat. "Long story short, the Akatsuki got you, and extracted the Tailed Beast from you. These Konoha ninjas helped us rescue you and drive the Akatsuki away. We even managed to kill one of them, the infamous Sasori of the Red Sands."

Gaara processed the Jonin's words with a thoughtful expression. However, there was something that didn't make any sense.

"Wait," Gaara replied. "If that was true, I should be dead."

"You almost were," Kankuro added. "We managed to stop the extraction ritual when it was about to end. Naruto and Hinata managed to heal you and stabilize what little Tailed Beast chakra remained inside you so you wouldn't die."

"You weren't the only ones they did save," Temari added. "If it wasn't for Konoha, Kankuro and I would have suffered a long and painful death due Sasori's poison."

Once again, Gaara paused to absorb this new information. So, the One Tail was no longer within his body. That would explain why he felt so... different. On one side, he didn't miss having a murderous beast sealed inside, but on the other hand, he felt an unexplainable sensation of emptiness, as if a part of him had been destroyed.

"I see," Gaara replied, as he walked closer to the Konoha ninja. "Thanks to all of you for your help. Suna will never forget what you did here."

"Hey, we did help too, you know!" Yukata protested.

"Yukata!" Maki chided her.

Gaara's lips formed a small smile, something rare to see in the stoic redhead. "No. It would be unfair to deny them their contribution in this endeavor. You also have my thanks, and I'll make sure that you're properly rewarded."

"Yay!" Yukata cheered.

Matsuri then walked closer to Gaara, a smile on her face as she tried to hold back her tears.

"It's okay, Gaara-sama. Seeing you alive and well is all the reward I need," Matsuri earnestly said.

"Now, if all it's said and done, and if it's not much to ask... I'd like to return home," Gaara weakly said.

Everybody nodded, and headed towards Sunagakure at a pace slow enough for Gaara to be comfortable.

...

A few hours later, long after the Konoha and Suna ninjas left the Land of the Rivers, two Akatsuki appeared in the site of the battle, easily identifiable since most of the puppets Sasori had used were still there.

"I'm sorry, boss," the black half of Zetsu said, as he and his other half checked the puppets. "But it seems that they took the body away. We won't be able to get the replacement."

Obito, however, smirked as he noticed something. He walked towards something that caught his attention: a single, disembodied hand. Picking the puppet hand up, he noticed it had a ring on its thumb.

"Not all the body, it would seem," Obito said, taking the ring, and tossing the hand away. "Sasori was gracious enough to make sure we'd be able to replace him once he saw his end was close."

"Those are good news, indeed," the white half of Zetsu replied. "So, shall we proceed to induct the new member?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Obito asked, as he placed the ring inside a pocket under his cloak.

"Of course. I'll make sure the Moon Portal is ready as soon as possible," Black Zetsu said, as both he and Obito vanished.

...

Sunagakure, Next Morning

To say that the previous day had been one of the Hidden Sand Village's most distressful days would have been an understatement. The news of the Akatsuki attacking the Kazekage's children and Gaara's abduction had been like a hammerblow to the collective spirit of the villagers. Fear and worry spread among the population as wildfire, as they wondered if this was nothing but the first part of an attack on the village as a whole.

The general panic made the Kazekage and his councilors to send most of his available ninjas to secure and watch over all the strategic zones, just in case a larger attack would fall upon the village, leaving only a small team to assist Temari, Kankuro and the Konoha ninja with Gaara's rescue. And, indeed, one of those fears appeared to be true when one of the village watchers spotted somebody in the horizon.

"Somebody is coming!" the Suna ninja said, seeing shadowy figures coming from the East.

"Are they enemies? How many of them?" his partner asked.

"I'll tell you right now," the first ninja said, as he pulled out a spyglass, taking a better look of the newcomers. "It's a small group. Ten, I think. They don't appear to be enemies. In fact they're from our own... no way!"

"What? What did you see?" the second ninja impatiently asked.

"It's Gaara-sama! They brought him back!"

The second watcher immediately understood his partner's reaction and sudden excitement.

"I'll spread the good news! Gaara-sama is alive and back with us!"

...

As the group of seven Suna and four Konoha ninjas slowly approached the village, Kurenai started to notice something odd.

"Look like a large gathering of Suna ninjas is forming at the entrance of the village," Kurenai pointed out.

Hinata activated her Byakugan, confirming her sensei's words.

"Indeed. Are they here to greet us?" Hinata wondered.

And yes, Hinata's guess proved to be true. Once they were close enough, the Suna ninjas started to loudly cheer, both for Gaara, seeing him return, and for all the ten ninjas that had made his return possible. Gaara reacted to this by showing as little emotion as he usually does, but on the inside, his heart was flooded by a warm feeling.

"Look at that, brother," Temari pointed out. "The very same people who used to fear and hate you are cheering for your return and safety."

Gaara smiled. He was about to say something, when the cheering abruptly ceased, much to the group's confusion. The mass of Suna ninjas then moved aside, forming a passageway, revealing the reason the mood had been killed so fast.

Sporting an unreadable expression stood Rasa, the Fourth Kazekage, and Gaara, Kankuro and Temari's father.

Wordlessly the Kazekage walked forward, his eyes fixed on Gaara, as the rest of the Suna ninja silently watched their supreme commander, his stone cold face unchanged. The seconds he took to bridge the gap and met Gaara's group felt like an eternity.

"Father," Gaara simply said.

Then, the unthinkable happened. To everybody's utter shock and surprise, Rasa suddenly wrapped his arms around his youngest son, and started sobbing loudly, in an undignified manner befitting a Kage, which indeed caught off guard everybody who already knew the stern and unpleasant man.

"I'm sorry, Gaara," Rasa cried. "I'm sorry for all of this... it was me who made you this, who made you carry this burden..."

"Father," Gaara replied, seemingly not acknowledging his father's state. "I no longer possess the One Tail within me. The Akatsuki took it away."

Regaining some of his composure, Rasa wiped the tears from his eyes as he broke them embrace and stood up.

"It's okay, Gaara," Rasa replied, his lip quivering a little. "When I heard the news about your abduction, I didn't think about Shukaku until much later. It was your life that worried me the most. And seeing you here, alive and well, fills my heart with a joy unlike no other.

"Gaara... I've realized far too late what an awful father I've been to you," his eyes darted to Kankuro and Temari. "To all of you. I won't ask for your forgiveness, I'll earn it by becoming both a better father and better Kazekage altogether."

While they still harbored some resentment towards their father, Kankuro and Temari smiled a little at their father's change of heart.

"By the way," Temari replied, taking a step forward, and handing her a scroll. "The new alliance treaty with Konoha."

"Good job, Temari, Kankuro," Rasa said, taking the scroll. He then looked at the foursome of Konoha ninjas. "But I think that a mere paper is now irrelevant in the light of what has transpired these days. Ninjas of Konoha, in my and Suna's name, thank you for saving my children. Suna will always be a friend of Konoha as long as I'm the Kazekage."

"Good to hear that," Kurenai said, smiling a little.

"Also, you're invited to spend the day in the village. Tonight, we will have a feast to celebrate Gaara's return," the Kazekage said.

Everybody cheered, and they headed back to the village. Temari and Kankuro then noticed somebody, an old woman, walking towards them, sporting a dejected expression. They recognized her as Chiyo, one of Sunagakure's elders.

"Kankuro, Temari. I'm glad to see that both you and your brother are alright," Chiyo said. After a heavy sigh, she added. "Was my

grandson... responsible for this?"

Temari and Kankuro nodded. "I'm afraid yes, Chiyo-baasama," Temari replied.

"It was as I feared. What has been of him?" Chiyo asked. The two Suna Jonin took too long to answer, but their silence was all she needed to hear to know. "I see. Deep down, I believe it was my fault my grandson took such a path."

"Don't blame yourself. We're all responsible for our own actions, and Sasori chose his path on his own free will," Kankuro firmly replied. "I know it must hurt to learn the fate of a family member, but don't think for a second what he did was your fault."

"I know. I wish it was as easy," Chiyo lamented. "Oh well, I'll try to see the positives. How we got both you and your brother back... and that my grandson won't be able to hurt anybody else anymore..."

...

Several Hours Later, Kazekage's State

As expected, the party in Gaara's honor ended up being entertaining, memorable, and above all things, really fun. There was lots of food, drink, music and dancing. After finding out that Hinata was dating the son of a Kage, Matsuri asked the Hyuga to share advice on how she could approach Gaara, whom he had a crush on but saw him out of her league. The Hyuga Heiress was way too happy to oblige.

Despite having a good time in the celebration -and having more than enough reasons to celebrate-, there was a couple things lingering on Naruto's mind that stopped from fully enjoying the festive mood. And he was going to deal with one of those issues right now.

Exiting the party lobby, Naruto found a terrace where the sound of said party was barely audible. A deceptively cold night breeze

brushed against his face as he entered the terrace, and the blond saw a spectacular view of all of Sunagakure. Yes, this place would be a perfect spot for what he wanted to do. He closed his eyes.

The faint noises of the party in the other room, as well as the city above vanished, a deafening silence taking their place. Naruto opened his eyes, and he was no longer in the Kazekage's state, but in a place where nobody but him could reach.

"Hey, Kyubi!" Naruto called.

Naruto heard a loud rumble, followed by an annoyed groan, as the mighty beast lazily stretched, and looked at him with unfriendly eyes.

" **Ugh, again so soon? What do you want now?**" the Kyubi asked in a massively annoyed tone.

"I wanted to thank you again for helping me save Gaara's life. What you did means a lot to me," Naruto earnestly said, giving the best the best of his smiles.

The Nine Tails, however, was far from amused. **"I DIDN'T DO IT TO EARN YOUR GRATITUDE!"** the Nine Tails angrily roared. **"It was the only way to stop you from handing me to the Akatsuki!"**

Far from being intimidated, Naruto chuckled, his smile becoming wider, as he rubbed the back of his head. "Haha, yeah, I can't believe you fell for my bluff," Naruto laughed.

The Nine Tails was taken aback. **"... what did you say?"**

"I was really desperate to save Gaara, and I had nothing to bargain with you, and threatening you with that was the only thing I could come up with," Naruto happily confessed. "I mean, I know I'm not the brightest mind around, but even I know that letting Akatsuki getting their hands on you would lead to nothing but trouble. Heh, now that I think about it, I shouldn't have said that. Next time you know I'll be bluffing."

" What would have you done had not I bought your bluff?" the Kyubi asked, sounding sincerely curious, rather than anger for being duped.

"Truth be told, I have no idea," Naruto admitted again. "Though I don't like to think about that. I managed to save Gaara after all."

" Is there anything else you want? Or you came to disturb my rest just to show me your pointless gratitude?" the Fox asked.

"Actually, yeah, there's something I want to talk about," Naruto replied. A loud groan came from the Fox, which Naruto promptly ignored. "That creepy statue used to extract and seal Tailed Beasts... I remember the way you reacted when I saw it for the first time. You know what is it, right?"

The Nine Tails remained oddly silent.

"I'll take your silence as a yes," Naruto continued. "Why don't you tell me what is that thing?"

" Such knowledge won't do you any good," the Nine Tails replied.

"It will, at least if you want me to prevent you being sealed there. Why do you fear so much being sealed inside that statue? Is any worse then being sealed inside me?" Naruto asked.

The Fox grumbled. **"To put it into terms your feeble human mind can understand, imagine if somebody tried to shove you back into your mother's womb."**

"EWWWWW, GROSS!" Naruto whined, as his face formed a grimace. "No wonder you don't want to be sealed there! Hey, wait a second... is that statue your mother or something like that?"

" In a way, yes. But it's much more complicated than that," was the Fox's answer.

"Then tell me," Naruto said, earning a cold stare from his tenant. He crossed his arms, and stared back at him as he put the best serious face he could. "I'm not going to leave until you do. You should already know how stubborn I can be."

Naruto earned another annoyed groan from the Fox.

" I'd take ages to explain you all the details, so I'll give you an abridged version," The Nine Tails conceded. **"Long time ago, before my kind existed, there was a being called the Ten Tails. It was a beast of infinite power that ravaged the land, causing misery and destruction. Until one day, a very powerful man managed to defeat that beast by draining it of its chakra. He then split the chakra into nine entities and gave them form and a mind of their own. That's how my siblings and I were born.**

" He then proceeded to seal away the body of the beast, now a lifeless husk, since if the chakra of the Ten Tails was returned to its body, that monster would be reborn again, and would cause the end of the world."

The Fox's tale finished, Naruto took a moment to think about what he just learned. If what he said was true, then it was a discovery of epic proportions, since nobody really knew where Tailed Beasts came from. It also painted the Akatsuki under an even darker shade, since at first, Naruto thought that they merely wanted the Tailed Beasts to use their power for their own means. But if they were trying to revive such an apocalyptic beast...

"Whoa, that was... amazing," Naruto admitted. "So in that way that statue IS your mother. But I also have several questions! If that powerful man managed to seal the statue, how the Akatsuki obtained it then? And who was that man to begin with?"

" To answer your first question, in order to unseal the statue, one must possess the same Bloodline Limit as the man who sealed it: the Rinnegan, the most powerful of all Bloodlines," the

Kyubi explained. **"As for the man himself, you humans know him as the Sage of the Six Paths."**

Naruto's amazement vanished, being replaced by sour skepticism. He raised an eyebrow, as he crossed his arms again. "Yeah. The Sage of the Six Paths. Really?"

Unsurprisingly, the Fox took offense to Naruto's reaction. **"You don't believe me? Hmph, fine then! But don't go asking me questions if you don't like the answers!"**

"It's not that I don't want to believe you but... the Sage of the Six Paths? Everybody knows that's just a myth of ancient times," Naruto replied, trying not to sound disrespectful.

" And what do YOU know about ancient times, human child?"
The Fox snapped back. **"Now, if I sated your inane curiosity, go bother somebody else."**

Deciding that it was better not to press the Kyubi any further and take what this conversation had revealed, Naruto exited the mindscape where the Tailed Beast was sealed. When he opened his eyes again, he was back in Suna. Albeit truth be told, he never left that place to begin with. At least, his body didn't.

"Naruto-kun? What are you doing here by yourself?" Hinata's voice asked from behind. "Didn't you enjoy the party?"

Naruto turned around, and smiled at his girlfriend. "Oh, no, none of that. The party was fine."

"But there's something that bothers you, right?" Hinata guessed, holding her hands above her chest.

Naruto chuckled. "You know me so well."

The Hyuga heiress took a step forward, and put on her most sincere smile. "If there's something that bothers you, you can always talk

with me, you know that?"

"I know," Naruto nodded. "Remember the barrier seal Akatsuki used to protect their hideout?"

"It was Uzumaki fuinjutsu, right?" Hinata asked, recalling the events from the previous day. "Are you worried about how much Uzumaki knowledge Akatsuki has in their power?"

"At first yes, but then I realized of something. Something far worse," Naruto replied, sounding ominous. "Keeping that barrier seal active consumes immense amounts of chakra. Even a Kage would have a hard time keeping it active for more than an hour or so. Only a member of my clan would have enough chakra capacity to keep it active for so long."

"Naruto-kun, are you implying...?"

"Yes. I believe one of the Akatsuki is an Uzumaki."

...

Amegakure

From the top of a tall skyscraper, two figures contemplated the city below them, as rain constantly poured. A tall man with spiky orange hair, rippled purple eyes, and face covered in facial piercings, and a woman with blue hair styled in a bun, with two bangs framing her face, and light brown eyes. The two of them were wearing Akatsuki cloaks.

"Three of the Tailed Beasts have been successfully captured. One third of our job is now complete," the man said in a deep voice. "The path to true peace lies even closer."

"Yes, but things will get more difficult from now onwards, Pain," the woman told her partner. "Konoha and Suna will do their best to

hinder our mission. They wouldn't be above warning other villages against us."

"You worry too much, Konan," Pain replied. "The power the Great Villages currently have pales in comparison to Akatsuki."

"While true, it would be wise not to grow confident. Remember that Konoha and Suna did manage to interrupt the sealing ritual. It was luck that we were almost finished," Konan reminded him. "Not to mention Sasori's loss. Pain, no Akatsuki member ever fell in battle before."

"Do not worry. I'll take measures such thing won't happen again," Pain assured her. "As for Sasori, Obito and Zetsu are in the way of recruiting an even more powerful replacement."

"More powerful than Sasori? I'm already curious to meet this person," Konan admitted.

"While they do that, we need to continue with our plan, and decide which jinchuriki should we target next," Pain said.

"Kakuzu requested he and Hidan to go and capture the jinchuriki of the Seven Tails, currently residing in Taki," Konan informed him. "He has a plan that will take time, but it will not only ensure the jinchuriki, but will also notably increase Akatsuki's resources."

"And unsurprising claim, coming from kakuzu. Wanting to go after his old village, while at the same time finding a way to make profit. Tell him he has my permission to proceed as he sees fit. But also tell him not to take much time with preparations," Pain decided.

"It will be done," Konan replied, before she crumbled into a mass of papers, which bend themselves into origami butterflies, and flew away.

...

Somewhere in the Moon

When Obito and Zetsu emerged from the former's spiraling portal, they found themselves in a large, spacious room, tastefully decorated with all manner of expensive looking ornaments and pieces of art. It looked like the place of residence of a particularly wealthy or powerful Feudal Lord.

Suddenly, the two Akatsuki were surrounded by masked guards wearing dark robes. Spheres of golden chakra appeared in the hands of those guards, no doubt ninjutsu attacks ready to be fired.

"I don't know who you are, nor how you managed to get here," a soft, but firm, young sounding voice said, as a white haired man wearing a long, white robe walked towards them. "Choose your words carefully, for they may be your last."

Obito smirked, his confidence not wavering one bit. "Hello. My name is Obito Uchiha. This is my associate, Zetsu. And you're Toneri Otsutsuki, am I right?"

"You seem to know an awful lot about me. Tell me a reason as for why I shouldn't kill you two right here, and right now," Toneri replied.

"Let's say I made here to make a deal," Obito said, with a wide smirk. "One you won't be able to say 'no' to." His left Sharingan, the one it used to belong to Shisui, changed its shape into a four bladed shuriken. "Literally."

...

Undisclosed Location

A woman with long black hair and green eyes, who was wearing a long white robe, alongside other religious-looking apparels, contemplated the night sky. More specifically, the full moon.

"You sensed it, right, Nori?" a voice said behind her back.

The woman named Mori turned around, and saw a broad-shouldered man in his late fifties, with short brown hair and a thick beard of the same color. He was also wearing a similar religious garment as her.

"Yes, father. The moment we've been preparing for all our lives is about to come," Nori replied.

"You know what you have to do, then," the man said, his tone denoting urgency.

"Yes. I need to go to Konoha... and bring the Byakugan Princess here."

Author's Note: And thus, one of my least liked sagas from Shippuden comes to an end. I did try my best to make it better, and I like to think that I managed to do it to some extent. I mean, a lot of reviews told me how they liked that I had Kankuro and Temari more involved in the arc, so there's that at the very least. And even if the ending is the same (Gaara survives, the Akatsuki gets Shukaku) I like to think the different execution mattered.

And here we had another talk with the Kyubi, which I love to write. On this occasion, Naruto learns quite a few things, such as one of the Akatsuki being an Uzumaki, the origins of the Kyubi, the Demonic Statue, the Rinnegan and the Sage of the Six Paths. Such information will surely come in handy in the future.

I'm pretty sure that the last few scenes, which set up the next two arcs, left you yearning for more. And since Sasuke didn't defect to Orochimaru this time around, the Sasuke and Sai arc won't happen (and good riddance, since in my opinion, it's easily the worst arc of not just Shippuden, but I'd say the entire series. Albeit the Ultimate Ninja Storm 2 game made an admirable effort trying to fix it), so I had to come up with something to fill that void. And while my original arcs tend to

have worse reception than straight adaptations, I'm very confident all of you will enjoy the Byakugan Princess Arc ;)

In the meantime, tell me what you think about this chapter, the arc that it capped off, and your expectations for the next one in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Byakugan Princess, Part I

Author's Note: And with this chapter, this story breaks the 500K words mark! Whohoo!

Something I want to point out: many reviewers asked how Obito put Toneri under a genjutsu if he had no eyes. The answer is simple: he used Kotoamatsukami, which doesn't need to make eye contact in order to work (remember that Danzo used it with his eye bandaged). With that said, I'm not going to address this point again.

So, here we being an arc that I've been wanting to write since pretty much the beginning of this story. Man, time sure flies, doesn't it? Anyway, I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it:

Chapter 56

The Byakugan Princess, Part I

or

When you find yourself part of an ancient conspiracy

Naruto was in the Hokage's office. The only other people in the room besides him and his adoptive father were Tsunade and Shizune. After giving him the report on the Suna mission, Naruto requested to talk with him, Tsunade and Shizune about certain developments that happened during the mission. Most importantly, the fact that Orochimaru had somehow cloned Hagane and Kaida.

"I can't believe that monster would go such lengths for mere Bloodline Limits," Shizune commented in disgust.

"Sadly, I can. Orochimaru always wanted our children the moment knowledge of their abilities reached his ears, and if he couldn't have the originals, he'll get replacements," Jiraiya said in subdued anger.

"Mom?" Naruto asked Tsunade, who had been silent the whole conversation.

Tsunade didn't say anything, and merely looked at the village outside the window. Her breathing was rather heavy. Naruto felt compelled to crack a quip on how he was expecting her to trash the whole office in a fit of righteous anger upon hearing her former teammate's actions, but she remained surprisingly calm.

"If Orochimaru send our kids' clones against you is because he doesn't care if we know about them. And in my experience, that's never a good sign," Jiraiya stated, crossing his fingers under his chin. "Did they have cursed seals?"

"No. Well, they may have, but if they did, they didn't use them. And given that we ended up winning, the fact that they choose retreat over using them points towards not having it," Naruto reasoned.

"Of course. According to Anko, there's only a ten percent chance of surviving the sealing process. He probably doesn't want to risk them," Shizune said.

"That doesn't remove the possibility of branding them in the future," Jiraiya added.

"Indeed. But what we should ask ourselves is what are we going to do with them," Shizune pointed out. An air of uneasiness set upon the office. "I know they're clones of your children, but they're also Orochimaru's minions. How should we... deal with them?"

"Save them," Tsunade said, turning around, a determined fire burning in her eyes. "Those kids shouldn't be judged by the crimes of their creator. In fact, I'm sure they aren't even aware of their

origins. Maybe we can use that to convince them to come to our side."

"Easier said than done," Shizune said with a sigh. "Orochimaru conditions his servants into being devoted to him with an inhuman zeal."

"Yes, but Orochimaru shows little to no care about his minions either. Plus we do have a history of turning our enemies to our side, if Zabuza and the Sound Genin are any indication. And once they're safe..." Tsunade pointed out. Her eyes then narrowed. "... I'll beat the life out of that pale skinned bastard with my own bare hands."

"That's if I don't beat you to it first," Jiraiya interceded, before forcing himself to calm down. "Well, now that we know this, we can plan for the next time Orochimaru sends those clones against us," Jiraiya said, closing the discussion. "Is there anything else you'd want to tell us, Naruto?"

"Actually, yes. During the mission, I talked with the Kyubi," Naruto stated.

Tsunade and Shizune's eyes snapped open, but they didn't say anything. He then explained what the Kyubi told him, about the statue, the Sage of the Six Paths, the Rinnegan and one of the Akatsuki possessing it, as well as the possibility about an Uzumaki among them.

"Those are indeed troubling news," Jiraiya said. "But the more information we know about the enemy, the better."

"Do you know about the Rinnegan, Jiraiya-sama?" Shizune asked.

"Not much. Rumors, legends, but nothing concrete. I'll put a few agents to investigate this issue. If there's nothing left to discuss, then you can go, Naruto," Jiraiya told him.

Naruto nodded, and walked out of the office, followed by Shizune, who said something about meeting her team for training. That only left Tsunade in the office.

"Jiraiya, you know about the Rinnegan," Tsunade pointed out.

"I do," he admitted.

"Then why you didn't say anything?" Tsunade asked, placing her hands on her hips.

"I... okay, I admit that I don't want to think that one of those kids ended up in Akatsuki," Jiraiya confessed. "Even if I'd be happy to know that they survived their clash with Hanzo..."

"I understand. You spent two years with those brats, it's normal that you feel a strong bond with them," Tsunade said, placing a comforting hand in his shoulder.

"While I'll try to remain unbiased, I don't want to do anything rash. I'll put somebody to do some research and see if Nagato is truly an Akatsuki," Jiraiya told her.

"Okay but... if the worst come to pass, try not to do anything foolish, okay?" Tsunade softly pleaded. "A lot of time has passed, and you don't know how much those kids have changed ever since."

Tsunade bent down, and gave Jiraiya a chaste kiss in the lips. And with that, the Slug Princess finally left the office, leaving Jiraiya alone.

...

A Month Later

Kurenai's Assault Squad were having dinner at Shushuya, the team's Jonin-sensei's favorite restaurant, to celebrate the successful completion of an A-Rank mission. The mood was cheerful so far.

A month has passed since Gaara's kidnapping, and during that time, Konoha didn't hear any news about Akatsuki. Even if they knew better than lowering their guard due their apparent lack of activity, they were indeed going to enjoy the reprieve as long as it lasted. Especially now that once again, Konoha hosted the Chunin Exams, and such topic was on everybody's mouths.

"I heard your little siblings managed to make it to the final round, right?" Kurenai asked Naruto and Hinata.

The couple nodded happily. "Yeah, did you really doubt it? Those kids are just as awesome as we are. I bet they will earn a promotion on their first try just like Hinata-hime and me."

"I heard that this time around, the finals will consist on team matches reather than individual ones," Haku pointed out.

"That's even better! The three of them form a really solid team. Just as good as us," Naruto continued his unabashed praising.

"It would have been interesting if we were able to fight in the finals as a team unit, instead of on our own," Hinata commented.

"Yeah. I'm sure you would have been of a lot of help in my fight against Sasuke Uchiha," Haku pointed out, remembering his fight against the black haired teen.

"Sasuke would had had his teammates to help him as well," Kurenai pointed out.

"Yes, but Naruto-kun and Hinata-san are much better fighters than Sakura-san and Karin-san. We could take the latter two easily, then triple team him," Haku explained.

"Any other teams of interest that made it to the finals?" Kurenai inquired.

"As far as I heard, the team with Old Man Hokage's grandson made it to the final as well. And so did Temari's Genin," Naruto recalled.

"Shikamaru-kun is really happy that he gets to see Temari-san every day. Of course, he will never admit it out loud," Hinata said with a giggle.

"Haha, yeah, sometimes wonder what can make him drop that 'everything is troublesome' attitude he has," Naruto added, laughing as well.

"Ah, thank goodness that we already passed the Chunin Exams ourselves, and even moved in rank past Chunin as well," Hinata mentioned. "I'm positive Haku-kun and myself will soon be promoted to Jonin as well."

"And we will be an all-Jonin squad!" Naruto cheered.

Kurenai nodded, and smiled. "Yes, you three certainly grew a lot since you left the Academy and were assigned under my watch. While I knew you three had a lot of potential, I never expected it to be so great. I can safely say that you no longer need me as your sensei anymore."

"Don't say that, Kurenai-sensei. You will always be an integral part of this team," Hinata softly protested.

"Yes. Besides, I still have much to learn regarding genjutsu if I ever want to get close to your level," Haku added.

Kurenai smiled sadly at them. "Unfortunately, you'll have to do without me for some time in the near future," the Genjutsu Mistress said, much to her students' shock, before her smile grew warmed. "Because I've been removed from active duty due maternity leave."

The reaction was instant, and the faces of Kurenai's students morphed into expressions of pure joy, and quickly proceeded to congratulate her.

"Thank you, guys. I'm really happy for this, even if it means not being part of this team anymore," the raven haired woman replied. She then turned at Naruto. "Naruto, since you're the one with the highest rank, you will be the new leader of the Assault Squad."

"Understood, Kurenai-sensei! I'll do my best to fill your spot as the team leader," Naruto enthusiastically replied.

"And I'll do my best as well to fill your spot as the genjutsu specialist," Haku added.

"Let's say we'll do our best to make up for the fact that we'll be one member short for some time," Hinata finished.

"I'm sure all of you will do an splendid job," Kurenai replied.

...

Meanwhile, as this conversation happened, a black haired girl with green eyes wearing what appeared to be religious robes crossed Konoha's gates. As with most newcomers, she was interrogated by the Chunin guarding the gate, namely Izumo and Kotetsu.

"Name?" Kotetsu asked.

"My name is Nori. I'm a priestess from the Land of Tea," the girl told the pair of Chunin, showing a rather pleasant disposition.

"What business brings you to Konoha, miss Nori?" Izumo asked.

"I wish to hire the services of one of your ninjas. Isn't that the reason most people come to a ninja village?" Nori asked, tilting her head a little.

"I guess... you have a point," Izumo awkwardly admitted. "In that case, you should head to the Hokage's Tower to conduct your business. Is a large, red building with the kanji of fire on the front. It can be seen from here."

Nori smiled at the duo. "Yes, I see it. Thank you very much," she said, before she walked into the village, and headed towards the Hokage's Tower.

...

Hokage's Office, Next Day

The Assault's Squad daily training was interrupted by an ANBU appearing there and telling them that the Hokage had an urgent mission for them. Not wasting any time, the now three ninja squad headed to the Hokage's Tower and see what it was.

Turns out, Naruto's team wasn't the only one Jiraiya had summoned for a mission, since Gai's Close Combat Squad was present as well. Haku and Tenten were obviously happy with the fact that they'd get to be on a mission together.

In front of both teams was the Hokage. His face reflected a serious and even tense expression, unlike his usual cheerful and laid back disposition. Whatever this mission was, it seemed it was important.

"Yesterday, we had a visit from a priestess from the Land of the Tea. She requested a team of ninjas to escort her back to her home," Jiraiya asked.

"Wait. You assembled two of the strongest teams Konoha has for a mere escort mission?" Neji asked, skeptical. "Who is this priestess?"

"Come on Neji, is very unyouthful to deny a request from help like that, especially from a holy woman!" Lee loudly protested.

"I'll get to that shortly. Said woman belongs to a group called Order of the Moon Acolytes," Jiraiya's eyes rested on Hinata. "Hinata, does that name sound familiar to you?"

The Hyuga heiress tilted her head in confusion. "No, it doesn't. Should it be familiar?"

"I was asking mostly because the priestess requested specifically you to be among the escort group. She even knew your name," Jiraiya casually said. Naturally, the effect of his words were instant.

"Wait, what?" a shocked Hinata asked.

"Now I *demand* to know who is this woman!" an angry Neji hollered.

"This situation seems rather suspicious to me. Taking this mission might mean putting Hinata-san in danger," Haku sagely noted.

"And I agree," Jiraiya said, taking a look at Gai's team.

"Wait, that's why you called us, right?" Neji said in realization. "We're Hinata-sama's escorts, just in case something happened to her."

"Exactly. It took me very little to realize that said woman is not interested in any kind of escort. She just wants to take Hinata somewhere else," Jiraiya explained.

"And you're going to let Hinata-hime walk into a potential trap?" Naruto asked, growing outraged. "What the hell, dad? Did you forget that somebody tried to kidnap Hinata when she was little?"

"I'm aware of the implications, Naruto," Jiraiya said, hoping to soothe his son. "That's why I assembled the best ninjas I have currently available to diminish the risk to a minimum."

"You haven't told us why you agreed to do this mission to begin with, Hokage-sama," Neji asked, crossing his arms while fixing a hard stare on the white haired man.

"Said woman claims to have important information regarding the Hyuga Clan, and Konoha as a whole. She shared some of that information with me as well, which is more than enough incentive to continue with the mission," Jiraiya replied. "She said she can't share the rest until Hinata sees what she has to show her."

"Understood, Hokage-sama," Hinata softly replied. "We'll do our best to complete this mission."

"In that case," Jiraiya snapped his fingers, and the door opened. "You should meet our client."

All seven ninjas turned around, and saw the girl in question, escorted by an ANBU. She let out a little gasp when her eyes rested on Hinata.

"Nori, these are the ninjas that will escort you to your home. Guys, this is Nori," Jiraiya introduced both parties.

"It's an honor to meet you," Nori softly said, making a bow. She then walked closer towards Hinata. "By any chance, are you Hinata Hyuga?"

Hinata nodded. "Yes, I am."

Nori's smile grew, and even let out a swoon. "Oh, you have no idea how long I've been waiting to meet you, Hinata-sama. The whole purpose of my Order leads up to this day."

Hinata laughed awkwardly, and took a step backwards. "Uh... nice to meet you too... I guess..." Hinata unsurely said.

"Now that everything's settled, when can we leave? Time is of essence," Nori insisted.

"Don't worry, it won't take long. Give them an hour so they can get prepared for the journey ahead," Jiraiya told her. "Gai, given that of all the Jonin you're the most veteran, you'll be the leader of this mission."

"Yosh! Thank you, Hokage-sama! You won't regret this decision! And if you do, I'll run five hundred laps around Konoha on my hands, with boulders tied to my ankles!" Gai enthusiastically shouted, as he gave Jiraiya a thumbs up.

"I'm starting to regret it," Jiraiya grumbled under his breath. "Anyway, you're dismissed. I'll be eagerly waiting your report once you get back."

...

A couple hours later, the seven ninjas and the priestess were already heading south, to the Land of the Tea, leaping from one tree branch to another as fast as they could. In order to be there as fast as possible, Gai offered to carry Nori on her back, while Lee carried her bag with the few supplies she had brought with her. They estimated that, at the current pace, they'd reach Nori's home in a little less than two days.

The end of the first day arrived before everybody realized it.

"Alright, the sun will set soon, so let us set as well!" Gai cheerfully ordered. "This seems to be a good place to set up a camp. Let's distribute the chores, shall we?"

Haku offered to look for firewood, while Tenten rather unsubtly volunteered to go with him. Fortunately for them, nobody disagreed. Gai, Lee and Naruto went to find some food in the forest, either berries, fruit, or by hunting. That left Neji, Hinata, and Nori to set up tents and the rest of the camp.

Neji had been waiting for an opportunity to approach Nori and talk with her. The Hyuga was a reserved clan to the point of paranoia, if the cursed seal on his forehead was any indication. Yet this Nori treated Hinata as if she was some sort of celebrity, known by all. As far as his experience went, whenever somebody showed disproportionate interest in a clan, it was never because of good intentions.

After he finished setting up the tents, his keen eyesight spotted Nori checking her sleeping bag. She walked towards her.

"Excuse me," Neji said, in his usual stoic tone. "May I have a word with you?"

Nori turned around, and smiled at the Hyuga. "Of course! Your name was Neji, right?" the Branch House member nodded. "What can I do for you, Neji-sama?"

Neji was taken a bit aback. After a lifetime of using that honorific to refer to other family members, it felt incredibly weird, almost to the point of sounding wrong, that somebody else used it with him, to the point that it took him a couple seconds to regain his bearings.

"Uh... listen, I'm going to be blunt. I noticed that, for somebody who isn't from the Land of Fire, much less Konoha, you seem to know quite a lot about Hinata-sama and the Hyuga clan," Neji pointed out. "I'm sure you'll understand my suspicion."

"Of course I do, Neji-sama. But I'm confident that such suspicion will turn into trust once the truth about the Hyuga Clan is revealed," Nori enigmatically said.

"Truth of the Hyuga Clan? What truth?" Neji asked, half annoyed, but half curious.

"Everything will be revealed at the appropriate time. More specifically, when we reach my home. It is not safe to speak of such things here. Who knows who may be listening," Nori replied.

"Your evasiveness isn't helping," Neji bluntly stated. "How do I know you're not taking us to a trap? It wouldn't be the first time somebody pretended to be a friend of us to kidnap Hinata-sama," Neji accused.

"You talk about that incident with Kumo, right?" Nori asked. Neji was a bit taken aback by her knowledge of that event, given that Konoha did their best to make sure it never reached the public ears. But given how much this girl knew, it wasn't that surprising. "Yes, that was the work of our enemies."

"So you made enemies with Kumo then?" Neji asked.

Nori shook her head. "No. I'm talking about somebody far worse than a single ninja village. Kumo were nothing but puppets of this enemy."

"And who is this enemy you speak about? Akatsuki?" Neji guessed, though he immediately tossed the idea aside. The Akatsuki were jinchuriki hunters, and were not interested in collecting Bloodline Limits. Well, one of the Akatsuki was, but as far as he knew, that wasn't the goal of the organization as a whole.

"Again, I'm sorry, but I can't tell you right now. It's too dangerous to talk about that here," Nori insisted. "But try to quell your frustration. Once we're in a safe place tomorrow, you'll learn everything."

Neji didn't look frustrated, but he didn't look relieved or satisfied either. "I see. In that case, I hope you don't mind if I don't take my eyes from you as long as this mission lasts."

"A sensible, and very understandable course of action, Neji-sama," Nori replied with a nod, before she smiled at him. "I'm going to prepare some tea. Do you mind helping me?"

"Not in the slightest," Neji agreed.

A little later, the two Hyugas and the priestess heard two sets of steps coming close to the campsite.

"We're back!" Tenten's happily announced as she and Haku returned from the forest. Both of them looked a bit red and sweaty, had messy hair and slightly disheveled clothes. It didn't take a genius to guess what the two of them have been doing.

Neji walked towards them, looking even more serious than usual.

"Where is the firewood?" Neji asked.

Haku tilted his head. "Firewood?"

"The firewood you were supposed to gather in order to start a fire," Neji clarified. "You know, in order to stay warm once night arrives and we can cook the food Gai-sensei, Lee and Naruto will bring back. That's it, unless the three of them decide to also have an impromptu three way makeout session and forget about their duties."

Tenten's face became even redder. "OH SHIT! I knew we were forgetting about something!"

She took Haku's hand and hurriedly dragged him back to the forest.

Neji then shuddered. "Gai-sensei, Lee and Naruto in a three way makeout... why I even came up with that? Now that image will never leave my brain..."

...

An hour later, everybody had returned to the campsite, and were enjoying the meal Gai, Lee and Naruto had brought. Haku and Tenten also brought some firewood as well. The group of seven ninjas and the one priestess sat around the campfire, and enjoyed their meals. The dinner then made way for some conversation.

"Hey guys, check it out this little thing I've been working on for the past months," Tenten excitedly said as she rummaged through her backpack, until she finally produced some small tool. "Here it is!"

"What is that?" Naruto asked.

Tenten answered by pressing a button, which made the tool to expand and develop into a finely crafted bow with no string. A set of seals inscribed across it started to glow with a blueish white light, and it produced a string made of chakra of the same color.

"Ta-daaaa! This is the chakra bow! A ranged weapon that needs no ammo, only your chakra to attack!" Tenten proudly explained. She stood up, tensed the string, and an arrow also made of pure chakra was automatically created. Releasing the string, the arrow softly flew

until it crashed against a tree branch, producing a small chakra blast that cut that branch from the tree, falling to the ground below.

"Wow! That was such an amazing weapon, Tenten!" Lee praised.

"Indeed! As long as you have chakra, this weapon will always work! And you can put more or less chakra into the arrows to regulate their power," the odango haired girl explained.

"It's kinda the same idea behind my chakra sword, right?" Naruto asked.

"Yeah, I took your chakra sword as the base idea, though my intention was to make a ranged weapon," Tenten replied.

"Can I try it?" Haku asked his girlfriend.

Wordlessly, Tenten collapsed the bow and tossed it to her boyfriend. Haku unfolded and activated the bow, pulled the string, and generated an arrow made of chakra. The arrow then generated a frosty aura, and quickly turned into ice.

"It also works with elemental chakra," Haku pointed out, before returning the bow to Tenten.

"Of course it does! I thought of everything!" Tenten boasted. "So, if you guys want one, you only have to tell me!"

"I think that with my Byakugan, I can make a good use of such weapon," Hinata pointed out.

"It's a very useful tool. I'm interested in having one as well," Haku said.

Tenten then looked at Naruto and grinned. "What about you, Naruto? Do you want one so you don't feel left out? You guys can be the Archer Squad!" she asked, and everybody else laughed.

"I'd like to think that I stand out, thank you very much," Naruto replied, in a half joking self important tone, making everybody else to laugh harder. "But since we're talking about fitting with the rest of the team, maybe Neji and you could get a pair of nice green jumpsuits."

Everybody laughed, except Neji and Tenten this time around, who instead sulked, as their faces made a grimace.

"OH! That's a great suggestion, Naruto-kun!" Lee excitedly agreed, as he turned towards his sensei. "Gai-sensei, do you think that when we go back to Konoha we can get Neji and Tenten some green jumpsuits?"

"That won't be necessary, Lee..." Gai replied, prompting Neji and Tenten to sigh in relief. "... because I always carry several spares with me! Now we only need to find the right size!"

Naruto felt a massive killing intent focused on him coming from Neji and Tenten, though that didn't stop him from sharing a laugh with his friends.

...

While the group of eight chatted and laughed, they were unaware that there was a certain somebody spying on them. And since neither of them were sensors, they couldn't detect this presence. And said spy was feeding all this information to Akatsuki's newest member, who wasn't that far away from there.

"So, those Moon Acolytes are finally making their move," Toneri said to no one in particular. His lips curved into a small smirk. "Then it should be time to make my move as well. Byakugan Princess... you shall be mine."

...

The Next Day, Land of Tea

Once sunrise arrived, the group of eight continued with their journey towards Nori's home, which was completed without incidents. Or at least, that's what it appeared when they arrived to what appeared to be a large wall of rock, and the priestess started that they had arrived, much to their confusion.

"Are you sure it's here?" an skeptical Naruto asked.

"Let's ask somebody with a better eyesight," Nori cryptically replied, giggling a little. "Hinata-sama, Neji-sama, can you use your Byakugan and tell me what you see?"

The two Hyuga obliged, and activated their Bloodline Limits. Both of them let out a soft gasp in unison.

"What did you see?" Haku asked.

"There's a door in there!" Hinata pointed out. "It's both made and protected by innumerable chakra seals invisible to the eye."

"Exactly. We might not be ninja, but we still know how to use chakra," Nori added, as she placed a hand on the wall, and send a pulse of chakra into it.

The effect was instant. The earth started to shake, as a large rectangular section of the stone wall sunk down, leaving a large entrance hole of the same shape. Everybody could see a path that led inside, illuminated by torches on both sides.

"Hurry, let's get there. Once we get inside, we'll be safe, and all your questions will be answered," Nori urged as she quickly entered in, followed by the eight ninjas.

Once all of them were inside, the section of the stone wall rose again, sealing the entrance with a loud slam, inevitably making some of the Konoha ninja felt that they've walked into a trap, though that may have been their instincts. Nori walked forward, with the rest of

the group following her. She certainly looked far more relaxed, as if she took a weight off of her shoulders.

"What is this place, Nori-san?" Gai asked the priestess.

"Our home," Nori replied. "Our shrine. Our refuge. At least, until now."

They eventually left the tunnel, which ended in a massive underground chamber, which looked like nothing the Konoha ninjas had seen. It had the appearance of a massive temple, complete with pillars, statues, smaller temples and shrines, and other religious ornaments. There were a few waterfalls that fed a river that crossed the chamber. It was illuminated by beams of light that came from holes in the chamber ceiling. There were multiple people dressed in the same white robes as Nori, who took no time to notice the newcomers.

"Hey, look, Nori is back!" a man said.

"Yes, it's Nori!" a woman replied.

"Did you find her, Nori?" a second man asked.

"Yes, my brethren, I have returned. But that's not important," Nori then grabbed Hinata by the wrist and pulled her forward. "Because I found her! The Byakugan Princess is finally with us!"

The chamber was filled by cheers and shouts of joy and jubilation, many repeating "Byakugan Princess" over and over. Hinata really didn't know what to make out of that. Nori seemed to catch the Hyuga's confusion.

"Don't worry, everything will become clearer once you meet my father. He's the leader of our order, and the one with all the answers," Nori assured. "He'll explain everything. Now follow me."

Nori took the group of Konoha ninjas to the temple in the opposite extreme of the underground cavern, which was also the biggest. On their way there, they noticed something odd about the statues scattered around the area, which depicted a man and a woman. The man had horns, and the woman had four arms. They wondered what kind of deities these religious people worshipped.

When they entered the temple, a strong smell of incense invaded their noses. The temple, just as finely decorated as the rest of the place, was empty, save for a single burly man with a beard and a moustache that was sitting on a table-like altar, reading from a large tome, under the light of several candles. He took no time to notice the newcomers, and recognize Nori.

"Ah, Nori, welcome back. It pleases me to see you so soon, and completely unharmed," the man got up, and walked to hug his daughter. After that, he turned towards the Konoha ninja, and made a head bow. "Welcome to our humble home, Konoha ninjas. My name is Takuya, High Priest of the Order of the Moon Acolytes."

Everybody else introduced themselves in return as well. Unfortunately, the atmosphere wasn't as cordial as Takuya would have hoped.

"I never heard of such group," Neji suspiciously said.

"That's because we didn't want to be heard of," Takuya sagely replied. "We were created with a single purpose, which is to complete a sacred mission. Unfortunately, we do have powerful enemies that don't wish us to succeed in our endeavor."

"But they're about to fail. Now that the Byakugan Princess is here, our mission shall be completed," Nori added, her voice overflowed with hope.

"Okay, I think it's time for some answers," Naruto impatiently demanded, as he took a step forward. "You keep calling Hinata-hime

'Byakugan Princess' and refer to her as if she's some sort of world savior. What's with that?"

"Fear not, your worries and doubts shall be elucidated," Takuya assured. "However, our history is a really long one. You might want to take a seat," Takuya said with a hand motion. All the Konoha ninja and Nori sat on the floor around him. "But first of all, answer me this questions: what do you know about the Sage of the Six Paths?"

"They said he was the very first man who ever used chakra, and that taught humankind how to do it as well," Tenten replied.

"But that's just an old myth. There are no historical records that such figure ever existed," Neji pointed out.

In the past, Naruto would have been quick to agree with Neji. But now, he wasn't so sure. It would be better to remain silent and listen before opening his mouth, or even forming an opinion.

" *Wow, that's SO unlike me,*" Naruto thought, repressing a chuckle.

"Part of the reason of the very existence of this order has been to preserve the knowledge of ancient times. Work we wouldn't be able to do if we didn't keep such secrecy," Nori interceded. "Now father, if you may tell our guests what they need to know..."

"I was about to do that," Takuya replied, before clearing his throat. "The story of ninjutsu begins with a woman. A woman that came from a faraway land. Some even said that her home was in the sky beyond the stars. Though that's irrelevant for this tale. Her name was Kaguya Otsutsuki, and she was the first Byakugan user."

Naturally, Neji and Hinata were taken aback, but decided to remain silent for the time being.

"Nobody knows why she came to this planet or what she wanted, though she claimed that she came to bring peace to the world. To do so, she sought to consume the fruit of a powerful tree called the

Shinju, or Divine Tree. That fruit only appeared once every thousand years, and whoever ate from it, it would gain the power of a god. Something she managed to achieve, and using her newfound divine powers, she put an end to all wars, and instated world peace. Due this, Kaguya ended up being worshipped as a goddess.

"It was known that Kaguya was pregnant when she ate the Divine Fruit -the name of her lover and father of her children was sadly lost to history, but beyond that he isn't relevant to this story either-, and she gave birth to two twin children, both boys, which she named Hagoromo and Hamura. The older, Hagoromo, would become the Sage of the Six Paths.

"At first glance, Kaguya's peaceful world looked like the kind of future we strive for. But the peace she created was artificial. Conflicts still existed, she simply shut them down by force rather than trying to properly solve them. People grew more and more unhappy, and they started to see Kagura as what she really was: a tyrant with far too much power. People went from worshipping her as if she was a goddess, to fearing her like a demon.

"Hagoromo and Hamura inherited their mother's vast power. Hamura had a Byakugan, just like her, while Hagoromo developed a doujutsu known as the Rinnegan. Despite their power, the brothers tried to solve conflicts in a peaceful way, and they did try to convince their mother to drop her oppressive ways, but Kaguya refused to do so. Having no other options, the brothers engaged Kaguya in combat. Kaguya found her sons way stronger than she thought, and in order to have a chance at beating them, she merged with the still existing Divine Tree, and became an abomination as horrifying as powerful: a beast named the Ten Tails."

"Ten Tails?" a startled Naruto asked. Takuya and Nori realized it wasn't the first time he heard that.

"Is it related to the other Tailed Beasts? I thought then one with the most tails was the Fox," Tenten pointed out.

"Yes, it is. I'll explain in a second, but first you need to let me finish," Takuya replied.

"Sorry, Takuya-san. Please, continue," Lee politely asked.

Takuya nodded as well. "Anyway, the battle that ensued was of such scale, is pretty much impossible to imagine, to the point that it pretty much changed the face of the planet forever. Think of the Valley of the End, only applied to the whole world.

"After literal months of battle, the brothers reached a grim conclusion: the Ten Tails was functionally immortal, and no matter how much damage they did, it would never die. The only way to end the battle was to incapacitate it. To do so, they drained the Ten Tails of its chakra, and sealed it inside Hagoromo. Then, using a powerful jutsu, they sealed the Ten Tails' empty husk inside the Moon.

"The battle over, the brothers planned how to rebuild the world and heal it from the damage their mother had caused. Hagoromo stayed on Earth, while Hamura and his followers traveled to the Moon, in order to watch over what it used to be their mother, as well as other possible threats from beyond the stars.

"Despite their power, Hagoromo and Hamura considered themselves human, and despite having the means to prolong their lives indefinitely to live forever, they choose instead to age and die like humans. That means that something had to be done with the Ten Tail's Chakra Hagoromo sealed inside him. So, when Hagoromo's life was about to reach its natural end, he released the Ten Tails' chakra, split it in nine parts, gave them shape and a mind of their own, and became the Tailed Beasts you know today."

"That's exactly what the Nine Tails told me!" Naruto excitedly interrupted.

Naturally, all eyes were drawn to him.

"Naruto, you shouldn't reveal so casually your status as a jinchuriki," Gai said in a jarringly serious and chiding tone.

"S-Sorry," Naruto stammered.

"Naruto-san's status as a jinchuriki does not matter to us. But it seems that it matters for this situation in particular," Nori calmly reassured, before her eyes rested on the blond. "You said the Nine Tails told you this story before?"

"Yeah... well, a very summarized version. He didn't told me the name of the Sage of the Six Paths or that Kaguya lady. But he did told me about the Ten Tails," Naruto explained. "Also, I think the Ten Tails' lifeless husk might not be sealed inside the Moon anymore."

Takuya and Nori paled. "What do you mean by that? Elaborate, boy." the latter requested.

"The Akatsuki can summon it. It's called the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path. They use it to seal the Tailed Beasts they capture there," Naruto told them.

"What? Naruto-kun, if you knew that, why didn't you tell us about it?" Hinata asked, sounding almost hurt.

"Yes. Any information regarding Akatsuki should always be shared," Neji insisted.

"Sorry again! The source wasn't exactly the most believable!" Naruto defensively replied. "But it's not that I kept it a secret from everybody! Mom and Dad know too!"

The two priests paled even further. "But if they're doing that... no! They can't be trying to revive the Ten Tails! Nobody would be stupid enough to do that!"

"Father, we're obviate something. Only a bearer of the Rinnegan can unseal the Demonic Statue, and there hasn't been one since the

Sage himself. Clearly, somebody in this Akatsuki group has one."

"Nonsense! If a second Rinnegan bearer existed, we would know it!" Takuya protested.

"While I don't want to suggest anything about your ability to gather information, evidence suggest otherwise," Lee argued, trying to sound as polite as possible.

"In that case, it's a good thing the Byakugan Princess is here. We're going to need her power in order to counter this threat," Takuya replied, sweating a little.

"My power? I help as much as I can, but what can I do on my own against Akatsuki? Especially against somebody with a Rinnegan?" Hinata asked.

"You'll know soon enough. Father, resume the tale, please," Nori requested.

Takuya nodded, and cleared his throat again. "Before we continue, I think it's important to establish the source of Kaguya, Hagoromo and Hamura's power. By eating the fruit of the Shinju, Kaguya's chakra turned into we call Divine Chakra, or Six Paths Chakra. A kind of Chakra way more powerful than normal human chakra. Naturally, her sons inherited said kind of chakra as well."

"So that's why the Sage is of the 'Six Paths', right?" Haku ventured to guess.

Takuya nodded. "Exactly. Said chakra is what allowed Hagoromo to develop his Rinnegan, as well as plenty of other powers we normal humans can only dream of. Now, our tale here diverges into two branches. Hagoromo's life on Earth, and Hamura's life on the Moon. I'll begin with the former.

"Hagoromo tasked himself with the quest of bringing peace to the world. To do so, he created the Ninshu, a set of religious and

philosophical beliefs whose goal was to use chakra to bring humanity together and give them a better understanding of each other, which would lead to eventual peace. However, he knew that it would take generations for such thing to happen, and since he chose to live and die like a human, he would never live to see this.

"Hagoromo, however, had two sons, and he had to chose one of them to carry on his legacy once his life came to an end. His older son, Indra, inherited the Sage's Yin Half of the Six Paths Chakra. Said half allowed him to develop the Sharingan, and he's indeed, the very first Sharingan user, and the ancestor of the Uchiha Clan," Takuya explained.

"Whoa! Do the current Uchihis know this?" Naruto asked in shock. "I mean, they're pretty much direct descendants of the Sage of the Six Paths!"

Takuya just shrugged. "I don't know, more than likely not. Now, pay attention young Uzumaki, since this part will be of interest to you. The younger son, Asura, inherited the Sage's Yang Half of the Six Paths Chakra. Said half allowed him to develop Wood Release, and he's the progenitor of the Senju and Uzumaki clans."

"WHOA!" Naruto echoed, this time even louder. He sounded really giddy. "So does this mean that I'M a descendant of the Sage too! And mom, and Kaida and Hagane!"

"Yes you are. Though I doubt very few people will take those claims seriously, as valid as they are," Takuya replied, rolling his eyes a little. "May I continue?"

"Yeah, sorry," Naruto sheepishly replied.

"The older son, Indra, believed that the key to peace was power. Somebody, or a group of people, that should wield power in order to stop conflicts and punish those who start them. The younger son, Asura, believed that the key to peace was through love and mutual understanding. As you can see, Indra's beliefs were a parallel of

Kaguya's failed system, while Asura's embodied the cores of Ninshu. Naturally, Hagoromo chose Asura as his successor.

"However, such choice didn't come without repercussions. Hagoromo thought that Indra would accept his decision, and didn't foresee how displeased he was. Feeling he was claiming his birthright, Indra attacked Asura with the intent to kill him. That would be the beginning of a blood feud that would last generations, since, as Indra failed to kill Asura and Hagoromo, he promised that his descendants would carry his hatred, and would never stop until Hagoromo and Asura's legacy was a thing of the past.

"That's what we called the Uchiha's Curse of Hatred, which had and will lead them to a quest for power, and the extermination of those who are descended from the younger brother, Asura."

The mind of the Konoha ninjas collectively traveled back to the night the Uchihis pulled their coup d'etat on the village. Was this the result of Indra's curse, or it was a mere coincidence? So far, these revelations lend some credence to the former.

Hinata raised her hand. "Uh, excuse me... you said it was the Ying Half of the Six Paths Chakra what causes the Sharingan to awaken?"

"Yes. The Yin half of the chakra is the one tied to the emotions and thoughts. So, when an Uchiha feels intense emotions, it causes the Yin Chakra to strongly react, and it manifests in the Sharingan. When an Uchiha experiences an even more intense emotion, it causes it to evolve even further into the Mangekyo Sharingan. Are you aware of its existence?" Takuya asked. All of them nodded. "With the Senju, it's a similar process. Yang Chakra is the one tied to the body, but unlike the Uchihis, a Senju or an Uzumaki won't be able to use Wood Release unless they're born with an exceptionally powerful chakra, such as the case of Hashirama Senju."

"Wait, what's so special about Wood Release? I thought it was just an elemental combination just my own Ice Release," Haku asked.

"It might be at first glance," it was Nori who replied. "But becomes clearer when you think about it. Tell me, Haku-san, what's the origin of the Six Paths Chakra?"

"The Divine Tree," Haku automatically replied, before the realization dawned upon him. "Wait, don't tell me..."

"Yes. Wood Release isn't just summoning a bunch of trees. You're channeling the raw power of the Shinju itself. That's why it has the ability to bind and control the Tailed Beasts," Nori explained.

"I have a question," Tenten asked. "So... what would happen if an Uchiha and a Senju or Uzumaki had a child together? That child would have both the Yin and Yang halves of the Six Paths Chakra, right?"

Takuya nodded. "Exactly. Albeit the virulent hatred both clans had for each other prevented from such thing to while the kid would be powerful, the parents should also be strong in their respective halves of the Six Paths Chakra for the resulting child to reach its full potential. And in that case, the kid should be able to awaken the ultimate from the Sharingan: the Rinnegan itself."

The revelation led to another silence, as the Konoha ninjas pondered those words. Naruto's thoughts, however, were leading him to a grim conclusion: he suspected that one of the Akatsuki might be an Uzumaki, and now had the confirmation that one of the Akatsuki also possesses the Rinnegan. Now, he was told that a powerful Uzumaki has the potential to develop the Rinnegan if they also have strong Uchiha ascendancy. How did this happen?

Nori's eyes rested on Hinata. "Now that you have understanding of the working of Six Paths Chakra, you'll understand better your role as the Byakugan Princess. Father, tell them about Hamura-sama."

Takuya nodded. "Hamura and his many followers traveled to the Moon. There, they built a small civilization, whose purpose was to watch over the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, preserve the

historic knowledge of Kaguya and the Otsutsuki Clan, and watch for more threats from beyond the stars, like Kaguya herself.

"Like his brother, Hamura had Six Paths Chakra, and this allowed him to manifest a higher form of the Byakugan: the Tenseigan."

"Wait, what? The Byakugan also has an evolution?" Neji asked, sounding visibly agitated, a far cry from his usual stoicism. "How is that our clan isn't aware of such a thing!?"

"Such knowledge had to be kept a secret for the safety of your clan, until the time was right. If you let me finish my story, I'm sure you'll understand," Takuya replied, a little annoyed at the constant interruptions. "Like his brother, Hamura also had two children, though they were girls: his eldest was named Kalika, and the youngest was named Shiva. Like Indra an Asura, Kalika and Shiva inherited the Yin and Yang halves of Hamura's Six Paths Chakra respectively. "

"That means that only Kalika developed a Byakugan, right?" Hinata guessed.

Nori shook her head. "No. The Sharingan was a byproduct of the Six Paths Chakra. The Byakugan, however, is something Kaguya already possessed before eating the Divine Fruit, and both of Hamura's daughters inherited it. The Ying half enhanced Kailika's Byakugan, while the Yang half boosted the power of Shiva's chakra as a whole. Their descendants inherited these powers as well,. Why Hagoromo developed a Rinnegan instead of a Byakugan, is something we have no answer for."

"Exactly," Takuya agreed. "Like Hagoromo, when Hamura's life came to an end, he had to choose an heir to lead the Otsutsuki Clan. His choice was Kalika, and before dying, he transferred his chakra into her, allowing her to develop the Tenseigan, something Kalika herself also did with her own heir once her life came to an end. And thus, the Tenseigan became the symbol of the leader of the Otsutsuki Clan.

"Eventually, the Otsutsuki Clan was reorganized into two groups: the Main Family, composed by the leader and their close family members, which ruled over the clan, and the Branch Family, composed by pretty much everybody else, including Shiva's descendants. However, tensions began to rise, as every generation passed. As they kept watch over the Earth, they saw how Hagoromo's gift of Ninshu was perverted into Ninjutsu, and used as a weapon to wage countless wars. Branch Family members believed that they should do something about it, but the Main Family refused to interfere. But despite their superior numbers, they couldn't change anything since they couldn't match the power of the Tenseigan.

"And thus, the Branch Family started to work on a weapon that would equate the Tenseigan in power. Once said weapon was finished, they declared war on the Main Family, which were then crushed. The then current Otsutsuki Clan head was killed before he could pass on his Six Paths Chakra. The Branch House members, which possessed the Yang Half of the Six Paths Chakra, sought to obtain the Yin-enhanced Byakugan from the Main House, however, they found an obstacle they were unable to overcome: the Caged Bird Seal."

Once again, Neji was taken aback. "Wait a minute. The *Main Family* wore that seal?" he incredulously asked.

"Yes. Its original purpose was to make sure no Main House Byakugan ever fell into the Branch House, so they wouldn't be able to obtain the Tenseigan. That way, when a Main Family Member died, their Byakugan would be destroyed with them. And they made sure they weren't captured alive," Takuya explained. "Now, the ensuing war decimated both families, and the few Main House members managed to escape the Moon and reach Earth, with several Branch House members they took prisoner.

"Their original plan was to force said Branch House members to transfer their chakra into the current heir, so a new Tenseigan could be created, but in the end, they decided against it, since there was

the problem of the Branch House family's superweapon, and thus, decided that a new beginning was in order.

"The Otsutsuki survivors realized that they had to cut all ties to their past if they hoped to escape the Branch House's purge, and have a chance to regroup. The first thing they did was to change their clan name to Hyuga, which as you know is a reference to the Sun, to hide their ties to the Moon. But that wouldn't be enough. The newer generations had to forget about their past entirely so they wouldn't become targets, but doing so would imply to destroy all the knowledge they had accumulated during the centuries. And thus, a solution was devised.

"The first Hyuga Clan head created the Order of the Moon Acolytes, which would safekeep all the Otsutsuki knowledge, as well as the Yang half of the Six Paths Chakra they managed to extract from the captured Branch House members. The Hyuga Clan would continue with the Main House/Branch house division, albeit with a single, but meaningful change: the Caged Bird seal would be carried by the branch house members, and it would be modified so Main House members could inflict great pain upon them with a single hand seal. That way, a new uprising could be averted.

"From that point onwards, the Hyuga became a nomadic clan that traveled the world, until less than a century ago, when they joined Konoha," Takuya said. "Let's say that made our mission to keep track of your clan considerably easier. As for ourselves, our secret order thrived in the shadows, waiting for the right moment until a new Tenseigan could be created again."

"And that moment... is now?" Hinata asked.

"Yes. We knew that the Otsutsuki clan that remained on the Moon slowly declined, and hoped that the clan would die out, and thus the problem would solve itself, and a new Tenseigan wouldn't be necessary," Nori told them. "But even if the Otsutsuki clan is reduced to a single member, said member is still in possession of that superweapon, and is planning to use it to finish what his ancestors

started so long ago. And after the Hyuga are gone, the rest of the world will follow suit."

"And... you want Hinata-hime to be that bearer, right?" Naruto asked. He didn't need them to reply.

"But... why me? Why not Neji-niisan?" Hinata protested. "He's much stronger than I am. The Tenseigan would be better in his power than in mine."

"Neji-sama would be a fine candidate, but unfortunately, the new Caged Bird seal might be a danger for the process," Nori countered, shaking her head. She then turned at Neji with an apologetic expression. "Sorry, Neji-sama, but the stakes are too high to take such risk."

"It's okay. It's not a power I desired to begin with," Neji replied, letting out a weary sigh. While he spoke the truth, he was upset that that seal had robbed him of such chance to begin with. "Besides, it's obvious that Hinata-sama was fated to have this power bequeathed to her."

"If it's as urgent as you say, then I'll do it," Hinata sated, albeit some insecurity could be noticed in her voice. "What should I do?"

"Follow us," Takuya said as he stood up.

He went to the other end of the temple, and moved a candelabra to the side. It produced a clicking noise, instantly opening a secret door on that wall, leading to a dark and narrow passageway. Wordlessly, the high priest walked in, and everybody else followed in. After a few minutes, they finally emerged from the other side of the passageway, into a different chamber.

Like the main instance, there was a hole in the ceiling that allowed light to illuminate the place, even if the sun was no longer in the sky, the moon took its place. The only thing worth noting in the chamber was a rather large pool of water, which reflected the moonlight.

"What is this place?" Hinata asked.

"This is what we call the Moonwell," Nori began. "Before I explain any further, Hinata-sama, Neji-sama, would you kindly check the water with your Byakugan?"

The two Hyuga complied, and when they did so, Hinata gasped. Neji's reaction was far more subdued, but couldn't completely hide his surprise.

"The water is teeming with chakra!" Hinata noted.

Takuya nodded. "Yes. The Yang Half of the Six Paths chakra. Anyone who will enter this pool and does not possess at least either half of Six Paths chakra will have their own chakra drained and die. However, if somebody who does enter this pool, they will absorb the chakra of the water."

"Hinata-sama, you now must enter the pool. When your inherent Yin Half chakra mixes with the Yang Half of the pool, they will merge into Six Paths Chakra, and your Byakugan will become a Tenseigan," Nori instructed the Hyuga to do so.

"Wait, what if you're wrong? What if Hinata doesn't have that kind of chakra and she dies?" Naruto worriedly asked.

"I understand your doubts, Naruto-san, but you must understand the importance of this. If we weren't sure Hinata-sama wouldn't survive the process, we wouldn't have asked her to do it," Nori replied.

"Okay, I'll do it," Hinata stated, sounding now more determined. "If this power is necessary to face our future enemies, and I'm the only one who can bear it, I'll take it then."

"Good," Nori said in approval. "Neji-sama, watch over her with your Byakugan to make sure that the process happens as it should."

Neji nodded, and kept his Bloodline Limit activated.

Taking a deep breath, Hinata entered the pool. Contrary to what she was expecting, she didn't feel anything when her skin touched the water, other a bit of cold. She walked to the center of the pool, where the water covered up to her waist, and waited for something to happen.

"So... what do I do now?" Hinata asked.

But before anybody had the chance to answer, the pool's water surface erupted into a massive wall of purple flames, engulfing Hinata.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" Hinata screamed from behind the fire.

"HINATA!" Naruto yelled, as he dashed towards the pool, before he was stopped by Takuya.

"NO! Don't do it! Not only will you interrupt the process, but you'll die!" Takuya urged, as he struggled to contain the blond.

"Get out of my way! Hinata needs my help!" Naruto said, before finally pushing the man aside.

"Naruto, stop," Neji calmly said.

"Huh?"

"Hinata-sama... she's in no danger," Neji stated, a bit in awe. "In fact... the chakra of the pool is being drained into her body."

"Finally. After so many generations... a new Sage of the Moon will be born," Nori said in awe and expectation.

...

Somewhere Beyond Time and Space

When Hinata opened her eyes, she was no longer in that underground pool illuminated by the moonlight. She found herself in

the middle of what appeared to be an ancient palace.

"Hello, Byakugan Princess. I've been waiting for you," an elderly male voice said.

Hinata turned around, and saw an old man looking at her. Said old man was dressed in a white robe similar to that wore by Takuya. The man had pale white skin and light gray hair. Two small horns grew from his forehead. Eight black spheres the size of grapefruits floated behind his back on a circle.

But the man's trait that drew Hinata's attention the most were his eyes. His eyes were light blue, with dark blue pupils, and glowing white floral patterns that overlapped with each other that slowly spun around the pupil.

A realization of who this man was dawned upon her with the force of a giant sledgehammer.

"You... you are..." Hinata stammered in shock.

"My name is Hamura Otsutsuki. Nice to finally meet you, Hinata Hyuga," Hamura courtly greeted her. "There's much we need to talk about."

Author's Note: Dun dun duuuuuuuuuuun! Hinata met Hamura Otsutsuki and awakened the Tenseigan! What will happen now?

Like I said at the beginning, I've been dying to get to this arc. Mostly because Hinata finally gets the Tenseigan (seriously, I was so pissed when The Last didn't gave her one despite being imbued with Hamura's chakra).

You know, besides that part, I also enjoyed a lot writing all the backstory of the Otsutsuki. While the part with the Senju and the Uchiha was more or less the same, I had a lot of work to do with the Hyuga, since we know pretty much nothing about their

origins. Not helped the fact that Kishimoto's mythology for the series makes almost no sense, so I had to make an herculean effort in order to create a backstory that was both compliant to canon, as well as being coherent. Hope I succeeded. So, what we have here is what TVTropes would call Fan Wank. And Fan Wank of an epic magnitude.

Regarding Kurenai, yeah, she said goodbye for the time being, but don't worry, she will be back to active duty once she delivers the baby. I'm not going to do the same thing as canon and have her retire being so young. And even then, I'll make sure to give her enough screentime during the breather chapters.

Funny thing, I was planning to introduce a replacement for Kurenai, which would be Yakumo Kurama, that girl from one of the last filler arcs pre-shippuden. However, I realized that introducing her in an arc that's mostly about Hinata and the Hyugas really didn't work, so I had to cut her out, and decided that while Kurenai is on maternity leave, the Assault Squad will stay a three man squad.

And this is the second chapter that isn't betaread due my usual beta being unavailable. So I think it's time to ask for a new beta. So if you're interested, send me a PM.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the beginning of this arc. Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Byakugan Princess, Part II

Author's Note: Damn, I wasn't expecting the last chapter to have such a good reception! 27 reviews the very same day I posted it, plus eleven more reviews during the next two weeks! Oh boy, this story is much closer than I thought to the 2000 review mark!

Also, a clarification regarding the last chapter I forgot to mention. You probably noticed that I didn't mention anything regarding reincarnation. That's because in this story, Naruto and Sasuke aren't Indra and Asura's reincarnations. I never liked that "plot twist", so away it goes. The Rinnegan in this story is awakened the way it was explained in the previous chapter.

Anyway, enjoy this chapter:

Chapter 57

The Byakugan Princess, Part II

or

The Princess' many suitors

...

"Hamura Otsutsuki..." Hinata dumbly repeated, as her brain was trying -and failing- to understand that she was talking not so much to a living legend as much as a living myth. If he was living to begin with.

"Yes. That, I am," Hamura replied. "And if you're able to talk to me is because you, my descendant managed to form Six Paths Chakra

inside you. Must say, it feels nice being able to talk to somebody else again after so many centuries of quietude."

"Are you... are you alive?" Hinata fearfully asked.

"Hmmm... you could say that I am... but in the same way, I'm not," Hamura answered. Noticing Hinata's growing confusion, he added: "I know those two concepts are hard to reconcile. While my body stopped working a long time ago, my essence is permanently tied to the kind of chakra that now courses through your body."

"I... see," Hinata said, not fully understanding it, but deciding to let the issue go, since it wouldn't lead anywhere.

"Tell me, Hinata Hyuga, what do you know about the history of our common family?" Hamura asked.

Hinata nodded, and told Hamura an abridged version of what Nori and Takuya had told her and the others a few moments ago, culminating with the visit to the Moonwell.

"Good, that will save us an explanation," Hamura satisfyingly said. "Though you'd understand that, with this new power, you'll have to carry on several duties."

"I do, but I have a question," Hinata replied. "Why me? What did I do to deserve this power?"

Hamura smirked a little. "Why the self doubt? Do you find yourself unworthy of it?"

"I think there may be others more suited to wield this power than I am. While I came a long way, I'm... not strong," Hinata admitted. "Meaning... it is okay for me to just have this power handed to me? Aren't others who deserve it more than I do?"

"Hinata, tell me. If you had a great power, what would you do with it?" Hamura asked.

Hinata felt a bit slighted that Hamura had ignored her woe, but she decided it was for the best to answer his question.

"I... I'd do what I've always done. Use it to help others, to the best of my ability. I would also try to not get lost in that power either. After all, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," Hinata told him.

"Then there you have it. You're a good person, therefore this power will be good in your hands," Hamura casually said.

"You can't be serious," Hinata replied, a bit taken aback. "I'm sure a lot of people think the same way I do. And even then, I might be just saying this but deep down think otherwise. Power makes people change."

"Indeed. My brother and I were painfully aware of that," Hamura interjected. "We could have taken our mother's place, and rule over humanity forever. But her example was impossible to forget. That's why we tried to use our powers as little as possible, and try to live as any normal human would, even if we were far from normal. Our only regrets were not being able to do more with the time we had. Unfortunately, our descendants didn't live during her reign, and soon they forgot."

"Yes. Takuya-san and Nori-san told us how humanity used ninjutsu to wage wars," Hinata added. "And... still does."

Hamura nodded. "Yes, they did a good job preserving history and keeping secrets safe, didn't they? But even somebody as efficient as the Moon Acolytes make mistakes, and there were historic details that escaped them."

"Yes. They weren't aware of the current Rinnegan bearer," Hinata replied.

Hamura nodded. "Indeed. Feeling my brother's chakra among the living after such a long time was... surprising, to say the least. Sadly,

I can't say I'm happy with the event, given the way its current bearer is using my brother's power. But that wasn't what I was referring to."

"Huh?"

"The part in which the last Main House heir arrived to Earth, formed the Order of the Moon Acolytes and changed the Otsutsuki into the Hyuga clan... you see, this man did manage to awaken the Tenseigan, and was planning to use it to continue the fight against the Branch Family," Hamura revealed.

"He did?" Hinata asked in shock. "And... what changed his mind?"

"I did," Hamura told her. "Just like you're talking with me right now, I met this young man the moment he awakened the Tenseigan. I had to tell him that the bloodshed had to stop, that this wasn't the way. I don't like being authoritarian, but I was glad that my identity alone was all that I needed to convince him to drop the war."

"And what would have you do if he didn't obey you?" Hinata asked, a little curious.

"Nothing," Hamura flatly stated.

"Nothing?"

"What did you expect me to do? Like I told you before, I'm dead. My power no longer belongs to me," Hamura explained. "We old people may be able to guide and offer advice, but in the end, the younger generation must follow their own path and take their own decisions. All we can do is to have faith in that they will make the right choices."

"I see," Hinata said.

"I told him that the Otsutsuki Clan had to start anew. That's why he renamed it Hyuga. As for the Tenseigan, I told him that only somebody with a kind soul and an emphatic heart would be worthy of the Tenseigan. The Otsutsuki Clan was too blinded by their own

power, and needed a better leader, somebody who would remind them of my brother's teachings. So I foretold a Byakugan Prince or Princess, that would lead the Otsutsuki Clan to a new golden age.

"And as I hoped, said princess was born fifteen years ago, Hinata. As the Moon Acolytes kept watch over your clan, they realized you were the person I was talking about, the one worthy enough to finally inherit my power after centuries of dormancy," Hamura explained. He stared at Hinata, and his rugged lips curved into a smile. "Was this explanation enough?"

"It was, Hamura-sama. Even if I can't help but feel overwhelmed at both this power and the responsibility it entails, I'll do my best to use it correctly," Hinata solemnly stated.

"That's what I was hoping to hear," Hamura replied. "Then I believe this conversation should reach its end. One last thing, though: some of my most misguided descendants also know about you. They will try to kill you or use you for their own purposes."

"Don't worry, Hamura-sama. I won't let such thing happen," Hinata assured the elderly man.

"One more thing," Hamura said, his expression growing worried. "There is another Tenseigan wielder. One who awakened it before you. I did try to convince him to follow the right path, but I was unsuccessful. I sensed a great darkness clouding his judgement."

"In that case, I'll make sure that person sees the light," Hinata stated.

"Good. Then go, my child. We shall see each other again in the future," Hamura finally said, before everything turned black.

...

When Hinata opened her eyes, she found herself back at the underground temple of the Moon Acolytes. The rest of the Konoha ninjas were looking at her.

"Oh good, she's waking up!" a relieved Tenten said.

Then, all of them gasped.

"Whoa..."

"Just look at that..."

"Is that...?"

"Huh...?" Hinata groaned, as she slowly sit up. Her head was throbbing, and was having a hard time thinking. Her encounter with Hamura Otsutsuki -which she was still trying to determine if it was a dream or not- occupied her mind. "How... how long have I've been out?"

"Quite a few hours. You got us quite worried," Naruto said, chuckling a little. "It's almost sunrise."

"Are you okay, Hinata-san?" Haku asked.

"A bit tired, but fine otherwise," Hinata replied, before noticing the looks of both concern and curiosity that her friends were shooting at her. "Why... why are you looking at me like that?"

Wordlessly, Tenten pulled out a compact mirror from a bag and handed it to Hinata.

"See it for yourself," Tenten cryptically said.

Hinata did so, and soon her reaction echoed the one made by her comrades. Gone was her lavender colored Byakugan, now replaced by the same eyes Hamura Otsutsuki had.

"Is this... the Tenseigan?" Hinata unsurely asked.

"It is," Takuya confirmed. "I have seen it on ancient pictures, but to see a real one myself, with my own very eyes... it feels unreal."

"How do you feel, Hinata-sama? Do you feel the power of the Tenseigan?" Nori excitedly asked.

"My head feels a bit lighter. But other than that, I feel just like always," the Hyuga admitted.

"It's okay. Your new powers may take some time to manifest, and you will take some time as well to master them," Nori reassured.

"That's why it's imperative to return to Konoha as soon as possible and begin your training."

"I already ordered our brothers and sisters to pack all our valuable goods and move to Konoha," Takuya added.

"Wait a minute! Are you planning to move to Konoha? As in, permanently?" Gai asked.

"Yes, that's the intention," Takuya answered. "We remained hidden to keep the secret of the Tenseigan safe. But since a new Tenseigan has awakened, our secrecy is no longer necessary. All that remains is to move all our knowledge to Konoha. Konoha is Hinata-sama's home, and as her followers, we shall go wherever she shall."

"I'm not sure what the Hokage will say about this..." Gai replied.

"Don't worry. Hokage-sama will be more than happy to welcome us to your village, if only for the wealth of knowledge that we bring with us," Takuya said.

"It's a good thing Hokage-sama decided to send an additional team. I'm more than sure our enemies will try to attack us once we leave the safety of our shrine," Nori commented. "Especially with all the treasures we carry with us."

"Wait a minute! You guys expect us to escort all of you all the way to Konoha?" Naruto asked in disbelief. "But there must be more than one hundred people here!"

"Not to mention all the things they want to take with them. Even with sealing scrolls, it will be quite the luggage," Haku added.

"You don't have to worry. We won't leave at the same time, but in small groups. The first one will be the one to carry our most valuable possessions," Takuya explained. "Nori, you go with them. I'll remain here and supervise. Once the shrine has been completely evacuated, I'll leave with the last group."

"Again, if you're expecting more ninjas to come here and escort you, you're going to need more money to hire them," Gai reminded them.

"Don't worry, Gai-san. Is in Konoha's best interest for the treasures of this place to reach the village. They're worth more than any amount of money we could gather," Nori insisted. "Hokage-sama will agree with me."

"If that's the case, then we should move as soon as possible. When will be the first group ready to leave?" Gai asked.

"I'd say an hour. Two hours at the very latest. In one case or another, then it won't be too long," Takuya replied.

"ALRIGHT! Come on guys! Let's make sure all of them reach Konoha in one piece, and in record time!" Gai enthusiastically yelled.

...

Many hours later, the Konoha ninja, accompanied by Nori and a few other Moon Scolytes, were heading back towards Konoha. Unfortunately, due the fact that this time around they were escorting more people, as well as a large cart loaded to the brim with scrolls of all sizes, meant that the journey back would go much, much slower. And that gave potential enemies better chances to attack.

Now out of their sanctuary, the acolytes looked clearly distressed, even more than Nori when they escorted her the first time around. It

was the fear of somebody who knew they had a lot of enemies, and for the first time, they were in a vulnerable position. And the Konoha ninjas could sense that fear, which in turn made them become tense.

The Konoha ninjas positioned themselves in a surrounding formation towards the acolytes. Neji and Haku were leading the group -Neji had forbidden Haku and Tenten to stay close in a situation of potential danger- with Gai and Lee at each side of the cart, and Naruto, Hinata and Tenten in the back. Beside the acolytes, they also had the unsaid mission of protecting Hinata, given that awakening the Tenseigan left her both drained and a bit disoriented. At first she was able to hide this, but as the hours passed, her condition became more apparent.

"Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked.

Hinata turned his gaze at him, and smiled weakly. "Yes?"

"How do you feel?" Naruto asked, a little worried.

"I'm fine, Naruto-kun. Don't worry about me. Nori-san told me I'd take some time for my body to get used to this new power," Hinata reassured him.

"The sun will set soon. You'll be able to rest once we set up a camp for the night," Tenten reassured the Hyuga.

Hinata wasn't just talking about her eyes. Back when she was unconscious, when checking her chakra network to see if she was okay, Neji realized that Hinata's chakra reserves had multiplied tenfold. Her chakra reserves were still a far cry from Naruto's, but even then her chakra pools were those of a strong jonin.

"Wonder if I'll have to go through all those chakra control exercises again," Hinata wondered. "Because having my reserves expanded so suddenly is going to have side effects."

"Hey, maybe you've now enough chakra to use Shadow Clones! Trust me, once you get a taste, you'll wonder how can you live without them," Naruto excitedly assured her. Hinata giggled in return.

"I have a question," Tenten interjected. "Can you still use the Byakugan? Given that your eyes look all different now."

"If the Uchihas can use both the normal Sharingan and the Mangekyo Sharingan at will, I don't see how this could be different," Naruto stated, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I would think the same, but the Tenseigan doesn't seem to be like the Sharingan or the Byakugan. It's permanently on," Tenten said, taking a closer look at Hinata's new eyes.

"That's a good question. Let me check," Hinata went through the same motions she did when she had her Byakugan. Her eyes briefly flashed blue. "Yes! The Byakugan's still there!"

"That's great!" Naruto cheered.

"Plus there's the bonus of those creepy veins not appearing at the sides of your eyes anymore," Tenten added. "And no offense to you, Neji or any of your clansmen, but whenever you guys use your Byakugan and those veins start to bulge... ewww!" the odango haired girl said, as she shivered.

"None taken," Hinata replied. "Though, I feel I can now expand my sight way beyond my previous limits. Let me try..."

And indeed, Hinata's Tenseigan now increased her range so much, it was almost unreal. Looking around, she could see the forests, small mountains, rivers, lakes, towns of the Land of Tea. Then, rather than area, she focused on range, and looked to the north, to see if she could see Konoha, despite being hundreds of kilometers away, though she was unable to reach that far. Even the Tenseigan had its limits.

As she expanded her sight, something caught her eye. Leaves and branches moving. Focusing on the disturbance, Hinata could see that there were people jumping from one tree to another. It was clear that they were ninjas, but their chakra was... off. Almost as if they weren't human, she couldn't tell from such a distance. But what was most worrying was that they were heading in their direction. They were walking into an ambush!

"Everybody, listen!" Hinata shouted, drawing everybody's attention. "There's a group of ninjas that are heading towards us from the north! While I'm not sure, I'd say they're enemies!"

"Really?" Neji asked, activating his Byakugan. "I don't see anything."

"They're too far away yet, but they're heading in this direction. They'll be here in a few minutes," Hinata told them.

"What do we do? If we fight here, the acolytes might get hurt!" Tenten pointed out.

"Not to mention that their valuable scrolls might get damaged. You're right, Tenten, we need to get the fight far from them, but at the same time, make sure they're safe!" Gai stated.

Naruto bit his thumb, and started making hand seals. "Leave it to me, guys! Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto slammed his hand into the ground, producing a large burst of smoke. Once the smoke dispelled, Naruto was standing on top of the same giant green toad he had summoned during the battle of the Crimson Citadel.

"Greeting, Naruto. What can I do for you?" Gamahiro asked.

"Gamahiro, I need you to take that cart, and all the guys dressed in white, and take them to Konoha as fast as you can. Can you do it?" Naruto asked, before realizing that he had to give him info about

their situation. "We're in the Land of Tea, about two hundred kilometers to the south of Konoha."

"You can count on me, Naruto," Gamahiro said, as he grabbed the cart with his giant, webby hands as if it were a mere toy.

"Nori, get your people on top of Gamahiro! You'll be safe with him!" Naruto told her, before making a hand seal. Four clones popped into existence. "I'll also send four clones as additional escort just in case."

The acolytes were naturally unsure about the idea of riding on a giant toad towards Konoha, but at the ninjas' insistence, they climbed on his back.

"What do I do if I'm under attack?" Gamahiro asked.

"Ignore them. Just focus on reaching Konoha with the acolytes and the cart of scrolls in one piece. My dad will know what to do next," Naruto instructed.

Gamahiro nodded. "Very well. Everybody, hold tight, we're leaving!"

And thus, the giant green toad disappeared into the sky with a mighty leap, accompanied by the screams of terror of the acolytes that were on his back, and weren't expecting such a sudden takeoff. After a few seconds, Gamahiro landed with a thud a couple kilometers to the north, before leaping into the sky again. The second time he landed, he was so far nobody but Hinata could see him anymore.

"Summons can be useful for more than just fighting, you know?" Naruto said, clearly proud of his idea.

"Hinata, are those ninja still heading our way?" Gai asked.

Hinata nodded. "Yes. Gamahiro passed them, but they didn't pay him any attention."

"Good! That means that we can go all out without having to worry about harming the acolytes!" an excited Lee stated.

"What should we do? Should we wait for them here, or should we go and meet them?" Haku asked.

"For the small chance that they may not be enemies, let them attack first," Gai replied. "Naruto, Lee, with me. Haku, Tenten, move to the sides of the road each, and try to ambush them after they attack. Neji, Hinata, you'll cover our flanks and our backs!"

"Yes sir!" all ninja chorused in unison, as they moved to their respective positions.

As expected, the ninjas turned hostile, as both Neji and Hinata could see their chakra spiking up. They were getting ready to attack.

"Here they come!" Neji shouted.

A barrage of golden energy projectiles rained upon the group, forcing them to scatter while barely avoiding the incoming explosions. The group dispersed, the attackers revealing themselves. They were wearing dark brown cloaks under black pants and black long shirts. Beside the hoods they were wearing, they also had their faces completely covered in bandages, making it impossible -for the non-Hyugas- to tell what they looked like, or how they were able to see in the first place. Their forearms and forelegs were also bandaged. They were wearing a dark blue headband with a yellow symbol of a crescent moon and a sun.

One of the attackers, whoever, had his eyes exposed. He was also wearing entirely black clothes. He appeared to be the leader of this group.

Soon the mysterious attackers and the Konoha ninjas engaged in close combat. While the former were much greater in number, the latter had more skill and power on their side. And the number parts wasn't going to last long.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Naruto created a score of clones that quickly engaged the incoming enemies. However, the clones soon started to fall before the attackers' merciless skill.

"Damn, these guys are tough! My clones aren't even making a difference!" Naruto complained, as he made another group of clones to replace the ones he lost.

"What's with these people?" Neji asked, as he traded blows with two enemies. "My Byakugan can't see past these guys!"

"Mine can't, either," Hinata replied, as she struck her lightning-enhanced palm on the chest of one of those masked ninjas, to little effect. "And the Gentle Fist doesn't seem to do much damage."

"Then we'll use the strong fist!" Lee hotly exclaimed, as he delivered a flurry of punches and kicks to another of the ambushers. However, half his hits were parried, dodged or blocked, and the other half didn't make much effect on them either, other than pushing back.

"What village do these guys come from?" Tenten asked, noticing their headbands, as she cast a rain of explosive kunai upon a group of enemies. "Do you recognize that symbol?"

"Not at all!" Naruto shouted, as he dodged several of those weird golden energy blasts. "But then again, I don't know that many village symbols myself!"

"Wherever they come, they've been well trained!" Gai said, sending one of the enigmatic ninjas flying against a tree with a well delivered kick. "This is the kind of enemies I love to fight against! Those who give you a proper challenge, and a way to fan your flames of youth!"

"Yosh! You're so right, Gai-sensei! There's no point in taking pride in one's strength if one doesn't test that strength against worthy

opponents!" Lee cheerfully agreed as resumed the fight with an even more vigor.

"That's fine, but should focus on finishing this mission rather than enjoining it," Haku replied a bit annoyed, while making several hand seals. "Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

Haku slammed both hands into the ground, and multiple giant spikes of ice emerged from below, impaling some of the mysterious attackers. However, despite the direct hit, they were still moving, and struggled to get rid of the ice spears.

" That one got his heart pierced by my ice attack, yet he acts as if it is a minor inconvenience... just what's with these guys, are they even human?" Haku thought.

"Watch out! More enemies incoming!" Neji warned.

Like the first wave, the new batch of enemies joined the fight by showering the Konoha ninjas with a rain of golden chakra blasts, fired with acute accuracy as to only hit their enemies and not their allies.

"Where are these guys coming from?" Neji asked, as he was on the verge of being overwhelmed. "Heavenly Spin!"

Neji turned into a spinning dome of chakra, succesfully repelling the attackers, but failing to do any lasting damage.

"Should we start opening the gates?" Tenten asked.

"Let's keep fighting. These guys must have some sort of weak point," Neji suggested, as he continued fighting.

What the Konoha ninjas didn't realize is that a good chunk of the second wave of enemies moved to attack Hinata, and little by little, isolated her from the rest of the group. Both Hinata, and of course Naruto were the first ones to notice this.

"Go help Hinata!" Naruto yelled, as he rushed towards her. "She's their target!"

However, before Naruto could help his girlfriend, the leader of the attackers landed in front of him, brandishing a sword made of the same golden chakra the strange ninjas used to attack.

"That was a bad move," Naruto darkly said, as he extended his hand, creating a Rasengan. He then rushed towards the masked ninja, and slammed the destructive sphere forward. "Rasengan!"

The enemy ninja used his golden chakra sword to parry Naruto's attack, and much to the blond's shock, it managed to resist the impact. The Rasengan exploded, and all that energy was pushed back, which in turn violently pushed Naruto into the same direction.

"Okay..." Naruto breathed out, as he pulled out his own Wind Blade, producing a blade of flame-like white energy the moment he channeled his chakra through it. "Let's do it your way," Naruto said as he engaged the silent ninja in a swordfighting duel.

That meant that Hinata had to continue to struggle alone against the growing horde of enemies. Not helped by the fact that she was still lightheaded, and was having a hard time molding chakra due her sudden expansion of her chakra pool, leaving her mostly with taijutsu.

"I can't hold them like this much longer..." Hinata breathed, taking a step back with each hit she dodged or parried, despite knowing that's what the enemies wanted. "I need to push them back, maybe with a Vacuum Palm Wall or a Heavenly Thunderstorm..."

Suddenly, as if to answer Hinata's distressed call, the Hyuga heiress felt an alien but pleasant energy forming inside her gut, a power unlike anything she had felt in her life. Ignoring reason and going with a gut feeling, Hinata spread her arms, and unleashed the power building inside of her.

The air shimmered for a bit, before Hinata's body cast a powerful shockwave in every direction. The shockwave violently pushed the attackers away, some of them being painfully slammed against the nearby trees, producing a sickening crunch upon impact. However, the damage wasn't as bad as what it seemed, since they got back on their feet to keep fighting, even if some of them hobbled and had difficulty moving.

" *What is this...?*" the confused bluenette thought. "*Is this... the power of the Six Paths...?*"

"What did Hinata do?" Haku asked, after witnessing her powerful repulsion wave.

"No idea, but it's a good thing she learned to do that," Tenten said. "Maybe is the power of those new eyes she has now?"

"If that's the case, let's hope she finds more hidden powers that can help us turn this fight around," Haku replied.

Naruto continued his fight against the lead enemy, trading blows, pushing back and forth, until his enemy made a mistake, delivering a swipe slower than intended. It wasn't a mistake big enough to capitalize unless you were an elite ninja. And fortunately for Naruto, he quickly took advantage of that. Moving aside, he delivered a swift vertical wipe that chopped off the hand holding the golden balde, followed by another quick strike to the neck, which separated his head from the rest of his body.

The ninja fell to the ground, motionless, while Naruto smirked in victory. The blond jinchuriki then noticed something strange. Despite cutting first his hand and then his head, there was no blood pouring from the severed zones. Inspecting the body and the head a little further, Naruto realized what was wrong with them

"The hell? This guy isn't even human!" Naruto exclaimed, much to everybody else's surprise. "It's some sort of... puppet!"

"What?" Gai asked in shock.

"That can't be right! There are no guys pulling strings on them, and they can use chakra!" Tenten protested, as she tried to hold back several of those mysterious beings.

"Well, whatever they are, they're not alive, and they're definitely not human!" Naruto exclaimed, as he joined his girlfriend in fighting the group that was surrounding her. "Try to destroy their heads! I managed to kill one of them by beheading him... it!"

With this new piece of information, the Konoha ninjas proceeded to adjust their tactics in dealing with them.

"I see. If they're not alive, then no wonder the Gentle Fist doesn't work with them. Even if they can somehow use chakra, nothing says that they must have a human chakra network," Neji inwardly realized. "If that's the case, then we're going to need a little more brute force..."

Neji jumped back a few times, putting some distance between his enemies and himself, distance they quickly tried to bridge. But that moment was all the Hyuga needed. He crossed his arms in front of his face.

"Gate of Opening: Open!"

Neji spreaded his arms outwards, releasing a powerful burst of chakra, as a faint green glow surrounded his body.

"So, it's okay for us to use the Gates now?" Tenten asked.

"In light of the new information, yes," Neji told her. His hands started to shimmer as he gathered copious amounts of chakra on them.

"Eight Trigrams: Sixteen Exploding Strikes! Two strikes! Four strikes!" Neji's palm strikes produced powerful chakra explosions that made them impossible to block. Each strike managed to

seriously damage, mutilate, or downright completely disable the alleged puppets. "Eight strikes! Sixteen Strikes!"

"It seems that with just one Gate opened, Neji is doing rather well against these enemies," Lee observed.

"Okay then, Lee, let's go!" Tenten said, as she and Lee proceeded to imitate their teammate. "Gate of Opening: Open!"

Tenten and Lee joined their teammate, and with the additional boost provided by the first Gate alone, they started to trash their enemies and turn the tide in their favor. The masked ninjas noticed this, however, and changed their strategy. Some of them jumped backwards, and formed a circle around the battle. In perfect synchronization, they formed a golden chakra sphere between their hands, but rather than toss it as soon as it appeared, the sphere kept expanding as they spread their hands. Once they reached the diameter of their arms completely spread, they tossed the energy balls forward at the same time.

"Impressive... NOT!" Gai laughed, as he grabbed two of the puppet ninjas by their necks, and tossed them against a giant energy ball each, forcing them to prematurely explode.

Naruto had the same idea, except he simply used several clones to absorb the impact. Neji, Lee and Tenten opted to dodge them, Haku retreated to one of his Demonic Ice Mirrors, while Hinata used her newly found kinetic powers to deflect a couple aside.

This time, the ninja puppets opted for a different tactic. Half of them generated more giant sized golden chakra spheres, while the other half bombarded the group with rapid fire of smaller blasts. Naruto, however, rushed towards the puppet ninjas while quickly deflecting their incoming blasts with his Wind Blade. When he reached hand to hand combat, Naruto hacked the puppet to pieces, before moving to the next.

Their tactics overturned and their numbers decimated, the puppet ninjas opted to flee.

"Yeah, run away, you cowards! Next time, bring more of you, maybe that way you can be a little of a challenge!" Naruto shouted to the retreating foes.

"Naruto-kun, they're puppets. They aren't going to react to your taunts," Haku told the blond.

"I know. But it feels take that out of my chest, you know?" Naruto replied, with a foxy grin.

"Is everybody okay?" Gai asked. "If yes, then we should try and catch up with the giant toad, before more enemies show up."

"Alright!" everybody minus Hinata said in unison.

The Hyuga Heiress hadn't listened to Gai's command, and stared at the sky with an unreadable expression. The others took no time to notice this.

"Hinata-hime? Something's wrong?" Naruto asked.

"Somebody's coming," Hinata said. She raised her hand, pointing at an the night sky, illuminated by a half moon. "Somebody with a really powerful chakra."

"Yes... I'm seeing him too," Neji agreed. He tensed even more. "This chakra... Hinata-sama, his chakra is very similar to yours."

"What does that mean?" Naruto asked, not liking the sound of that.

Soon, even those without a Byakugan could see a figure standing on a golden floating platform with red railings was floating towards them. Once he was close enough, they could finally see who this mysterious individual was: an young man with soft facial features, shaggy white hair, and very pale skin. He was wearing a white, high-collared kimono with a black obi, with a pale green sash tied at the

right shoulder. There were several black magatamas tattooed on his bare collarbone.

However, the man's most eye-catching features were his eyes. They were a pair of Tenseigan, just like Hinata's, except these ones glowed with a brighter gleam.

"Ah, the Byuakugan Princess. After so much time, it's great to finally see you in person. Allow me to introduce myself: my name is Toneri Otsutsuki," Toneri told Hinata, acting as if the rest of the group wasn't there.

"You have a Tenseigan too..." Hinata said in a whisper.

"Then that means that he must also have Six Paths Chakra, just like Hinata-sama," Neji observed. An enemy with such power was something not to be underestimated.

"Indeed. It's the power my family coveted. The power needed to destroy this corrupt world, and replace it with a better one," Toneri stated.

"Wait a minute, then you're the other Hamura-sama told me about! The one tainted by darkness!" Hinata said in realization, as she instinctively took a step back, closer to Naruto.

"Tainted by darkness?" he repeated. "Oh no, my dear Hinata. Is this world the one consumed by darkness. I am the light that shall purify it. And what did you say about Hamura-sama?"

"Hamura-sama talked to me when I awakened the Tenseigan. He warned me about another with the same eyes I possess," Hinata warily replied.

Toneri looked skeptical. "You said Hamura-sama appeared to you? Curious. I did not receive such a vision when I awakened my Tenseigan."

"It's the darkness of your heart that stopped him from reaching you," Hinata sharply replied.

"Hamura-sama is one of the most powerful beings who ever lived. Had such thing be true, he should have been able to reach me, darkness or not," Toneri insisted.

"Enough of that nonsense! What the hell do you want!?" Naruto shouted.

"A world of peace and justice, in which nobody has to suffer senselessly," was Toneri's reply, leaving Naruto a little flabbergasted. "But I presume you were expecting a more short term answer. That would be to take Hinata from this withering world, so she can take her rightful place in the next one."

"WHAT!?" Naruto asked, outraged, as he defensively stood between Hinata and Toneri.

"Hinata is the prophesied Byakugan Princess, a direct descendant of Hamura's eldest daughter, with a kind sould and an emphatic heart, that will lead the Otsutsuki clan to a new golden age," Toneri explained. Hinata felt a chill running down her spine. Those were the very same words Hamura had used. "That's why you must come with me. It's your destiny to join me in creating a new world devoid of wars, greed and misery, and a new lineage that will rule it once we're no longer here."

"Yeah, I don't see that happening anytime soon," Naruto coldly deadpanned. "Nor at all."

"Watch your mouth, jinchuriki. You have no idea who you're talking to," Toneri warned, his tone just as cold. "I wasn't talking to you, but to Hinata. What do you say?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Hinata incredulously replied. "I'm not going to leave my family and friends to join some stranger, much less one who wants to destroy this world!"

Toneri let out a sigh, and looked downwards. "I knew this would happen. You remained in this world too long, and thus you fell victim to its inherent corruption. That's why I arranged you to be brought to me when you were three years old."

"When I was three years old...?" Hinata repeated.

"The kidnapping by those Kumo ninjas! You were behind them!" Neji exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

"Yes, it was me. But that's irrelevant now. Oh well, I believe it's not too late yet. You will see the light, even if I have to open your eyes by force," Toneri darkly said, as he made a hand motion.

His floating platform elevated into the air, as another horde of puppet ninjas appeared out of nowhere, leaping into mid air, as they summoned golden chakra orbs between their cupped hands. Another rain of fire awaited the Konoha ninjas, who took no time to scatter. Naruto, however, made the hand seal of his favored technique.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Another multitude of Naruto clones appeared from thin air. A good chunk of them were instantly destroyed by the initial barrage, but those who survived quickly went to engage the puppet ninjas. All but one of them.

"I bet he's the one controlling these puppets, somehow," Naruto guessed, as the clone grabbed him by an arm and started to spin. "So if I take him out, his puppets will go down with him!"

After building enough momentum, the clone launched Naruto towards the white haired man in the sky. As Naruto flew like a missile towards him, he extended both hands, a Rasengan forming in each one of them. In a few seconds, he would be in range to attack.

"You're dead! Double Ra-!"

Toneri merely raised an open hand against him, and Naruto was hit by an extremely powerful kinetic blast, that not only negated all his momentum, but sent him flying backwards, falling several hundred meters behind them, among a bunch of trees.

"NARUTO-KUN!" Hinata shouted in horror, before she turned her eyes at Toneri, casting him a bone chilling glare. "You will pay for hurting him."

"Somehow, I find that unlikely," Toneri replied, as he jumped off his floating platform, and slowly descended, as if he could somehow control the speed of his fall. "Now, you have to come with me, Hinata."

"Never!" Hinata replied, mimicking Toneri's earlier movement, and blasting him with a telekinetic push.

Like with Naruto, Toneri was hurled backwards, but Toneri was able to resist the hit, and remained still in mid-air.

"You may have the same eyes as I do, but not only mine are more developed, but my skill with them is far superior to yours," Toneri boasted, though his voice remained calm. "If you come with me, I can teach you how to use the power you now possess. Just imagine what we could do if we joined our forces."

"Sorry, but Hinata-sama said NO!" Neji's voice was heard, as Toneri was slammed by a white and brown blur, hurling him crashing against the ground. The Branch House Hyuga landed beside Hinata, and quickly went to check her. "Hinata-sama, are you okay?"

"Y-Yes. Thank you, nii-san," Hinata replied. "That was a good hit, but I doubt it was enough to put him out of commission."

"Yes, I thought as much," Neji said, as he turned around.

Like Hinata said, Toneri got back on his feet, and floated a few meters above the ground.

"You're fast, Hyuga. Even with my Tenseigan, I was unable to see you coming in time for me to react," Neji said, as he shook the dust from his robe. "However, you won't be able to land a hit like that a second time."

Neji smirked in return. "Is that a challenge? Gate of Life, open!"

As the third Gate opened, Neji's green aura glowed even brighter, and a powerful wind started to blow from his body in all directions. The Hyuga prodigy then vanished. However, the moment he did that, Toneri raised another palm, and blasted Neji backwards with another telekinetic shockwave, when the Hyuga was centimeters away from hitting him.

"That was close, I have to admit," Toneri smugly replied. "But my words were true. Now, Hinata, take a good look at the power of the Tenseigan."

Toneri clapped his hands together. The ground below their feet started to rumble, of huge chunks of earth were pulled upwards, floating around the last Otsutsuki in a surreal manner. Once he decided he had enough ammunition, his hands formed a hand seal, and the chunks of earth and rock fell towards the two Hyugas, though mostly towards Neji. Rather than dodge them, the two Hyugas met the incoming rain of giant rocks.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

With a strike of her lightning enhanced palms, Hinata shattered a large rock into a multitude of tiny pebbles.

"Eight Trigrams: Mountain Crusher!"

Neji thrust both palms forwards, releasing a destructive vacuum wave that also shattered a couple rocks headed towards him into small shards, but the force of the attack also pushed those shards back to Toneri. With a dismissive hand wave, Toneri deflected the incoming shards sideways.

"Not bad. Let's see how do you do against this," Toneri stated, making another hand seal. A few rocks floating around him instantly shattered into tiny, sharp pebbles. The pebbles started to spin in a circle around the area Neji and Hinata were in. "Let's see how well you do against an attack that comes from every direction."

Toneri closed his hand into a fist, and the spinning pebbles rained upon the two Hyugas. They nodded to each other.

"Heavenly Spin!"

The Hyuga cousins turned into a spinning blue chakra dome each, easily deflecting the rain of the stone bullets.

"Impressive," Toneri conceded, sounding strangely pleased. "Besides your beauty, you're also really strong, Hinata. You'll make a great wife."

"I know. I won't be *your* wife, though," Hinata said, panting. Then, she suddenly fell on her knees, clutched her head, and started screamed. "AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

"Hinata-sama!" Neji panicked, and grabbed her by her shoulder. She shot Toneri a murderous glare. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," the Otsutsuki nonchalantly replied. "Those migraines are a side effect of the Tenseigan developing. They will stop once it reaches full maturity. Anyway, I think I wasted enough time as it is."

Toneri raised her hand, and Hinata was telekinetically pulled towards him.

"I won't let you!" Neji shouted, as he blitzed towards the white haired man.

But Toneri already predicted this, and had already raised his other hand to blast Neji backwards with a telekinetic pulse.

"You think you can keep me away from my bride?" Toneri asked. His politeness was replaced by condescension. "For somebody with these eyes, you're nothing but ants. Let Hinata be where she clearly belong."

"Manipulated Tools: Rain of Fire!"

Multiple kunai rained upon Toneri, who forced him to release Hinata in order to evade them. But much to his shock, he realized that the kunai had explosive notes attached to them.

"Disappear!" Tenten said, as she triggered all the explosives at once.

Using a kinetic blast, Toneri launched himself into the air, barely avoiding the chain of explosions that, even if they wouldn't have killed him, would have left serious injuries.

Toneri panted, seeing how close he was of getting caught in that ambush. "That was close... huh?"

"KONOHA WHIRLWIND!"

Two green blurs appeared besides Toneri, both delivering a powerful kick to his face. Toneri's reflexes, however, were fast enough to let him see Gai and Lee's double teaming him, and raised his arms to block the attacks. Even then, the kicks packed so much power, he felt they left his arms on the verge of breaking.

"Don't dare to touch me!" Toneri yelled, as he blasted Gai and Lee away with a repulsive shockwave.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

A loud, high pitched whirring noise alerted the Otsutsuki of a chakra shuriken flying towards him. He didn't need the Tenseigan to know that if he let that jutsu hit him, he would be as good as gone. Raising his hands, he projected the most powerful telekinetic wave he could muster, but much to his shock, while he was able to stop the

shuriken's from going forward, he was unable to push it backwards, until it finally burst into a massive wind explosion, which hurled the Otsutsuki backwards, tumbling towards the ground.

"What!? What kind of power is that? With these eyes, there's nothing that could be able to challenge me!" Toneri angrily thought, as he hit the ground.

"You won't be able to stop the next one," a voice Toneri recognized said, as the same infernal high pitched whirl drilled his ears.

As he got back on his feet, Toneri saw that Naruto was back. For a reason he failed to grasp, his chakra had become incredibly more potent. He also noticed that his previously blue eyes were now yellow, and had some orange pigmentation around them. Naruto and a clone were now forming another of those destructive chakra shuriken.

"It seems these people are far stronger than they let on. With my undeveloped Tenseigan, my chances are low," Toneri regretfully thought. "You're really strong, Naruto. No wonder Obito-sama failed to capture you so far."

"Obito-sama...? Are you with Akatsuki?" Naruto asked, as he prepared his Rasenshuriken. Suddenly, a realization dawned upon him. "Wait a minute... !"

That moment of distraction was all what Toneri needed. Quickly raising his hands, he sent another kinetic pulse that knocked the Konoha ninja on their backs. Wasting no second, he turned around, and flew towards his platform, still floating high in the air. Once he reached it, he flew away, disappearing into the night of the sky.

As everybody got on their back, they looked around to see if the enemies have truly fled, and were they now safe. Relatively speaking.

"Just... what was all that about?" a slightly confused Tenten asked.

"Guys... I think I have an idea of what's going on..." Naruto replied.

Author's Note: So yeah, Hinata finally awakened the Tenseigan, but you probably deduced that already from the way the previous chapter ended. If you're disappointed in that Hinata only got some telekinesis out of the whole ordeal, don't fret. Hinata's Tenseigan powers will start out small, but will gradually develop as the story progresses. After all, it's not that Sasuke was able to create Perfect Susanoo right after awakening the Mangekyo Sharingan, right?

The same thing goes for Toneri. You'll probably noticed that he's weaker than he was in The Last. But just like Hinata, he will reach the level of power he had in The Last in due time. Otherwise, well, he would be able to wipe out Konoha all by himself with little effort.

Thanks a lot to my new beta, Grimlock987, for betareading this chapter.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed this chapter, with more action and less plot development. The next chapter will be the end of this arc. Let's say that there's going to be quite the big changes within the Hyuga Clan, hehe. And while you wait, give your thoughts on this chapter in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Byakugan Princess, Part III

Author's Note: And with the last chapter, this story officially crossed the 2000 reviews! Thanks a lot to everybody who ever left a review, so you could help this story achieve such heights.

While not as popular as the one before, the previous chapter got a pretty good reception as well. I love how well received this original arc is turning out to be. Let's hope the third and final part is liked just as much. Enjoy:

Chapter 58

The Byakugan Princess, Part III

or

Setting Things Straight

As everybody got on their back, they looked around to see if the enemies have truly fled, and were they now safe. Relatively speaking.

"Just... what was all that about?" a slightly confused Tenten asked.

"Guys... I think I have an idea of what's going on..." Naruto replied. "I'm not one hundred percent sure... but that guy might be under Obito's mind control."

"Are you sure? If he was working for Akatsuki, he'd be more interesting in you than in Hinata-sama," Neji pointed out.

"You assume that the Tailed Beasts are Akatsuki's only target, my young student," Gai intervened. "Who says that they aren't after other sources of power, such as Hinata's new eyes?"

"Just great," Naruto said, letting out an annoyed snort. "As if I wasn't worried about Akatsuki going after me alone, they're not after my girlfriend. Just great."

There was a moment of silence, as the group of seven processes both Naruto's words, and what they entailed.

"So... what do we do now? Should we go back to the village, or should we rest and continue at morning?" Haku asked.

"For the time being let's rest. I'm sure all of us were already tired before this battle even began. By now, Naruto's toad should be close to Konoha, if he hasn't arrived there already. Let's set a campsite, and we'll continue our journey back tomorrow," Gai decided. "But before we do, let's see if we can salvage any of those ninja puppets that attacked us earlier. Knowing them will make us better prepared next time we have to face them!"

Everybody nodded. While Neji and Tenten went to retrieve and store the remaining puppets, the rest of the group went to find a good place to pass the night.

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Next Day

Said decision turned out to be the most sound. After a good night of sleep, the seven Konoha ninjas were now properly rested and full of energy -even Hinata-, and were ready to resume their way back to their home. And just by noon, the Konoha ninjas triumphantly returned to their village. A quick talk with the entrance guards told them that the Moon Acolytes and all the scrolls they were carrying safely arrived last night, on the back of a giant toad.

While the first thing they wanted to do was to go home and rest, or tell their loved ones about the mission, duty came first, and they had to go to the Hokage's Tower, in order to give Jiraiya the report on

how the mission went. One of the first things Jiraiya noticed was Hinata's new eyes.

"So... that's the Tenseigan?" the Hokage asked. Hinata nodded. "And what does it do?"

"So far, it allows me to control attractive and repulsive forces," Hinata began. She moved her hand, and pulled a pen that was in the table to it. She then made it float above her palm. "Though I believe that there may be more to the Tenseigan than this."

"I think so, if the explanation Nori gave me is of any cue," Jiraiya replied. "She pretty much stated it was a doujutsu on par with the Rinnegan."

"Wait... Nori told you about the Tenseigan?" Naruto asked.

"Of course. That's why I allowed this mission to begin with. If there was a chance that one of our ninjas could awaken a power that can give us an edge against the Akatsuki, I wasn't going to let that chance go," Jiraiya explained Naruto, his tone uncharacteristically serious. "Of course, I took some precautions. That's why I sent team Gai with you as an additional escort. Especially since you guys are one teammate down."

"Which was a good thing, in hindsight," Tenten added.

"During our journey back, we were attacked by a mostly unyouthful individual claiming to be an Otsutsuki who also possessed a Tenseigan," Lee spoke. "But fortunately, Tenseigan or not, our flames of youth burned too bright for him to beat us!"

"The man commanded an army of puppets. However, unlike those used by Suna ninjas, they were autonomous and could use chakra," Tenten said, as she placed a couple scrolls on the Hokage's desk. "Here are the ones we managed to retrieve."

"That sounds like our Chakra Golems," Jiraiya observed, as he took the storage scrolls and placed them inside a drawer on his desk.

"In a way, yes, but..." Naruto began, struggling to find the proper words. "But they could fool you into mistaking them for actual humans, you know? I only realize that they weren't made of flesh and blood when I wounded one, but blood didn't come out."

"I'd say the craftsmanship and technology behind such puppets is superior to those of the Uzumaki Golems," Hinata interjected. "Though thankfully, they are unable to absorb chakra, and are nowhere near as resistant or stout."

"Though those are indeed troubling news if the enemy counts with such assets," Jiraiya replied. "I'll send a letter to Suna so they can send some of their puppeteer ninjas here and help us studying these puppets."

"By the way, may I ask where are Nori and the other Moon Acolytes now?" Neji asked.

"They requested to stay at the Hyuga State as long as they remain in Konoha. I told them to talk with the leader of the clan to see if they were allowed to do that. If you want to see them, they will be there," Jiraiya replied.

"By the way, Hokage-sama, those aren't the only acolytes that requested to be escorted here. Almost a hundred more remain in their old hideout, as well as a good chunk of scrolls, books and other knowledge they claim to be of importance for both the Hyuga Clan and the village as a whole," Gai informed him.

Jiraiya nodded. "Understood. I'll send several teams to escort the rest of the Moon Acolytes. After this, you guys deserve some little rest."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," Tenten gratefully replied.

"If there's nothing left to discuss, then you're dismissed," the Hokage finally said.

The seven ninjas nodded, and left the office.

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As they exited the Hokage's Tower, the now dismissed ninjas went on their separate ways to enjoy their leisure time until they were summoned again for another mission. Hinata then walked towards Naruto, before the blond could leave.

"Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Yes, Hinata-hime?" Naruto replied to his girlfriend with his best smile.

Hinata looked away, and started to twiddle with her fingers. Naruto noted it was something she hadn't done in ages. In fact, he couldn't remember when was the last time she did that. Definitely sometime before they became boyfriend and girlfriend.

"I... there's something I want to ask you..." Hinata said, almost in a whisper.

Naruto guessed it had to be something big for such a regression in her behaviour. He gave her a reassuring smile. "You know you can ask me anything."

"I was going home... and, well... my clan is going to see my new eyes. And I'll have to break them the news about what Nori-san told us... if she didn't do it already," Hinata exhaled. "Would you like to come with me? I don't think I can do this alone."

"Of course," Naruto said, taking her hand. "You don't even need to ask."

Hinata smiled back. "Thank you."

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Hyuga Compound

As the couple approached the compound's gate, they were greeted by a Branch House member that was on guard duty that day. He smiled upon seeing the two teens closing by.

"Hinata-sama, Naruto-san, welcome back to the-whoa!" Not even the Hyuga's legendary stoicism was able to mask the clansmen's reaction to their heiress' new eyes. "Hinata-sama... !"

"Yes, she has new eyes, she will explain it right now. Can you go and tell her mother that we're here?" Naruto asked, mildly annoyed, as he rolled his eyes.

"R-Right away, Naruto-san," the guard said, before heading inside the compound, with Naruto and Hinata following him at a slower pace.

To try not to draw attention to her, Hinata kept her eyes looking down, and kept them half closed, and relied on Naruto to guide her. As they walked, the blond noticed a couple of Moon Acolytes walking around the compound. It seems that Hikari had allowed them to stay with the Hyuga for the time being. He then saw the guard that had greeted them at the entrance walking towards him once again.

"Hikari-sama is waiting for you in main living room," the guard informed them. "Nori-san is currently with her. Do you want to see your mother in private?"

"Thank you. And no, it's okay. Nori-san already knows what I'm going to show her," Hinata replied, as she and Naruto walked in.

"Very well then. Hinata-sama," the guard made a polite bow before returning to his assigned post.

After a minute or so, they arrived at the main living room. And just as the guard said, both Hikari and Nori were there, talking about something, before the duo walked in. Hikari immediately smiled, and walked to greet her daughter and probably future son in law.

"Hinata! Naruto! So good to see you're back! Nori-san was telling me about-"

Hinata then raised her eyes to meet her mother's, and the older woman was stopped in her tracks, and gasped loudly, covering her mouth with her hands.

"Hi-Hinata..." Hikari mumbled, losing her composure for the first time in years. She took a better look at her daughter's face. "Your eyes..."

"I know, mother. Let's sit, there is much we need to talk," Hinata said, motioning to the nearby couches.

"Yes, Nori-san has been telling me-"

"Trust me, Hikari-sama, I barely told you anything," Nori interjected. "Listen to Hinata-sama. I'm sure that whatever she has to say, it will be mostly revealing."

"But before we begin, can you tell me where is Hanabi-chan?" Hinata asked.

"I think she should be training with her team at their usual training ground," Hikari replied.

Hinata turned at her boyfriend. "Naruto-kun, do you mind fetching Hanabi-chan and taking her here? Tell her it's an important issue."

"Of course! I'll be back with her before you realize!" Naruto helpfully said as he rushed out of the living room.

"I should be able to give you a rundown of the events of the past day by the time Naruto returns with Hanabi-chan," Hinata stated.

And thus, Hinata began her tale, with Nori adding something at times, or correcting Hinata when she stated something wrong: how the mission began, their arrival to the Sanctuary, what they learned about the Sage of the Six Paths, his brother, the Senju, Uchiha, Uzumaki and Hyuga, Hinata meeting Hamura himself and awakening the Tenseigan, and finally, the confrontation with Toneri, another Tenseigan wielder, with all what it entailed.

When Hinata was finished, Hikari was speechless. There were so many things to process... so many things she thought were nothing but myths and old wife tales.

"So, the Sage of the Six Paths is real," Hikari said, chuckling.
"Somehow, that's the least ludicrous part of this story."

"And we're his younger brother's descendants." Hinata emphasized.

"And the Tenseigan... to think that those people I heard about were actually right..." Hikari added, mostly to herself.

"You knew about the Tenseigan, mother?" Hinata asked, her curiosity piquing a bit.

"I did, but I didn't give it much importance. I thought it was a myth, like the Sage of the Six Paths," Hikari replied. "There were some members of our clan who tried to awaken it, some went so far they even lost their lives. One of your great uncles in particular, he dedicated most of his life to try to achieve it. Guess that, wherever he is now, he's possibly laughing while saying something like 'who is the crazy old man now?'"

"And most importantly... the caged bird seal, and the Main House/Branch House split," Hinata added. "Now we know where do they come from."

"Indeed. I never liked the way the clan was divided, and hearing its origins didn't make me like it much more..." Hikari admitted.

"Then why don't we change it?" Hinata asked her mother. "You're the Clan Head!"

"Being the Clan Head doesn't mean that I can do whatever I want," Hikari regretfully told Hinata. "However, I think we might have a chance now that-"

"I'm back!" Naruto happily chimed in. "And I brought Hanabi with me!"

"Naruto said that nee-chan had something important to tell me," Hanabi said, as her eyes darted towards her older sister. Naturally, she noticed Hinata's Tenseigan, and her reaction mirrored those of her clansmen. "WHOA! What the hell happened to your eyes!?"

Well, maybe a bit more brusque than her clansmen.

"Don't worry Hanabi-chan, you'll find out soon," Hinata gently said as she walked towards her. "Now, give me your hands, please."

"Okay...?" Hanabi unsurely replied, and complied. Hinata grabbed her hands, and both sisters were suddenly engulfed by an intense lavender aura, as Hanabi felt a huge power invading her body. "WHOOAAAAAAHH!"

"Don't worry, Hanabi-chan. This will hurt a bit at first, but it's for the better," Hinata said, in an almost regretting tone.

"Hinata-hime? What are you doing?" Naruto asked, midly concerned.

"Hikari-sama, what is she doing?" a distressed Nori asked, though she was already fearing the answer.

"Byakugan!" Hikari's Bloodline Limit came to life. "She's... she's transferring her Six Paths Chakra into Hanabi!"

"NO!" Nori shouted, as she rushed towards Hinata and tried to forcefully separate her from Hanabi. "Hinata-sama, you have to stop!"

Seeing the urgency in the priestess tone, Hinata stopped the flow of chakra. Hanabi moaned a little, before fainting into her older sister's arms.

"Why did you stop me? What's wrong?" Hinata asked.

"Hinata-sama, you can't do that! The Six Path Chakra in your body is what powers the Tenseigan! The less you have, the weaker it is!" Nori explained, still shaken.

"You didn't tell me this before," Hinata noted.

"Because I never thought that you'd do something like that! WHY did you do something like that?" Nori loudly asked.

Hinata's face hardened, and fixed a determined glare on the priestess. "Why, you ask? After hearing the true history of how our clan came to be, 'why not' would be a better question. The Otsutsuki clan kept the power of the Tenseigan for themselves, and look what happened. And our clan then continued those foolish practices. No, I won't hog this power all to myself. Besides, you said that only an Hyuga with a kind heart and an emphatic soul is worthy of the Tenseigan, and I like to think that Hanabi-chan fits those qualities. Besides, no one ever said that there can only be one Tenseigan wielder."

"Yes but... sharing that power dilutes it. You'll need the Tenseigan at its full power to face the enemies that are to come," Nori insisted.

"Can't my Six Path Chakra regenerate, like normal chakra does?" Hinata asked.

"Yes, but it will take some time," Nori replied.

"How long?"

"I couldn't tell. What you just did had no precedents. Weeks, months, years... who knows," Nori replied, letting out a sigh.

"I will find a way to accelerate the Six Paths Chakra regeneration speed, then," Hinata firmly stated. "But like I said before, there's no way I'm going to let our clan to continue with the same traditions that let it to its doom once."

"That's... very mature of you, Hinata," Hikari praised. "You know, all these revelations made me think. Given what Nori-san said about the wielder of the Tenseigan being the head of the Otsutsuki Clan... I think it may be the time for me to step down and let you take your place as the Clan Head."

"W-What!?" Hinata blubbered.

"That's awesome!" Naruto piped in.

"I understand it may feel overwhelming right now. You're still young, and had this strange power thrust upon you. But deep down, I believe it's the right choice to do," Hikari explained. She then grabbed Hinata's hand, and smiled. "And you won't be alone. You will have me to help you and guide you if you feel lost or don't know what to do."

"Thank you, mother. I promise I'll do my best," Hinata assured Hikari.

"Well, I think we should also start your training with the Tenseigan as soon as possible. My group alone brought plenty of books and scrolls that you will have to study in order to master the new power you now possess, Hinata-sama," Nori interjected. She then took a look at the unconscious Hanabi, resting on the couch, unconscious. "And Hanabi-sama as well, it seems."

"We better wait until she wakes up. That way we can start the two of them at once," Hinata suggested.

Nori nodded. "I see no issue with that."

"Meanwhile, I'll start making preparations for Hinata's announcement as the new clan head," Hikari replied. "I'll make sure the whole clan

is gathered here for the afternoon."

"I'll be here as well to see such a moment," Naruto promised. "In the meantime, I should go see the Uchihas. They should know all the things pertaining their clan's history."

"Alright then, see you later, Naruto-kun," Hikari saw Naruto off.

...

Shisui and Shizune's apartment, a few hours later

Just like Naruto told Hinata, after leaving the Hyuga Compound, he headed directly towards Shizune and Shisui's apartment, and had them gather the rest of the clan -which were just Sasuke and Itachi-, before Naruto could tell them about the mission. All of them gathered in the living room. Shiro, however, was playing with some toys, isolated from the others by a baby fence -not that the baby minded being alone-, while a sleeping Shizuka rested on her mother's arms.

Just like Hinata before him, Naruto gave the Uchihas a quick rundown on how their mission went, and all they learned about the Sage of the Six Paths and his family, but focused mostly on the part with Indra and Asura, the origins of the Sharingan, and Indra's Curse of Hatred. The Uchihas listened intently, and didn't open their mouth until Naruto was finished, not even to ask questions.

"... so that's pretty much everything," Naruto finished. "Well, technically not everything. There's a bunch of stuff about the Hyugas, but I thought that you guys wouldn't find that that interesting."

There was a moment of silence, before anybody broke it to speak. Said person was Sasuke.

"The Uchiha is one of the most powerful clan to ever lived. But to think that we are descendants of the Sage of the Six Paths

himself..." Sasuke said, his awe being hidden by his usual low-key tone.

"The fact that the Sage is an actual thing as opposed to a myth is just as amazing," Shisui followed.

"Guess that those who said that the Uchiha is a clan cursed by hatred had no idea how right they were," Itachi sourly said. "The part about Indra's curse was... troubling, to say the least."

"Do you think that curse is real?" Shizune asked, as she looked apprehensively at both her sleeping daughter and playing son, worried for their future.

"I'm not somebody who believes in curses, but that would explain a lot of things," Itachi regretfully admitted. "But we allegedly now have tangible proof of the Sage of the Six Path's existence, so the curse might as well be real."

"Are you thinking that it might be the responsible of pushing our clansmen into that suicidal coup?" Sasuke asked.

"Again, it's a possibility, one more probable than I'd like to admit," Itachi replied. "I can't help but wonder what kind of extent does this curse has over our very actions..."

"Come on guys, don't get so gloom! Even if there's a curse out there, you guys doesn't seem to be ruled by it or anything!" Naruto vehemently countered. He looked at Itachi and Shisui. "When the clan rebelled, you guys worked to protect Konoha," he then turned at Sasuke. "And Sasuke, if it wasn't for you, I'd be dead right now, and Akatsuki would have the Nine Tails in their power. That has to count for something, right?"

Naruto's unbridled optimism made Itachi smile a little. "Thanks for having so much faith in us, Naruto, but it's not as simple as that. My father served loyally to Konoha for decades as Chief of the Military Police, yet in the end he decided to lead a coup."

"But I'm sure it wouldn't have done it if Obito didn't manipulate him!" Naruto protested. "He's the real culprit behind that."

"Naruto-kun, even if that might be true, the Uchihas weren't forced or coerced. They attempted the coup on their own volition," Shizune softly said.

"Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it, they have nobody but themselves to blame for it," Shisui agreed with his wife. "And it's on us to pick up the pieces and rebuild the clan into something greater, that won't make the same mistakes of the past."

"You know, now that you mention it, the Uzumaki Clan's downfall was pretty similar," Naruto said, earning the attention of those present. "Uzushio wanted to be a Great Village at any cost and... well, it brought the wrath of two other Great Villages upon it."

"Maybe it's not something exclusive to the Uchiha and inherent to all of the Sage's descendants," Shisui said with a chuckle, maybe joking, maybe not. "You mentioned that the Uzumaki and the Senju were descended from the Sage's youngest son, right?"

"I don't remember hearing anything similar regarding the Senju Clan, so that might not be it," Itachi interjected.

"Naruto, you said that the Sharingan has a form even higher than the Mangekyo Sharingan, right?" Sasuke asked. Itachi shoot him an apprehensive look.

"Yeah, the Rinnegan. It awakens when the Ying Half of the Six Paths Chakra all Uchiha have is combined the with the Yang Half of the Senju or the Uzumaki," Naruto explained, before shooting Sasuke an intriguing look. "Why? Do you want to get one?"

"Sasuke..." Itachi tiredly said.

"What? It would be an useful tool against the Akatsuki. And you said one of the Akatsuki have it too, right?" Sasuke asked.

"So there may be more Uchihases in the Akatsuki besides Obito," Shisui guessed, sighing a little.

"Actually, I think they might be an Uzumaki," Naruto interjected. All of them looked at the blond in surprise.

"Come again?" Shizune asked.

"During our mission in Suna, we found out that Akatsuki also have access to Uzumaki sealing jutsu," Naruto began. "However, it was a kind of seal that required a lot of chakra to make it work. That's why it made me realize that said Uzumaki seals might not be stolen. Now, it's possible that this person, besides Uzumaki, might also have Uchiha ancestry. That's how he or she was able to awaken the Rinnegan. Do you guys know about any Uchiha who disappeared under mysterious circumstances, defected the village, or something along those lines?"

Shisui sighed. "None come to mind, but it could be just about any Uchiha. Until a couple years ago, we all thought Obito died during the Third War, yet it turned out it wasn't the case. Maybe an Uchiha faked his death in order to defect Konoha, met an Uzumaki, and had a child together that would awaken the Rinnegan."

Naruto slumped in defeat. "So nothing then."

"Itachi, you've been gathering information about the Akatsuki. Do you have any idea regarding this mystery?" Shizune asked.

"Just one, but it's not very reliable," Itachi replied. "I heard rumors that Akatsuki had infiltrated Amegakure. This is coupled with the fact that Hanzo the Salamander, Amegakure's leader, hasn't been seen in years, despite official word being that he's still the leader."

"Wait a minute, you think somebody ousted Hanzo the Salamander? As in, the same Hanzo who defeated the Sannin in their prime?" Shisui asked, incredulous.

"Somebody with a Rinnegan could have done it," Itachi countered. "But like I said, these are just rumors with no actual solid evidence to back them up. Gathering said evidence would require an infiltration in Amegakure."

Naruto nodded wordlessly. Silence briefly reigned over the apartment. That is, until a realization dawned upon Shisui.

"Hey, all of these stuff Naruto told us about... doesn't it sound similar to the Stone Tablet?" the one eyed Uchiha asked.

"Now that you mention, yes. I knew this sounded similar to me for some reason," Sasuke agreed.

Naruto, however, was completely lost. "Uh? Stone Tablet? What stone tablet?"

"It will be better to directly show you," Itachi decided. "Let's move this conversation somewhere else, shall we?"

The others nodded. Naruto raised an eyebrow.

...

Uchiha Training Ground, a few minutes later

"You still keep a private training ground?" Naruto asked, as he walked alongside the Uchihis through the field of grass, heading towards a small forest. "I thought you gave all the old Uchiha properties to the village as a compensation for the insurrection."

"We did, but Hokage-sama allowed us to keep this training ground," Itachi replied. "Given how far from the village they usually are, nobody would be interested in building anything here, so there wouldn't be any money to be made."

"We dug an underground chamber below this field to store all our clan secrets and knowledge, once we no longer had the compound," Shisui explained. "Though what we're looking for isn't underground."

"In fact, we're already here," Shizune announced.

The group were now standing in a small clearing surrounded by the middle of the clearing, surrounded by thick rope held by four stakes forming a square, there was a large stone tablet with several characters carved upon its surface.

"So, this is the stone tablet?" Naruto asked to no one in particular. Sasuke grunted something the blond took as a "yes". He tried to read the tablet's inscription, but was unable to do so. "Do you guys understand what it says? It's like a bunch of gibberish to me."

"Naturally. The cyphers of the Stone Tablet can only be translated by a Sharingan," Shisui replied.

"The Mangekyo Sharingan allows to translate it even further. And even then, there are still parts that not even the Mangekyo can fully read," Itachi continued.

"Which led me to believe that we need the Rinnegan to translate it completely," Sasuke finished.

"I see. And what does the tablet says?" Naruto asked.

"Mostly secrets regarding the Uchiha Clan, and the Sharingan," Itachi began. "How the Sharingan works, how the Mangekyo Sharingan can be achieved, how it can be used to put Tailed Beasts under one's control, as well as other powers."

"However, there's this line here, it says 'two opposing forces work together to form all things in the universe'," Shisui said.

"Sounds rather vague," Naruto pointed out.

"It is. This line has been the subject of much discussion among the Uchiha clan. Many thought that the two opposing forces were them and the Senju, and believed that if they stopped fighting the Senju and formed an alliance with them, happiness could be found," Shisui

explained. "Madara Uchiha, however, believed it meant something else. Many of his clansmen thought that he was just blinded by his hatred of the Senju."

"However, the information you brought to us has shed a new light over the debate," Itachi interjected. "It's possible that this line alludes to the possibility of awakening the Rinnegan, by merging the Yin and Yang halves of the Six Paths Chakra Uchiha and Senju have, respectively."

"Thank goodness I'm not a Senju by birth. Having to raise two children that can awaken the power of a god..." Shizune shivered at the thought. "No thanks!"

"Think how well they would do in the Chunin Exams, though," Shisui joked, laughing a little.

"Then again, I believe in the first interpretation. When the Senju and the Uchiha buried the hatchet and formed Konoha, it was the best for everybody, right?" Shizune suggested, as her face became a little more solemn. "And... sorry for reopening old wounds, but when the Uchiha rebelled and tried to subdue their former friends and allies..." Shizune left the sentence unfinished, but the message was more than clear.

"Don't worry. If there's a silver lining to this, is that future generations of Uchiha will learn from their ancestor's mistakes, and won't have to go through the same suffering," Itachi replied.

"By the way, guys, where did you find this stone tablet? Who wrote it in the first place?" Naruto asked.

"Nobody knows. It has been in our clan since pretty much forever," Shisui replied. "Some said that it was the Sage of the Six Paths himself who wrote it to guide the Uchiha. It was believed to be just nonsense, but given what we now know... it may as well be true."

"Wonder if the Sage left another tablet for the Senju or the Uzumaki," Naruto mused. "Anyway, now that you know the history of your clan... what do you plan to do?"

"Probably the same thing we've been doing so far. Living our lives, becoming the best ninjas we can be," Itachi replied, shrugging a little. "And continue undoing the damage our fallen brethren did to the village."

"Though now that we know about the Curse of Hatred, we'll do our best to overcome it," Shisui added.

"Yeah. Plus, I refuse to let some old guy who died centuries ago to dictate my life, Uchiha ancestor or not," Sasuke firmly stated.

Naruto smiled a little. "Glad to hear that," Naruto then turned around, and realized that the sun was starting to set. "Whoa, I didn't realize it was so late! I have to go to the Hyuga Compound!"

"Late for a date with Hinata, Naruto-kun?" Shizune asked, giggling a little.

"Even better! Hinata is going to be named Head of the Hyuga Clan!" Naruto enthusiastically announced as he ran away.

"... say what?"

...

Hyuga State, an hour later

Hanabi stirred in the couch, blinking slowly, groaning as she slowly woke up.

"You're finally awake, Hanabi-chan," Hinata said, smiling. She was sitting on the couch besides her, with Hanabi's legs resting on her lap.

"I had the weirdest dream ever," Hanabi groaned as she sit up, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand.

"What kind of dream?" Hinata asked, though she could imagine the answer.

"It had some weird old man with horns, and glowing eyes, kinda like yours," Hanabi explained, trying to recall the rather vivid dream. "He said something about how now I had a great power and that I had to be responsible with it. Sounds like a rather cliché line from a comic book."

"There's more truth to those words than what you think, Hanabi-chan," Hinata replied, as she handed her sister a compact mirror.

Feeling a bit agitated by such action, Hanabi opened the mirror and looked at her reflection. She yelped, and instinctively dropped the mirror. "My eyes! What happened to my eyes!? They're like-" she stopped, before noticing Hinata looking at her. "... like yours."

"Yes. Your Byakugan is a Tenseigan now. An ascended form that will grant you an array of new and powerful abilities," Hinata explained.

"Wow..." Hanabi said in awe. "And how did I manage to do that? Hey, wait a second! What you did before I fell asleep... !"

Hinata nodded. "Yes. I transferred some of my Six Paths Chakra so you could awaken it. While not much, your body will now generate more Six Paths Chakra so the amount you possess will match mine."

Hanabi tilted her head. "Six Paths Chakra?"

"It's a bit complicated. You see-"

That moment, the door of the living room slid open, and Hikari walked in. "Oh, Hanabi, you're awake already. And look at that, with a Tenseigan as well," Hikari smiled. "And just in time. The whole clan is gathered outside. Time to make the announcement."

"Announcement? What announcement?" Hanabi asked.

Hikari couldn't help but smile knowingly. "You'll see soon."

...

When Naruto arrived at the Hyuga State, there was a huge crowd of Hyugas formed in the front patio. However, despite his initial fear, he realized that the announcement hasn't been made yet, much to his relief. Even if deep down he knew Hinata would forgive him, he wouldn't, and he didn't want to miss his girlfriend's big day.

Naruto wasn't alone. He made sure to bring both Haku and Kurenai with him, so the whole Assasult Squad could be present for the announcement.

"You know, Naruto," Kurenai began. "When you told me Hinata was going to be made Clan Head, I was rather skeptical, but seeing this crowd, well, it supports your claims."

"You didn't see Hinata-san after we returned from our latest mission, did you, Kurenai-sensei?" Haku asked. The Genjutsu Mistress shook her head. "Let's say that Hinata came from that mission more changed than anybody else."

"We'll explain you after we're done with this, because you just can't imagine what Hinata is now," Naruto cryptically said, visibly enjoying his sensei's confusion.

At that moment, the murmurs of the gathered Hyugas -and few guests- came to a halt when the state's main doors slid open, revealing the current Clan Head Hikari, flanked by her two daughters. The murmurs began once again when everybody noticed the blue and white glowing eyes the Hyuga sisters were sporting now.

Hikari cleared her throat before she started speaking. "My esteemed clansmen, both Main and Branch houses, thanks for heeding my call

and gathering here. There's an important announcement that I need to make.

"But before I do, I have to explain a certain series of recent developments, in order to give all of you the context of the situation. As you probably know by their presence, our clan is now housing a group of religious scholars known as the Order of the Moon Acolytes. Said Acolytes possess numerous hystorical records and tresures regarding our clan and its past. Among those, is the ability to elevate the Byakugan to a higher level, called the Tenseigan."

The murmurs became suddenly louder when Hikari made such announcement. Even if some Hyugas made questions regarding it, the Hyuga matriarch chose to ignore them.

"Before you ask, yes. My daughters have awakened the Tenseigan. So far, due their lineage, they're the only ones capable of doing it," Hikari continued. Her explanation wasn't entirely true, but felt it should be for the better to keep the whole truth of the Tenseigan under wraps for them time being. "Hinata and Hanabi now possess a power not just beyond any Hyuga, but beyond most ninjas as well. All they need now is proper training in order to master that power."

"We've recently discovered that our clan are descendants of another clan named Otsutsuki. Like us, they also had a Byakugan, and their family was structured into a Main and Branch houses. And their leader was always somebody who possessed a Tenseigan."

"And, to honor such ancient tradition, and due the fact that both my daughters have surpassed me in terms of power, I have made a decision. I hereby step down from my position as the Hyuga Clan Head. Now everybody, give a warm welcome to our new Clan Head, my eldest daughter, Hinata Hyuga!"

Naturally, the news weren't met with cheers and celebrations. Hinata wasn't popular among Main House members due her opposition to most of the clan's traditions and hierarchy. And even if she was

popular among Branch House members, they still considered her too young to be a proper leader.

Hikari moved aside, and let Hinata take the spot she was occupying.

"Thank you, mother," Hinata then turned at the large group in front of her, made mostly of her clansmen. "Like my mother told you, we recently discovered the true history of our clan. They had similar customs and traditions as ours, in order to make sure a few members had absolute power over the rest. Said customs led them to their downfall, and we will follow the same path, if we don't change.

"After many centuries, our clan finally recovered the Tenseigan, a power that was lost during the Otsutsuki Clan's downfall in the past. And as its wielder, it's my responsibility to use this great power for the whole clan's interest and well being.

"And thus, my first decree as the new Clan Head is to abolish the separation between Main and Branch houses. Application of the Caged Bird Seal shall be banned for future members, and while I'm looking for a way to remove the existing seals, any Main House member that is caught using the Cage Bird Seal to threaten, coerce or cause pain to a Branch House member will suffer harsh consequences."

Naturally, the effect was immediate. While the many Branch House members started to cheer and sing the praises of their new clan head, most Main House members started to protest loudly.

"You can't do that!"

"You'll tear the clan apart!"

"This will end in a disaster!"

Suddenly, Hinata's eyes flashed white for a second, as she send a pulse of chakra. The air became much heavier, and everybody felt

as if Hinata's eyes were piercing their very souls. Everybody was silenced upon realizing the sheer power the new Clan Head possessed. Hikari wasn't exaggerating. Opposing her wouldn't be wise.

"Do you question the decisions of our Clan Head?" Hikari smugly asked.

"But... Hinata-sama," a middle aged Main House member began, sounding more pleading than demanding. "The Caged Bird Seal is a crucial tool to stop our enemies from acquiring the Byakugan. What will we do then?"

"What other clans with Bloodline Limits do: push ourselves harder and grow stronger. The stronger we are, the less chances our enemies will have to steal our eyes," Hinata sharply said. "The Hyuga had always prided in being one of the strongest clans of Konoha. Let's show everybody that we can back those boasts."

"You can't do this!" another Main House member, a woman, protested. "Clan Head or not, you can't change our ancient traditions on a whim!"

"I think Hinata made it clear that there will be consequences for those who oppose her," Hikari replied the woman.

"So if we refuse, she will impose her will by force? What a tyrant your oh so meek and gentle daughter turned out to be when she got some power handed to her," the woman scoffed

Hikari was about to protest, but Hinata beat her to the punch. "Tyrant? Imposing my will by force? Isn't that what the Main House has been doing to the Branch House for generations?"

The woman opened her mouth to reply, but no words came from it. She closed it, hesitating, as if trying to come up with a proper argument to refute Hinata's claims. She mumbled something, but eventually shut up.

"That's what I thought. If any of you think I'm abusing my both authority and my new power, feel free to express your concerns to me. But before doing so, I want you to realize that this is how the Branch House members have felt their whole lives," Hinata replied, resting her eyes on them. "In fact, I don't see *them* complaining about my decisions or calling me a tyrant."

This made the Main House members realize that they were both outnumbered and overpowered. The Branch House was the majority of the clan, and if Hinata had their support, on top of the incredible power she now possessed, her rule would be pretty much uncontested.

"For the time being, that will be all," Hinata said. "More changes are bound to come in the near future. I know the Hyuga Clan values tradition, but hopefully in time you'll see that these changes are for the better, and you'll agree with me as well. You're dismissed."

The murmurs began once again as the crowd gathered in the patio started to slowly dissolve. Hinata's teammates, however, remained there.

"... was that Hinata? The same Hinata that has been my student?" a flabbergasted Kurenai asked. "She radiated so much..."

"Power?" Naruto finished.

"Confidence," Kurenai corrected. "I mean, Hinata did grew more confident over time, but such jump in attitude was quite the shock."

"Hinata-san always tried to put the more beligerent clan members in their place, and now she has the power to do so," Haku added.

"Don't worry. Deep down, she's still the same kind person we know and love."

...

A few minutes later, Hinata, Hikari, and Hanabi returned to the living room.

"So... how did I do?" Hinata unsurely asked.

"That was amazing! I've never seen you being so assertive!" Hanabi excitedly praised.

"Don't you think I exceeded myself?" Hinata asked once again.

"Not in the 're the Clan Head now, you should show them who's in charge," Hikari firmly stated. "By the way, I loved what you did with that chakra pulse. A really good way to let those idiots know who were dealing with."

"Speaking of which... mother, you still haven't told me what are my responsibilities now that I'm the one in charge," Hinata asked.

"Don't worry about that. For the time being, I'll continue doing the boring part of the job. All you have to do is to make sure change can finally happen within the clan," Hikari replied.

"By the way, mother, if you wanted the Caged Bird Seal gone, why you didn't abolish it yourself?" Hanabi asked.

"It's not that simple, sweetie. As you can see, most of the Main House opposed its abolition, and if a Clan Head tried to eliminate it by force, the whole clan would fall into chaos," Hikari explained.

"But with Hinata-nee-chan is different," Hanabi concluded. "Is because of the Tenseigan?"

Hikari nodded. "Though it's not just because of the power. Both you and Hinata are the first persons in literally centuries to awaken a higher form of the Byakugan that most of us thought it was just a myth. Your place in the clan is too important to earn your enmity. Imagine if the Sage of the Six Paths appeared and asked to be made Hokage. I doubt anybody would turn down such request."

"But I'm not the Sage of the Six Paths," Hinata protested.

"No, but you have the same eyes his brother once had, if what you and Nori-san told me it's true," Hikari cheekily replied. "Yes, some clansmen will call you a tyrant, but don't listen to them. You're doing something great, and you will have my support."

"And mine too!" Hanabi chimed in. "And if you feel that using your power against them is wrong... remember that I also have a Tenseigan, but I'm not the Clan Head." Hanabi said with an evil giggle, as she punched her palm for added emphasis.

"Hanabi-chan!"

"Joking! I was just joking! Sheesh!" Hanabi protested, holding her hands defensively. "I was totally not joking," Hanabi added under her breath.

"By the way, I saw your teammates outside during the announcement. How about if we invite them to have dinner for us, to celebrate your appointment?" Hikari suggested.

Hinata smiled warmly. "I'd love it."

...

Outskirt of Takigakure, a month later

Hidden within the thick forests that surrounded the Village of Takigakure, there was a large army that waited the order to move on. Said army was rather diverse, ranging from thugs unable to use chakra, ninja mercenaries, missing ninja whose strength ranged from Genin to low Jonin, and finally robe-wearing religious cultist whose entire skin was dyed in black and white, with skeletal patterns.

Commanding this army were two members of Akatsuki, Hidan and Kakuzu. They've been spending the last few weeks gathering this

army to assault Takigakure. Most of them would die, but the Akatsuki cared very little for their eventual fate.

"The troops are ready to fight," Hidan said, as he walked towards his partner. "I can already smell all the blood that's going to be spilled today. Jashin-sama will be pleased."

"Make sure you and the lunatics that follow you do your job. And remember, do not harm the jinchuriki," Kakuzu stressed.

Hidan rolled his eyes, and groaned loudly. How many times did Kakuzu need to remind him that? As far as his tenure in Akatsuki go, he didn't kill any jinchuriki yet. Even then, the cultist decided not to answer that.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Hidan dismissively said. "So, this is your former village, right? I'm sure you can't wait to burn this shithole to the ground."

"While I try to keep personal feelings away from business, I'm going to admit that yes, I'm going to enjoy this mission in particular," Kakuzu confessed.

Hidan's grin formed a sadistic grin. "Then what are we waiting for?"

"Very well. Send the attack order."

Hidan couldn't repress a glee upon thinking in the incoming battle. Soon, the world will be one ninja village down, and Akatsuki will have one more Tailed Beast in their power.

Author's Note: And thus concludes the Byakugan Princess arc. I've been waiting to write and publish this arc since the moment I uploaded the first chapter, but alas, I just couldn't give Hinata the Tenseigan when she was still in the Academy. As you could see, this chapter was mostly exposition and characters recovering from the intensity of the two previous episodes. Still,

I hope you enjoyed Hinata's ascension to clan head, and how she started to make things better for the Branch House.

Next chapter will begin my take on the Hidan and Kakuzu arc, which will also bring back an old fan favorite, Fu! Who's also a favorite of mine as well. It's been a while since she last appeared, huh? Tournament arcs, like the Chunin Exams, are popular because they not only allow, but demand the author to use a lot of characters at once, and sadly, other arcs are much more restrictive, so sometimes several characters might go for quite some time without any major appearances or contributions to the story.

Thanks a lot fro grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

So, what are your thoughts on this chapter and the arc as a whole? And what do you expect to see in the next arc? Tell me in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Fall of Taki

Author's Note: Against my expectations, the Byakugan Princess arc was a success. I'm glad you guys liked it so much. Hell, some of you were even disappointed that it ended after just three chapters. I'll try to make sure all the future original arcs are just as good as this one.

So now, let's start a new arc with a returning fan favorite (and personal favorite): Fu! Who didn't appear since... chapter 31? She's been absent for almost 30 chapters? Damn, that's almost half the story so far! Good thing this arc will fix such thing. Enjoy :

Chapter 59:

The Fall of Taki

or

Clipped Wings

Takigakure

"It's not fair!" Fu whined to no one in particular.

The green haired jinchuriki was lying on a large branch of the village's Great Tree, looking at the sky through the small gaps left between the tree's leaves. She let out a loud snort, as if that somehow would relieve if her boredom.

She went through all the troubles of taking an S-Rank mission so she could get a several days permit afterwards, that she was planning to use to travel to Konoha, and get to see her friends again, and most importantly, her boyfriend. It's been three months since the

last time she saw him, and while she enjoyed reading his letters, it was just not the same.

But then Shibuki said: "No, it's too risky letting you leave the village alone. And I can't afford an escort right now."

"Why don't you make up a reason to justify me sending me there?" Fu had suggested.

But Shibuki denied her request, saying along the lines of "I'm not going to make that mistake again", and that, since no Taki Genin team made it to the finals, there was no reason for any Taki ninja to be in Konoha. Meaning goodbye seeing the Chunin Exams, goodbye laughing with her friends, and goodbye making out with Shino.

She thought that earning a promotion to Jonin would show Shibuki her strength and thus result in more freedom, but how wrong she was. Despite her rank, she was never allowed to leave the village alone, not even for missions, which she always had to do under the watch of her babysitters -or "escorts", as Shibuki called them- despite the fact that she had grown way more powerful than most of the ninjas the village leader assigned as her squadmates.

What was the point of being a Jonin then? Sure, the Jonin paycheck was sweet, and allowed her to buy anything she wanted, but that's about it. No matter what she did, it would never stop Shibuki from treating her as a delicate porcelain doll that has to be protected at all time.

"I might as well ask Shibuki for a mission," she concluded. "Free days are rather boring if you have no friends to spend with."

Yes, that should do. Preferably, a mission that involved going to the Land of Fire. Maybe that way, she could take a small detour to Konoha, and pay a brief visit to her friends, and her boyfriend.

Little did she knew that her wishes were going to come true, and the price she had to pay for them.

Deciding to stop wasting more time, Fu jumped to her feet, spread her wings, and flew towards Shibuki's office. She didn't pay attention to the buildings and people below her - while watching the village from the sky was incredible the first few times, it ended up losing its awe. That's it, until several screams caught her attention.

"Huh?" she said, as she unconsciously moved towards the source of the commotion. She narrowed eyes. "Is that... a fight?"

Flying closer, Fu realized that she was right. There were several ninja invaders attacking her comrades, while others escorted the civilians to a safer place. She was unable to see where the invaders came from, since she was too high in the air to properly see their forehead protectors. At least, of those who carried them.

"Where did those guys came from?" she asked.

She got her answer when she saw that the enemy ninjas were coming from the lake, where one of the entrances to the village was.

" *But said entrances are top secret, and only Takigakure ninjas know about them...*" Fu thought, as distress started to manifest within her. She forced herself to stop wondering about how such thing could happen. She could care about that later. Now she needed to put a stop to it. "I think I should help them... no, wait, I should tell Shibuki first! Then he can alert the village of the attack!"

Flying as fast as he could, the green haired girl zoomed into the center of the village, and in a few seconds, she burst through Shibuku's office's -thankfully- open window.

"WHOA!" the young leader of Taki shouted, startled by Fu's sudden entrance. "Fu, what the hell!?"

"Sorry, but there's no time! We are under attack!" an alarmed Fu told him. "Come on, you have to mobilize everybody!"

"Shibuki-sama!" a Taki ninja burst into the office, kunai in hand, ready to attack anybody who would dare to harm his leader. "What was that noise? Are you alri- oh, it was Fu."

"Calm down, Fu!" Shibuki told her. "What are you saying about being attacked?"

"What does it need to be said? Enemy ninja are entering the village! They found about the secret passageways! Come on, come on, come on, come on, come on!" Fu urged, jumping up and down.

What Fu said was beyond unlikely. But she looked really distressed and frantic. And, eccentric as she was, she wouldn't lie about something so serious as an invasion for the sake of playing a prank. Shibuki's eyes rested on the ninja who had burst into the office shortly after Fu, who was still in the door.

"It seems that an enemy force had found one of the secret entrances to the village, and we're being invaded. Spread the news and make sure everybody's ready to defend the village. I'll join you shortly," Shibuki calmly ordered.

"Yes, Shibuki-sama!" the ninja obediently replied as he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Fu, how many enemies did you see?" Shibuki asked the mint haired girl.

"I didn't have time to count them, but they were a bunch! And more were coming from the lake, so there might be even more right now!" Fu stated.

"Okay. Knowing you, I was afraid that you'd rush into battle, but I'm glad you did the right thing, and came here to warn me first. Now, while we fight, find a safe place to-"

"NO!" Fu yelled, interrupting his leader. "Don't even dare to finish that sentence! Taki is my home, and I want to help to protect it!"

Shibuki sighed wearily. "Fu, we talked about this. You're too important for the village. If what you said is right, things are going to get dangerous, and you may die."

"I know that! But I'm a ninja, for Kami's sake! A jonin! Hell, I'm sure I'm even stronger than you! What's the point of letting me be one in the first place, if you aren't going to put my abilities to use?" the jinchuriki protested.

Shibuki sighed again. He had no time to waste arguing with Fu. And if he made her relent, deep down he knew she'd disobey him anyway and join the fight. Besides, she wasn't entirely wrong when she talked about her strength and skill.

"Alright, but make sure you stay at my side at all times, understood? I don't want you to go on your own and get killed," Shibuki warned her.

The green haired girl's previous outrage disappeared, replaced by her usual sunny disposition. She flashed him a confident grin as she gave him a thumbs up.

"You got it, Shibuki! We'll cover each other's backs!" Fu happily said. "Now, to battle!"

Shibuki didn't share Fu's almost careless enthusiasm and optimism. For some reason, the young Taki leader had a very bad feeling about this.

...

Kakuzu had disappeared to do some "intelligence gathering", as he called it, leaving Hidan in charge of leading the initial assault. Kunai and shuriken flew through the air, some of them hitting thin air, but most of them finding their marks. Invaders and defenders traded elemental ninjutsu while others engaged their opponents in hand to hand combat.

From what Kakuzu had told him, Takigakure was a very small village, but they managed to stay afloat thanks to the quality of the ninjas they produced, which were almost as skilled as those that came from the Great Villages, but could be hired at an overall considerably cheaper price. The downside, however, was that due their low number of ninjas they couldn't take as many missions as other more populated villages.

And so far, such thing was proving to be true. Despite the rabble Kakuzu had gathered, plus Hidan's own cultists outnumbering the Taki ninjas, they were having a very hard time pressing their advance.

"Come on, you weak-ass shitheads! Fight a bit harder! Janshin-sama demands it!" Hidan hollered, as he skewered a Takigakure Chunin with his three bladed scythe.

His commands fell into deaf ears, and Kakuzu's fools kept dying. Oh well, it's not that he cared about their fate. Kakuzu himself admitted that these thugs were mostly fodder whose purpose was to wear down Takigakure's defenses. Until Kakuzu returned, he had to make sure the plan went as followed. Hidan rushed forward, and leaped into the air. Several shuriken flew towards him, but he skillfully parried them using his scythe. He landed in the middle of a cluster of enemies, as he started to cut them down.

"Those cloaks... Akatsuki!" a Taki ninja pointed out in fear.

"They must have come for our jinchuriki!" another one cried.

"Then we won't let them! Come on, attack, all at once!" a third one, braver than the first two, stated, as he charged forward.

"Yes, come and attack me, you fucking heathens! Jashin-sama is thirsty for the blood of the nonbelievers!" Hidan shouted, as he laughed maniacally while skewering more Taki ninja coming at him. "Let's step up our game! Brothers, summon the Sons of Janshin!"

"Yes, Hidan-sama!" the Jashin cultists chorused at once.

Hidan's acolytes spread in groups of three and four, focusing on a single Taki ninja each, and isolated them, before ganging on them. But the cultists didn't kill them. They only hurt them enough so they wouldn't be able to defend themselves. However, those poor Taki ninjas would wish they were given a quick death instead, since once they could no longer fight, they were placed on their backs on the ground, and the cultist would use their own blood to draw demonic symbols around them in a circle. And finally, the cultist would weave the same chain of hand signs, completing the process.

"Demonic Summoning: Sons of Janshin!"

Suddenly, the ninjas used for the strange rituals were invaded by a nauseating feeling. As if something appeared inside them, and started to quickly grow. A massive pain got hold of them as whatever was eating their bodies from the inside out grew bigger, until they burst from their chests, killing them almost instantly.

The other Taki ninjas watched in horror how creatures that they've never seen before emerged from their deceased comrades' bodies, like a macabre childbirth. The creatures were of many sizes, ranging from as small as a housecat to as big as a tall person. Each of them had a different number of limbs, all of them ending in long, sharp claws. Some of them didn't have eyes, while others had multiple eyes all over their bodies. The only thing they had in common were their inky, dark blue skin, and their huge mouths full of razor sharp teeth.

"Behold, heathens, the Sons of our mighty lord, Janshin-sama!" a cultist screamed. "Let them fill your hearts with pain and terror, and rejoice!"

Without needing to be ordered, the demonic aberrations lunged in disorderly fashion at the Taki ninjas, who tried to protect themselves as good as they could. But between the numerical advantage of the

invaders and the damage these abominations were doing, soon they found themselves forced to fall back.

"Yes! Now you'll see Janshin-sama in all his glo-" Hidan gloated, before he was being interrupted by a Taki ninja impaling his chest with a large sword. He shot the attacker an annoyed look. "Didn't your bitch of a mother teach you that interrupting someone who's speaking is rude as fuck?"

"H-How...? I impaled your heart!" the Taki ninja stammered.

"BECAUSE I'M FUCKING IMMORTAL!" Hidan yelled, as he pulled the sword out of his chest, and stabbed it into the Taki ninja's gut. "This knife's yours, by the way, I don't want it!"

"It seems you're having quite the time here," a deep, monotone voice said. Hidan turned around, and noticed Kakuzu standing besides him. "However, your fun has to end. I've located the jinchuriki."

"Oh well. As long as I get to use my ritual with something worthy of sacrifice, it will almost make up for the pain in the ass that it's not to kill the jinchuriki," Hidan replied.

"I'd suggest the leader of the village, but I need him alive, since the reward for his head is greater that way. However, I'm sure that god of yours will find any of his bodyguards worthy. From what I know, despite being the leader, Shibuki isn't a particularly strong ninja," Kakuzu told him. Hidan's unnerving grin was all the answer he needed. "Meaning that I'll take care of both him and the jinchuriki. You take care of the rest."

"Whatever. Can we go now?" Hidan impatiently asked.

With that last warning, both Akatsuki vanished in a blur, like two predators ready to hunt their preys.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Shibuki, Fu, and other Taki ninjas -most of them Shibuki's bodyguards-, were fighting with all they had against the mercenaries, thugs and cultists that were swarming the small village.

"Water Release: Water Blade Jutsu!"

A sword made of pure water appeared in the young Taki leader's hand, as he engaged a couple missing-nin in melee combat, who were easily pushed back. "These thugs are nothing but rabble! There must be somebody leading the attack! If we take him down, we'll win half the battle!"

"Yes, Shibuki-sama!" his escorts chorused in unison.

"More enemies incoming!" one of the Jonin, a middle aged broad man with a thick moustache warned, pointing to a group of thugs coming towards them. "Ninjas and... what the hell is that!?"

Along with the enemy ninjas, there were what appeared to be some kind of near skeletal, inhuman inky creatures with sharp teeth, claws and either lots of eyes across their bodies, or no eyes at all.

"I'll take care of it!" Fu happily said as she leaped into the air, while wounding her fist back. "Takigakure Whirlwind!"

Fu landed in the middle of the arriving group, her fist slamming into the ground. The force of the impact alone produced a shockwave in every direction, which in turn created a powerful tornado around her, hurling the enemy ninjas and monsters away in every direction.

Unlike the human opponents, the inhuman monstrosities recovered rather quickly from Fu's initial assault, and quickly stood back to their feet, and charged at the jinchuriki, letting out high pitched, inhuman screeches.

"Want for more? Suit yourself!" a small tornado enveloped Fu's fists. "Hurricane Punch!"

Fu punched the first of the Sons of Janshin with such force, it was literally vaporized, producing a loud booming noise. The Wind Chakra, as well as the force of the punch created quick but powerful bursts of wind that knocked the other demons back. Undeterred by their siblings' death, the rest of the demons charged again, with predictable results.

"Whoa, that bitch's strong!" a loud voice said.

"Indeed she is. So you better get ready, since that's the jinchuriki," a deeper voice replied.

Everybody froze when the newcomers revealed Fu's jinchuriki status so casually. Suddenly, two men wearing Akatsuki cloaks landed in front of them. Remembering Naruto's words about the organization, Fu instinctively took a few step backwards, closer to Shibuki and his group.

"I mean..." the Akatsuki with the red scythe narrowd his eyes at Fu. "That's a girl, right? Because damn, she's so fucking jacked, she almost looks like a dude."

"Look like a dude? I'll show you-!" Fu snarled as she stomped forward, but she was grabbed by the shoulder by a fellow Taki ninja.

"Remember, Hidan, leave the Jinchuriki and Shibuki to me. Do with the others whatever you please," the masked Akatsuki reminded his partner.

"Hey, I think I know you... you're Kakuzu, our village's most infamous missing-nin!" Fu said, pointing a finger at him.

"K-Kakuzu? It can't be!" Shibuki cried, as fear started to creep into his body. If Kakuzu was the leader of this attack, then things would get way harder than Shibuki had expected.

"After you failed to assassinate the First Hokage, you murdered the village elders and stole Taki's secret kinjutsu!" Fu recalled, sounding

oddly excited. "There's only one reason you came back here!"

Kakuzu chuckled under his mask. "So, it seems today's youth still know about me. I should feel flattered. That's right, girl, I'm back, and that's because-"

"You regret your past crimes and want to ask for the village's forgiveness!" Fu finished.

A moment of silence followed Fu's optimistic statement. Kakuzu blinked a few times, not knowing how to answer that.

"Kakuzu... is she mentally retarded?" Hidan asked.

This seemed to snap Kakuzu back to reality. "No, girl, none of that it's true. This village betrayed me, all what I did next was a fair retribution. And my reason to be here is to capture you and extract the Tailed Beast sealed inside you."

"Of course, if Akatsuki lead the attack, they're clearly after Fu," Shibuki thought. "But they're smart. They brought a large attack force so we're forced to divert our ninjas to defend the village, and they have an easier time capturing Fu. It also explains how do they know how to access the village."

"Kakuzu? Impossible! Somebody that old can't still be a ninja!" a Taki ninja with red short hair cried.

"He can, thanks to the forbidden jutsu he stole when he left the village," Shibuki explained. "I don't know exactly what it does, but he can harvest the heart of his defeated enemies to both prolong his lifespan, stay in his prime, and acquire their strenght."

"I see that you're well informed, Shibuki-kun," Kakuzu replied.

"Shibuki-sama, you need to take Fu to a safe place. We'll hold the Akatsuki as much as we can," one of the Jonin, a woman holding a large sword with blond hair tied in a short ponytail told Shibuki.

"I can't ask you to do that! Kakuzu is by far the strongest ninja this village has ever produced! And we don't even know what his partner can do!" Shibuki protested.

However, his warnings fell on deaf ears as one of his Jonin, a man in his thirties with a buzzcut, dashed forward. "Go now! I'll create an opening!" the man said, tossing a shuriken, and making several hand seals. "Shadow Shuriken Clone Jutsu!"

The lone shuriken turned into several dozens. Hidan, however, smirked, and tossed his scythe forward. Using the thick cable it was attached to, he made it maneuver and spin so it would easily deflect all the shuriken away.

"Damn, now I have no choice!" Shibuki cursed inwardly as he grabbed Fu by the forearm, and started to run, pulling her. "Come on Fu, we need to leave!"

"Whoa, wait!" Fu protested, as she allowed herself to be dragged by her leader. "Aren't we going to fight?"

"They're after you! We need to take you to a safe place!" Shibuki told her.

"You're open right now!" the woman with the large sword said, dashing forward. Her sword started to glow with a blue light as chakra was channeled through it, before she made an slashing motion. "Flying Chakra Blades!"

The released chakra took the shape of crescent shaped energy blades that flew at the Akatsuki. However, Hidan merely smirked, as he easily jumped above the incoming attack, while pulling the cable down. His scythe came down towards her, however, she was able to parry it with her long sword.

"Himiko!" the Taki ninja with the buzzcut replied.

"I'm okay, Tadashi!" Himiko replied, as she struggled against the scythe. "Quickly, attack him now!"

The redheaded Jonin was about to do so, until he noticed something. "Hey, where did Kakuzu go?"

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Shibuki was taking Fu to one of the secret emergency exits the village had for evacuations. The fact that no enemies were coming from that direction meant that the Akatsuki weren't aware about it. They managed to make it out of the village, and were heading the edge of the island lake.

"Shibuki, we should stay and fight! If we help the others, we can-" Fu protested.

"No, it's too risky!" Shibuki replied. "We cannot allow them to get their hands on you! You're too important! I need to protect you at all costs!"

Unfortunately, their escape was cut short by Kakuzu violently landing in front of them, opening a crater, and raising a large cloud of dirt and dust when his feet hit the ground.

"Protect her? Please. From what I know about you two, she's the one who needs to protect you," Kakuzu said in a condescending tone, as he walked towards them.

"Fu, stay behind me!" Shibuki insisted, as he took a step forward.

"No!" Fu protested once again. "He's right! You're no rival for him! But if we fight together, we might have a chance!"

"If I'm allowed to give my opinion, you should listen to her, Shibuki-kun," Kakuzu interjected. "Not that it will change the result of this fight, but it's indeed the most intelligent way of dealing with me."

Suddenly, much to Kakuzu's surprise, Fu vanished behind his very eyes. The Akatsuki barely had time to jump away before Fu's fist

came down, hitting the ground, opening a large crater that send chunks of rock and dirt everywhere.

"You are... ridiculously strong," Kakuzu observed.

"You have no idea!" Fu replied, as she sank her other fist inside the former Taki ninja's gut. However, Kakuzu burst into smoke, leaving a log in his place, which instantly shattered upon receiving the brunt of Fu's attack. "Shit!"

The ground beneath her fist cracked, and Kakuzu burst from below just as fast, hitting Fu's lower jaw with a powerful punch. The mint haired girl was sent flying backwards in an arc, before landing with a thud.

"But I'm still stronger," Kakuzu confidently stated.

"FU!" Shibuki cried, as he dashed towards Kakuzu, his water sword above his head. He brought his sword down upon the unmoving ninja in a vertical slash, but much to his shock, Kakuzu caught his makeshift weapon with just one hand. "What?"

Kakuzu's hand darkened, and squeezed the water sword with greater force, making it burst into dozens of water droplets that splashed both Shibuki and the ground below.

"You should know that Earth beats Water. Though with the gap between us, elemental advantages become irrelevant," Kakuzu said, as he delivered a brutal kick to Shibuki's gut, sending him flying a few meters backwards. "This was even easier than-"

The masked Akatsuki was interrupted mid sentence by another equally brutal kick, this time to the side of his head, which also send him flying a few meters, before painfully landing on the ground. After getting on his feet, Kakuzu saw that it was Fu who had attacked him.

"You are even stronger than I had initially assessed," Kakuzu admitted.

"I'm even stronger than that," Fu said, as she rubbed her pained jaw.

"I find that doubtful. But then again, I do not seek to kill you, and beating an enemy while holding back makes the fight complicated. However, I wouldn't be the best bounty hunter in the elemental nations if I lacked skill," Kakuzu said, as he made several hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullets!"

Mud started to gather in front of Kakuzu, and it took the shape of a dragon head. The dragon opened its jaws, and fired a quick barrage of mud bullets. Fu then deployed her wings, and flew high in the air. The dragon head continued firing mud bullets at her, but her flight gave her more room to dodge than an earthbound target.

"And she can fly too. This task is becoming more complicated by the moment..." Kakuzu groaned.

Meanwhile, Shibuki managed to get back on his feet. Despite the brutal kick, he could still fight, even if he was sure he had a broken rib.

"One hit... that's all what he needed to take me out," Shibuki moaned in pain, as his hand reached his ninja tool pouch. "He's right. The difference between him and me is too big. Fortunately, I have the means to bridge that gap!"

In his hand there was a vial with a glowing blue liquid.

"The boost from this amount of Hero Water should be enough to deal with Kakuzu, with the backlash not being so big as not to survive it..." Shibuki said to himself, as he downed the contents of the vial in one go.

The effect were almost instant. He felt all the pain disappearing from his body, being replaced by a powerful wave of energy. He felt his bones strengthening, and his muscles swelling up a little. His chakra became so strong, it manifested in the form of a blue aura all around

his body. Yes, with this power, he and Fu would be able to take down Akatsuki.

"KAKUZU!" Shibuki yelled as he dashed towards the Akatsuki. While some might think it was stupid to waste the surprise factor like that, the young leader wanted to draw his attention away from Fu.

"Oh? You're still alive?" Kakuzu nonchalantly deadpanned, as he moved his body a little, so his back pointed to neither Fu nor Shibuki. However, he was forced to focus on Shibuki the moment the young man assaulted him with a flurry of punches and kicks. While unrefined and not that hard to block or dodge, they moved much faster and packed far more power than before. "What? How did you become so strong all of sudden, kid?"

"With the only thing you weren't able to steal before you defected!" Shibuki replied, as he delivered a high kick to Kakuzu's head.

The Akatsuki blocked the kick with his forearms, but it had enough force to push him sideways. He had barely time to notice a shadow falling over him.

"Takigakure Whirlwind!"

Kakuzu jumped back before a green haired meteor could crush him. Like it did before, Fu's punch opened a crater the moment it hit the ground.

" *Now is my chance!*" Shibuki thought, as he moved backwards, closer to the edge of the lake as his hands flied through hand seals. "Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

A massive, serpentine dragon made of water rose from the lake's surface. It let out a distorted growl, before it lunged at Kakuzu. Fu deployed her wings once again, anf flew into the air to avoid thw attack. Kakuzu replied by making hand seals of his own.

"Earth Release: Earth Dome Jutsu!"

Dirt and stones gathered around the Akatsuki, quickly forming a dome around him, which was finished just in time the water dragon found its mark, collapsing into a massive torrent that left the entire area wet and full of puddles. The dome, however, was left untouched.

"Damn, not even with the Hero Water I can overcome the elemental disadvantage..." Shibuki cursed.

"Let's bring you out of your shell, shall we?" Fu shouted from above, as she slammed the rock dome with both feet, shattering it into a multitude of pebbles. However, rather than Kakuzu, she only found a hole. "Dammit! He escaped underground again!"

"I have an idea! Fu, let's force him out by flooding the tunnel he just dug!" Shibuku suggested, as he ran towards the hole.

Fu nodded, and the two of them started weaving hand seals as well.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

The two Taki ninjas expelled a stream of water from of each of their mouths, quickly flooding the tunnel Kakuzu had dig. If he didn't come out, he'd drown.

Suddenly, the earth started to shake. That definitely wasn't the effect the two Taki ninjas were expecting. Suddenly, powerful streams of water burst from underground as if they were geysers, startling them into stopping.

"What... what the hell is going on?" Fu asked in shock, as she took a step back.

The jinchuriki noticed too late the ground trembling under her feet, and she was hurled into the air by a powerful stream of water.

"FU!" Shibuki yelled.

The mint haired girl deployed her wings once more, and managed to escape the stream of water. She panted a little, spitting the water that had flooded her respiratory system. And that moment was all what Kakuzu needed to strike. Fu didn't even see the Akatsuki appearing besides her, and found herself at the receiving end of a rather savage punch that send her flying against the ground. But when she hit the ground, she didn't stop there. The force of the punch keep pushing her towards the edge of the island, leaving a furrow behind.

"Fu! Are you okay?" Shibuki asked, as he rushed towards her. However, he was stopped in his tracks when several kunai with explosive tags attached to them landed in front of him. "What?"

The young Taki leader managed to jump back in time before the tags detonated, producing a chain of loud explosions. When the smoke of the explosions dispelled, there were several missing-nin of several villages.

"Kakuzu-sama, we came here to help!" a missing-nin from Ame said.

"Yeah, the situation in the village is pretty much under control!" another one from Kumo confidently added.

"What do you want us to do?" an Iwa missing-nin asked.

"Good job. It seems the money I spend on you was a good investment. Keep that man busy, but make sure he lives. Meanwhile, I'll secure the girl," Kakuzu said in a deadpan tone, as he walked towards the bruised Fu, who was trying to get back on her feet. "Stand down, jinchuriki. You've already lost."

"That's... that's the best you have?" Fu laughed weakly as she got back on her feet. She wiped a trickle of blood that came from her mouth.

"Girl, you only experienced a fraction of my true power. I recognize that you're strong, but my experience as a ninja far outstrips yours.

Don't make this harder than it should be," Kakuzu said, as he continued walking forwards.

"Fu! You have to flee!" Shibuki shouted, as the various hired missing-nin engaged him at once.

"There's... there's no way I'm going to do that! Taki is my home, and I'll defend it!" Fu stubbornly shouted back.

"And you will defend it, but not this way! Don't let Akatsuki get their hands on your power! Go and look for help!" Shibuki pleaded, as he felt the effects of the Hero Water slowly banishing.

"I'm not going to abandon you, Shibuki!" Fu yelled, as she tried to fight back the tears.

"You won't," Shibuki replied, as he parried a kunai blow from the Ame missing nin. "Fu, you're a ninja. You know what you have to do."

Fu didn't reply. Her sight shifted back and forth between Shibuki and three approaching Kakuzu. He was right, she did know what to do, even if deep down she didn't want to admit it. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and her face reflected a look of determination, looking as if she was ready to fight.

"A last stand against me? Brave, but foolish," Kakuzu observed.

Fu clapped her hands together. "I will fight against you, and I will beat you," she said, as her hands formed a single seal. "But it won't be today. Hiding in the Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu released a huge cloud of glittering power that blinded Kakuzu and all the missing-nin in the area. Taking advantage of the distraction, Fu turned back, deployed her wings, and flew away. At that moment, the effect of the Hero Water vanished, and Shibuki fell on his knees, not being able to fight anymore. He was quickly apprehended by two missing-nin.

"Lock Shibuki up in a safe place. The rest of of us, come with me. We have to catch that girl," Kakuzu ordered.

"But, Kakuzu-sama... she's flying," the Kumo missing-nin weakly protested.

"I can see that," Kakuzu deadpanned in return. "But she won't be able to fly forever, especially with those wounds and bruises. Now keep your mouths shut and come with me! I pay you to follow my orders, not to question them."

"Y-Yes, Kakuzu-sama!" the present missing-nin chorused, as they all ran after their employer, ready to hunt the fleeing jinchuriki.

...

As Fu flew, she didn't look back. She knew that if she did, she'd turn back and try to help Shibuki and the rest of her comrades. She hated everything so much. Feeling so impotent, the Akatsuki bringing her village to its knees so easily, what would happen to Shibuki...

She pushed those thoughts out of her mind, and focused on her mission: reach Konoha. Once there, she could ask her friends for help in driving the Akatsuki away. She had to cover a lot of distance, but with her wings and natural speed, it would be no problem.

" **Fu,**" a voice said in her head. A voice she hadn't heard in quite some time. "**What are you doing?**"

"What do you think I'm doing? I'm going to Konoha and get some help!" Fu answered the Seven Tails.

" **You know, you could have used my power. That way, you could have defeated those Akatsuki,**" the Seven Tails replied.

"Not falling for that one again. I still remember what happened the last time I tried to do that," Fu bitterly replied.

" It's the only way. You won't reach Konoha in your current state. Besides, they're chasing you," the Seven Tails pointed out.

"Unless those guys learn to fly in the next hours, I don't see them catching me," Fu replied.

" No, but they will wait until you get tired and can't fly anymore. I'm trying to heal you, but I will take some time. There's not enough luck in the world that can take you out of this," the Seven Tails insisted.

"Why do you care about me so much all of sudden?" the mint haired girl snapped.

" Because I know what will happen to me if those Akatsuki get their hands of you. I felt what happened to Isobou and Kokuo. I wasn't sure myself, but Shukaku confirmed it. I don't plan to get sealed back into the Demonic Statue," the Seven Tails replied, sounding almost scared.

"Demonic Statue? What are you talking about?" Fu asked.

" There's no time to explain. If you're foolish enough not to use my power in such dire situation, guess that I have no option but do the next best thing," the Tailed Beast cryptically said.

"And that would be?" Fu asked.

But she got no answer.

...

Konoha Stadium

Like two and a half years ago, a good chunk of Konoha's population, as well as many foreigners, were gathered in the village's stadium to watch the finals of the Chunin Exams. This time, however, instead of a tournament of one on one fights, the Hokage decided to break the mold, and make team fights instead. Most of the teams were from

Konoha, but there were a couple from Suna, and another two from Kiri, participating in an Exam hosted by Konoha for the first time in more than two decades.

Currently, the second fight of the tournament, between two Konoha teams, came to an end as the last member of one of the teams fell to the ground, unable to continue fighting.

"All members of Team Masaru are no longer able to fight!" the proctor, Anko Mitarashi, declared. "Team Yamato moves to the semifinals!"

"We did it, guys!" Kaida happily said as she high fived both her brother and Hanabi.

"I can already feel that Chunin Vest around my body," Hanabi gushed.

"We're doing good so far, but we better not get overconfident," Hagane wisely noted. "The best way to ensure a promotion is to win this tournament."

"Yeah. Besides, mom will bet a lot of money on us, and if we lose just like Naruto-niisan did during his exams..." Kaida shivered upon thinking what her mother's reaction would be.

"We may have to become missing-nins," Hagane solemnly noted.

"Come on, Tsunade-sama may have a gambling problem, but he wouldn't do anything too bad if we lose after she bets on us, right?" Hanabi asked. The Hyuga grew nervous upon seeing the look her teammates were giving her. "... right?"

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"Those children better win their remaining fights, or they shouldn't even bother to return back home," Tsunade stated, as she gripped her many betting tickets on both hands.

Alongside Tsunade was Shizune, with Shiro and Shizuka respectively sitting on their laps. Naruto and Hinata were also with them, watching and enjoying the fights. Many Hyugas were sitting on previous rows.

"I wouldn't worry about them losing, Tsunade-sama. They were already strong before, and now that Hanabi has a Tenseigan, I find doubtful that they will find any team that will give them a challenge. Not even veteran ones," Hinata said in an assuring tone.

"How can you be so sure? You only started training with it for a couple weeks, right?" Shizune asked. "Hanabi didn't look that different to me."

"It might not be obvious to the naked eye, but her new power it's still there. It manifests in a more subtle way. You'll probably noticed that her blows pack more power than they did before," Hinata explained.

Naruto was idly following the conversation, until he felt something. A pull. Knowing what it was, he let himself be pulled in, and soon he found himself inside the Nine Tail's seal.

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"Do you want something?" Naruto asked. "Because I'm having a good time watching the Chunin Exams with my family."

" Your entertainment will have to wait, brat. I've received a distress call," the Nine Tails began. **"From the Seven Tails."**

Naruto's bored expression immediately changed into one of shock. "Fu!"

" Yes. It was short but from what the bug told me, Akatsuki is after her. They invaded her village, and is currently on the run. You better hurry. You got lucky you were able to save the tanuki's host, but you might not be so lucky this time," the fox warned him.

Naruto nodded. "I will. Thanks a lot for telling me."

The Nine Tails snorted dismissively. **"Keep your gratitude for somebody who might appreciate it. I only warned you because it's of my interest that the Akatsuki don't capture anymore of my siblings."**

"Whatever you say, you furball," Naruto replied with a cheeky smile, before leaving the seal.

...

The moment Naruto returned to the real world, he found his girlfriend staring at him in concern.

"Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked, mildly worried. "Are you okay? You look tense."

"It's the Nine Tails. He told me Fu is in danger. The Akatsuki are after her. We have to save her!" Naruto stated.

Hinata emphatically nodded. "Okay, let's fetch Haku. By the way, do you know where Fu is?"

"The fox didn't tell me. Somewhere between Taki and Konoha, I think."

"That's... a lot of ground to cover. We'll need a tracking team to find her. Is Kakashi-sensei's team in Konoha?" Hinata asked.

"If they are, they should be in their usual training ground. I'll go fetch them, you get Haku," Naruto replied. He stood up and looked at Tsunade and Shizune. "Mom, Shizune-nee-chan, we need to go. Akatsuki is on the move again, and another jinchuriki is in danger."

"I understand. Take care," Tsunade said. "Before you go, you should warn your father about it."

"I will," Naruto said, as he made a Shadow Clone.

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Meanwhile, in the Kage Box, three Kages were watching the fights. The first was Rasa, looking a bit bored, since so far none of the Suna Genin had fought yet. Just like the other time he was in Konoha, he brought Baki and Maki as his escorts. Sitting in the middle was Jiraiya, escorted by Shisui Uchiha and Neji Hyuga. And lastly, to the left of Jiraiya was Mei Terumi, escorted by Chojuro and Ameyuri.

"Your children are truly a sight to behold, Hokage-dono," Mei praised.

Mei hadn't changed that much since the last time Jiraiya had seen her, when she came to Konoha to hire some ninjas to boost her rebel forces. That's it, unless one ignored the rather large round belly that she now sported.

"Wonder if mine will be just half as good as those three are," Mei said, as she lightly patted her pregnant belly.

"With you and Zabuza as their parents, I doubt they'll be a weakling," Jiraiya said with a light chuckle. "Speaking of which, where is Zabuza? I thought you'd bring him with you."

"I planned to, but I had a better idea," Mei replied, her mouth forming a slightly malicious smirk. "You see, Zabuza-kun wants to become Mizukage after me, so I decided it would be a good idea to let him get acquainted with the job while I'm out."

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Meanwhile, in Kirigakure, Zabuza was trying to make sense of the loads of paperwork that occupied most of Mei's desk. One of Mei's assistants entered the office, carrying another large stack of paper.

"Zabuza-sama, here are the mission solicitations that need to be approved or rejected," the assistant said, as he added the papers to

the growing pile. "And don't forget that you have a meeting with the ANBU commander regarding the upgrade of equipment. And after that, there's the the meeting with the Guild of Merchants regarding the safety of the trade routes..."

As the assistant droned all the duties that awaited Zabuzza, the swordsman stopped what he was doing, and let his head hit the desk.

"No more paperwork and meetings... no more paperworks and meetings..." Zabuzza cried, as tears of despair streamed from his eyes.

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"Yes, I'm completely sure Zabuzza-kun is adapting perfectly to the job," Mei stated, almost repressing a laugh. "By the way, Hokage-dono, given the outstanding abilities your children possess, didn't your clan or your wife's clan pressure you to have more?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "I have no clan, and before we had Hagane and Kaida, Tsunade was the last Senju alive. Besides, Tsunade had them at a rather late age, so we decided it was for the best not to have more. And between those two and Naruto, we had our hands full."

"So lucky," Mei said, letting out a longing sigh. "People think that having a Bloodline Limit is a gift, and in a way it is, but they're unaware of everything that it entails, such as the need to pass it to the next generation. Do you know that the only reason I exist is because my three older siblings failed to inherit both my parents' Bloodline Limits? My oldest brother only has Steam Release, while my older sister and second older brother only have Lava Release."

"Yes. Some research shows that very few human beings have the proper physical condition to handle two Bloodline Limits," Jiraiya replied.

"And now, they expect me to do the same. You have no idea how much pressure my clansmen put on me to get married as soon as possible. 'When are you going to marry, Mei-chan, you're already pushing thirty', 'You know, Mei-chan, if you marry too old, you won't be able to have children', 'Mei-chan, when your older siblings were your age, they already had at least one kid'," Mei said in a mocking tone, before her face turned red. "Well, sorry for not marrying and having children as soon as you wanted, mom, but I was busy leading a FUCKING REBELLION!" Mei yelled, as she slammed both fists on her chair's armrests, earning a few looks from Jiraiya, Rasa and their escorts. Mei's face reddened, this time of embarrassment rather than anger. "Uh, sorry. I'm usually not this emotional. The pregnancy and all that..."

Rasa scoffed, and rolled his eyes. Jiraiya let out a hearty chuckle. "Don't worry. You should have seen Tsunade-hime when she was pregnant. Between that and not being allowed to drink... looking back, I'm amazed our house managed to survive her with such little damage."

"Dad!" a loud voice yelled.

Naruto Body Flickered into the Kage Box, startling all those present not from Konoha.

"What's the meaning of this?" Rasa asked, outraged. "Your father may be the Hokage, but you can't be here!"

"Sorry, Kazekage-san, but this is important. I need to talk with dad about the Akatsuki," Naruto quickly replied.

"Akatsuki? Where?" Mei asked.

"In the Land of Waterfall. They're after Taki's Jinchuriki," Naruto explained.

"Naruto, how do you know about this?" Jiraiya questioned.

"The Nine Tails told me. By the way, I'm a clone. My team and I are going to see if the Animal Squad is here so we can track and rescue Fu before Akatsuki does," Naruto stated.

Jiraiya let out a sigh in resignation. "If they are not, at least one tracking team should be available. I made sure to leave one in standby in case something like this happen. Alright then, consider this an official Konoha mission sanctioned by the Hokage. Take care. I'll try to send you reinforcements as soon as I can."

The Naruto clone nodded, before dispelling a burst of white smoke.

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An Hour Later, Forests of the Land of Fire

Fortunately for them, Kakashi's Animal Squad was on Training Ground Seven, doing their morning routine training. Since none of them had any friend or relative taking part in the Chunin Exams, they had no interest in seeing them.

The moment Naruto explained the situation, they were immediately on board. Kiba, Tamaki and specially Shino were really close with the Taki Kunoichi, and weren't going to let anything bad happen to her. Using the scent of one of the letters she had sent to Shino over the past years, Kiba and Akamaru managed to track her scent. As expected, they were heading northwest, to Takigakure.

"Kiba, how long until we reach Fu?" Kakashi asked.

"A few hours. Maybe more. She's too far away!" Kiba shouted, as he tried to go faster.

"Naruto, did you got any more messages from Fu's Tailed Beast?" Tamaki asked.

Naruto shook his head. "Not even one. I hope we aren't too late."

"Fu's strong. She will resist until we can lend her a hand," Shino confidently said.

Naruto couldn't help but admire Shino's ability to remain calm in such situation, as well as maintaining a positive attitude. The blond didn't know what he'd do if Hinata was in such situation. In fact, he did remember when Hagane and Kaida were kidnapped by Orochimaru's minions almost three years ago, and despair had been eating him from the inside out.

Maybe Shino was also feeling that way, except that he was much better than Naruto at hiding it. Aburames were known for being almost impossible to read.

"Alright, I know Fu is a friend of yours and you're rather tense, but I need you to keep a cool head," Kakashi advised. "We've never faced an Akatsuki before, so be careful."

"Hey, Naruto's squad killed one and drove his partner away. They can't be that tough," Kiba mentioned.

"Underestimating them wouldn't be wise, Kiba-kun. The two our team fought were rather powerful, and we needed a lot of help to take them down," Hinata recalled.

"Besides, you guys are a tracking squad. You didn't see as much combat as we did," Naruto added.

"We'll see that once the fight begins!" Kiba heatedly replied.

"Will you stop you two? Why don't we focus on saving Fu?" Tamaki interjected.

"Tamaki-san is right. Our priority is to help her, not to beat the Akatsuki," Shino continued. Despite he sounded in his usual monotone, his words were coated in some harshness.

Neither Naruto nor Kiba said anything. Following Tamaki's advice, they decided that it would be better if they focused on rescuing Fu. But in order to do so, a clash with the Akatsuki would be inevitable.

" I don't care how many of them are, or what kind of strength they do possess," Naruto decided with determination. *"I won't let Akatsuki harm another jinchuriki ever again."*

Unfortunately for the blond, he wouldn't be able to keep that promise for long.

Author's Note: Dun dun duuuuun! Fu is being chased by the Akatsuki and Naruto and his friends rush to save her! Will Fu survive, or will she join the ranks of Han and Yagura? The answer to that question is within the chapter itself, meaning that if you paid attention, you should know already.

Besides Fu, I was also dying to get to this arc because of Hidan and Kakuzu, two of the most interesting Akatsuki members in both powers, personalities and dynamics. I hope my writing can make them justice. Unlike other arcs like Kazekage Resuce or Sasuke and Sai, the original Hidan and Kakuzu arc was pretty good, and making it better is going to be an uphill battle.

As you can see, Fu wasn't the only familiar face to make a return. Even if her presence is going to be pretty small, Mei is back, with an "expansion pack". Yeah, Mei and Zabuza are an item now. You know, I always found Mei being unable to get married ridiculous, not only because given that being super hot, smart, skilled and holding a big position should make men to fight to death to be her husband, but as I highlighted here, Mei has TWO Bloodline Limits, and thus her clan would pressure her to get married and have as many kids as possible in order to pass said Bloodlimits. So in this story, Mei's lack of romance is due her dedication to overthrowing Yagura's regime, and later being busy both leading and rebuilding her village. I hope you find my interpretation better than what we got in canon.

Thanks a lot for grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

Next time, while not the conclusion of the arc (this one is going to be longer than the Byakugan Princess Arc) we'll see if Fu is captured or not. In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Calm Skies

Author's Note: I have the feeling that readers were expecting this chapter more than any other. Can't imagine why. Anyway, enjoy:

Chapter 60:

Calm Skies

or

Time to counterattack

Forests of the Land of Fire

"Well, do you plan on using my power yet? Because frankly, I can't see how the situation can get any worse," the Seven Tails deadpanned. **"And not even my luck is going to be enough to get you out of this."**

"Shut up already!" Fu shouted out loud.

Despite not wanting to admit it, the situation was dire. Kakuzu managed to take her down from the sky with a powerful long range attack involving both fire and wind. Once down, one of the first things the Akatsuki did was to rip her wings out of her back. While they would regrow after a good night of sleep, she was now deprived of her greatest asset for survival.

It was then when his goons moved for the kill.

She was now in the middle of a thick forest, cornered against a cluster of trees, with no escape route. If she was at her best, she could easily crush them, but so far, she only managed to keep them at bay. She was too weakened to offer proper resistance.

She noticed an Iwa missing-nin making several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Rock Crusher!"

A shadow alerted Fu of the three giant boulders that suddenly appeared above her, before gravity pulled them down.

"They're probably expecting me to dodge them, and another one will attack me while I'm vulnerable," Fu thought, as her muscles tensed while she prepared to counterattack. *"They're in for a surprise then!"*

Even if she could no longer fly, the Taki kunoichi shot into the sky with a mighty leap, shattering an incoming boulder with a powerful punch, and another one with her other punch. She then spun mid air, and kicked the last boulder back to the Iwa nin.

"Shit!" the Iwa missing-nin cursed, as he ran away before being crushed by his own attack.

While Fu was busy, a Konoha missing-nin made hand seals on his own in order to capitalize Fu's predicament.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A volley of fireballs flew towards Fu as she fell to the ground. Of course, that didn't mean that the Taki jinchuriki was helpless in the slightest, as her hands quickly formed several hand seals in return.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Fu expelled a massive amount of water from her mouth, which formed a circular wall around her, successfully absorbing the volley of fireballs flying at her, resulting in a cloud of smoke that blinded both sides from each other.ç

"Good, this steam curtain should give me a few seconds to breathe," Fu thought.

"I know I'm being repetitive, but you could-" the Seven Tails piped in.

"Shut up! I'm not using your power! I know what happens when I do! Sure, I could defeat these guys easily, and even the Akatsuki as well! But then what? I couldn't stop you from going on a rampage!" Fu angrily replied. "I'm not letting innocents die because of you!"

"At the cost of your own life? How heroic. Too bad you aren't only putting your life on the line," the Tailed Beast dryly replied. **"And if you haven't noticed, these guys are merely wearing you down. The Akatsuki is still watching from afar. And once you're weak enough, he'll move and end this fight in one hit."**

"Oh, he's going to need more than just one hit if he wants to-"

"Everybody, attack at once! Even if we can't see her, she's still there!" one of the missing nin shouted. "I can hear her somewhere inside the cloud, rambling about something!"

"You... you weren't speaking out loud when you were talking to me, right?" the incredulous Seven Tails asked. **"RIGHT!?"**

Fu laughed awkwardly. "... perhaps?"

"How did you last this long it's beyond me. Next time I hear Gyuki complaining about his human, and I'm going to suggest a trade and see how-"

The Tailed Beast's rambling was interrupted by a volley of fireballs, watery missiles, rocks, kunai and shuriken appearing from the cloud of steam, flying directly at her.

"OH SHIT!" Fu yelled as her hands scrambled to form the correct right seals. "Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Fu blew a massive gust of wind that was able to push back the kunai and shuriken, and even dispelled the water attacks. However, not

only it failed to stop the stone projectiles, but it magnified the power of the fireballs coming at her.

"This is going to hurt," Fu whimpered.

"YOU DON'T SAY!?" The Seven Tails sarcastically replied.

The rocks and fireballs found their mark, resulting in a massive explosion that hurled Fu into the air, as well as taking down several of the trees behind the jinchuriki. The mint haired girl fell back to the ground with a loud thud, as Kakuzu's thugs cheered in victory. Fu, however, managed to summon enough strength to get back on her feet, if barely.

Perched on a tree branch, Kakuzu was looking the ongoing fight, carefully analyzing Fu's strengths and weaknesses. His information already stated that the girl was powerful beyond belief, but it wasn't until he saw Fu's extraordinary resistance and toughness that he understood the whole extent of it.

"It doesn't matter now. After a whole day of flying, then fighting for so many hours, she can barely stand. There's no reason to drag this any longer," Kakuzu decided, as he jumped from the tree branch, and landed on the ground below. "Everybody, stand back. I'll deal the final blow. I can't risk you lot accidentally killing her."

The others nodded, and followed Kakuzu's instructions, while he dangerously came closer to claim his prize. Fu tried to back away, but she tripped, and fell flat on her butt.

"So this is it... it's too late to use your power?" Fu weakly asked, as feelings of primal fear and desperation crawled on her back.

"Girl, even I'm amazed at how much luck I can bring," the Seven Tails cryptically answered.

"Uh, what do you-?" Fu was about to ask, before several whistles could be heard.

Multiple arrows made of chakra rained upon Kakuzu, which was forced to stop, and take a few steps back.

"What the...?" the Akatsuki wondered aloud, before a loud, sharp whirring noise filled the air.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

A massive tornado came from above, catching the Akatsuki off guard, and violently hurling him against a tree, which was instantly snapped in two. Amazingly, the Akatsuki didn't appear too hurt by such a brutal onslaught, and got back on his feet without much difficulty.

Several ninja landed around her in a protective formation. It took her a few seconds, but she ended up realizing who they were.

"Alright, hunt's over, you jackasses! So scram unless you want to get your butts kicked!" Kiba shouted, with Akamaru barking in agreement.

"Yeah, if you want to get your dirty hands on her, you'll have to go through us first!" Tamaki added, as three blades appeared on both of her gauntlets with a 'snikt' sound.

The missing-nin snarled at the newcomers, as they cautiously stepped back.

"You sounded like you were having a good time hurting my girlfriend," Shino coldly said, as he spread his arms. Swarms of beetles emerged from both his sleeves. "Let's see if you're that bold now that the numbers are more even."

"Alright, we'll leave hand to hand combat to you three, we'll cover you from behind," Haku said, as he and Hinata tensed their chakra bows, producing another arrow each, which was pointed at Kakuzu.

"Guys... you came!" Fu squealed, trying to hold back her tears.
"Lucky Seven is really worthy of her name!"

"Thank goodness we reached her in time. A few seconds late, and Akatsuki would have claimed another jinchuriki," Naruto said, sighing in relief. His expression then turned sharp with determination the moment his golden eyes rested on Kakuzu. "So, you want to see if you can finish the job? Please say yes."

"Whoa!" Hinata said in shock, almost taking a step back.

"Hinata-hime? What's wrong?" Naruto asked his girlfriend.

"That Akatsuki... I don't know what's with him, but his chakra system and his organs... they look like nothing I've seen before!" Hinata replied in shock and even some horror, unable to tear her sight apart from Kakuzu.

"Explain," Kakashi instructed.

"His body... is a jumbled mess of multiple organs, held together by some sort of wires. I'm seeing several hearts... and his chakra network looks like several networks intermingled together... is he even human?" Hinata wondered aloud.

"You have a keen eye, girl," Kakuzu mentioned. "You look like a Hyuga, but that's definitely not a Byakugan. What are those eyes?"

"It's a long story. One I'm not keen on sharing with a mortal enemy," Hinata harshly replied, as she fixed a hard stare on the Akatsuki. First Sasori, and now this man. Where did Akatsuki find these inhuman freaks?

"Kakuzu-sama, what do we do?" a missing-nin from Kumo asked, his fearful tone clearly indicating he wasn't expecting such huge opposition.

Kakuzu reviewed his options. Even if he fought with all he had, sacrificed both his hired thugs and even some of his hearts to retrieve the girl, the odds weren't that good. Among this group of Konoha ninjas, he only recognized Kakashi Hatake, somebody skilled enough to give him a hard time, and the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails. Then there was the Hyuga with the weird eyes, which gave the Taki missing-nin very bad vibes. The other four looked unremarkable, but underestimating them would be a mostly unwise thing to do.

He also noticed the blond's appearance. Their data stated that the Fox's jinchuriki had blue eyes, yet his were golden. And those markings around his eyes, could that be... senjutsu? If that was the case, he was seriously outmatched. Even with Hidan at his side, it would be a battle really hard to win.

"You win this round, jinchuriki," Kakuzu conceded. "But know this: your village is pretty much in our hands now. You have three days to come to us peacefully. For each passing day past that limit that you fail to show up, we will kill ten Takigakure inhabitants, ninja or civilian. For your people's sake, I hope we do meet again soon. Everybody, fall back!"

The hired missing-nin were relieved that their leader had chosen to retreat to fight another day. Almost in unison, they all leaped away, and disappeared among the trees, followed by Kakuzu.

"Fu!" the Chunin of the Animal Squad shouted, as they rushed to hug her.

"Guys, you have no idea how happy I am to see you!" Fu gushed, as tears fell down her cheeks.

"You're hurt. Let me heal you," Shino offered, as he placed a hand on one of her visible wounds, which started to glow with a green light.

"Fu, that Akatsuki said that your village was his. Can you explain what did he mean?" Kakashi asked, shedding his usual nonchalant tone for a far more serious one.

Fu nodded, and as Shino healed her, she told the Konoha ninja about Takigakure's attack, how those two Akatsuki and their army had pretty much crushed what resistance they had put up, mostly to get their hands on her and extract her Tailed Beast. She wasn't sure if Shibuki was still alive, but she hoped for the best.

"Akatsuki is far more powerful than we feared if they were able to take down a ninja village with such ease and celerity," Haku grimly noted. He remembered far too well the massive efforts the Kiri rebellion had to make in order to have a chance at conquering the city.

"It would be in any other village's case, but in Takigakure, not so much," Shino interjected.

"Huh? Why do you say that, Shino?" Naruto asked.

"Takigakure is one of the least populated ninja villages," it was Fu who replied. "And as such, most of our ninjas are always out doing missions in order to bring money to the village. That means that we don't have that many people protecting the village in case of attack."

"If that's the case, how is that your village hasn't been invaded before?" Haku asked.

"Because our village is actually hidden. Every way to enter the village is a fiercely guarded secret," Fu mentioned.

"It's true. Not even I have been considered trustworthy enough to be made privy of such secrets. Whenever I came to the village, I was told to put on a bag on my head as a ninja lead me both inside and outside," Shino explained.

"Wait, then how do your potential clients can ask for missions, if they can't even enter the village?" Kiba asked.

"We do have several outposts on nearby towns that take mission requests which are then sent to the village for their approval," Fu explained. "It may sound bothersome, but Takigakure has a pretty high rate of S-Rank missions successfully completed."

As Fu finished her brief explanation of how her village worked, Shino had also finished healing her.

"Okay, I healed most of your injuries, but it would be better if you were checked at a hospital, just in case. Can you stand up?" the Aburame heir asked.

"Yeah, thank you," Fu replied, as she got back on her feet. Then, almost all Konoha ninja minus Shino and Kakashi flinched and gasped. "Huh? What's wrong?"

"Just... WHAT THE HELL DO THEY FEED YOU!?" Naruto screamed.

While Naruto's reaction might seem exaggerated, it was far from unwarranted. Everybody remembered Fu as the short, scrawny girl whose massive strength was deceptive. It wasn't the case anymore.

Fu had grown. A lot. Now that she was standing up, they could see she pretty much towered above all her Konoha friends, standing a full head taller, and even had a few centimeters on Kakashi. And that was far from her only change. Her previous scrawny build had vanished, replaced by a far more muscular one, and while not as curvaceous as Hinata or even Tamaki, she still retained a feminine figure. Her affinity for extremely revealing white clothes remained the same, though.

"Wow, now that I get a better look at you guys... you got so short!" Fu observed, almost giggling. "I thought it was just Shino, but it seems that you Konoha guys need to eat more greens!"

"Sorry to interrupt this moment, but we need to take Fu back to Konoha. You can talk and do some catch up later," Kakashi interjected.

Nobody could deny the truth in those words, as they all nodded, and headed towards Konoha.

...

Takigakure, a few hours later

Hidan took a deep breath, and exhaled, moaning a little. He was in such good mood. He didn't remember when was the last time he witnessed such a blood spilling of this scale, and he was going to savor every second of it, make sure the sight of the corpses everywhere, burning buildings and overall wanton destruction would be burned into his retinas for the rest of his life.

Jashin-sama was happy, he could feel it in his heart. He had ample opportunity to use his Curse jutsu with powerful ninjas, the kind of sacrifice his god valued the most. In turn, Hidan's strength had multiplied, and would remain at that level in the foreseeable future.

The Takigakure defenders had surrendered already; those who were alive were on their knees with their arms on the back of their heads. Who would have guessed that taking over a village was so easy?

"Hidan-sama?" one of his cultists asked, as he walked towards him. "The village is now secured. Those who refused to surrender have been killed or managed to escape."

"Good. You did a good service to Jashin-sama, acolyte. You should feel proud," Hidan praised the cultist.

"Thank you," the acolyte said, making a slight bow. "What shall we do with the prisoners? Should we sacrifice them?"

"Tempting, but for the time being, let's keep them alive. I'd like to have some stock for the future," Hidan instructed. "Besides, I know for a fact that Kakuzu would get mad as shit if I decided to do something like that without asking him first, and I don't want my good mood to be ruined by one of his fucking dressing downs. Lock them down somewhere safe."

"As you wish, Hidan-sama," the acolyte replied, as he went to communicate Hidan's instructions to the rest of their forces.

At that moment, a group of ninjas entered the village. Everybody was startled for a bit, but relaxed upon realizing that they were part of their own forces, lead by the other Akatsuki.

"Speaking of the devil, he took his sweet time to get his sorry ass back," Hidan said, as he walked towards his partner. "Oi, Kakuzu!"

Kakuzu didn't greet Hidan. The Jashin high priest noticed that Kakuzu looked dour. Well, dourer than usual, since that mask made the Taki missing-nin a bit hard to read. The fact that he didn't appear to have the jinchuriki with him probably had something to do with it. He was holding something in one of his hands.

"Hey, why the long face?" Hidan asked in an irritatingly teasing tone. "No jinchuriki? Did she escape you, uh? Hehe!"

Kakuzu narrowed his eyes at Hidan, and clenched his fists. But refrained himself from attacking.

"Yes, the jinchuriki escaped, regrettably so. She was somehow able to call for reinforcements from another village," Kakuzu told his partner. He then took a look at the ravaged village. "It seems like things have gone well since my absence."

"They would have gone better if you did your job and caught the fucking girl," Hidan needled him, before deciding to ask about the item Kakuzu was carrying. "What the hell is that?"

Kakuzu showed Hidan what appeared to be a pair or rather large insect wings. "I managed to tear her wings apart. Though I admit I don't know if she can regrow them."

"Hehe, you did brought something of the jinchuriki after all. Too bad that shit's worthless," Hidan laughed. Upon seeing Kakuzu's scowl, he decided to change the topic. "But yeah, the village is pretty much ours now. I ordered all our prisoners to be locked up. It is okay with you?"

"Yes, you did good," Kakuzu nodded. "Even if the jinchuriki escaped from our grip, we still have this village and a good chunk of its inhabitants under our control. She will return, sooner rather than later."

"You know she won't return alone, right?" Hidan told him.

"I'm aware of the possibility. In fact, I already met some of the ninjas that she'll probably bring with her in an effort to take the village back," Kakuzu replied.

"And what are we going to do then? Should we ask help from Akatsuki?" Hidan asked.

Kakuzu shook his head. "No. She will make the mistake of thinking that we care about keeping this village. We'll use that for our advantage. Is the Takigakure leader alive?"

"Nobody touched him since you ordered it. How is more money going to solve anything?" Hidan asked, rolling his eyes.

"I wasn't talking about the bounty. Well, not yet. I noticed that the girl was quite attached to him. Listen, Hidan, this is what we're going to do..."

...

Konoha, a few hours later

The sun was starting to set when the group of eight finally arrived at Konoha. Exhaustion started to wash over their bodies, as they finally allowed themselves to relax, knowing that, for the time being, danger had finally passed.

"I think it's too late to give the Hokage the report of our mission, so we'll give it to him tomorrow," Kakashi decided, before his eye rested on Fu. "Now, I think that the first thing to do is to send you to the hospital to check that you're okay, or get you fixed if there's something that's not."

"I feel fine," Fu happily replied. "I really don't need to go."

"It's better not to take any chances. Come on, I'll walk you there," Shino offered.

Fu let out a defeated sigh, and slouched childishly. "Okaaaaay..."

"As for you, Naruto, the moment you see Hokage-sama, you should tell him of what had transpired in Taki. We're going to take decisive actions against the threat of the Akatsuki," Kakashi told the blond.

Naruto nodded in return. "I was planning to. Thankfully Taki is an ally of Konoha, so this won't be seen as meddling into another village's affair."

"Technically speaking, that's not the case anymore," Haku interjected. Upon seeing Naruto's confused stare, he elaborated. "Just like how Kiri's old alliances were nullified when Mei took over, Taki is now under Akatsuki's control. Their alliance with Konoha is void until the previous regime is reinstated."

"Even then, I doubt any village will take us attacking a village occupied by Akatsuki as a pretext for war," Naruto replied. "If they do, they'd be pledging their support to the organization."

"A fair point. But there's still much to discuss before we decide what to do," Kakashi replied. "We'll talk about this tomorrow. Now try to

get some rest all of you."

And the silver haired Jonin Body Flickered away, leaving a poof of smoke behind.

"Let's better do what Kakashi-sensei said. After running so fast toward Taki, and then back to Konoha, I'm kind of tired," Kiba mentioned. Akamaru yawned emphatically.

"Then it's a good thing we didn't have to fight, or else you'd be so exhausted, you wouldn't have been of any help," Tamaki sneered, giggling a little.

"Even asleep, I sure can be of more help than you at your best," Kiba fired back. "Come on Akamaru, let's go home."

Tamaki just stuck her tongue at the Inuzuka, before she let out a yawn. "I think I'll go home as well. See you later, guys."

With Tamaki gone, the Assault Squad was left alone.

"You know, sometimes I wonder when those two are going to get together," Hinata commented, letting out a giggle.

"I know, right? Their constant bickering is starting to get stale," Haku added.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Naruto asked his teammates.

"Kiba-kun and Tamaki-san," Hinata replied.

"Those two? Getting together?" Naruto asked in disbelief. "But they are constantly arguing!"

"Yeah. But deep down, they do care a lot for each other. They're simply afraid of confronting their mutual feelings," Hinata explained. "When they met, their animosity was genuine, but as soon as they got to know each other better, those feelings changed. They're simply too stubborn to admit it."

"None of the couples I know ever behave that way," Naruto pointed out.

"Maybe not at the beginning, but some started out that way. They won't argue as much once they move past that childish phase," Haku added as well.

"Well, I'm so glad that Hinata-hime and I were never that way. Otherwise, it would have suck," Naruto said.

"Just like how not all persons are the same, not all couples are the same either. We did start out as friends, but that doesn't necessarily apply to everybody," Hinata told him. "Anyway, I think I'm heading home. I have to apologize to Hanabi-chan for leaving in the middle of her fight. I also have to ask her how did it go."

"Oh damn, the Chunin Exams! I totally forgot about that!" Naruto sheepishly admitted. "I better do the same with Hagane and Kaida. Maybe I should buy them something just in case."

"Your little siblings seem to demand a lot from you," Haku observed. "I'm kind of worried about the time Seiichi-kun grows up."

After that, the three members of the Assault Squad went their separate ways.

...

The next day, just like with their own Chunin Exams, the promotion ceremony took place in front of the Hokage's Tower. So far, only one team was found worthy of being promoted to Chunin, and to no one's surprise, it was that composed by Hanabi, Hagane and Kaida. The three of them were proudly standing in the podium, holding their diplomas and flak jackets.

"Despite their youth and relative lack of experience, these girls and boy have proven in front of everybody that they're more than

deserving of the Chunin rank! Let's give them the congratulations they deserve!"

The public loudly cheered and clapped, as the newly minted Chunin smiled and waved at them. before they finally stepped down and joined the crowd, heading towards their respective families. Hikari, Hinata, and a group of other Hyugas were expecting Hanabi.

"Look mother, Chunin on my first try, just like nee-chan!" Hanabi proudly announced.

"In fact, you managed to become Chunin a year younger than I was," Hinata pointed out, smiling. "Then again, of the two of us, you're the one with the most talent, Hanabi-chan."

Hanabi crossed her arms, and frowned. "Yeah, sure. I know you only said that to make me feel better. You don't have to. I'm not a baby, you know? I'm aware of how strong you are, even before the Tenseigan."

"But Hanabi-chan, for mother and I you'll always be our baby," Hinata said, giggling.

Hanabi stuck her tongue at her sister, before she went to show her trophies to the rest of the Hyugas gathered there. Hinata, meanwhile, shook her head.

"Hanabi-chan's so blinded by her admiration towards me, that she can't see how much farther than me is she going to go," Hinata said.

"No matter how much stronger than you Hanabi becomes, she'll never stop kissing the ground you walk. You're an amazing big sister, Hinata," Hikari praised her, making Hinata to blush a little.

"Well... I try," Hinata sheepishly replied.

"Especially after you passed her half of your Six Paths Chakra so she could awaken a Tenseigan as well," Hikari recalled. "She will

never forget such a gesture, no matter what."

"I felt it was the right thing to do. I meant everything I said when you appointed me as the new clan head," Hinata firmly replied.

"By the way, how is the training with the Tenseigan going?" Hikari asked.

"Slowly, but we're progressing," Hinata replied. "We're still having some trouble with the flight, though."

"Flight is a very rare ability, so you won't find many teachers," Hikari pointed out. "As far as I know, there's a jutsu used in Iwa that allows one to fly by making reducing your weight. However, it's a fiercely guarded secret that's only taught from one Tsuchikage to the next. There may be another jutsu that allows one to fly, but I don't know any other."

"Wait... I do know somebody who can fly," Hinata's lips formed a smile. "In fact, we rescued and brought her to the village not long ago. I think she'll be more than happy to lend Hanabi-chan and I a hand."

Meanwhile, Hagane and Kaida were showing their diploma and flak jackets to their parents (Jiraiya was now among the crowd), Shizune, Shisui, their kids, and finally Naruto.

"It's a pity you had to go on that mission, Naruto-niisan, if you could had seen us," Kaida said.

"All Chunin Exam matches are recorded. I'm sure Naruto will be able to see you once Hokage-sama gives us a tape of it," Shizune pointed out.

"In fact, why don't I ask dad about it now? That way, we can see your matches tonight all together," Naruto suggested with a smile, as he looked at Jiraiya.

"Sure, I'll ask for a copy of the tapes. Being Hokage, there shouldn't be any problem," Jiraiya said with a shrug.

"That would be great!" Kaida agreed, nodding fervently.

"Alright then, it's settled," Naruto replied. "Say, dad, why don't you go to the tower to get the tape, and since we're at it, we discuss the Taki job more thoroughly?"

Jiraiya nodded. "Yes. Now that the Chunin Exams are finally over, I can spend more time and resources on working on the Akatsuki threat. Come on, let's go."

After bidding Tsunade, Shizune and all the kids a "see you later", Naruto and Jiraiya headed to the tower, while the rest went back to their respective homes.

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Hokage's Tower, Ten Minutes Later

Naruto thought that Jiraiya would take him to his office, but was surprised to see that they actually headed for the council room. There, three people were already waiting: Hiruzen Sarutobi, Rasa, and Mei Terumi.

"Kazekage-dono, Mizukage-dono, sorry for making you stay longer than you intended, but there's an important issue that needs to be addressed, and think it's to your interest," Jiraiya began, sounding ominous. "We got recent news that Takigakure has been invaded and taken over by the Akatsuki."

Both his fellow Kages and his predecessor Hokage reacted immediately. Shock was more evident in Rasa and Mei's faces, while Sarutobi merely frowned.

"C-Come again?" Mei asked, almost choking.

"That's... unbelievable..." Rasa added. "I know Akatsuki is powerful, but to think that they can topple a ninja village like that..."

"If I remember correctly, Takigakure had a jinchuriki. The only of the minor villages to have one," Hiruzen recalled. "What has been of them? Do Akatsuki have yet another Tailed Beast?"

"Thankfully no," it was Naruto who replied. "Fu, the jinchuriki, managed to contact me through the link of our Tailed Beasts, and we could save her before it was too late. She's now in Konoha, under our protection."

"If Akatsuki knows that, then this village is also a target for them," Mei somberly noted.

"Konoha's might is much greater than Taki. If they plan to attack our village, they're in for a nasty surprise," Jiraiya firmly stated, angry at the notion of Akatsuki daring to do such a thing.

"I wouldn't be so confident. Akatsuki is growing bolder with each passing day. If they can take down a village, even a minor one, I wouldn't assume they can't do the same with our villages," Rasa noted.

"The difference is that while Suna and Kiri don't have jinchuriki anymore, Konoha now houses two," Mei added.

"It's not the same," Naruto interceded. "Takigakure has a very low number of ninjas compared to our villages, and thus their defense force is much smaller as well. To compensate, their defenses rely mostly on their secret entrances. If somebody finds out about those entrances, well, getting an invading force into the village wouldn't be that hard."

"Even then, it would be wise if we reinforce our own defenses, just in case Akatsuki does dare to attack us," Hiruzen noted. Jiraiya nodded in return.

"Anyway, you can imagine the reason for which I requested your presence here," Jiraiya said. "We can't allow a village, now matter how small, to remain under Akatsuki's control. Konoha is coordinating a counter-attack with those Taki ninjas who escaped the invasion with their lives, or those who were away on missions while the invasion happened. I'd like for Suna and Kiri to lend us a hand, if possible."

A deafening silence fell upon the council room. Rasa was the first one to break it with a heavy sigh, before opening his mouth to speak.

"In another time I would have declined," Rasa admitted. "My loyalty is to Suna and Suna only, but given what Akatsuki did to us, and that if it wasn't for Konoha, my son would be dead, I think I can't decline such requests."

"Think that, by helping us weaken Akatsuki, you'll be protecting Suna from their threat," Hiruzen told Rasa.

Rasa, however, let out a snort. "Akatsuki already took what they wanted from Suna. I seriously doubt that they'll come after us again."

"That's an unwise line of thought, Kazekage-dono. After all, what do you think it will be of Suna, as well as pretty much every ninja village, once Akatsuki fulfill their goal and capture all Tailed Beasts?" Hiruzen asked.

Rasa's face lost all color upon thinking in such scenario. He gulped uneasily. "You make a fair point, Sarutobi-san. Suna will help you in your fight against this threat."

"I'm glad to hear that," Jiraiya said, as he turned his sight on the pregnant Mizukage. "How about you, Mizukage?"

"Given how much Konoha has done for Kiri, I have even less reason than the Kazekage to turn down such request," Mei admitted, smiling. "Not to mention, Sarutobi-san's words hold a lot of truth. We can't let this issue snowball to a point beyond no return. Though

keep in mind that, due the distance between our villages, moving Kiri ninjas all the way to Taki might take us a considerable amount of time. When is the counterattack due?"

"As soon as possible. Probably in less than a week's time. We already have a strategy to draw the Akatsuki out of the village, making the counterattack easier," Jiraiya stated.

Mei pondered the Hokage's words. "Very well then. Even if I can't promise that my forces will arrive in time, I'll also send help in the form of food, medicine and other supplies for Taki once the Akatsuki have been ousted and they begin rebuilding."

"Very well, thanks a lot for both your help, Kazekage-dono, Mizukage-dono," Jiraiya said, as both he, Hiruzen and Naruto bowed before them.

"Alright. In that case, I should better return to Suna and prepare our forces for the operation," Rasa stated.

"And I'll do the same as well," Mei replied.

"Alright. Then we can consider this meeting finished. I presume you'd want to return to your home villages as soon as possible," Jiraiya correctly sensed. "I'll start planning the counter-attack with my councilors immediately. I'll send you a toad messenger once we're ready to strike.

The other two Kage nodded, before they stood up and left the room.

...

Training Ground 8

Hinata and Hanabi were standing in front of Fu. The green haired jinchuriki's smile was wider than usual. She cleared her throat before she started to speak.

"Hello, and welcome to Fu's Fantastic Flight lessons! My name is Fu, but you may call me... Fu-sensei, hehe," the bubbly girl giggled. "It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Hinata and Hanabi looked at each other awkwardly, before a pair of Tenseigan rested on Fu again.

"Okay... what do we do first, Fu-sensei?"

"Let's start with some warm up exercises!" Fu brightly stated, as her two insect-like wings protruded from her back. "First, deploy your wings!"

Once again, the two Hyuga sisters stared at each other awkwardly, until Hanabi raised her hand.

"Yes, mini-Hinata?" Fu asked.

"My name is Hanabi," the annoyed Hyuga youth corrected. "And... we don't have wings."

Fu reacted as if she had a bucket of cold water splashed at her. "Say what?"

"What Hanabi said. We don't have wings," Hinata repeated.

"Then how can you fly?" Fu asked, almost indignant.

"We don't know, we just... can?" Hinata unsurely said.

Then, to prove her words were true, both Hinata and Hanabi's feet stopped touching the grassy ground, as the two sisters elevated about half a meter above it. Fu opened her eyes very wide as her iris shrunk. She then came closer to the floating sisters, and carefully inspected them.

"Amazing..." Fu said in almost a whisper. "You two are clearly floating..." she moved to inspect their backs. "... but you have no visible wings. This is unbelievable!"

"Can you still teach us how to fly?" Hanabi asked.

"Sure!" Fu cheerfully said, her previous amazement vanishing as if it was never there to begin with. "Though your lack of wings threw me off. I'll have to restart my teaching plan from scratch... oh well, improvising is always more fun!"

Hanabi leaned towards Hinata. "Nee-chan, do you think that this girl is qualified to teach us?" the younger sister asked.

"She may look a bit loopy, but Fu-sensei is a very strong kunoichi, and a Jonin. I'm sure we're in good hands," Hinata reassured Hanabi.

"Okay, first of all we should- OH MY GOD, A SQUIRREL!" Fu yelled, as she started chasing the rodent. "Come here, squirrel! I want you to become my pet!"

"... she's the only one who knows how to fly, so she'll have to do," Hinata said, letting out a defeated sigh.

...

Takigakure

On a safe room protected against potential spies, Kakuzu and Hidan were in front of an astral projection of the Akatsuki leader, and that unnamed woman that was always by his side.

"So, you managed to take over your former village, but the jinchuriki escaped, am I right?" the leader asked. Kakuzu's silence was all the answer he needed. "Disappointing."

"Oh come on, we took over a fucking village, give us some slack!" Hidan protested, throwing his hands in the air. "How is this different from what you guys did with Hanzo?"

"Because the world at large thinks that Hanzo is still alive and in charge of Amegakure, and thus nobody suspects that our village is

under Akatsuki's control," the woman harshly replied. "On the other hand, you embarked on open warfare. Upon seeing what we can do, the other villages will watch out for us."

"You talk as if that didn't happen already," Kakuzu replied.

"Everybody knows our involvement in the Kirigakure Civil War, as well as the village's previous state. Not to mention the ruckus caused by the abduction of the Kazekage's son. Han's capture was easy to hide due his self-imposed isolation, but we won't be able to do the same with the other jinchuriki. Besides, I promised that I'd increase Akatsuki's resources, and I brought a whole village."

"The jinchuriki is more valuable than any village, Kakuzu," the leader replied, fixing a hard stare on him. "Do not let your love for money deviate from what should be your mission. I really hope you have a plan to capture her."

"I do. I told her that for every day that passes before she surrenders to us, we'll start killing her fellow villagers in small groups," Kakuzu mentioned. "Hidan here is more than happy to carry such threat."

Hidan nodded fervently. "So many sacrifices for Jashin-sama... I can't believe we didn't do this before."

"I already anticipated that she'll bring reinforcements to Konoha in an attempt to retake the village. When she appears, taking advantage of the chaos of the ensuing battle, Hidan and I will isolate her and capture her," Kakuzu explained.

"You seem to be really confident in your plan," the woman noted.

"Aren't you afraid of losing the village while you're capturing the jinchuriki?" the leader asked.

"You yourself stated that the village comes second to the jinchuriki. And even if such thing happen, the other villages will think that Akatsuki is weaker than they thought and that there's nothing to be

afraid of, prompting them to lower their guard, and making catching future jinchuriki all the easier," Kakuzu explained.

There was a moment of tense silence as the leader pondered Kakuzu's words. He seemed to agreed, as his head moved in a nodding gesture.

"Very well. Given that you two proved to be competent in the past, I'll leave it to you two to fix the mistake you made. I hope to hear from you two soon," the leader ominously said, as he and his female partner's projections disappeared.

Kakuzu exited the safe room, followed by Hidan. The two thugs guarding it stood to attention when their boss walked past them, but quickly relaxed and went to do something else once the new leader of Takigakure no longer required their services. After that, the two Akatsuki exited the building they were in, which was Shibuki's old residence.

"Man, what a dress down leader-sama gave us," Hidan said, sounding amused, as he shook his head. "Are you sure that that bitch is coming back? If I were Konoha, I'd lock the jinchuriki up somewhere safe, toss the key into a river, and kill everybody who knew about her."

"Yes, that would be the wisest thing to do," Kakuzu would never imagined he'd indirectly call the religious fanatic 'wise'. "But given the way Konoha manages its jinchuriki, it won't be the case. She'll want to take part in the counterattack, she will argue that her strength and power are needed to beat us, and those Konoha fools, following feelings over reason, will let her. Then, we will capture her and let this wretched village burn to the ground."

"Leader-sama did make a good point there. Things didn't go according to the plan the last time. Why are you confident they will go now?" Hidan asked.

"The jinchuriki being able to call for help from Konoha being so far from the village was something I would have never foreseen. This time, however, will be different. Now it's our enemies' turn to move," Kakuzu answered. "I had much time to study both Konoha and its current Hokage. I know what they will do. If our goal was to keep this village, then I'd worry. But snatching the jinchuriki will be easy if you do what I say."

"We are always doing what you fucking say," Hidan dryly replied, rolling his eyes.

"Because I'm the one with the most experience. Even if it wasn't the case, I'm also the one with the most common sense," Kakuzu coldly replied, narrowing his eyes at his silver haired partner.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Your plan sounded all nice and shit, but how are we going to isolate the jinchuriki from the rest of the attack force?" Hidan questioned, raising an eyebrow. "Because I doubt that they be willing to leave her alone."

"I'm counting on that. That's where the previous leader of this village, Shibuki, comes to play. When I fought the two of them, I noticed they were pretty close. While they don't look to be related, they treated each other as if they were family. " Kakuzu stated.

"How the fuck does he have to do with this? Do you plan to use him as a hostage or something?" Hidan asked.

"Yes. I'm not going to force the jinchuriki to trade his life for hers, since I know such thing won't work. However, she will more than likely try to free him. But most of the forces will be preoccupied with taking the village back. So we'll take Shibuki away from the battle, to a battleground far away from the village, and we'll make sure no reinforcements can reach her," Kakuzu explained.

"Even then, if she's as retarded as to take the bait, she won't come alone," Hidan pointed out.

"No, she won't. But we should be more than able to deal with any rabble she's assigned as an escort," Kakuzu replied. He then handed Hidan something. "Take this."

Hidan looked at the item puzzled. "What the hell is this?"

Kakuzu explained Hidan what the item in question was.

"I see. But I don't think I'll need it. As long as Jashin-sama is with me, my enemies will never know victory," Hidan boasted.

"I don't doubt that. But keep it with you just in case," Kakuzu said in a warning tone. "Now, one last thing: the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails, a loud mouthed brat, will be more than likely one of the jinchuriki of the Seven Tails' escorts. He's a powerful master of Senjutsu, but I doubt he'll be able to bypass your immortality. I need you to deal with him, but I need you not to kill him either."

Hidan rolled his eyes, and snorted in annoyance. "I'm starting to get sick of this no killing rule..."

"The rule is just for the jinchuriki. You can go broke for the rest for all that I care," Kakuzu dismissively replied.

"In that case, I better prepare some worthy sacrifices to appease Jashin-sama beforehand," Hidan decided.

"Do as you wish. I'm going to prepare the village for the imminent attack, as well as the battlefield where we'll capture at least one jinchuriki," Kakuzu said, before he and his partner went their own ways.

Author's Note: Fu did survive this encounter. I can already hear all your collective gasps of relief.

Though it's not that she came out of this unscratched. Her home village now belongs to Akatsuki, and the man she loved

like an older brother is now their prisoner, and they plan to use him as bait for her. And while Fu might enjoy some peace in the next chapter, soon she'll have to address Kakuzu's threat and head to Takigakure in order to help her people.

Thanks to grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

Not much else to say here. Just tell me your thoughts on this chapter in a review, since reviews make me really, really, really happy.

Training for the Dangers to Come

Author's Note: I love how everybody's enjoying Fu's return. Well, here's more Fu goodness for you to dive into:

Chapter 61:

Training for the Dangers to Come

or

Teaching is not as easy as it looks

Hokage's Tower

It was early in the morning, and Naruto knew that his father wouldn't have any kind of meeting until at least two hours. However, when he arrived at his office, he found through Jiraiya's secretary that it wasn't the case, as somebody was already in the office discussing something with the Hokage.

"But... who the hell requests a meeting with the Hokage this soon?" Naruto asked, a bit frustrated.

"... you did?" the secretary, a middle aged woman with graying brown hair, replied. "And if you're wondering no, I'm not allowed to disclose such information with anybody. Not even with his son."

Naruto huffed, and crossed his arms. "And how long until dad's free again? This is kind of important!"

"Everybody who wants to meet the Hokage thinks they have important matters to discuss," the secretary snarked at Naruto.

Fortunately, the blond didn't have to wait much, and in a few minutes, the door to the office opened, and the last person Naruto

was expecting his dad would see this soon in the morning walked out.

"Ino?" Naruto asked, confused.

"Oh, hello, Naruto. Sorry if you wanted to talk with your dad and I made you wait. He's free now," Ino said with a friendly smile.

"What are you doing here?" Naruto asked. He sounded more curious than demanding.

"I was giving Hokage-sama the report of my latest mission," Ino replied, as if stating something obvious.

"At this hour?" Naruto asked, scratching his temple. There was something fishy about Ino, but couldn't tell what.

Ino merely shrugged. "The sooner I do it, the sooner it's out of my hair. Anyway, I should get going, I have plenty of stuff to do today. See you later, Naruto!" Ino happily waved him goodbye as she left the office.

Naruto shrugged, and entered the Hokage's office, where Jiraiya was sitting by his desk.

"Oh, hello, Naruto. What can I do for you?" Jiraiya asked.

"I came to ask you something. But first, what was Ino doing here?" Naruto asked.

"She was giving me the report of her latest mission. Nothing you should worry about," Jiraiya added, noticing that Naruto's encounter with Ino left him a bit uneasy. "Anyway, what do you want to ask me?"

Naruto took a seat. "It's about Fu."

...

Land of the Waterfalls, undisclosed location

Kakashi was leaping from one tree branch to the other, as he was heading towards his destination. He looked at the sun, at his highest point in the sky, indicating it was high noon. The Copy Ninja felt satisfied with how fast he had managed to reach the country that hosted one of their former allies. Though with some luck, said alliance should be restored.

"Okay..." Kakashi mumbled, looking around. "This is the zone, but I have no idea where I should go..."

The silver haired Jonin continued to move forward, expecting to see some patrols or sentries that may direct him to the place he should go. He wondered if he should summon his tracking dogs and have them find the place for him.

His thoughts were interrupted when his uncovered eye saw multiple kunai flying at him from higher tree branches. Fast as lightning, Kakashi pulled a kunai of his own, and while jumping backwards, deflected the incoming knives he was unable to dodge.

"Ah, I was wondering where you'd guys show up," Kakashi nonchalantly said as he let himself fall to the ground below.

Two ninja wearing Takigakure headbands emerged from the canopies, a woman in her twenties with light blue hair tied in a ponytail, and a tall man about ten years older than her, with undercut black hair, a moustache and a small goatee. The man started to make hand seals.

"Water Release: Syrup Shot!"

The man expelled a stream blue jelly-like liquid from his mouth, which immobilized Kakashi and glued him to the ground when it hit his body.

"Yakari, now!" the man stated.

The blue haired woman nodded as he leaped at Kakashi, doing hand seals before winding her fist back.

"Fire Release: Combusting Fist!"

Yakari's fist burst into flames, before punching Kakashi with it, producing a considerable fiery blast. However, when the smoke caused by the explosion dispelled, there was only a charred log behind, much to her shock.

"Oh, shit! Where is he?" the Taki kunoichi asked.

"Right here," Kakashi said, not dropping his nonchalant tone, as he appeared behind the mustachioed man, and placed a kunai on his throat. "Whew, you guys know how to treat a guest, don't you? With such a warm welcome, no wonder Hokage-sama send me to deliver a mere message."

"Who are you? What do you want?" Yakari angrily asked, as she leaped into a branch close to Kakashi and the male Taki ninja.

"My name is Kakashi Hatake. I've been sent here by Jiraiya, Hokage of Konoha, in order to inform the Takigakure Resistance -which I presume you two are members of- about the incoming attack on your village to drive the Akatsuki out."

There was a moment of silence, as if the two ninjas were trying to discern if Kakashi's words were true, or if it was a trick by their enemy.

"Taeshi?" Yakari asked her partner.

Taeshi nodded, making sure not to touch Kakashi's kunai. "He... he's telling the truth."

"Oh, a sensor type, I see," Kakashi said, as he removed the kunai from Taeshi's throat. "Now that everything's been clarified, can you take me to your base camp? Like I said before, I have a message

that I have to deliver to whoever is in charge of the Resistance. And no, I can't tell you the message to you two. My orders explicitly said the Resistance leader, or leaders if there's more than one," Kakashi clarified, before the two sentries had the chance to protest.

"Alright, it seems that you're telling the truth. We'll take you there," Taeshi said, as he started to look for something inside his ninja tool pouch.

"Sorry for attacking you, Kakashi-san," Yakari apologized, as she made a slight head bow. "But you have to understand our situation, with our village lost-"

"Don't worry," Kakashi said, dismissing her apology with a hand wave. "I know what you guys are going through, and I think I wouldn't be too trusting with strangers if I were in your shoes."

"Before we go, however, you must put this on your head," Taeshi said, as he handed Kakashi a black cotton bag. "Nothing personal, but all non-Taki ninjas, even allies from other villages, can't know the location of our base."

"Of course. I can't believe I wasn't expecting it," Kakashi said, as he took the bag and placed it on his head. "Guess I won't be able to enjoy the sights this country has to offer while you guys take me there. Pity."

Taeshi carried the blinded Kakashi piggyback as he and his partner headed towards their base camp. After about fifteen minutes - Kakashi was sure they made several detours so he'd have a harder time remembering the way with his other senses, they arrived the base camp, and the silver haired Jonin was allowed to see again.

Kakashi found himself entering campsite. It was exactly as he imagined: several rows of camping tents, some bigger than others, a few piles of crates containing what he guessed would be supplies of the both the battle kind, such a kunai and shuriken, and necessary goods like food or medicine, torches scattered around -all of them

unlit, given that it was daytime-, and Taki ninjas doing a variety of activities, such as menial tasks, talking, sparring, sharpening their weapons, and so on...

The Copy Ninja saw a small group of Taki ninjas walking towards him. Leading them was a square-jawed man with spiky black hair. For some reason, he had the feeling he had seen this man somewhere.

"Yoro-sama," Yakari began. "This is Kakashi Hatake, from Konoha. He brings news from his village."

"Very well then. Welcome to our camp. This pretty much what the true Takigakure is now," Yoro told Kakashi, as he spread his arms in an enthusiastic manner.

"Thankfully, things won't stay like this for much longer. Hokage-sama has ensured the cooperation of both Sunagakure and Kirigakure. With three Great Villages joining forces, retaking Takigakure will be child's play," Kakashi explained, as he gave Yoro an -eye-smile.

Yoro smiled in return, letting out a sigh of relief. "It's really good to hear that. Morale will improve a lot when our comrades hear we're going to have such a huge support."

"Hokage-sama knows the threat of Akatsuki, especially since his oldest son is a jinchuuriki," Kakashi told him.

"Oh, speaking of which, what happened with Fu? I heard rumors that she managed to escape to Konoha, but we were unable to confirm them. Is that true? Is she in Konoha? Is she alright?"

"Fu is alright, you have nothing to worry about her. We're taking good care of her," Kakashi said in a reassuring manner.

Yoro chuckled. "Heh, good luck with that. Fu can be quite the real handful, despite her age and rank. She didn't grow up, she just became bigger."

"Oh, now I remember," Kakashi said in realization. "You were one of the two ninjas that came with her during the past Chunin Exams held in Konoha, right?"

Yoro laughed awkwardly. "I can't believe you still remember that. I thought that Fu would get all the spotlight, given that Kegon and I faked our defeats during the preliminaries."

"I usually have very good memory for faces," Kakashi stated. "I knew that there was something suspicious about you two, but when I heard that you were Jonin..."

"Shibuki-sama was afraid that sending Fu to another village unprotected would be too risky. That's why he sent us with her," Yoro explained.

"Wait, doesn't Fu had her own teammates or sensei? Why did you have to go through such charade that the Hokage ended up finding out anyway?" Kakashi asked.

"Well, Fu... she doesn't have a squad in the traditional sense of the word," Yoro replied, sounding uneasy.

Kakashi raised his only visible eyebrow. "Elaborate, please."

"Fu had some trouble adapting to her squadmates. Between her... exuberant and eccentric personality, status as a jinchuuriki, and closeness with our village leader, she always ended up on bad terms with her teammates. She went through four different teams before we finally give up and decided to give her personalized tutoring," Yoro explained.

"I see. It wasn't just one of two things, but several elements that gave her a hard time making friends and connecting with others," Kakashi pointed out.

Yoro nodded. "Which was a pity, since Fu is one of friendliest persons that ever walked this world. We were glad she able to make

friends during her short stay in Konoha. If she wasn't a jinchuriki, I'm sure Shibuki-sama would have let her go there for a visit from time to time."

"Though it's no coincidence that the people she ended up befriending were the friends and former classmates of Naruto Uzumaki, our village's jinchuriki. They more than likely were able to see past her status and judge her by the strength of her character."

"Knowing that she's okay in Konoha will also act as moral booster for our troops. We're the only minor village with a jinchuriki, and she's like a symbol of pride for all of us," Yoro stated.

"Soon you'll be proud of her, though not for the beast that hosts inside her body, but by the actions she will take to help liberate the village," Kakashi thought.

...

Training Ground 8

"One of the requirements for a proper flight is to create a shield of chakra around your body, but mostly your face," Fu explained. "Not only to protect your body from the cold of higher altitudes, but also to stop dirt floating in the air to get into your eyes, as well as not accidentally swallow insects. Unless you like to do that, I'm not one to judge. Albeit Shino-kun isn't going to like if you do such a thing..."

As Fu's mind drifted into one of her rather usual aimless ramblings, Hinata and Hanabi followed their teacher through the sky. Right now, they were only slowly flying in circles as they learned the basics of proper flight.

The Hyuga sisters were rather surprised to learn how many things there were to flying. Fu made it look so easy, but that was only the years of experience showing. The chakra shield was only the tip of the iceberg: they had to learn how to sense wind currents in order to maximize their speed, how to jump from one wind current to the

next, choose the proper attitude to fly depending on what speed did you want to go, adapt their stomachs to resist height-induced stomach sickness, and many more things. They would take a lot of time before they could reach Fu's level of expertise.

The mint haired girl interrupted her own ramble when she noticed that Hinata and Hanabi were struggling to keep her pace. She stopped mid air.

"Uh, am I going too fast?" she asked them.

The sisters stopped in front of her. At the very least, they had mastered how to remain in mid air stationary. Fu guessed it was their lack of a need for wings that allowed her to master rather quickly something she still had trouble with.

"Flying while keeping the shield active is far more complicated than I would have guessed," Hanabi admitted, her older sister nodding in agreement.

"Eh, it's like those chakra control exercises. Fighting somebody on a wall or on water was hard at first, but you get the hang of it with enough practice," Fu nonchalantly explained, as she shrugged. "So, you want to take a rest?"

Hinata looked at Hanabi, who looked back at her pleadingly.

"Yes, please. It would be appreciated," Hinata replied.

Fu's mouth formed a cheery smile. "Alright then!"

And with that, the three kunoichi landed on the ground. Fu's wings disappeared into her body. Hinata and Hanabi started to pant, as if they just made some brutal training exercise with Maito Gai.

"My, my, look at how exhausted you look!" Fu said, sounding so bright it was borderline obnoxious. "I'm not that strict of a teacher, am I?"

"No, but this... is, well... it's way harder than it looks," Hanabi replied between pants. Then, she smiled. "But it's really cool!"

"I know, right?" Fu replied, just as excited. "Those landwalkers will never know the amazing feeling of seeing the world from so high above. That's why, when I met Shino for the first time, I HAD to share such an experience with him. Occasional screaming aside, I think he enjoyed it."

"Hey, nee-chan, maybe you should take Naruto to a flying date!" Hanabi happily suggested.

"Now, that's something I wouldn't mind trying," Hinata said, as her lips formed a smile while her mind imagined the possibilities. "Though I don't think I'm strong enough to carry Naruto-kun into the air for long..."

"Oh, don't worry, I have the best solution! Just follow the same training Shibuki gave me, and soon your arms will be as thick as mine!" Fu proudly boasted as she flexed her rather impressive biceps.

"That's... tempting, but I think I'm going to pass," Hinata replied, trying to sound as polite as possible. "For the time being, let's stick to the flight, okay?"

Fu shrugged. "Your loss."

"Hey!" a new voice called.

The three girls turned towards the direction of the newcomer, and saw a smiling Naruto walking towards them.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata said, as she ran at him with renewed forces. She wrapped her arms around his neck and greeted him with a kiss on his lips.

"Hello, Hime," Naruto happily replied. "So, how's the training going?"

"Slow, but we're progressing," Hinata replied. "Did you come here to see us train?"

"Yes, but that's not the only thing," Naruto said. He then looked at the mint haired girl. "There's something I want to talk with Fu about."

Fu perked up upon hearing her name. "Oh, and what that would be?"

"I was wondering... are you able to tap into your Tailed Beasts' power?" Naruto asked.

Fu's smile instantly vanished, replaced by shock, then by another smile, except this time, it was far more subdued. She averted her gaze, looking at her feet.

"Wow, you don't pull any punches, do you? Hehe," she laughed weakly. "To answer that, no. I don't know how to use the power of my Beast."

"Did somebody in the village teach you how? Or have you ever practiced on your own?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto-kun, stop," Hinata gently requested. "Don't you see that you're making her uncomfortable? Such topic clearly troubles her."

Naruto sighed. "I know, Hime. But this is important," the blond stated, before his eyes turned back at Fu, who rubbed her arm as she continued averting eye contact.

"The answer to those questions are 'no' either," Fu replied. "After, well... you do remember what happened in my fight against Gaara almost three years ago, right?"

Naruto nodded. "It's something hard to forget. Did that experience make you fearful of the Tailed Beasts' power?"

Fu nodded. "I lost control. The Tailed Beast took over. And if the pale redhead didn't knock me out... who knows what would have

happened. I brought great shame to both Shibuki and my village with such display."

Both Naruto and Hinata were taken aback, even if they managed to hide their reaction. Hearing Fu, somebody so carefree who gave the impression that she didn't have a care in the world about whatever other people think of her, admitting feeling ashamed, then that past event had to affect her way deeper than what she let others believe at that time.

"From that day onwards, I swore that I'd never let that incident repeat again. And that means no more using Lucky Seven's chakra, other than the wings," Fu said in determination, as she raised her sight and looked at Naruto directly in the eye.

"I see. And is there anything I can do to change your mind in that front?" Naruto asked, as she tried to give Fu a reassuring smile.

Fu raised an eyebrow. "Why do you want me to do that?"

"Think about it. Akatsuki are after us, and we're going to need every resource at our disposal to fight them. Using our Beasts' chakra would can give us the edge against the enemy in battle," Naruto told her.

Fu looked unconvinced. "What kind of control do you have over the Fox?"

Naruto chuckled awkwardly. "Eh, not much. I can use his chakra to some degree, usually to one or two tails, if I push it. And even then I tend to have a hard time keeping in control."

The mint haired girl crossed her arms over her chest. "So you have the same problems as me. And you expect me to learn to use the power of Lucky Seven when you can't do the same with the Fox?"

"In my case, I have something else that serves as a replacement: Sage Mode."

"Sage Mode? Never heard of that," Fu replied.

"It's not an art many people are able to master. Long story short, you can draw nature's ambient energy and mix it with your own chakra. As a result, your body gets a massive boost in strength and endurance, and ninjutsu becomes far more powerful," Naruto explained. "The requirement to learn Sage Mode is that you need to have a rather large chakra pool in order to properly mix nature energy with your chakra. The larger your reserves, the easier you'll master Sage Mode."

When Naruto and Jiraiya went to Mount Myoboku to learn Sage Mode -or in the white haired man's case, to perfect it-, Naruto took a little more than a week to master it, and about half of that time was spent trying to understand how nature energy worked. Naruto even figured out a way to work around the Nine Tails making merging with Fukasaku or Shima impossible by using Shadow clones.

Naturally, Jiraiya was half amazed, half indignant, and wholly shocked, to see Naruto mastering Sage Mode in such a short amount of time while he struggled.

It was later revealed that the reason Naruto had such an easy time with nature energy was his colossal chakra reserves. It was like dissolving a spoonful of sugar in water; you'd have a hard time dissolving it on a few drops of water, but no problem with a large bucket. That's why large chakra reserves were a must to master Senjutsu.

So with that information, Jiraiya trained as much as he could in order to expand his chakra reserves until he got an acceptable level of control. Now, he only needed to merge with Fukasaku alone in order to activate Sage Mode, and could also use clones to gather nature energy like Naruto did.

"That sounds like fun! Why don't you teach me Sage Mode instead? I have pretty huge chakra reserves!" Fu excitedly suggested.

"I want to learn that too!" Hanabi piped in. "My chakra reserves got a boost after I awakened the Tenseigan!"

"And I'd love to teach it to you, but it's not that easy," Naruto replied, making the two girls to pout a little. "In order to be able to draw nature energy, you first need to get a taste out of it."

"How did you do it then?" Fu inquired.

"The toads of Mount Myoboku have some special oil that, when applied to the skin, makes your body draw nature energy on its own," Fu opened her mouth, but Naruto interrupted her. "And before you ask, no, you can't use that oil. The oil evaporates in a few seconds if it's taken out of Mount Myoboku. I don't know why."

"Maybe we could go to Mount Myoboku then?" Hanabi asked, almost pleading.

Naruto shook his head again. "Only toad summoners can go there. And before you ask to become one, I find that unlikely. Summon tribes almost never accept more than two summoners at once."

Both Fu and Hanabi slumped in defeat, letting out depressed sighs.

"With so many obstacles, there's little wonder as for why there are so few Sages out there," Hinata commented.

"Besides," Naruto said, looking at Hanabi. "Why do you want to be a Sage so much? You already have the Tenseigan. From what I heard, it's a power beyond our wildest imagination."

"Duh, so I can have both," Hanabi replied, as if stating something obvious. "I'll do whatever it takes to be a kickass kunoichi like neechan!" she proudly stated, before throwing two quick punches into the air.

"I think you should focus on learning how to use the Tenseigan," Naruto said good naturedly. Then, he looked at Fu. "And you should

try to learn to control your Tailed Beast's chakra. To some degree at least."

Fu let out a sigh. "Okay, you win. You're no fun, you know that?"

"Oh, I'm plenty of fun!" Naruto replied, with a wide grin.

"So, who's going to train me to do it? You?" Fu asked.

"No, me!" a new male voice said, as Jiraiya landed behind Naruto, and started to make poses. "The Toad Sage of Mount Myoboku! The author of the successful Icha Icha Series! Konoha's Powerful and Handsome Fifth Hokage! The Legendary Sannin, Jiraiya!"

"Hokage-sama?" Hinata asked.

"Were you hidden near here all the time until you got a cue to come out?" Hanabi asked in disbelief.

"So what if I did? There's nothing wrong with being a little theatrical!" Jiraiya protested.

"You're going to train me? Nice!" Fu chirped.

Jiraiya's brow furrowed. "Nice? A living legend like yours truly is going to train you, and that's all what you have to say?"

"That's... very nice?" Fu asked, looking as if she trying really hard to think something else. "Is that better?"

"Uh, with all due respect Hokage-sama, I know it might not be my place to ask, but aren't you supposed to be working right now?" Hinata asked, trying to sound as deferential as possible.

"And I am. I'm a shadow clone reinforced with fuinjutsu for increased durability," Jiraiya explained. "Anyway, let's get to the training already! You too, Naruto! It's been a while since we last trained you on the Nine Tails' chakra!"

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Training Ground Three

After Hinata and Hanabi went home, Jiraiya took Naruto and Fu to another training field so he could start their specialized training.

"Okay, we'll invade Takigakure in a few days, so we'll only have time to teach you some basic stuff," Jiraiya's clone began. "First of all, tell me what do you know about your Tailed Beast."

Fu raised an eyebrow, looking a bit lost. "Uh... not much, honestly. Is it important?"

"It is," it was Naruto who answered. "The more you know about your Tailed Beast, the better you'll be able to use its power. Sometimes you'll need to ask for power. Others, you'll be able to take it by force. I mostly need to ask the Nine Tails for his chakra, but sometimes I'm able to do it without his permission."

"If you can do it without his permission, what stops you from doing it at all times?" Fu asked.

"Because when I do that, I usually do it unwittingly. If I'm overwhelmed by an intense emotion, like anger, I'm able to draw the Nine Tails' chakra. But I'm at risk of losing myself to the rage when doing it," Naruto explained.

Fu's eyes saddened. "Like what happened to me when I drank the Hero Water."

"Indeed. The water allowed you to tap into your Beast's chakra freely, but it also allowed it to influence you to a greater degree," Jiraiya interjected.

"In my experience, when it's the Beast the one who allows you to use their chakra, it's when there's the least risk in using it," Naruto added.

"Because you're in a calmer state of mind?" Fu guessed.

"Exactly," Naruto told her. Fu smiled and clapped childishly upon guessing it right. "That's why the first step is to try to create a bond with your Tailed Beast so they'll be willing to lend you their chakra."

Fu started to grow uneasy, as she started to rub her arm. "Uh... do you think that's a good idea?"

"Don't worry, I'm here if things go out of control. I have a set of sealing tags able to suppress Tailed Beast chakra," Jiraiya assured her.

"Well, we can try but..." Fu began, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"But?" Naruto asked.

"... but after the Chunin Exams, I kinda rebuffed all of Lucky Seven's attempts to talk with me. I don't think she'll be very eager to let it go."

Naruto was going to point out that it was thanks to her Tailed Beast that she was able to call for help and evade Akatsuki. But then again, it could also be the Beast saving her own skin. After all, he used a similar trick with the Nine Tails in order to get his chakra.

"Okay, now, let's try to make contact with your tailed beast. Given that we have two jinchuriki, I'll like to try something that I have been thinking. First of all, sit in front of each other with your legs crossed." Jiraiya instructed. Naruto and Fu did so. "Okay, now hold your hands."

"Uhh..."

"Eh..."

This time, the two teens weren't as obedient. Both of them started to feel a bit uneasy. Jiraiya just rolled his eyes and groaned.

"Come on, I know you two have a significant other, but I'm only asking you to hold hands, not to kiss!" an exasperated Jiraiya snapped. Naruto and Fu quickly obeyed the Hokage. "Okay, now close your eyes, and try to synchronize your chakra with each other. As you do, think in your Tailed Beast, and let your chakra drag you to them..."

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Jiraiya's voice started to sound more and more distant, as if the Sannin was slowly walking away. Naruto was already aware of what was going on, but it was something new to the green haired girl.

"Hokage-sama? What do we do now?" Fu asked, but got no response. "Hokage-sama?"

"He's no longer with us. At least not in this place. Open your eyes," Naruto instructed.

Fu did so, and gasped. She was no longer on the grassy training field, but some sort of... she was unable to find the word that properly described the place. It was some kind of large chamber made of a nondescript light brown material. Several torches on the walls provided some dim light to the place.

"Where are we?" Fu asked.

"Since you're a jinchuriki, a pocket dimension exists within you where your Tailed Beast is sealed. I presume this is such place," Naruto explained.

But much to the blond's confusion, Fu shook her head.

"No, I already talked to Lucky Seven before, and this place looks nowhere like where she's sealed," Fu replied. "Maybe this is your seal?"

"It's both, and it's neither," a new voice said, a voice that was foreign to Fu but familiar to Naruto.

"Nine Tails?" the Konoha ninja asked.

Wordlessly, Naruto and Fu started to walk towards the place the voice came from. Much to their surprise, when they reached one of the chamber's end, they saw two gigantic cell gates. The Nine Tails was in the one to the left, while the Seven Tails was in the rightmost one.

"Whoa! What the-?"

"Since you synchronized your chakra, the dimensions where we're sealed have been temporarily merged," the Seven Tails explained.

"Not that it's too big of a change for us, as you can see," the Fox dryly said as he flicked one of the heavy bars with one of his fingers.

"Hey, at least we now have each other to make us company," the giant beetle chimed in.

"I take that back. It's change for the WORSE," the Nine Tails grumbled.

"Awww, don't be like that brother," the Seven Tails whined.
"You must feel all lonely on that cage. I certainly do."

"I am. But then I think that it could be sealed with you or the rest of our dim-witted siblings," the Nine Tails fired back.

"Enough you two!" Naruto shouted. "We didn't come here to see you squabble."

The Nine Tails scoffed. **"I couldn't care less about what you two came to do here."**

"I do! What did you come here?" the giant beetle asked excitedly.

"Wow, this beast is almost as overexcitable as Fu. You'd think they would get along just fine," Naruto wondered. "We came here to try to fix things up between you two. I know that the Fox is a lost cause, but from what I see of you, there might still be hope."

"There is!" the Seven Tails happily chirped. Fu crossed her arms and looked away. It was obvious that the memory of the Chunin Exams was still in her mind despite being almost three years ago. **"I'm willing to help her, but she doesn't want to. Not even when that Akatsuki guy almost got us."**

"You already proved to me you can't be trusted! If that pale redhead wasn't as strong as he was, we could have killed him!" Fu protested.

"Oh come on, the boy had Shukaku with him, there's no way we could have make any permanent damage," the giant beetle feebly protested. **"Besides... it was the first moment in a long time that I had some semblance of freedom, so I got a bit... carried away."**

Fu, however, continued to give her Tailed Beast the cold shoulder.

"You should at least listen to her, she's willing to cooperate with you," Naruto advised Fu. "The Nine Tails only threatens to kill me and everyone I love at every opportunity."

"Yes, and you better remember those words, you puny human!" the Nine Tails growled, but Naruto ignored him.

"See?" he told Fu, as he rolled his eyes.

Fu still looked unconvinced, but decided to listen to her fellow jinchuriki.

"I guess I could give her another chance... since these Akatsuki guys are a rather big threat and I'm going to need more power..." Fu weakly conceded.

"See? That's the spirit! The next time we face that guy, use my power and tables will turn!" the Seven Tails happily claimed.

"I still have the feeling that you only want to have a chance to escape your seal..." Fu grumbled.

"Can you blame me?" the Seven Tails replied. **"But don't worry, I have my priorities straight. It's not that I could keep a low profile in my true form... but anyway! If you don't trust me, just try using a little of my power. Enough to make a difference, but still not enough to let me influence you. Deal?"**

Fu remained silent, but visibly conflicted. After she silently pondered her options, she reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"Alright. But the moment you step out of your bounds... !" Fu threatened, as she pointed an accusatory index finger at the caged beast.

"I get it girl! You won't have to worry, promise!" the Seven Tails said, raising all six arms defensively. **"Okay then, let's get started!"**

"Wait, you want to give me your power right now?" the green haired girl asked.

"Why not? That way you can get a taste after such long time. Plus even I was tricking you and was biding my time to escape - hypothetically speaking, of course!- you have that Jiraiya guy that can suppress my chakra," the Seven Tails explained.

Fu sighed. "Okay then."

"Yay! You're SO going to enjoy this!" the giant Beetle cheerfully said, as a wave of reddish-orange chakra emerged from her cage and enveloped Fu.

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Both Naruto and Fu opened their eyes, and found themselves when they were before they were transported to that odd mental dimension, still sitting and holding both hands. The only difference is the reddish-orange aura that surrounded Fu's body.

"Given the results, I take it went well?" Jiraiya asked, snapping the two teens back into the real world.

They both stood up as Naruto nodded. "Yeah, the Seven Tails is far more reasonable than the stupid Fox."

"I heard that!"

"I know, I don't care,"

"Well, Fu, how do you feel?" Jiraiya asked.

Before answering, the green haired girl took a few seconds to contemplate her glowing hand, as if it was a new part of her body.

"It feels... oddly nice. It doesn't feel like that time in the Chunin Exams," Fu explained.

"There are many reasons for that. For once, you're using much less Tailed Beast chakra. You also aren't under the effect of the Hero Water either," Jiraiya explained. "Say, how about a spar against Naruto to test your new power?"

Fu enthusiastically nodded. "Yes!"

Naruto smirked. "Okay then, bring it on!"

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Hyuga State, next day

Much to the Hyuga sisters' disappointment, Fu wouldn't be able to train them in the art of flying, since the green haired girl herself was undergoing some training of her own with the Hokage and Naruto on

how to control her jinchuriki powers. Not that they didn't have anything to do, since their training to control the Tenseigan had just barely begun. They simply enjoyed flight practice much more.

Right now, the two sisters were in the state's ample backyard, practicing their telekinetic/gravity based powers -nobody really knew what those powers were- by stacking concrete blocks on top of each other, forming a tower. The point of this exercise was to test the limits of their power by lifting and manipulating large, heavy objects. Another similar exercise was to use lots of tiny bits of wood, which helped them refine their control by handling multiple small objects.

Watching over their training was Takuya, the High Priest of the Acolytes. Despite not having a Tenseigan -not even a Byakugan- the man proved himself to be a competent teacher.

"I've read the scrolls and books detailing the powers of the Tenseigan many times during my life. If I had one, I'm confident that I'd be able to master its powers with reasonable aptitude," the old man had replied when Hanabi pointed such thing out.

"Can I read those scrolls too? I'd prefer to choose what I get to train on," Hanabi said, as she lazily placed a block on the top of the tower, which briefly threatened to fall.

"Hanabi-sama, training can't be done in the order we wish. I know these exercises must be tedious, but the Tenseigan is no ordinary ability, and great skill honed through practice is needed in order to fully master it," Takuya patiently explained.

"There HAS to be a better way to learn this," Hanabi said as she stomped towards the small pile of books and scrolls that were resting on a bench, which Takuya was using for their training. The young, impatient Hyuga skimmed over the texts, until she found something worth her interest. "Aha! This sounds pretty exciting! Why don't you teach us how to do this?"

Takuya walked towards Hanabi, picked up the scroll the young girl was holding, and read it. A disproving expression appeared on his face.

"The Truth Seeking Ball? I think this is far too advanced for somebody who had just begun her training," Takuya said, shaking his head.

"Can I see what this 'Truth Seeking Ball' is?" Hinata asked, walking towards her teacher.

Takuya nodded and wordlessly handed the Hyuga Leader the scroll.

Truth Seeking Ball

Also called Truthseeker Orbs, this jutsu is the ultimate elemental combination, as they're composed of all five basic elements, as well as Yin and Yang. Across history, very few individuals managed to acquire this power, as it is not something a normal human being can attain, regardless of their strength, skill or determination...

While she found such description fascinating, there was something about it that made little sense.

"Wait a minute," Hinata said, as she stopped reading. "In order to combine two elements, one need to have affinity to said elements, and I know it's neither the case with Hanabi nor me. We had our elemental affinities tested. I'm just lightning, and she's just fire."

This seemed to amuse Takuya. "But you tested your affinities before awakening the Tenseigan, right?"

"Yes, but awakening it didn't change our affinities," Hinata replied. Seeing Takuya's expression, her confidence in her words faltered. "... right?"

"Why do you have to take my word for it? I'm sure you can see it for yourselves if I'm right or not," Takuya told them.

Hinata wordlessly left the backyard. She returned a couple minutes later with two pieces of Chakra Litmus paper, and handed one to Hanabi.

"Okay, let's see," Hinata said, as she and Hanabi channeled their chakra into the paper. "WHOA!"

Much to the sisters' shock, the paper quickly crumbled while turning wet, was sliced into multiple bits that turned almost immediately into dust, which ignited into small explosions as if it were gunpowder.

"W-What...?" Hinata dumbly stammered.

"So, do you believe me now, Hinata-sama?" Takuya asked, savoring the moment of validation. Hinata silently nodded.

"This... this... this is SO COOL!" Hanabi loudly cheered, as she threw both fists into the air. "All five elements! Just wait until I tell Kaida! She's going to be so jealous!"

While Hanabi continued cheering and planning all the cool things she'll do with all five elements at her disposal, Hinata continued to read the scroll. Once again, she stopped reading when she reached something that left her a bit puzzled:

Before any attempt to produce Truth Seeking Balls can be made, the user must have a certain level of mastery over the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak.

"Tenseigan Chakra Cloak? What is that?" Hinata asked.

"The Tenseigan Chakra Cloak is a state that brings to the surface the power of the Tenseigan. You need to awaken it in order to have access to most of its abilities," Takuya explained.

"Wait, but we are already using Tenseigan abilities without that mode!" Hanabi pointed out.

"Your kinetic abilities are nothing but a scratch in the surface. Or did you think moving objects from afar with your chakra was all the eyes of the Sage of the Moon had to offer?" Takuya asked.

"Then why aren't we learning how to use this mode, instead of working with concrete blocks?" Hanabi asked, her exasperation growing with each second.

"We're doing exactly that!" Takuya replied, who was also becoming a bit heated. "Six Paths Chakra is hard to control, and these exercises will help you in that regard."

"Takuya-san, maybe my little sister expressed it in a rash and impatient form, but I agree with her in this regard. Our chakra control is already good enough," Hinata softly said, trying to sound reasonable. "I was wondering if you could speed up our training. We're going to face powerful enemies in the near future, and we can't take a lot of time trying to master this new power."

Takuya crossed his arms over his chest, and pondered the Hyuga's words. When she put it that way, her request sounded more reasonable than Hanabi's lack of patience with a repetitive exercise.

"Very well then. I'll introduce you to the Tenseigan Chakra Mode, and I'll see for myself if you're ready to learn it or not," Takuya conceded.

"Way to go, nee-chan! I wish I had your way with words," Hanabi said, earnestly happy. Hinata giggled at her in return.

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Training Ground Seven

The next day, Fu had asked the Animal Squad to go train with her, or at the very least, see her train, so she could show them the fruits of just one day of training with Naruto and Jiraiya. Given that the Animal Squad was temporarily lacking a sensei and didn't have any

kind of schedule for today, they decided to tag along and spend some quality time with their seldom seen friend.

But what they saw wiped out completely whatever intention they were of training with Fu.

"I knew that she gotten stronger over the years, but this..." a dazed Kiba said. "This is too much..."

The three Chunin of the Animal Squad stared at the orange blurring forms of Naruto and Fu trading blows, moving so fast they were nearly impossible to track. Naruto was using his Sage Mode, while Fu was using the most basic stage of the Tailed Beast chakra cloak. Even then, it give her enough of a power up to push Naruto to fight seriously.

Though, given that it was a 'normal spar' to help Fu get accustomed to the Seven Tails' chakra, they decided to limit themselves to taijutsu only. No ninjutsu, or even kunai or shuriken. Naruto didn't use clones, and Fu's wings were hidden beneath her skin.

Every time the two jinchuriki traded blows, it would be accompanied by a loud thunderclap and a shockwave that raised some rather strong winds. And given that they traded several blows per second, for the onlookers it was like being in the center of a powerful storm.

"Watching them going like that, doesn't make you feel... inadequate?" Tamaki uneasily asked her teammates,

"Eh, maybe, but they're jinchuuriki, and Naruto is a Sage on top of that. They're on a completely different level we normal humans are unable to reach," Kiba said in mild resignation, shrugging.

"I'm sure that Kakashi-sensei would be able to fight either of them, and he's neither a jinchuriki nor a Sage," Shino pointed out.

"You guys just love to oppose me no matter what, right?" an annoyed Kiba asked.

"No. But if seeing them makes you feel inadequate, then maybe we should train harder. Even if we can't reach their level, at least we'll have the satisfaction to know that we're doing our best," Shino explained. "We might never be able to reach Fu and Naruto-san's level, but we can at least aspire to surpass Kakashi-sensei."

Nobody contested Shino's statement, and continued watching Naruto and Fu's bout in silence. They swore they could hear some giggles and laughs among the constant thunderclaps, as if the blond and the mint haired girl were having the time of their lives beating the tar out of each other. They spend like that for a few more minutes until the two of them put some distance from each other, in order to take some breath.

While the two jinchuriki were visibly panting, and their visible skin -a lot in Fu's case- had several bruises, the two of them looked ecstatic.

"We can't stop if you feel I'm going too hard on you," Naruto taunted.

Fu smirked in return. "Ha, asking to stop and making it look as if it's because of me. Give some credit, will ya?"

"So, how are you doing? Feel any different?" Naruto asked.

Fu looked at her hand, flexed her fingers before curling them into a fist, and threw a punch forward.

"I've never felt better. I can move so fast it's almost as if I weight nothing, yet at the same time I can hit really hard while my fists barely feel the impact!" Fu cheered.

"It's nice to see that you're getting the hang of Tailed Beast chakra, but try not to revel on it too much. Remember that the Tailed Beast will use it to trick you into letting her take over you," Naruto warned her.

"Yeah, yeah, I know! But don't worry, I'm not feeling any different," Fu reassured him.

"If the Tailed Beast chakra influenced you, would you notice it? Did you notice it when you lost control during your fights against Gaara?" Shino promptly asked.

The green haired girl opened her mouth to reply, but no words came from it. She tried to tell him that yes, she knew when something was wrong, but the truth was that it wasn't the case.

"Well... no," Fu was forced to admit. "But if I started to lose myself, I would notice that there's something wrong, right?"

"Sometimes yes, others not so much," Naruto replied. "There were a couple moments in which the Nine Tails' chakra completely overwhelmed me, and I thought that everything was okay. Tailed Beast chakra is at its most dangerous when you're overwhelmed by an intense emotion."

"So the key to control it is to remain calm?" Fu asked.

"It's a possibility. If you keep your head cool, the Tailed Beast won't be able to influence you," Naruto then looked at the Animal Squad. "Hey guys, why don't you fight against Fu now?"

"Fight against Fu while using Tailed Beast chakra?" Kiba incredulously asked. "No thanks, I choose to live!"

"Come on, guys, it will be fun!" Fu insisted.

"Then you and I have very different concepts of 'fun'," Kiba snarked.

"Listen, Fu won't go all out against you like she did with me. She'll have to remain calm while keeping the Tailed Beast chakra active. Such mental effort will stop her from fighting at her best," Naruto explained. "Plus it's three versus one."

"And I'll go easy on you guys, promise!" Fu happily added.

The three Chunin looked at each other unsurely. Well, Kiba and Tamaki looked unsure.

"Well, she said that she'll go easy on us. Plus we do this to help a friend in need," Tamaki said, though she clearly wasn't happy with the idea.

"And I know what you're going to say," Kiba said, looking at Shino. "So yeah, let's go with it. It might be good training for us as well."

As the Animal Squad Chunin walked towards Fu, Naruto cancelled his Sage mode and left them some space, taking their role of spectator. The four ninja adopted fighting stances, and the handicap spar began. Though it wasn't exactly clear who was the handicap for, given the difference in power between both sides.

As expected, the fight was nowhere near as fast paced and brutal as when Naruto was fighting her. While Fu was clearly in control of the fight, she wasn't overwhelming the three Chunin, and fought with less wild fighting style. She kept her eyes on her opponents, dodged their attacks with quick movements, and then she would deliver a single, precise strikes.

Not that this strategy worked all the time, not even close, especially against opponents that, unlike her, weren't holding back. Kiba and Tamaki managed to land quite a few hits on her, and on more than one occasion the jinchuriki found herself unable to avoid her boyfriend's long range jutsu.

"Dang, this is much harder than I thought!" Fu complained, as she briefly struggled against Tamaki, before disengaging her and jumping backwards, narrowly avoiding a claw swipe from both Kiba and Akamaru.

"You're used to rely on strength and reaction instead of thought and action," Shino stated. "Such things will only take you so far. Eventually, one must learn to think before they act. And against superior opponents, the time to think will be severely limited."

"Eh, I've always been a 'going with the flow' kind of person," Fu shrugged, as she resumed the fight.

"Keep going like that, Fu! You're doing great!" Naruto praised, as she gave her a thumbs up.

So far, the green haired kunoichi was doing fine with the most basic level of Tailed Beast chakra while remaining in control of her emotion. But Naruto wondered if that would be enough to face the Akatsuki.

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Training Ground Twelve

While Naruto helped Fu train with the Animal Squad, Hinata was doing the same with her little sister. The Hyuga Clan Head, and Hanabi's sensei, Yamato, were watching the young Hyuga fighting against both Senju siblings.

"Fire Release: Burning Palm!"

Hanabi's palms were coated in fire, as she dashed towards her female teammate, who jumped backwards while making several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

Kaida slammed both hands into the ground, erecting a wall with the Senju crest carved on it between herself and Hanabi. Hanabi's burning palm strike blew a hole in the wall, but the construct did its job in stopping her tracks. Her Tenseigan immediately saw Hagane, his body glowing with a white aura, leaping at her from behind, ready to deliver a flying kick.

Hanabi jumped into the air just in time to avoid Hagane's incoming kick, which shattered the wall Kaida had created. Staying mid air, she clenched her fists, causing the fire surrounding her hands to grow bigger.

"Now take this!" Hanabi said, as she began to thrust her hands downwards in a rapid way. "Fire Release: Eight Trigrams Phoenix Fire!"

Which each arm thrust, Hanabi released a small projectile of concentrated fire that produced a huge explosion when crashed against the ground. Despite the jutsu's widespread destruction, the twins' didn't falter.

"Brother, I need some senjutsu juice!" Kaida called.

"On it!" Hagane replied, as he jumped to her side, before bumping fists with her.

Hagane's white aura spread to Kaida. From above, Hanabi could see how some of Hagane's nature energy was being passed to his twin sister, and the two of them started to make hand seals.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Kaida's cheeks puffed, before releasing a massive stream upwards, while a tornado came from Hagane's hands. Hinata was a bit surprised to see one of Naruto's most used Wind jutsu being used by somebody else, but she quickly came to the conclusion that it was her boyfriend himself who taught it to him. The two attacks merged into a massive, spiralling water vortex, that engulfed and contained the explosions of Hanabi's jutsu, as it continued upwards, threatening to swallow the younger Hyuga.

Seeing no other options, Hanabi descended in order to avoid the twins' combined jutsu, which flew above her head, spraying everything below it.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

Hanabi had been so preoccupied with avoiding the combined elemental blast that she hadn't noticed the white haired girl preparing her next move. Thick wooden vines emerged around her, and launched themselves at the young Hyuga.

"Haha, got you! Where's your Six Paths chakra now?" Kaida taunted.

A fiery aura surrounded Hanabi as she started to spin. "I don't need Six Paths chakra to avoid such an attack! Fire Release: Heavenly Firestorm!"

Hanabi turned into an spiraling column of flames that instantly burned all the emerging vines, while releasing several firebolts in every direction. When Hanabi stopped spinning, she was standing on top of a charred crater.

And the moment she stopped spinning was the moment the twins choose to attack her in close combat. While it was Hanabi's specialty, she was completely wide open due still spinning. And while in the past the fight would have ended here and there, Hanabi now had one last ace in the hole.

Quickly spreading her arms, Hanabi cast a kinetic shockwave that pushed both white haired Chunin backwards with incredible force, until a tree painfully stopped their momentum.

"Ha! Not even the two of you are even close to-"

But Hanabi's boast was interrupted by a couple of hands coming from underground grabbing her ankles, and pulling her down with incredible force, leaving her buried to the waist.

"What the hell?" she shouted, as she tried to use her kinetic powers to pull herself out. That's it, until a kunai touching her neck forced her to stop.

"I think victory is ours," Hagane, who was holding the Kunai to her neck, stated.

Kaida emerged from behind, and high fived her brother, before the two of them helped Hanabi out of the ground. The match now over, Yamato and Hinata walked towards them.

"If there's a lesson to be learned here is that powers matters little if you lack the skill to use it," Yamato stated. "Hanabi, while your Tenseigan gave you a massive boost, and I'm sure one day you'll become of Konoha's most powerful kunoichi, that day is still pretty far."

"Well, it was two versus one," Hanabi scoffed, as she crossed her eyes, and turned sideways. "Plus it's not that they're a couple weaklings."

"Hanabi-chan, the reason you lost was because you lost sight of your opponents. With your Tenseigan you should have seen that Kaida had created Wood Clones to distract you while she went underground," Hinata stated, sounding chastising, but not demeaning. "You need to take care of those kind of details now that you're a Chunin."

"Listen to your sister, Hanabi. Do not let an unique and strong power blind you as to neglect proper fighting skill," Yamato added, before looking at the twins. "That goes for you two, you know."

"Hey, I'm not relying on Wood Release that much," Kaida protested.

Hagane, however, took the criticism in stride. "Yamato-sensei isn't lecturing us to make us feel bad. Listening to our teachers is the best way to improve."

"Sensei's pet," Both Hanabi and Kaida seethed.

"Okay, okay, I don't want any bad blood here. Let's take a rest before resuming the training, understood?" Yamato suggested.

"Alright!" the three Chunin said in unison.

...

Hokage Tower

"Come in," Jiraiya said after hearing somebody knocking the door.

The door opened, revealing a lizard-masked ANBU.

"Hokage-sama, here's Kakashi's latest report regarding the Takigakure resistance," the ANBU sotically said as he handed the white haired Sannin a scroll.

Jiraiya nodded, took and unfurled the scroll before reading its contents. His lips formed a smile of satisfaction, furling the scroll again once he had read everything on it.

"Alright, it seems that all the Taki ninjas outside of the village at the time of the invasion had been finally gathered, and they stand ready to retake their home. They're waiting for our reinforcements," Jiraiya stated. "Which we will be sending immediately."

"Understood, Hokage-sama," the ANBU said, as he was ready to leave.

"Before you leave, find my son and his teammates," Jiraiya stated. "I want them to spearhead the attack."

"Very well, Hokage-sama," the ANBU replied, making a quick bow before leaving the office.

Satisfied, Jiraiya stood up, and walked towards the window behind his desk.

"Alright, Akatsuki, you thought you can do whatever you want with no one able to stop you," Jiraiya said to no one, as his gaze drifted to the village before his eyes. "We're about to prove you wrong."

Author's Note: So, following where we left it the last chapter, Fu continues to adapt to her new life in Konoha. This time, some jinchuriki bonding with Naruto, as well as some training to help her control her Tailed Beast. Speaking of which, I had a lot of fun writing Chomei's scenes, especially the ones in which she's with Kurama.

And Fu isn't the only one who trains. She herself continues to train Hinata and Hanabi in the art of flying, while they also learn more about the power of the Tenseigan. Some little foreshadowing there *wink wink* ;)

Some reviewers were sad they couldn't see Hagane, Kaida and Hanabi fighting in the Chunin Exams, so I decided to throw a spar between the three of them to show a bit more their powers and fighting style. Hope you liked it.

Thanks to grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

Anyway, the action will resume next chapter as the good guys try to take Takigakure back from Akatsuki! Meanwhile, leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Battle for Taki

Author's Note: Hmmm, the number of reviews the last chapter got was one of the lowest as of date, though the reviews themselves didn't point out if there was something wrong. Oh well, let's hope this chapter fares better. Enjoy:

Chapter 62:

The Battle for Taki

or

You Catch more Fu with Honey than Vinegar

"It's a pity we have to abandon this village," Hidan said, sounding a little saddened. "I couldn't even get started on the construction of the Jashin Temple."

"I thought there was already a Jashin Temple in the Land of Springs. Wasn't there where you were trained?" Kakuzu asked.

"Well, yes, but the temple was in in the middle of fucking nowhere. Jashin-sama would be mostly pleased if I build a temple to him in the heart of a ninja village. Oh well, guess that another slaughter will have to do," Hidan said, with his usual sadistic glee.

"Do as you wish," Kakuzu apathetically replied, as from their vantage point, they watched the activity going on in the village below them.

A messenger had arrived with the news that the Taki resistance, alongside reinforcements from Konoha and Suna, were heading towards the village. Kakuzu and Hidan, pretending they cared about keeping the village, had ordered everybody to put a defense and repel the invaders, even if they did know that the village was already lost and those poor idiots would die for nothing.

Well, not for nothing. Maybe if they managed to kill some enemy ninjas before going down, their lives would weaken Akatsuki's enemies even if just a little.

Even if he would never admit it, Kakuzu felt it was a pity he couldn't keep the village for longer. It was a place that he hated like no other, and having it under his control would have been his ultimate revenge.

"Anyway, I'll better get everything ready. You stay here and keep them busy. Try to kill some of them if you can," Kakuzu told him as he turned around, and walked away.

"How are you so sure the jinchuriki will come to us?" Hidan asked.

"I know how she thinks," Kakuzu confidently said, before Body Flickering away.

"I know how she thinks" Hidan mockingly repeated. "'I'm Kakuzu and I'm a fucking smartass that knows everything, yet doesn't worship Jashin-sama'. Oh well, at least he gave me the fun part of the mission..."

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, said group of ninjas, about five hundred strong, were leaping from one tree branch to another, getting closer to Takigakure. The Konoha and Suna ninja would expect traps or an ambush the more they got closer, but the Taki ninjas told them that the Akatsuki wouldn't bother with that. The secret entrances to Takigakure were pretty much bottlenecks, and the defenders would use that to their advantage.

That's why they decided to send their strongest asset to deal with such situation first: Naruto Uzumaki.

The blond jinchuriki would infiltrate Takigakure on his own, create some ruckus with his clones and summons, and thus allowing the

bulk of their forces to enter the village unimpeded. Right now, he was being led by a Takigakure Jonin, a blond haired man he remembered from the Chunin exams as one of Fu's teammates. Kegon was his name.

They stopped when they reached a small waterfall that fed into a lagoon.

"Here we are," Kegon announced.

"So... where's this secret entrance? Behind that waterfall?" Naruto guessed.

"It is," the Taki Jonin confirmed.

"That's kind of cliché," Naruto pointed out, crossing his arms over his chest.

"It's not a direct way into the village," Kegon replied, a little annoyed. "Behind this waterfall there's a grotto. Said grotto is pretty much a maze where you will get lost unless you know where to go," the blond Taki man handed Naruto a small scroll. "Follow the indications on this scroll, and you'll be able to reach an entrance at the edge of the lake."

Naruto nodded as he took the scroll. "Understood!" he replied, as he gave Kegon a thumbs up.

"Make sure you're quick, because the moment I return to the others and tell them you're inside, we'll wait only ten minutes to attack. Will you be able to clear a zone big enough for our forces to enter unimpeded in such little time?"

Naruto smirked confidently. "I'll only need five minutes."

"For the sake of our village, hope you can back those words up," Kegon replied. "Anyway, now you'll be on your own. Good luck."

And with that, Kego leaped away, leaving Naruto to his mission. Despite his initial impression, he had to admit that the secret entrance wasn't as lame as he thought. Without the scroll telling him where to go, he would have gotten lost in no time.

"Or maybe I could summon an army of clones and have them move around until one of them found the exit," Naruto thought, pleased with his idea.

The blond jinchuriki exited from a small hole in the ground that was hidden by several strategically placed bushes. From that point, he could see the village of Takigakure. Most of it was in the island in the middle of the lake, built around the roots of the Great Tree, with a single bridge connecting it to the mainland. There were also several clusters of houses built at the edge of the lake as well.

"Okay, those houses at the edge of the lake look like they're from civilians, so I shouldn't worry too much about them. Now, the best way to call their attention would be to attack the bridge. But how? This requires a clever, intricate plan like any other..." Naruto said, as he started to think for a couple minutes.

After doing some thinking, the blond Konoha ninja grinned, and made his trademark hand seal. One hundred Naruto clones appeared besides him in an instant.

"Everybody, charge! Seek the enemies, and kick their asses!" the original Naruto shouted.

His command was met with a chorus of "yeah!", "let's go!", "Let's show them our strength!" and, oddly enough, a couple of "I'm hungry!".

The Takigakure defenders, composed by mercenaries, cultists, and a few Taki ninjas that decided to defect to Kakuzu's side, were soon swarmed by a tsunami of orange and black.

"We're under attack!" a thug cried.

"The hell? Why do these guys look the same?" another one asked.

"They're clones, you idiot!" a cultist told them.

"Impossible! Nobody should be able to produce so many clones!" the first thug angrily fired back, as he destroyed a clone of Naruto.

"We can!" several Naruto clones replied in unison, almost indignant at the mere thought of casting doubt on their boss' abilities.

The flash attack of the Naruto army quickly pushed the defenders of the bridge back into the main village, with the clones following suit. Sadly, by that point, most of the ninjas guarding the village had been alerted of the invasion, and quickly run to face the army of orange clad clones, which quickly began to dwindle in number as kunai, shuriken and destructive elemental ninjutsu flied at them.

"Well, so much for the clones," Naruto said, as he leaped into the air, landing in the surface of the lake. He bit his thumb, and made several hand seals. "Guess I'll need to bring the heavy hitters. Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto slammed his palm on the water, creating a giant cloud of smoke, as well as producing some waves due the water that has been displaced. When the smoke dispelled, everybody could see a gigantic toad, his rusty red skin covered in multiple warts. He was wearing a blue vest, had a short -to him- blade attached to his belt, and his lips were holding on a still smoking pipe.

The giant toad took a few moments to contemplate his surroundings.

"Naruto?" the giant toad asked, noticing the blonde standing on his head. "Is this the village you told me about!"

"Yup!" Naruto enthusiastically nodded. "Are you ready for the action, Bunta?"

Gamabunta, or Bunta, as he was sometimes called, unsheathed his blade to state his answer.

"I just hope it won't be just the two of us," Gamabunta stated, as he prepared to attack a group of mercenaries and Jashin cultists.

"Nah, we're just clearing the way for the rest to join us," Naruto reassured him.

"Good, because otherwise this would be kind of boring," Gamabunta said, as he leaped to the edge of the island in the center of the lake, creating a quake and producing more waves on the lake. "Come on, come at me, ants!" Gamabunta taunted, as he swung his blade at a group of enemies, some which avoided the swipe, others not so fortunate.

...

"Boy, you can heard the sound of the battle even from here."

The ten minutes long gone, the Takigakure resistance and their Konoha and Suna allies decided to move and attack. They were split in three groups, one for each secret entrance the village had. They would attack from three different sides in a pincer maneuver, and meet in the middle.

"I can believe that Naruto went on his own like that, the madman," Kiba continued, shaking his head. "The cocky bastard must think he can take on a village on his own."

Kakashi's Animal Squad was also taking part in the battle. Though rather than direct combatants, they have been appointed as Fu's bodyguards due their close friendship with the female jinchūriki, as well as their tracking skills just in case Fu disappeared, either on her own, or if she was abducted by the enemy. They were jumping from one branch to another like the rest of their group, while Fu flew above them.

"Naruto knows he isn't doing that. All he's doing is draw attention to him so we have a bigger window of opportunity to strike," Kakashi reminded him.

"Alright then, what secret entry are we going to use?" Tamaki asked.

"No one," Fu interjected before Kakashi could answer. "We'll attack from the air."

"Um... Fu? Maybe you can do that, but no one else here can fly," Tamaki uneasily asked.

Fu shot a smirk at the cat kunoichi, which sent chills down her spine. Then, without any kind of warning, Fu dived and, in one fell swoop, grabbed Shino, Kiba and Tamaki in a two-armed hug.

"Kakashi-san, grab onto me, I can't carry anymore people in my arms!" Fu told the silver haired ninja.

"Fu! Just... what are you doing?" the surprised Jonin asked in shock.

"The secret entrances take too much time. I prefer if we take a more direct route. And yes, I know that you guys are my escorts and I'm not going to leave you behind. But I will if you don't make up your mind!" Fu protested.

Seeing that the Taki jinchuriki was gaining altitude, Kakashi jumped and latched onto one of her legs. The additional weight added to the already heavy load didn't seem to hinder Fu in the slightest, as they continued to gain altitude. Kakashi silently thanked that this girl wasn't one of his students.

Fu continued flying as easily as if she wasn't carrying anybody, her eyes locked into the thick forest on a plateau that hid Takigakure. While those orange eyes usually shone with the glint of youth and happiness, now they reflected her determination and steel hard resolve to take back her home.

"Fu, I know this battle means a lot to you but..." Kakashi began.
"Shouldn't we attack alongside the rest of the group? If we arrive too early, we will find ourselves outnumbered and away from backup."

"Naruto should have taken care of that," Fu replied, as she pierced the forest that surrounded Taki, skillfully avoiding all the thick and lush branches without having to slow down. "Plus, we aren't going to take part in the main battle."

"We aren't?" Kiba and Tamaki asked in unison.

"Fu, you can't-" Kakashi was going to say before being interrupted.

"Our mission will be to find and rescue Shibuki," Fu firmly stated.
"You're a tracking squad, you will be able to track him, right? And taking advantage of the chaos of the battle, we'll take him to safety while the rest of our forces take back the city. Genius plan!"

Kakashi didn't share Fu's optimism.

"Fu, there's the chance that Akatsuki might be counting on you trying to rescue Shibuki, and thus making you leave the security of the bulk of the army," Shino pointed out.

"I already thought of that. But that's why you're also here, silly! You're also my escorts, right? So as long as you guys keep close to me, nothing will go wrong!" Fu excitedly said, as her lips curved into an innocent smile.

...

The bulk of the Taki Resistance and their allies took very little time to arrive at the village and join the battle, Thanks to Naruto drawing all the attention to him, the rest of the ninja could get into the village with little problem, and engage the enemies.

"Come on everybody! For Takigakure! Let's kick these invaders out of our home!" a Taki ninja shouted, with his comrades cheering back.

"Alright then, I think I can fight normally now. Gamabunta, cover us while we liberate the village!" Naruto said, as he jumped off of the giant toad, as he pulled out and activated his Wind Blade.

"You got it, brat!" Gamabunta replied.

Naruto landed in the water, and rushed towards the central island, eyeing the ongoing battles and wondering which one he should join.

"Naruto-kun!"

The voice of his girlfriend coming from above snapping him from his thoughts. Looking upwards, Naruto saw Hinata flying down at him. Haku was with her and, oddly enough, he was flying as well.

"Hinata-hime! Haku!" Naruto cheered, waving at them. "Good to see you're here! Now we can fight the three of us together!"

"Indeed. Let's end this battle as quick as possible so the loses for Taki and our forces are kept to a minimum," Haku agreed, as he landed near Naruto. Hinata remained floating above them.

"Um, Haku? Were you flying?" Naruto asked, scratching his head.

The Ice Ninja shook his head. "No. Hinata-san has become proficient in her abilities to share her flight with somebody else."

"So far I can only carry one person with me, but I'm working to expand that limit," Hinata chimed in. "That way, the Assault Squad can be a flying unit!"

"Neat idea, hime! Though for the time being, we won't need it," Naruto said, as he directed his eyes to the battle in front of them. "There doesn't seem to be any trace of the Akatsuki, and the ones defending the village are made of rabble. Thugs, mercenaries, and screaming cultists that look scary but aren't that though."

"Okay then. Let's clear the battlefield by the time the Akatsuki show up," Hinata agreed.

Suddenly, an ear piercing scream echoed through the village. The battle stopped for a few seconds, as everybody directed their eyes to the canopy of the Great Tree, where the scream had come from. Then, a mass of black creatures emerged from the canopy of the tree, and rushed to the battlefield, some of them running, those who had wings flying.

"What... what are those abominations?" Hinata asked in horror. With her Tensiegan, she could see them close. Ugly, nightmarish creatures with inky black skin, long, bony limbs, several maws full of razor sharp long teeth, multiple eyes across their uneven bodies, or no eyes at all.

"I don't know, but I have the feeling that they aren't on our side," Haku uneasily said, as his hand grabbed a handful of senbon from his ninja tool pouch.

"Oh no! Not those monsters again!" a Taki ninja cried in despair, taking a step back.

"You know those things?" Naruto asked the Taki ninja.

The fearful Taki man nodded. "The cultist summoned them when they first attacked us... but there weren't so many of them before!"

"Of course, it would be naïve on our part to think that this would be easy and that Akatsuki wouldn't have a nasty surprise in stock for us," Naruto said, sounding a bit annoyed, but he quickly lightened up. "But if there's no challenge, there's no fun! Hinata, Haku, let's focus on those creatures while the rest of our forces deal with the human opponents!"

"Alright!" the two of them chorused in unison, as they followed Naruto towards the incoming charge of demonic creatures.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, but far enough from the main battle, Fu and Kakashi's animal Squad had located the Akatsuki, and were heading towards their alleged location, with Shino leading the group. Given the threat Kakuzu made, Fu guessed that Shibuki wouldn't be far away from them.

"How do you know where they are?" Kakashi asked his quiet student.

"During our brief confrontation, I had a kikai beetle latched onto the Akatsuki that was chasing Fu. Said beetle is now releasing a pheromone only my hive of kikai can smell," Shino explained.

"Good one, Shino! I'll have to give you a really big reward for being so efficient!" Fu cheerfully said, winking at her boyfriend.

Shino blushed for a few seconds. "Err... that's very nice of you, but let's leave the celebrations for the moment the Akatsuki is defeated and Taki is again free of its grasp."

Akamaru then barked.

"Guys, Akamaru can smell him as well!" Kiba stated. "He says that he remembers the foul scent of his chakra. Wherever they go, they won't evade our senses."

"Alright then, everybody, prepare for an imminent fight! And Fu, stay close to us! I know what you must be feeling right now, but don't stray away, that's what Akatsuki wants!" Kakashi sternly stated, looking at Fu with his one visible eye.

"Don't worry, I won't let those bastards capture me so easily," Fu replied.

"We're heading out of the village," Tamaki mentioned.

And indeed, the others noticed that they were heading towards the forests west of Taki.

"I think they're moving," Kiba added. "My guess is that they know we're coming, and are taking us to a trap."

"Or they just simply want to isolate us from the rest of our allies," Kakashi stated. "Probably both."

All of them tensed up the moment they left the village and entered the forest. Now, they would be alone. Whatever Akatsuki had prepared, it wouldn't be pretty.

"Fu, do you know if there's something around here? Something the Akatsuki could use against us?" Tamaki asked the green haired girl.

Fu placed a finger under her lips, as she started to think if there is anything special about the forest, but nothing came to mind. She shook her head.

"As far as I know, there are nothing but trees. Kilometers and kilometers of trees," Fu replied.

"Remember that Kakuzu used to be a Takigakure ninja. It's probable that he knows secrets about the village and its surroundings many of the younger Taki ninjas such as yourself might ignore," Shino pointed out.

"If you say so," Fu replied, shrugging again. "Though I won't let my guard down."

"Too bad we didn't take Hinata with us. With those eyes of her, she could be able to see any potential trap in advance," Kiba said.

"Maybe in another life. But now, we'll have to do without an Hyuga to help us," Shino replied.

They continued leaping from one branch to another, until Akamaru started to bark.

"Kiba?" Tamaki asked.

"Akamaru said that they've stopped. I think they're ready to fight," Kiba explained the others.

"And so are we!" Fu firmly shouted, punching her palm.

They arrived to a clearing in the forest. In the middle of the clearing, lying on his side, with his arms and legs restrained by ropes, laid Fubuki, the former -hopefully not for long- leader of Takigakure. Fu couldn't help but gasp in shock upon seeing her leader and big brother-like figure.

"Shibuki!" she cried, while repressing her urges to speed towards him. Even she knew they were using him as the bait for a trap.

"Let's help Shibuki, but stay close to each other, and watch for any trap or ambush. It's not a matter of if, but of when," Kakashi instructed, as he uncovered his Sharingan.

The four members of the Animal Squad landed around Shibuki, each one of them facing to a different cardinal point, while Fu landed besides Shibuki, and quickly dropped on her knees, untied him, and checked if he was okay.

"Shibuki! Are you okay? Did those mean guys hurt you? Do you need something?" Fu hurriedly asked as she untied her leader. "Oh my Kami, you look awful! Shino, I need you to heal him a little!"

"Fu, you have to leave! They used me to lure you out of the village! The Akatsuki are here!" a panicked Shibuki stammered.

"We're already aware of that, Shibuki-san," Kakashi told him, without dropping his fighting stance. "By the way, do you think you can fight? We're going to need all the possible help."

As Fu helped him to sit up, Shibuki shook his head. "On top of the daily beatings I got from the guards, those bastards barely fed me. I can barely stand on my feet."

"Shino, go and heal Shibuki, I believe you have a spare soldier pill, right? Give one to Shibuki," Kakashi ordered. "With that, you should be able to provide us some assistance."

"Assistance that, in the end, will fail to make a difference," a new, raspy voice grumbled.

Everybody saw how Kakuzu and Hidan landed in front of them. They immediately turned towards their direction, but without leaving their backs uncovered. Who knows how many allies the Akatsuki still had.

"Hehe, you were right. Those retards fell right into our trap, despite being so fucking obvious what it was!" Hidan laughed.

"What is your trap, may I ask?" Shino asked. "You lured us to this clearing, but you didn't even ambush us. You blew the element of surprise by announcing your arrival. If this is a trap, it's a very poor one."

"Didn't your sensei teach you that a ninja must learn to see through deception, or, as more commonly said, appearances can be deceiving?" Kakuzu asked in a somewhat mocking tone, as his hands formed hand seals, before slapping Hidan's bare chest. "Five Purple Ray Barrier!"

Suddenly, Hidan started to glow with a purple light, and a purple colored beam of chakra fired from his body into the sky. Four other beams fired from different parts around their position. The four periferic rays started to curve towards the central one, until the five rays converged, creating a dome-shaped purple chakra barrier around the area.

"And now, the trap is complete," Kakuzu continued. "The Five Purple Ray Barrier is a secret jutsu of Takigakure they used back in my day to protect the village, but not anymore since I stole it. It's a powerful barrier that uses a human being as focal point and it slowly feeds into their life force. Once the focal point dies, the barrier will go down."

"Why are you telling us this?" Tamaki demanded. She was getting some really bad vibes from Kakuzu's overconfidence.

"Because I'm immortal, you dumb bitch! There's no way that barrier will go down until Kakuzu or myself decides to take it down!" Hidan shouted, laughing maniacally.

"Meaning that you're now trapped here with us, with no reinforcements, and no chance to escape. And if by some miracle you're able to kill Hidan..." Kakuzu said, as he briefly eyed his partner. "... you will have my eternal gratitude."

"Yeah!" Hidan cheered, before Kakuzu's words registered in his brain, and shoot his partner an indignant look. "... wait, what?"

"Enough chit chat, we have a job to do," Kakuzu said, as he started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullets!

A giant dragon head made of mud formed in front of Kakuzu. It opened its jaws, and fired a volley of mud bullets at the group of six, which jumped away in different directions (while Fu deployed her wings and took off to the sky).

"Let the slaughter begin!" Hidan hollered, as he leaped towards Tamaki, ready to strike her down with his scythe.

"Shit!" Tamaki cursed as she parried the powerful blow with her bladed gauntlets.

Still, Hidan was undeterred, and in his mad frenzy continued to deliver a flurry of furious swipes at the cat kunoichi, who could do nothing but defend while the demented cultist pushed her back with each swipe.

"Come on, little girl, put on a better show! Make your death worth something!" Hidan cackled as he continued to attack.

Suddenly, he heard a loud buzz, and looked upwards as a shadow was cast over the two of them. Much to his surprise, he saw a massive swarm of beetles angrily buzzing and flying at him.

"What the fuck!? Bugs? Like, fucking seriously?" the pissed Akatsuki shouted, as the swarm of insects forced him to disengage Tamaki and jump back.

"Fang Passing Fang!"

Suddenly, Hidan saw two drilling tornadoes flying towards him. The cultist was barely able to dodge them, shredding part of his Akatsuki cloak. When the tornadoes stopped spinning, they revealed to be Kiba and Akamaru, who landed between Tamaki and Shino.

"One with bugs, the other with a dog... just what kind of ninjas are you?" Hidan asked, almost indignant.

"The ones who are going to kick your sorry ass!" Tamaki replied, as her hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Blistering Firecat!"

Tamaki breathed a stream of fire, which quickly took the shape of a giant cat, rushing on all fours towards Hidan.

"And I guess that you use cats, right? Fucking flea ridden pests..." Hidan said, making no effort in dodging the attack. The fire cat crashed against him, and he was soon engulfed by a fiery torrent of flames.

"Yes! Direct hit! Well done, Tamaki!" Kiba congratulated his teammate, who smiled proudly in return.

However, when the fires dispelled, Hidan was still there, completely unscathed.

"So, that was all?" Hidan mockingly asked.

Tamaki and Kiba stared at the Akatsuki in shock, their mouths wide agape.

"It seems he may be an immortal after all..." Shino observed.

Meanwhile, a few meters from the clash against Hidan, Kakashi, Fu and Shibuki engaged Kakuzu. Fu was engaging him in hand to hand combat, while Kakashi and Shibuki supported her from afar.

"You didn't learn anything from our previous duel, did you?" Kakuzu asked, as he and Fu traded blows. Whenever their fists clashed, a small shockwave was produced.

Fu gritted her teeth in irritation. "Things are different now! I have my friends backing me up!"

"And I do have my partner as well, for all what it's worth," Kakuzu nonchalantly replied, as he blocked a lateral kick with both arms. "But even if I was alone, the result would be the same. You only saw a smidge of my power."

"Show me your full power, then!" Fu challenged him.

Before Kakuzu could answer, the sound of a thousand birds chirping could be heard. The Taki Akatsuki disengaged Fu and jumped upwards, barely avoiding Kakashi's Lightning Blade coming from the side, before the Copy Ninja could skewer him.

"Word of advice, Kakashi Hatake," Kakuzu stated as his feet touched the ground again. "Assassination jutsu tend to work better when they don't make a noise so loud it can be heard in the entire continent."

Kakashi remained silent as the blue electricity coating his hand flickered away, and merely glared at the masked Akatsuki with anger filled eyes. Kakuzu ignored Kakashi and directed his stare back at Fu.

"If you want to skip the warm up and go directly into the heat of the battle, I'm more than happy to comply," Kakuzu replied, in an oddly satisfied tone. "Hidan!"

The scythe-wielding Akatsuki was busy fighting the three Chunin of the Animal Squad.

"The fuck you want, Kakuzu? Don't you see I'm busy murdering some brats?" Hidan hollered at him.

"The jinchuriki asked us to go all out on her," Kakuzu said, as he removed his cloak, and tossed it away, revealing a body full of stitches scars. "I'm going to do it."

Hidan's anger instantly evaporated, and a sadistic grin appeared in his face. The Jashin cultist disengaged the three Chunin, and jumped towards Kakuzu.

"Why didn't you say it before? I love when we go all out!" Hidan said in glee.

The three Chunin took advantage of the brief pause, and rejoined their sensei and the two Takigakure ninja.

"Hey, what the hell is going on?" Kiba asked.

"I'm not sure, but whatever they plan to do, we won't like it," Kakashi said.

Kakuzu then bent over, and everybody could see that there were four different masks sewn to his back. The masks then started to tremble, as if they tried to break from Kakuzu's body, which they did after struggling for some seconds. Turns out those masks were attached to four inky black beings made my a mass of pulsating threads. Upon escaping Kakuzu, they placed themselves in front of the two Akatsuki. More threads emerge from the huge gap that was now on Kakuzu's back, and started to stitch the skin together.

"I think I'm going to throw up..." Tamaki moaned, green to the gills.

"I remember Hinata saying that Kakuzu's body was nothing like she saw before. I guess this is what she meant," Shino deduced,

remaining as impossible as ever.

"The number of enemies now matches our group. And we don't even know what those monsters even do," Shibuki observed, as he eyed the newcomers.

"Oh, you're going to find out really soon," Kakuzu said as he made three hand seals. The monster with the red lipped mask, which looked like a tiger, opened its mouth. "Fire Release: Searing Migraine!"

The thread monster exhaled a massive breath of fire that scorched the earth and burned any nearby plant or tree as it advanced. The Konoha ninjas jumped away, but the Taki duo decided to counter the attack.

"Fu!" Shibuki called, as he made several hand seals.

"I know!" the green haired girl replied, mimicking his actions.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Fu and Shibuki expelled two cones of water each at the incoming firestorm, Fu's packing more power than Shibuki's. A cloud of steam flooded the battlefield when the two elemental forces met, and Kakuzu's attack was nullified.

"Guys, are you okay?" Fu called.

"Yes! That was close, good one, Fu," Tamaki said from above, perched on a tree branch.

"I thought that man was an Earth Release user. An attack of such scale would have only been possible if the Akatsuki had a fire affinity," Shino noted.

"Double affinity then? Remember Sakura," Kiba pointed out.

"Your conjectures couldn't be any wronger," Kakuzu said, as he made the Ram seal. The monster with the bird faced mask opened its beak. "Wind Release: Pressure Damage!"

"Wind too? He can't have three affinities!" Tamaki protested.

The bird-masked monster released a monstrously powerful gale, that instantly dispelled the steam, tore apart tree branches and small plants, and naturally, blew away all the opposing ninjas, Fu included. With just those two attacks, Kakuzu had already doubled the expanse of the forest clearing.

"Ugh..." Kiba groaned, as he removed several branches from his body, as he tiredly stood up. "Just what's with this-"

"KIBA, LOOK OUT!" Tamaki screamed.

"DIE, YOU INFIDEL!"

Before he had time to react, Kiba saw Hidan leaping towards him, ready to cut him open with that three bladed scythe. Kiba managed to pull two kunai from his ninja tool pouch, and parried the hit. Like with Tamaki before, Hidan continued to deliver vicious swings. Kiba managed to defend himself, but Hidan's blows carried a lot of power, and his weapon had a greater range.

"Akamaru!" Kiba shouted.

Akamaru rushed towards his master with a loud bark, and leaped at Hidan. The startled Akatsuki disengaged Kiba and raised his scythe defensively towards the incoming dog. Akamaru clenched his jaws across the scythe's handle, trying to wrestle it away from Hidan.

"How you dare to touch the High Priest's Sacred Scythe, you flea ridden bitch!" Hidan hollered, as he tried to wrestle the scythe from the snarling dog.

"Keep him like that, Akamaru!" Kiba said, as he dashed towards them. However, much to his horror, he realized the fire monster was aiming another of those fire attacks towards them. "Oh shit!"

"Oh no, you won't!" Tamaki's voice said, as the cat kunoichi delivered a flying double kick to the monster's side, making it to release the fire attack into the sky. "You owe me one!"

Hidan, meanwhile, managed to retrieve his scythe from Akamaru's grasp, but as he did, he was unable to dodge Kiba lunging at him, ready to slash him with his elongated nails. His face and exposed part of his chest felt the pain of Kiba's slashed.

"God Dammit! What the fuck you think you-"

"Lightning Blade!"

Despite the initial sound, Kakashi's trademark jutsu hit its mark, and pierced the Jashin cultist's heart from behind, running him his arm through, his still electrified hand bursting from his chest. Hidan, however, looked more angry rather than in pain.

"You don't seem to understand what 'immortality' means, do you, you retard?" Hidan asked, as he grabbed Kakashi's hand, keeping him stuck.

"I had to test it to see if it was true," was Kakashi's answer. "After all, I'm not going to take the enemy's word for granted."

"Whatever, dude. Kakuzu!" Hidan hollered.

Another one of Kakuzu's monsters, this time one with a mask that looked like a horned demon, leaped towards them. Its body started to crackle with electricity as Kakuzu made the Snake seal. "Lightning Release: False Darkness!"

The demon masked monster opened its mouth, releasing a stream of lightning bolts at the startled Kakashi.

"This is bad!" the copy ninja distressingly though, trying in vain to pull his right hand from Hidan's chest. Before the lightning could strike, he used his left arm and, without the aid of seals, tried to use his signature jutsu once again. "Lightning Blade!"

With his electrified hand, Kakashi managed to swat away the lightning attack. Then, he felt that Hidan was no longer grabbing him, and pulled his hand from the hole he had made. However, Hidan spun over his feet, ready to deliver an horizontal spinning slash with his scythe. Kakashi jumped back, but wasn't fast enough, and the scythe slashed his chest, piercing his flak jacket, and drawing some blood.

"Yes! Hahaha... hahahaha... HAHAAAAHA! You'll make a fine sacrifice to Jashin-sama, copy ninja!" Hidan said, as he licked Kakashi's blood.

While Team Kakashi dealt with Hidan and some of Kakuzu's monsters, Fu hadn't lost sight of her initial goal, and flew to face Kakuzu once again. The masked Akatsuki didn't fail to notice the enraged jinchuriki.

"It's rare to see a prey seeking their predator with such energy," Kakuzu deadpanned as he engaged into another brutal hand to hand duel with the green haired jinchuriki. "Are you that foolish to believe that you have a chance against me?"

"I have more than a chance!" Fu yelled, as a tornado started to form in her fist. "Hurricane Punch!"

Fu's punch produced a powerful wind in every direction strong enough to push Kakuzu back. Before he could have time to react, Fu jumped and tried to deliver a roundhouse kick to the head. But Kakuzu's reflexes were sharper than she thought, and expertly grabbed her by the ankle. In a display of monumental force, Kakuzu then slammed Fu against the ground multiple times.

"Leave her alone!" Shibuku shouted, as he leaped at Kakuzu with a blade made of water in his hands.

Kakuzu merely chuckled Fu at Shibuki, who crashed against her, before they dropped to the ground with a loud thud.

"Not being able to kill you is rather irritating. But let's hope that can keep you two down enough time so we can get rid of the rest," Kakuzu grumbled.

Before Kakuzu could decide which enemy he should take out next, that decision was made for him when he was covered head to toe by an angry swarm of beetles.

"What the...?" Kakuzu asked, trying to swat the bugs away.

"You won't lay a finger on Fu while I'm here and I can fight," Shino said in cold anger, as with a hand motion, commanded his swarm to drain Kakuzu dry of chakra.

However, the swarm of beetles had the unintended effect of hiding Kakuzu while he made a hand seal. One of the thread monsters, the one with the turtle mask, leaped at them.

"Water Release: Roaring Waterfall!"

The turtle masked monster opened its jaws, expelling a massive cone of water wide enough to hit both Kakuzu and Shino with immense force. Shino jumped, as he recalled the swarm attacking Kakuzu, who made no effort to move and was engulfed by the incoming torrent.

"He didn't care about hitting himself with his own jutsu in order to get rid of my Kikai swarm..." Shino noted, as his brain tried to formulate a strategy. "Elemental blasts of such scale will wipe my swarm away in an instant... I didn't think I'd have to resort to this jutsu so soon, but guess that the quality of the enemy demands it..."

"You are an Aburame, aren't you? Very few clans use insects to attack enemies," Kakuzu noted. "If you were five years older, I could cash a nice bounty for your head. Such a pity, but I can't let you live. Please don't make it harder than it should be. I'm sure you already noticed that your set of skills will be of little use against me, so let's not drag this out. Time is gold, as they usually say."

"Trust me, the feeling is mutual," Shino coldly replied, as he made a singler hand seal. "Aburame Secret Art: Giant Beetle Growth!"

Several bursts of smoke exploded around Shino, creating eight beetles as large as Akamaru. Kakuzu, however, was unimpressed.

"That changes nothing. No matter what you do, you won't be able to land a hit on me," Kakuzu confidently said.

"Maybe," with a hand motion, Shino directed the enlarged beetles at the Akatsuki adopted a fighting stance. Then, much to his surprise, the beetles deviated their trajectory in the last second, flying to the sides. "But I'm sure she can."

Kakuzu noticed a shadow looming over him. Looking up, he saw an enraged Fu descending upon him, her fist ready to crush him into pulp. While her body was battered and had numerous bruises, she didn't look as she was unable to keep fighting.

"How did she recover so soon?" Kakuzu thought in frustration, as he instinctively raised his arms to protect himself. *"Too late to dodge, I need to harden my skin!"*

"TAKE THIS!" Fu screamed, as her fist hit Kakuzu's crossed arms, unleashing all her anger into that blow.

Fu felt like her fist was hitting solid rock rather than soft flesh, but she didn't mind. If Kakuzu turned into stone, she'll shatter him to bits. The force of the impact caused a powerful shockwave, while it also sank Kakuzu to his knees into the ground, cracks in the ground

spreading from the penetration point. Fu the continued punching Kakuzu both arms, sinking him a little more with each hit.

Sensing its master cornered, one of the monsters quickly rushed to his aid. The bird, masked creature opened its beak as it charged a devastating Wind Release against the jinchuriki...

"No, you won't," Shino said coolly.

... if it weren't for the group of giant beetles slamming against the monster, latching onto him, and devouring its chakra as well. The monster didn't scream -it seemed it was unable to- but tried to struggle against its predators by wildly shooting wind bullets in random directions, failing to hit any of the enlarged insects, who wisely positioned themselves to avoid being hit.

"What!?" Kakuzu asked in shock.

The first creature failing its task, and being already defeated, it was the turtle masked monster who attacked Fu with a powerful stream of water, forcing the mint haired girl to fly away, and allowing Kakuzu to get out of the hole Fu had sunken him into.

"Inconceivable. How did I lose one of my hearts so soon, to these children!?" Kakuzu thought in frustration. *"My greater experience should give me enough advantage to deal with these kids easily."*

"Fu, Shibuki-san, are you okay?" Shino asked, as both he and Fu converged with Shibuki.

"I'm fine, but Shibuki doesn't look that hot," Fu said, before turning towards Kakuzu, and raising her fists in front of her face. "I'll keep the Akatsuki busy while you heal Shibuki, okay?"

"You need healing too," Shino protested.

"Not as much as Shibuki. Now heal him already!" Fu ordered.

Shino decided not to oppose his girlfriend anymore, as he started to heal Shibuki while Fu went back to engage Kakuzu.

...

Takigakure

"Lightning Release: Thunder Arrows!"

Flying above the battle that was taking place in the village, Hinata fired several arrow-shaped lightning bolts with her chakra bow at some of the Sons of Jashin -that's how the cultists called those horrible creatures- that entered her range. The arrows exploded in a splash of electricity, hitting every enemy in a small radius. Had she used her Lightning Release jutsu from such distance she could have hit her allies, who were fighting very close to the enemies.

"But with this weapon, I can shoot accurate attacks at the enemy without being afraid of hitting my allies," Hinata thought, as she floated over the battlefield. "Haku-kun, two coming from behind!" Hinata warned him.

Haku wordlessly nodded, and made several hand seals, before slamming his foot on the ground. Ice started to grow on the ground around him, suddenly generating multiple ice spikes that impaled the Sons of Jashin that tried to ambush him.

"Thank you, Hinata," Haku replied, as he weaved hand signs to pelt with ice blades a group of mercenaries and Jashin cultists in front of him.

"Hey, do you guys know where is Fu?" Naruto asked, as he sliced more Sons of Jashin with his Wind Blade. "I can't see him anywhere. Hinata-hime?"

Hinata nodded, and extended the range of her Tenseigan to cover the whole village. Still, she was unable to find her physical body nor her chakra signature. A worried expression crept on her face.

"I can't find her!" she said in horror.

"What? No, she has to be here! What are Kakashi-sensei and the other doing!?" Naruto shouted in frustration. "There's no way Akatsuki could have get their hands on her so quick!"

"Hinata-san, can you scan the area surrounding the village? She might still be around here," Haku suggested.

Hinata nodded, and did as she was told. As she inspected the surrounding forests, her desperation grew when no signs of human activity were found. That's it, until she saw some flickers of chakra coming from the west. Focusing her sight in that direction, she finally saw it.

"There's a domed chakra barrier in the forest to the west!" Hinata pointed out. "I can't see what's inside, but I have the feeling that both Fu, Team Kakashi and the Akatsuki might be there."

"In that case, we should go and help them. I believe the situation here is under control," Naruto said.

"Indeed, those horrible creatures are retreating!" Hinata pointed out.

And just like she said, the Sons of Jashin disengaging the Taki, Konoha or Suna ninjas fighting them, and run back to the Great Tree. However, they didn't look as if they were abandoning the fight, but more like regrouping to plan a counterattack -could those beasts think complex strategies?-. She was taken aback by what they did next.

"What...?" Hinata asked.

"Hinata-hime, what's going on?" Naruto asked

"They're merging! It seems that, since they have the same chakra signature, they can combine themselves and-"

Hinata's explanation was interrupted when Naruto, Haku and their allies saw a massive black mass rise above them. The mass took a vaguely humanoid form, with a massive top body, large, thick arms, short but stocky legs, and a featureless tiny stump in place of a head. The giant creature had multiple eyes of varying sizes across his body, as well as many mouths full of sharp teeth. Several small tentacles protruded from several parts of his body, constantly wiggling as if they had life on his own.

"What... what the hell is THAT!?" Naruto screamed upon seeing the abomination.

"Our secret weapon! Behold the power of our dark master, you unclean infidels!" a Jashin cultist said in joy. "The Wrath of Jashin! A colossal avatar of our God's will, that will purge this place of the unbelievers!"

The massive creature took a step forward, crushing a house under one his feet, and several ninja of both sides. This caused all the Taki, Konoha and Suna ninja to flee from that monsters' vicinity.

"We need to take that thing out of the village!" Hinata said.

"I know!" Naruto replied, as he leaped onto Gamabunta's head. "Boss, you think you can take that creature away from here?"

"I'll try, but I won't promise anything!" Gamabunta replied, as he went to engage the giant creature. "Try to get everybody else out of my way!"

Gamabunta leaped out of the water, landing in front of the Wrath of Jashin with a loud rumble that make the earth shake. The abomination set all its eyes on the gigantic toad, identifying it as the main threat. Moving one giant arm, the monster tried to slam Gamabunta, but giant toad proved to be more nimble than his size let on, fainted, and latched onto the creature.

"Hinata-hime, Haku, come on, we need to help the boss deal with this guy! Let's try to finish it as soon as we can so we can move to help Fu and the others!" Naruto cried.

Naruto's teammates nodded and jumped -or descended in Hinata's case- onto Gamanunta's head.

"Let's take this somewhere more private, shall we?" Gamabunta said, before leaping high into the air, with the Wrath of Jashin in tow. They cruised the skies at high speed, before falling down a kilometer or so away from Taki. The abrupt landing caused an earthquake and blasted a multitude of trees away, creating a clearing.

"Alright then, now I don't need to hold back anymore!" Gamabunta said with a glee.

"Neither do we," Naruto added, as he prepared his Wind Blade.

...

Back inside the Chakra Dome

Holding his bleeding, slashed stomach with one hand, Kakashi watched in confusion as Hidan licked the blood from his scythe, and changed. His skin turned pitch black with white motifs that somehow resembled human bones.

"The condition has been met. Not, let us begin," Hidan cryptically said as he pulled out a ritual dagger from within his cloak, and stabbed it on his palm. He used the resulting gush of blood to draw a circle with a triangle inside it around him.

"I don't know what the hell is he doing, but my instincts are screaming not to let him finish!" Kakashi thought, as he lunged at Hidan with one hand still holding his stomach, and the other firmly grabbing a kunai.

However, he was forced to cancel the attack when his Sharingan noticed the lightning monster coming at him, ready to fire an electric blast at the copy ninja, who jumped away to avoid it. Still, the monster persisted in his onslaught, and fired more electric bolts, forcing the silver haired Jonin to continue jumping.

Kiba and Tamaki had noticed what had happened, and decided to stop Hidan before he could finish whatever he was doing.

"Come on, Akamaru!" Kiba said, riding his large dog, as they charged at Hidan.

"He needs to stay still to finish whatever jutsu he's planning to do! We can't waste this chance to finish him off!" Tamaki said, leaping besides him.

Unfortunately for them, Kakuzu still had one more monster left, the one with the tiger mask that spewed fire. And fire did spew, a massive torrent of flames, forcing Kiba, Tamaki and Akamaru away from Hidan.

"... and done!" Hidan cried triumphantly, as he started to laugh. "Hahahaha, yes! Now, Jashin-sama, accept this measly sacrifice from this unworthy servant of yours!" Hidan said, almost chanted, as he raised the ritual dagger over his head.

"I need to stop him! He changed when he drank my blood, that means he created some sort of connection between us, and plans to use it in some way to cause me harm!" Kakashi distressingly thought as he tried to avoid the demon masked monster while rushing towards Hidan.

Kakashi's hand crackled with electricity, as he jumped over the demon masked monster. The pain in his stomach became greater the more he moved, made it even worse by all the blood he was losing. He only had a chance to top it. He forced his Sharingan to his limits in order to have a clear shot at the Akatsuki cultist.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Beast Tracking Fang!"

But he was too late.

"Now... SUFFER!"

Hidan brought down his dagger, piercing his flesh, causing him a great pain that flooded him with a perverse sense of joy and pleasure. And the silver haired Jonin felt that very same pain in his own flesh.

"KAKASHI-SENSEI!" Tamaki cried in horror.

Author's Note: Yeah, another cliffhanger that teases a death of a major character. I know, I suck a lot and you hope I die in a fire.

So! The battle for Takigakure's freedom has begun! But we all know that in the end, that battle means very little and the Taki ninjas will take back their home. The real question, though, it's if Akatsuki will be able to capture Fu, or the green haired girl and the Animal Squad (and Shibuki) will be able to survive against the Zombie Team, at least until help arrives.

And while the Assault Squad knows about their predicament, not only are they busy dealing with the Wrath of Jashin, but there's that pesy barrier they have to deal with.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed all the action on this chapter. Tune in two weeks for the resolution. In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Immortal Team, Part I

Author's Note: Well, this arc don't seem to be doing that good in terms of reviews, since we're reaching historical lows. I'm really hoping I'm not losing my touch, or that this story is becoming repetitive or stale. Anyway, let's hope that this chapter fares a little better. Enjoy:

Chapter 63

The Immortal Team, Part I

or

You Can't Kill What's Dead on the Inside

"So... any of you guys have any experience fighting giant monster... thingies with lots of eyes, mouths and tentacles, all in places that shouldn't have any of those?" Naruto asked as he eyed the Wrath of Jashin, whom had recovered from the shock of the landing.

"The answer may surprise you, but no," Haku deadpanned.

The Wrath of Jashin let out a thundering roar from all its mouths at the same time, as it charged at Gamabunta while raising one of its massive arms.

"Fortunately, that thing telegraphs its attacks way in advance," Hinata noticed.

The arm came down, and Gamabunta managed to catch it with his webby hands. However, it packed so much force, the giant toad was pushed backwards, crushing a few trees under him.

"His attacks might be easy to predict, but that doesn't make them any less painful!" Gamabunta loudly wheezed. "Come on, do

something!"

"First of all," Naruto said, making his favorite hand seal, as he created two Shadow Clones. "Go collect some nature energy!" Obediently, the clones leaped away, and disappeared between the lush trees below. "So, anybody has an idea of how should we tackle something so big?"

"Let's go for the eyes, I think they may be its weak spots," Hinata suggested, as she readied her chakra bow. Haku did the same.

"Very well then! Let's go!" Naruto agreed, as he and his teammates leaped from Gamabunta towards the Wrath of Jashin. Naruto landed on its right shoulder, Haku on its left forearm, while Hinata stayed floating in front of its chest.

The tentacles that randomly wiggled weren't there for no reason. The moment Naruto and Haku touched the monster, nearby tentacles lunged at them, wrapping around their bodies.

"Oh no, you don't!" Naruto shouted, as he pulled his Wind Blade, and with a well directed swipe, cut the tentacle clean, releasing him at once. More tentacles flew at him, but they ended up sharing the same fate.

Haku, meanwhile, opted to make several hand seals. "Ice Release: Walking Winter!"

The Ice Ninja generated a powerful icy aura that quickly froze the tentacle restraining him. The tentacle frozen, Haku shattered it by slamming his chakra bow against it, breaking free from the appendage.

"Come on, before it has the chance to get us again, attack at once!" Naruto commanded. The others nodded.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Arrow!"

"Ice Release: Freezing Arrow!"

Arrows of lightning and ice impacted against two of the creature's many eyes. Naruto, meanwhile, stabbed his Wind Blade on a large nearby eyeball. The Wrath of Jashin let out a loud, thundering roar, as it thrashed wildly, trying to get rid of its comparatively tiny but painful attackers.

"Gamabunta, attack now!" Naruto shouted.

"You got it, brat!" the giant toad shouted, as he leaped into the air, unsheathed his katana, and delivered a vertical swipe. "TAKE THIS!"

Gamabunta's blade vertically bisected the monster from the stump where its head should be, right to the chest, but the blade didn't go down any further. Oddly enough, rather than blood or organs, Sons of Jashin started to pour from the cut, some of them falling to the ground, others trying to crawl back into the wound and repair it, and others remained on the monster's skin, not knowing what to do.

"The creature is gathering chakra! Watch out, it prepares to attack!" Hinata warned.

And just as the Hyuga Clan Head said, the Wrath of Jashin opened all its mouths at once, releasing streams of blue fire. As if it had life on its own, the fire flew in arcs towards the Konoha ninja and the giant Toad, who pulled his giant blade out of the monster.

"Ouch! Hot! Hot! Hot!" Gamabunta shouted, as the flames made him jump back. "My skin is not made to withstand fire!"

Naruto, Hinata and Haku tried to dodge it as best as they could. They noticed that, even if the flames they dodged crashed against the monster, its skin wasn't burnt, and the creature didn't appear to feel any pain.

"Goddamit, is this creature fireproof?" Naruto complained.

"I believe this is not normal fire," Haku conjectured, as he made several hand seals. "Water Release: Water Wall!"

Haku expelled a stream of water from his mouth to an incoming blaze of blue fire, which did nothing to stop it other than slow it down a little. Haku was forced to dodge once again.

"Indeed. The chakra of the flames doesn't look like normal fire chakra should. It is shaped like fire, but it's not fire," Hinata observed.

"But it still burns like fire!" Gamabunta loudly complained.

"Maybe the skin is fire resistant, but maybe the eyes are not! Let's try to direct the flames there!" Naruto suggested.

Haku and Hinata nodded, and the moment the next homing streams of blue fire came, they tricked them into hitting their eyes.

"GRAAAAAAARGH!"

And Naruto was right, much to his satisfaction. The creature's many mouths let out multiple high pitched growls of pain, as it trashed wildly in order to futilely fight the pain and those who were causing it.

"It worked!" Naruto cheered.

"I can see that. However, even if we destroy all the creature's eyes, I doubt we'll be able to kill it," Hinata pointed out.

"I know, but at least it won't use that attack anymore. Plus I have a plan," Naruto said. "I'll keep this guy distracted. Can you immobilize it?"

"Leave that to me," Haku volunteered, as he started to descend from the monster to the ground level. "Though I believe this may take some time!"

"We'll buy you that time, then!" Hinata exclaimed, as she and Naruto faced the Wrath of Jashin again.

...

Electricity from Kakashi's arm flickered away, as it was replaced by an intense feeling of pain. Blood started to soak the sleeve of his dark blue shirt, pouring from a gash that hadn't been there a second before.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Tamaki screamed.

"Just... what did that guy do?" a confused Kiba asked.

Using his ritual dagger, Hidan had stabbed his right arm, a deranged smile appearing on his face as he did so. He let out a soft, but demented laugh.

"Hahaha... the pain... it feels so good!" Hidan moaned, sounding like somebody who was experiencing the greatest of the pleasures. He pulled the dagger from his bloodied arm. "Shall we do it again?"

"Just like I expected, using my blood, he used a jutsu to create a link between us. Whenever he suffers an injury, the same happens to me. But since he's immortal, he can wound himself all what he wants without running into any risks. In fact, he looks as if he already did this plenty of times..." Kakashi thought, as he held his arm in pain. *"But the question is... what can I do to stop him?"*

"You know what, Kakashi? My jutsu allows me to shut down my pain receptors if I wish. But I don't want to," Hidan began. "Do you know why? Because I want to know what my victims feel as I slowly erode their lives away. And the pain... oh, the pain! Is there a more wonderful sensation?"

"Kakashi-sensei!" Kiba shouted, as he and Akamaru rushed to attack Hidan.

"No, stop! Hidan linked our chakra in some way! If you cause him any harm, said harm will go to me as well!" Kakashi warned his student.

"Heh, not bad. Most people only realize what's going on when they're about to die," Hidan praised the Copy Ninja. "Not that it's going to be of any help here either!"

"We'll see about that!" Kakashi shouted. Soldiering through the pain, Kakashi grabbed a kunai with his unwounded arm, and dashed towards the Jashin cultist. "Okay, I think I know how can I incapacitate him without causing lethal harm. I only need to-"

"Nuh-uh!" Hidan said in a chastising manner, as he drove his dagger into his right leg.

The silver haired Jonin felt an intense pain on his right leg, lost, balance, and fell to the ground facefirst.

"You may not know it already, Kakashi, but you're already dead. I'm merely toying with you, milking you for all the delicious pain in your body, until I have no more use for you, and I send your soul to Jashin-sama," Hidan gleefully said.

Kakashi tried to fight desperation and keep a cool head, something that was becoming increasingly difficult to do, due not only knowing that Hidan could kill him whenever he wanted to, but because the increasing number of bleeding wounds was making such task progressively harder.

"No jutsu is perfect, all of them have a weakness and ways to be countered, and this can't be an exception! Come on, Kakashi, think!" the silver haired Jonin desperately thought, as he tried to scan Hidan with his Sharingan. But, unfortunately, from his position, he could only see his legs, and that strange symbol he made with his own blood at the beginning.

A symbol he was standing over... could it be?

"Kiba, Tamaki, that Akatsuki is standing on a symbol he drew with his own blood! Push him away from it! Use shuriken with ninja wire!" the masked man commanded.

Hidan's expression when from sadistic smugness to utter shock in less than a second. And it was all what Kakashi needed to prove his theory right.

"The fuck!? How did you guess that!?" an indignant Hidan exclaimed. "You know what? Fuck it! You might have discovered how my jutsu works, but it was for naught, since I'm going to end this NOW!" Hidan said, as he prepared to stab himself in the heart.

"Not so fast!" Tamaki shouted.

Two shuriken with ninja wire attached flew at Hidan. Using the wire to maneuver it, the shuriken wrapped the wire around Hidan's arms, before Kiba and Tamaki pulled in opposite directions, immobilizing him. Kakashi suppressed a groan as he also felt like an invisible force was trying to rip his arms apart. His students noticed this, and hesitated for a second.

"Don't waver! Don't worry about me, I'll be fine! Focus on bringing Hidan out of that circle!" Kakashi insisted.

Kiba and Tamaki nodded, as they continued pulling Hidan back. The Akatsuki, however, despite offering no small amount of resistance, was being pulled back, slowly but surely.

"Goddamit!" Hidan shouted, as he was forced to take a step back, but wasn't fully out of the symbol. "Kakuzu! Lend me a fucking hand, you asshole!"

Meanwhile, at the other side of the clearing, Shino, Fu and Shibuki were fighting Kakuzu. Or more specifically, Fu was engaging Kakuzu in a brutal hand to hand duel while the men fought against the three remaining elemental creatures made of threads. Hidan's screams

momentarily interrupted the fight, dragging their attention to the other battlefield.

"It seems that Hidan can't even finish the job himself," Kakuzu grumbled, as he caught a punch from Fu. "Why do I always have to babysit that moron?"

"Kakashi-sensei seems to be grievously wounded. If I don't help him, he might perish," Shino stated.

"Then go! Fu and I will keep Kakuzu busy!" Shibuki told him, as he made several hand seals. "Water Release: Water Bullet Jutsu!"

Shibuki expelled a stream of water from his mouth, to counter the turtle masked monster's own water jutsu, giving Shino a chance to escape.

Wordlessly, Kakuzu disengaged Fu, and rushed to intercept Shino, but the green haired girl wouldn't let him.

"I am your opponent!" Fu shouted, as she appeared in front of the rogue Taki ninja, blocking his way. "Don't even dare to ignore me!"

Realizing that he had no way to go past the jinchuriki, Kakuzu commanded his masked monsters to aid Hidan in any way they could. While the help arrived, Hidan continued to struggle against the two Konoha Chunin.

"You fucking brats! You won't interrupt the Jashin's scared sacrifice!" Hidan protested, as he struggled to remain within the symbol of blood.

"Akamaru, now!" Kiba commanded.

With a bark of agreement, the large white dog dashed at Hidan, and bashed him in the chest with his head. Added to the force pulling him back, the immortal Akatsuki fumbled out of the symbol, before he finally fell on his back.

"Alright then, just to be sure, let's check if my theory is correct!" Kakashi said, as he pulled out a single shuriken from his ninja tool pouch, and tossed it at the downed Hidan. The shuriken stabbed on his chest. No such wound appeared on Kakashi's. "Theory confirmed. Now, to make sure you can't continue that ritual..." This time, Kakashi pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it, and tossed it to the blood symbol.

"NO!" Hidan screamed.

Kiba, Tamaki and Akamaru jumped away in time before Kakashi detonated the explosive note, destroying the blood symbol, and leaving a crater in its place.

At that moment, Shino landed besides Kakashi, and started to heal all his wounds.

"I hope the time of my arrival wasn't too late," Shino stated.

"You couldn't have arrived in a better moment," a thankful Kakashi said. Then, his eyes grew wide upon seeing what was coming. "Guys, watch out! The other Akatsuki sent reinforcements!"

Kiba and Tamaki saw the three remaining masked monsters flying at them. While the two Chunin could deal with them without troubles, Kakashi and Shino would be like sitting ducks for them.

"Kiba, we need to protect Kakashi-sensei and Shino from those things, as well as the Akatsuki!" Tamaki urged, as she adopted a fighting stance.

"Agreed. I think that this is a good moment to use the new jutsu I've been working on for the past weeks. Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Kiba said, and a clone appeared besides him.

Tamaki was unimpressed. "A shadow clone? That's your new jutsu?"

"That's just the first part! Akamaru!" Kiba called his dog, who rushed to his side. Both Kiba and his clone rode on Akamaru's back -the additional weight was apparent on the dog's struggling expression-, before making the Tiger Seal. "Inuzuka Secret Art: Human Beast Mixture Transformation Three-Headed Wolf!"

Kiba, his clone and Akamaru disappeared in a cloud of smoke, revealing a large, white furred, three-headed wolf in its place. The three heads let out each a bark in unison.

Tamaki was still unimpressed. "So, your giant wolf transformation has three heads instead of two. Eh, guess that's an improvement," she said, shrugging a little.

The three heads shot her an annoyed stare.

"Okay, here they come!" Tamaki said, as the masked monsters hovered over them, readying their attacks.

...

Meanwhile, back to the forests surrounding Takigakure, the battle against the Wrath of Jashin continued. Haku had descended all the way down to the ground, and from his point of view, he could now truly appreciate how massive the colossal aberration was.

The Ice Ninja rummaged through his ninja tool pouch, until he found a soldier pill, and popped it into his mouth.

"Even with the pill, I might not have enough chakra to completely immobilize it... but I have to try it nevertheless..." Haku wondered aloud, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Here goes nothing... Ice Release: Encompassing Mantle of the Yuki-Onne!"

The temperature abruptly dropped to subzero levels, as the green grass and brown soil of the ground started to crystalize, soon becoming white and light blue ice. The ice quickly spread all around Haku, the trees, the rocks, and most importantly, the Wrath of

Jashin's legs. Though Haku was directing all his chakra towards the latter point.

The giant monster seemingly realized what was going on, and tried to move one of its legs to crush Haku. However, he was too late, and both legs were frozen solid. But the monster didn't give up, and using his massive strength, tried to free its lower limbs. The ice started to crack.

"Oh no, you don't!" Haku said, making a hand seal, intensifying the cold of his jutsu, which repaired the cracks in the ice.

"Naruto-kun! Hinata-san! I'll try to hold it down as much as possible, but whatever you plan to do it, do it already!" Haku yelled from below.

Many meters above, Naruto was already in position, firmly on the handle of Gamabunta's weapon. His eyes were now yellow with orange eyeshadow, signaling that Sage Mode was now active.

"Okay Bunta, now, before it attacks! Hack it to pieces!" Naruto said.
"Haku, get out of the way!"

"You got it!" Gamabunta replied, as he began to wind his sword back.

"The monster is gathering chakra again! Watch out!" Hinata warned.

Pieces of flesh from the Wrath of Jashin's chest started to slip back, revealing a massive orange eye below. The eye started to glow with a crimson light for a few seconds, before it fired a chakra blast of the same color at Naruto and Gamabunta.

"Oh shit!" Naruto cursed.

However, Hinata got in the way between the crimson missile and its target, and using her telekinetic powers. It held it in place, slowing it down as much as she could.

"Naruto-kun... I'm trying to..." Hinata said, as she poured every ounce of her power into stopping that attack.

"Got it, no time to waste! Gamabunta, let's do it now!" Naruto called.

"Alright!" Gamabunta agreed, as he jumped in the air, and readied his sword for a downwards slice.

"Here it goes!" Naruto said, as he started channeling all his chakra into the giant toad's katana. The blade started to glow with a blue and white fire that swirled around it. "Sage Art: Majestic Destroyer Sword!"

This time, Gamabunta's katana sliced through the monster as easily as if it was made of butter. With two precise blows, the monster was split into three parts, which fell apart instantly, while at the same time releasing multiple Sons of Jashin, that tried to reform again.

"Naruto-kun, the monster will reform in a few minutes! Please tell me that your plan didn't end there!" Hinata pleaded.

"Of course it didn't!" Naruto shouted, as he jumped from Gamabunta's sword, and landed on the toad's head, and started making hand seals.. "I'm gonna need some oil!"

"Alright!" Gamabunta replied, as his dewlap swelled up, before releasing a stream of oil, covering the reforming monster under the sticky substance.

"Fire Release: Flame Toad Bullet!"

Naruto breathed a single fireball into the oil, igniting it, which instantly produced a massive blaze that consumed not only the Wrath of Jashin and all the smaller demons that formed it, but many trees around the area as well.

"Its chakra it's receding. I think that attack destroyed it completely," Hinata informed, as he scanned the creature with her Tenseigan.

"Alright then. Tell me when it's completely dead, and Gamabunta will put that fire out before it goes out of control," Naruto stated. "While Fu and the others might need our help, we can't leave this place with a forest fire waiting to happen."

Hinata nodded in agreement.

...

"These wounds are very deep," Shino noticed, as he healed Kakashi's gash on his right arm.

"Meaning that you will take some time to mend them, I know," Kakashi replied.

"No, I mean you're lucky to be alive. If the Akatsuki decided to forego toying with you and went for a vital spot... there would be nothing neither me nor any medic could have done to save you," Shino pointed out.

"Guess we must be thankful Hidan is so unhinged. His partner doesn't seem to be the kind of fooling around," Kakashi commented, before his eyes opened wide. "SHINO GET OUT OF HERE!"

Shino turned around, and saw one of the masked monsters looming above them. It opened its maws, and started to charge a fireball. However, before it could fire and turn Kakashi and Shino to ashes, the three headed wolf Kiba and Akamaru fused into blasted it with a sonic roar, making it to shoot the fireball in another direction where, thankfully, nobody was standing. The wolf then placed himself in front of Shino and Kakashi as if to protect them from further attacks, and growled menacingly.

The fire monster got back on its feet, and insisted on its attack. Opening its maws, it released a massive wave of fire at the same spot. The wolf took a deep breath, and countered it with a continuous sonic roar. The soundwaves and the fire pushed back and forth, with none of them gaining ground over the other.

Not far away from there, Tamaki was engaging Hidan, while Shibuki dealt with the Lightning and Water monsters. Though in Tamaki's case, she was mostly trying to dodge Hidan's scythe swings.

"Stop moving, you dumb bitch!" Hidan shouted, as he tried to skewer Tamaki.

"Fat chance. I know what happens if you manage to get a drop of my blood," Tamaki replied.

"It's going to happen sooner or later! I'm immortal, you're not! I can fight for as long as I want, while you will get tired, and when you do, you'll become my sacrifice! And then that silver haired bastard of a sensei of yours will go next!" Hidan screamed, before delivering a vertical slash.

Tamaki nimbly dodged it with a backflip, and the three blades stuck themselves into the ground. Hidan pulled, but the scythe didn't come out.

"Come on, this has to be a fucking joke!" Hidan loudly complained, as he struggled to pull the scythe from the ground.

"This is my chance!" Tamaki jumped backwards, retracted her claws, and made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Blistering Firecat!"

The cat kunoichi breathed a massive wave of fire, which took the shape of a large cat, and dashed towards the Akatsuki.

"Eh?" Hidan said, noticing the incoming fire cat, before chuckling. "You really have a hard time understanding what 'immortal' means, don't you?" Hidan laughed, before letting go of the scythe, and spreading his arms. "Your jutsu won't have any effect!"

The fire cat clashed against Hidan, exploding into a torrent of flames. And while such jutsu would have cooked any normal being alive, once the flames receded, Hidan could see that he didn't have a single burn in his body.

"Ha! What did I told you?" Hidan gloated, before realizing that Tamaki was nowhere to be seen. "Huh? Where did you go, you cat bitch?"

Meanwhile, Kiba and Akamaru were still trying to hold the fire monster off, but his continued sonic roar was starting to strain the three headed wolf, and the fire was slowly pushing the soundwaves back.

"Shino, leave me. I don't think Kiba will be able to hold that thing for much longer," Kakashi warned his student.

"Not until I'm able to heal you," Shino insisted.

"Shino, this is no time for-"

"DRILL CLAW"

Suddenly, a human tornado appeared out of nowhere, descending from above towards the masked monster still breathing a wave of fire. Noticing the threat too late, the fire monster was unable to move away, and the human tornado shredded the strange creature to black thread strings, and, oddly enough, blood and gore. And in the middle of all that mess, Tamaki stood, covered in some thread and blood. She smiled confidently.

"Another one down," she said with a satisfied grin. "And you guys are welcome."

The three headed wolf grinned in return as well. Kakashi sighed in relief. Shino didn't say anything, and continued healing the copy ninja.

Of course, the destruction of a second masked monster didn't go unnoticed to Kakuzu, who was still engaging Fu.

"What? Another one of my hearts down? Just how some brats offer such an incredible resistance?" the old Akatsuki thought, as he gave

his two remaining monsters a mental command.

The creatures, who were targeting Shibuki, immediately left him, and dashed towards Fu, as they charged an elemental attack each.

"Fu, watch out!" Shibuki warned her.

Thankfully, Fu heard the warning, and her hatred of Kakuzu didn't trump her common sense. She disengaged the masked ninja, deployed her wings, and flew high into the air - albeit not too high, since the chakra dome didn't allow her to - before the elemental barrage of water and lightning could hit her.

The monsters placed themselves at Kakuzu's flanks, as if they were his bodyguards. Hidan, noticing what Kakuzu was doing, also fell back and jumped towards him in order to regroup. The Konoha and Taki ninjas did the same.

"Kakashi-san, are you okay?" Shibuki asked, as he went to check the silver haired Jonin, whom, Shino had finished healing.

"Yes, I'm fine. Not at one hundred percent, but I still can carry my part of the weight," the copy ninja said, as he was helped by Shino and Tamaki back on his feet. "Plus the Akatsuki didn't come out unscathed either. Good job destroying two of those things."

"But even if by doing so we've weakened the enemy, I'm sure they'd now fight with more caution, if not fiercy," Shino noted. "A cornered animal is at its most dangerous."

"Don't worry Shino. I will put those rabid beasts out of their misery," Fu stated, as she punched the palm of her hand.

At the same time, the Akatsuki were discussing the course of the battle, and what would be their next move.

"Just what the hell, man? How are you letting a bunch of kids kick your ass?" Hidan asked Kakuzu.

"The same could be said about you. You had the Jonin's life in your hands, yet you botched it instead of finishing the job," Kakuzu fired back.

"Hey, you fucker, what does-"

"There's no time to argue who's more at fault. The fact is, this fight is not going our way, and we must do something about it," Kakuzu stated.

"Okay then. What's your brilliant idea?" Hidan asked. Wordlessly, Kakuzu pulled out something from his ninja tool pouch. It was a small vial with a blue liquid inside. "You're so fucking weak. Are we going to resort to that already?"

"If you have a better solution, I'm all ears," Kakuzu replied in cold anger. "If not, shut up and drink your part."

"Fine. Whatever," Hidan lazily conceded, as he pulled out an identical vial from a hidden pocket within his cloak, as both he and Kakuzu downed their contents in one go.

Shibuki and Fu immediately recognized the liquid the Akatsuki had ingested.

...

Thankfully, it didn't take long for Hinata to confirm that the Wrath of Jashin had been completely destroyed. After that, Gamabunta put out the fires with a powerful water jutsu, before bidding Naruto farewell. After that, the members of the Assault Squad headed towards the chakra dome as fast as they could.

Right now, it was only a matter of destroying the only barrier that prevented them from helping their friends.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Hinata released a myriad of lightning bolts from her fingers, and crashed against the bright purple barrier. Multiple small blasts were produced when the electric attack clashed against the barrier. But when the smoke dispelled, the barrier was still there.

"No damage," Hinata pointed out.

"Maybe we can dig a tunnel that goes under the barrier?" Naruto suggested.

Hinata shook her head. "The barrier goes all the way underground, forming a perfect sphere. This is no normal chakra barrier. Whoever did this, they made a very good job."

"I could generate a Demonic Ice Mirror to the other side of the forcefield, but I'm afraid I have no way of letting you pass," Haku pointed out. The Ice Ninja then looked at Naruto. "Naruto-kun, do you think you could use a seal to dispel the barrier?"

"Hmmm..." Naruto grunted, placing a hand under his chin, as he started to think of all the seals he knew, which one could be of help. "Sadly, I don't think there is a seal specifically created to destroy a barrier, but..." the blond then pulled out a small book -that according to its cover, was about fuinjutsu- and started to furiously flip through the pages, as if looking for something.

"What is it, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"This!" Naruto replied, showing a certain page of the book to both his teammates.

"A... chakra dampening seal?" Haku asked, reading the headline of the page.

"Yes. The seal is used to reduce, or even suppress completely, the amount of chakra a ninja can mold and release. It's normally used on cuffs to stop criminals from using chakra," Naruto explained.

"And how is that going to help?" Haku asked.

"I'll create a sealing tag with this seal, and use it on the barrier. The amount of chakra will consume it immediately, but it will significantly weaken the area I place the seal on, which would make said area vulnerable to our attacks. Though it will only last a few seconds before the barrier reforms, so we must be quick," Naruto told them.

"That won't be a problem. How long do you think you'll take in making that sealing tag?" Haku asked.

"Five minutes, give or take," Naruto said, as he pulled out from a sealing scroll a brush, ink, and a blank sealing tag. He then made a hand seal, and created other two clones, as well as replicas of his sealing tools. "I'll make other two at the same time, in case the first one fails."

"Very well then. Be quick, Naruto-kun. Our friends are counting on us," Hinata told her boyfriend.

...

"Shibuki, is that...?" Fu asked.

"The Hero Water, yes. Of course, I should have expected that Kakuzu would get his hands on it, with the village under his control," Shibuki replied..

"Hero water? Is the same elixir Fu drank during the fight with Gaara, right?" Kakashi asked, vaguely remembering said event.

"Yes. It provides a temporary power boost. Due the backlash it causes to the body once the effects wear off, we usually drink it in small doses, and only in dire situations," Shibuki explained.

"But since one Akatsuki is immortal and the other has multiple hearts and a modified anatomy, they don't have to worry about such effects," Shino said, being more a statement rather than a question.

"I'm afraid so," Shibuki uneasily replied.

Once they drank their contents, they lazily tossed the vials to the ground, the soft glass shattering in pieces. The effect was immediate, and Hidan and Kakuzu were surrounded by a fiery blue aura.

"Oh yes! This is some good shit!" Hidan hollered, as he gripped his scythe with both hands. "Let's go!"

Suddenly, Hidan vanished and reappeared in front of a stunned Tamaki, ready to slice her in two with his scythe. The cat kunoichi was unable to react in time when the weapon came down, but thankfully, Kakashi, just as quick, parried the blow with a kunai. However, the blow packed so much strength, the silver haired Jonin was hurled backwards.

"The Hero Water made him really fast. If it wasn't for my Sharingan, I don't think I could have seen him move at such speed," Kakashi thought, as he managed to land on his feet on a large tree branch. "And the swipe was so powerful, the force pushed me back."

Then, in an instant, Hidan was leaping towards Kakashi, his scythe winded back. The Akatsuki had a demented grin on his face.

"Don't think I forgot about you! Your soul belongs to Jashin-sama!" Hidan screamed, as he delivered a horizontal chop.

Despite slashing thin air, the blow projected a crescent-shaped chakra blast at Kakashi, which bisected him horizontally, before slashing the canopies of several trees in its path. Hidan smirked upon seeing Kakashi's body sliced in two...

POOF!

... and his smile disappeared when, after a cloud of smoke, Kakashi was replaced by two halves of a sliced log.

"Godammit!" Hidan hollered, as he childishy stomped on the ground. "You won't be able to evade death forever, you fucking heathen!"

Turning around, he saw the real Kakashi regrouped with his students.

"Kakashi-sensei, are you okay?" Tamaki asked.

"Yes. Thank goodness I got that Body Replacement prepared in advance," Kakashi replied. "The Hero Water has increased Hidan's power exponentially. With his newfound speed and strength, I believe he won't even need that ritual to kill any of us. Don't face him, only I can match him now."

"Are you confident you'll be able to beat him in your current state? Even if I healed your wounds, you lost a lot of blood," Shino pointed out.

"Truth be told no, I'm not sure. But I'm our best bet. You did a good job destroying Kakuzu's monsters, try to get rid of the remaining two," Kakashi instructed.

"Yes, Kakashi-sensei," Tamaki said, as he watched her sensei facing the incoming Hidan. "Kiba, Shino, Akamaru, you ready?"

"I believe I am," Shino replied.

"WOOF!" the three headed wolf barked in agreement.

Meanwhile, Fu continued her one on one duel with Kakuzu. However, the effect of the Hero Water in the Akatsuki soon became evident, since the old Takigakure missing-nin moved much faster, and even if Fu was able to block his punches, they left her sore due the additional strength. Soon, her exposed skin was covered in bruises. And on top of that, Fu was barely attacking, and her fighting was limited to just blocking or dodging Kakuzu's attacks.

"I need to put some distance!" the jinchuriki said, as she deployed her wings, and flew high into the air.

Wordlessly, Kakuzu raised his arm, and shoot his forearm like a missile at Fu, which remained attached to the rest of the arm through multiple threads. Fu felt how a hand caught her leg in a strong grip, before being brutally yanked downwards. But not happy with that, Kakuzu raised and slammed her against the ground multiple times, before tossing her against a tree with such force, the tree was toppled.

"Did you have enough, jinchuriki?" Kakuzu asked, as he walked towards the downed green haired girl. "You're lucky I need you alive, or else you should would been dead already."

Groaning, Fu pushed the tree branches away, as she tried to shook off the pain and got back on her feet.

"Dammit... this doesn't look so good..." Fu lamented.

"Hey Fu, I think it's time to use my power, don't you think?" the Nanabi asked.

"I think there's no other choice. But I don't want you to try anything funny, okay? The situation is serious!" Fu chastised her Tailed Beast.

"You have my word I won't try anything," the Seven Tails agreed. Fu suddenly felt a rush of power flooding her body. **"Now go and kick his ass!"**

A reddish-orange aura enveloped Fu's body. She slowly felt the pain being washed away, as the bruises on her skin started to heal. Her muscles swelled up a bit, as the sheer energy she was releasing produced gusts of wind. A single tail of chakra formed behind her. Fu smirked. With this kind of power under her control, she could tip the balance back into her favor.

Wordlessly, the jinchuriki charged at Kakuzu, who resumed the fistfight. The strength of both combatants was so great, every punch produced a loud booming noise accompanied by a shockwave, and the two of them moved so fast, it was almost impossible to follow their movements. An expectator would only see a pair of blurs moving across the clearing, followed by booming shockwaves.

As they traded blows, their fists slammed into each other, producing a deafening boom, and a shockwave so powerful, it created a crater big enough to encompass the two fighters, before said shockwave pushed them backwards.

"According to our intelligence, you weren't supposed to be able to use your Tailed Beast power," Kakuzu pointed out.

"Your intelligence isn't very intelligent then," Fu mockingly replied. "So, you didn't plan for this, do you?"

"I admit I don't. But in the world of ninjas, plans rarely unfold as intended, and thus you need to develop a sharp mind in order to rethink your strategies as you go by. Otherwise, I wouldn't have lived as long as I did," Kakuzu calmly replied. "Trust me, girl, your power may match mine, but your experience is a drop of water while mine is an ocean, and that will end the battle in my favor."

"We'll see then!" Fu yelled before vanishing.

Kakuzu vanished as well, and their brutal duel continued.

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Kakashi continued his clash against Hidan, who pushed the copy ninja into the defensive, barely avoiding the onslaught of lightning fast attacks the Hidan cultist was putting the copy ninja through.

"Ha, you think that you can beat me being only on the defensive?" Hidan taunted as he delivered a flurry of slashes.

The silver haired jonin dodged them with an aerial backflip, landing on top of a large tree branch. Undeterred, Hidan leaped at him.

"He's right, I can't just defend. Even if he's immortal, I'm sure I can incapacitate him in some way," Kakashi said as he made several hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Through his mask, Kakashi breathed a massive fireball, flying in the same direction Hidan was coming. The cultist didn't even bother to dodge the Uchiha Clan's signature jutsu, and plowed through the fiery projectile.

"Weak!" Hidan laughed, as he prepared to cleave Kakashi. "... uh?"

The sound of a thousand birds filled the air as the Akatsuki saw Kakashi lunging at him, his right hand coated in electricity, ready to impale him. Even if he knew the attack wouldn't kill him, it would be the first step to incapacitate him.

"From this distance, and with such momentum, dodging is impossible," Kakashi confidently stated. "Lightning Blade!"

Or it would have been, if it wasn't for what Hidan did next. In the blink of an eye, Hidan stabbed his scythe in the ground, and used it to stop his momentum and spin around, safely dodging Kakashi, and leaving him wide open. Hidan quickly retrieved his scythe, and prepared to cut him in two.

"Nobody escapes Jashin's judgement, infidel, nobody!" Hidan screamed, as the scythe came down. "NOW DIE!"

"Vacuum Palm!"

A vacuum shell appeared out of nowhere, and blasted Hidan's scythe out of his hands. The scythe was sent flying into the air, before it fell to the ground, a few meters behind the Akatsuki. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, Kakashi turned around, and tried to thrust his Lightning Blade at him once again, but Hidan

proved to be too fast, and jumped backwards, avoiding the attack, and landing besides his weapon.

"The fuck!? What the hell happened?" Hidan angrily hollered.

"Kakashi-sensei!"

Much to his immense relief, the copy ninja saw the teen members of Kurenai's Assault Squad landing besides him. The copy ninja allowed himself to relax, and the tension and stress of the recent fight all washed over him.

"Thank goodness you arrived. I don't know about the others, but I don't think I would have lasted much longer against this guy," Kakashi said, panting a little.

"WHAT THE FUCK!?" Hidan screamed. "How the hell did you dipshits bypassed the barrier? It's still standing, I can feel it!"

"Your barrier was impressive, yes. But no barrier is impenetrable, keep that in mind," Naruto boasted, without giving any more details. Naruto then turned to the silver haired Jonin. "What about Fu and the others?"

"They're fighting Kakuzu to the west, not far away from here," Kakashi replied.

Hinata focused her Tenseigan on the direction Kakashi mentioned, and she quickly found the other members of the Animal Squad, Fu, and a man she didn't recognize, fighting against Kakuzu and two weird creatures.

"Found them! All of them seem to be okay, but they're struggling against the other Akatsuki," Hinata explained.

"Kakashi-sensei, what can you tell us about the Akatsuki?" Haku asked.

"This one is called Hidan, and his main power is immortality," Kakashi noticed the dubious looks the three teens were shooting at him. "Yeah, I thought the same, but he repeatedly survived multiple fatal hits without any kind of consequence. Don't let him draw your blood. If he drinks it, he can use it to create a link with you making you suffer all the wounds he does. He almost killed me that way."

"Don't let him get our blood, got it," Naruto nodded.

"The other... well, it's a bit hard to explain. His body is like nothing I've seen before. He seems to be made of threads that move on their own and keep his whole body together. He also commands four creatures that can use an element each. Though my students managed to kill two of them," Kakashi told him.

"This Akatsuki's chakra flares with such intensity, it's almost like looking directly into the sun," Hinata noticed after directing her eyes at Hidan.

"That's because both him and his partner drank vials of Takigakure's Hero Water. Said water can give your body and chakra a massive boost, but the backlash it causes after the effect disappears can be crippling, even fatal," Kakashi explained.

"But since one of them is immortal and the other has a bizarre anatomy, they can bypass that backlash," Naruto concluded. "Smart bastards."

"Alright then, what are we going to do?" Hinata asked.

"I believe Naruto and Haku should stay here and help me deal with his man," Kakashi suggested. "Naruto can safely fight him without the risk of drawing blood, while Haku has the necessary skills to put him down permanently, even if we won't be able to kill him. Your skills will do more good against the other Akatsuki."

"Understood. I better not waste anymore time. Good luck!" Hinata said, as she flew away towards the other battlefield.

"Alright, Kakashi-sensei, I guess you're in charge now. What do we do?" Naruto asked.

"Listen to me closely, because I don't think we'll have more than one chance to pull this off," Kakashi looked at Haku. "Haku, you will be key to ensure our victory."

The Ice Ninja nodded.

"Hey, stop whispering among yourselves! Whatever clever plan you might come up with, it won't work!" Hidan said, as he adopted a fighting stance. "Hey, the blond shit, aren't you a jinchuriki?"

"So what if I am?" Naruto defiantly replied.

"That means that I won't be able to kill you. Just my fucking luck. Oh well, guess that torturing you to the point of begging me to kill you will have to do then!" Hidan happily said, as he charged towards the trio.

...

Thanks to her ability to fly, it didn't take Hinata long to reach the other battlefield. A quick scan over the area, and she saw Fu fighting against Kakuzu, the two of them moving at an almost imperceptible speed, while Shino, Tamaki, Kiba and Akamaru (fused into a giant, three headed wolf) and a young Taki ninja she was unable to identify, were holding against two of Kakuzu's monsters.

Hinata focused her sight on the masked creatures. They were mostly made of some kind of weird thread, but they also had organs and blood vessels, even if arranged in a way that had nothing to do with the human body. And of course, they had chakra. Though she didn't need the Tenseigan to realize of that when one of the creatures opened its mouth, and released a torrent of water towards the Konoha and Taki ninjas, which were forced to jump backwards in order to dodge.

"Should I help Fu-san, or Kakashi-sensei's students?" Hinata internally wondered. "Those monsters seem to be connected to him in some way. Meaning that if the Akatsuki is defeated, they'll go down with him."

After all, it was a similar situation that the battle against Sasori. Kill the mastermind, and the minions won't be a threat. Even if pained her not to be able to help her fellow Konoha comrades, the Hyuga Clan Head flew straight for the brawl between Fu and Kakuzu. Her hands flew through several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

The moment Kakuzu showed an opening, Hinata shoot several lightning bolts at him from her fingertips. However, the Akatsuki's reflexes and movements were far greater than the Hyuga had anticipated, and quickly jumped backwards before her jutsu could hit him.

"He's fast! I thought I had a clear shot," Hinata thought.

"Uh? Oh, it's you! One of my Sky Sisters!" Fu cheered upon seeing Hinata.

"Hello, Fu-san. I hope you don't mind if I join you in your fight against this horrible man," Hinata said, as she hovered near her.

"Not in the slightest! But I should warn you, this guy drank the Hero Water, a treasure from my village, and now he's much stronger than usual, so be careful. I can take his hits fine, but I'm not sure about you," Fu explained, sounding a bit apologetic.

"That explains why his chakra burns with such potency," Hinata replied, then she smiled at Fu, before taking a fighting stance. "And don't worry. I won't be able to take hits as well as you do, but I'm very good at dodging them."

Fu grinned in return, and mimicked the Hyuga.

"Those eyes... so, you must be the new Hyuga Clan Head. The one who evolved the Byakugan to a higher level. The... Tenseigan, I think it's called, am I right?" Kakuzu guessed.

Hinata was taken aback by the Akatsuki's words. "How... how do you know that?"

"I have my sources. I knew those eyes were special the moment I saw them," Kakuzu guessed. "So far, you don't have much of a reputation to have a bounty on your head yet, but I'm positive I can get quite an obscene amount of money from those eyes in the black market."

"Many were those seduced by greed or power who wanted to get their hands on my eyes. And as you can tell, none of them were successful. You won't be any different," Hinata stated.

"I bet none of them had my vast experience. While I admit that the two of you are powerful, deep down you're nothing but children that only play to be ninja, and have no idea what life is like," Kakuzu said as his hands rushed to form hand seals.

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Several shadows loomed over the two kunoichi. Looking up, they saw in horror massive boulders falling towards them, prompting them to jump out of the way. But while they were doing so, Kakuzu fired his hands, which latched onto the girls' throats. The hands' skin blackened as they hardened into a stone-like substance, before the Akatsuki pulled his hands back, slowly dragging them through the ground.

However, before Kakuzu could bring them closer, Hinata's body crackled with electricity, before her body released a powerful electric discharge, shocking both Kakuzu and Fu, but forcing the former to release both of them.

"Sorry for that, Fu-san," Hinata said, coughing a bit, as she started healing her neck.

Fu said nothing, but gave her a thumbs up to indicate that it was okay, as she rubbed her sore throat.

"A lightning release user. Without my other hearts, that gives you something of an advantage over me," Kakuzu noted, but didn't sound overly worried. "Oh well, guess I'll have to fight a bit more carefully. This should be enough."

Suddenly, a multitude of threads started to burst from the scars of Kakuzu's body, wiggling as if they had life on their own. Kakuzu's hands once again flew through hand seals.

"Earth Release: Earth Clone Jutsu!"

Six moulds of earth formed around Kakuzu, growing and eventually taking the shape of perfect replicas of the Akatsuki. Without any word from the original, the clones charged forward.

"You'll need something better than that to defeat us!" Fu shouted, as she launched herself against the incoming attackers.

"Fu-san, wait! Don't rush in!" Hinata called her. "This is not good. It seems like the Tailed Beast's chakra is affecting her mind, albeit in a subtle way that doesn't make her realize of it. I better stick close to her."

Something that would become hard to do since half of the clones chose her as their target, and surrounded her, ready to attack. Hinata frowned, and after quickly making two hand seals, her hands started to crackle with electricity.

"None of these clones should withstand an lightning-enhanced palm strike," Hinata mused aloud, as one of the clones lunged at her. Moving aside to dodge the incoming punch, Hinata delivered a palm

strike to the clone's chest, opening a hole in it, causing it to crumble into small rocks. "Just as I expected!"

The other two clones launched themselves at Hinata since she was now wide open, but the Hyuga proved to be faster than they anticipated, and with a backflip she dodged them as well. However, while she was doing so, she noticed something she hadn't seen before: chakra lines traveling underground towards both Fu and her. Following those lines, he realized they came from Kakuzu. Much to her horror, she realized the clones were nothing but a distraction. And Fu wasn't aware of this, as she happily fought against the clones.

"FU-SAN, WATCH OUT!" Hinata screamed.

"Huh?" Fu dumbly asked.

But it was too late. While Hinata was able to jump in time to avoid the mass of threads that came from underground, Fu wasn't so fast, and they tightly wrapped against her limbs. Kakuzu pulled the arm those threads came from upwards, tossing the green haired girl into the air. He then motioned down, violently slamming Fu against the ground.

"Fu-san!" Hinata shouted, as she dashed to help her friend. However, the clones that were fighting Fu, plus those Hinata didn't destroy got in her way. "Get out of my way!"

Pushing even more chakra into her hands, Hinata delivered a palm strike to a Kakuzu earth clone that not only shattered it on impact, but created a shockwave imbued with lightning that also destroyed a clone that was behind it. The Hyuga repeated the process with a nearby clone, but the others didn't fall to the trap this time around, and dodged the ensuing shockwave. They kept the distance, but made no move to attack.

"They want to keep me busy so I don't help Fu-san... I have to get rid of them as fast as possible!" Hinata thought, as panic started to

crawl her spine. "Fortunately, I don't need to fight you!"

Hinata started to elevate into the air, as she flew above the Kakuzu clones. However, much to her shock, one of the clones pushed the other into the air, and dived at her feet first, ready to deliver a flying kick. With a quick hand motion, Hinata stopped the clone on his tracks with a telekinetic blast. However, while she was doing so, the other clone leaped from the ground, and rounhoused her in the face, making her fall to the ground.

As she stood up, she glanced at Fu for an instant. Much to her horror, she saw Kakuzu now lunging Fu against a tree with such a tremendous force, the tree was toppled down. He then slowly pulled the threads, dragging Fu closer to him. The Tailed beast aura had already vanished.

"Jinchuriki are prey hard to capture, but eventually all of them fall to Akatsuki," Kakuzu said to one in particular, as he was about to grab Fu.

"No! You won't get your hands on her!" Hinata said as she got up, but the clone's incoming punch forced her to jump backwards. Her hand crackling with electricity once more, she thrust her palm forward. "GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

The vacuum wave combined with electricity shattered the last clone into dust, as Hinata rushed past him in order to reach Kakuzu and Fu before it was too late.

However, something unexpected happened. The ground beneath Kakuzu's feet started to shake, and before he had any time to react, a black mass of beetles emerged from below, engulfing the Akatsuki completely.

"What the hell is this!?" Kakuzu shouted, as he futilely tried to swat the insects away.

And from within the swarm, Shino emerged, carrying Fu in his arms - and struggling with her upon realizing that her height and muscle mass mean she weighted quite more than he expected -rushing towards Hinata.

"Nice save, Shino-kun," Hinata praised he bug user.

"How is she?" Shino asked, as he placed the half conscious jinchuriki in the ground.

"Despite the beating she got, her wounds aren't that grave," Hinata stated, as she scanned her. "The Tailed Beast chakra is already starting to heal her."

"I'll speed up the process then. Try to cover us," Shino asked, as he started to heal the green haired girl.

Hinata nodded, as she placed herself between the two and Kakuzu, adopting a fighting stance.

"You won't get your hands on her again," Hinata firmly stated.

"I fought against ninja way stronger and more experienced than the likes of you," Kakuzu boasted. "While I admit that you're far stronger than I had anticipated, you're still below my level. This time, I'm going to fight without holding back."

Suddenly, the masked creatures fighting the rest of Shino's teammates and Shibuki disengaged them, and leaped towards Kakuzu. The monsters were re-absorbed into his body, but rather than keep them hidden like he did before, the Akatsuki merged with them, turning into a monstrous mass of thick black threads that appeared to be wearing a human body. Two masses of threads sprouted from Kakuzu's back, as if they were grotesque wings. The two masks appeared on each one of the 'wings'.

"Let's see how well you do against THIS!" Kakuzu said.

Author's Note: As many of you guessed, Kakashi didn't die, at least not until I solve the ongoing subplot with Obito and Rin. After that... well, anything is possible.

With the Wrath of Jashin and the battle of Takigakure mostly over (there are no named characters fighting in Taki, so I don't think it's that vital to show what's going on there) we can now fully focus on the fight against the Immortal Team. Naruto, Hinata and Haku were able to penetrate the chakra barrier, but again, like many of you guessed, Akatsuki revealed their hidden trump card, the stolen Hero Water.

Thanks to grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

Next time, the conclusion of the Fu/Hidan and Kakuzu arc! Will Fu join the ranks of Yagura and Han, or will she survive? In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Immortal Team, Part II

Author's Note: So, due the fact that "True Potential", a fellow and admittedly better and more popular NH fanfic, is also doing an arc about Hidan and Kakuzu invading Taki in order to capture Fu, I've been asked if I'm copying TP or using it as an inspiration. I can assure you that, despite how similar both arcs are, it's nothing but a coincidence. I had this arc planned for months, and written for for weeks (in fact, the next two arcs are already fully written), even if I know some of you won't believe me.

Though I'm going to admit that True Potential as a whole, among other stories, was an inspiration for this fanfic. And its author's plea about featuring the jinchuriki more made me give them a more prominent role in the story.

Anyway, I'm pleased to say that the previous chapter got a higher number of reviews. Though I hope it wasn't because of me complaining about the lower number of reviews in the AN at the beginning. In hindsight, it was kind of lame for me to do so, and won't be doing that again.

Anyway, enough rambling, enjoy the Takigakure Arc's conclusion.

Chapter 64:

The Immortal Team, Part II

or

Trees are a girl's best friends

Shibuki, Tamaki, and the three headed wolf all landed near Hinata, Fu and Shino, facing Kakuzu's new form. The Akatsuki looked at the

Konoha and Taki ninjas, and shot them an unnerving grin. Fortunately, Shino had already healed Fu, since they would need the green haired jinchuriki's power if they hoped to beat Kakuzu in this new form.

"Well... who wants to go first?" Kakuzu asked.

"Eww... just when you think that old man couldn't be anymore gross, he proves you wrong," Tamaki stated, as she made a grimace.

"His external appearance is irrelevant, is the power he possesses now what we should worry about," Shino interceded. "Why? Because if Kakuzu and his creatures were formidable opponents when fighting on their own, their power became even greater by joining forces."

"That's right, kid. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There are moments in which a numerical advantage is necessary, but given that you have destroyed two of my hearts... this form is the best approach," Kakuzu agreed.

"Not just that. He still is under the effect of the Hero Water, which now also extends to the creatures he merged with," Shibuki pointed out.

"You're correct once again. Now, let's see the extent of my new power," Kakuzu said, as he made a series of hand seals. The two masks at his sides opened their jaws at the same time.

"Oh shit..." Fu said, as she and everybody else tensed up. "Guys, prepare to run..."

As expected, the masks fired from their mouth a massive torrent of water and a barrage of lightning bolts. Everybody jumped aside in different directions, lest them be obliterated by the empowered elemental attack, which not only was stronger, but had a longer reach and wider radius of effect, doubling as a good means of defense.

"Fu! Let's go into the air! He won't be able to attack both us and the others in the ground!" Hinata suggested.

Fu nodded, deployed her wings, and joined Hinata several meters above the ground.

"You think yourself so smart, don't you?" Kakuzu mockingly asked, as he directed the stream of water and barrage of lightning towards the flying kunoichi.

"He must think we're the biggest threat, and thus wants to take us out first," Hinata realized, as she thrust her palm forward, releasing a telekinetic pulse forward.

Fu, meanwhile, formed seals at great speed. "Wind Release: Breakthrough!"

Fu blew a gust of wind from her mouth that, combined with Hinata's telekinetic blast, was able to stop Kakuzu's water and lightning attack, locking into a stalemate as both attacks pushed back and forth.

"Now that they're keeping him busy, let's strike!" Tamaki shouted, as she, Kiba and Akamaru, and Shibuki charged forward.

"Your naivety is almost adorable," Kakuzu stated.

Suddenly, dozens of black threads emerged from underground, as they tried to wrap the charging ninja, which were forced to jump back.

"Let's try ranged attacks!" Shibuki suggested, as he and Tamaki started making hand seals. "Water Release: Water Bullet Jutsu!"

"Fire Release: Blistering Firecat!"

Shibuki expelled a stream of water from his mouth -much smaller than those used by Kakuzu- while Tamaki breathed a wave of fire that took the shape of a cat which rushed at Kakuzu, leaving a trail of

embers behind. The three headed wolf that was Kiba and Akamaru merged took a deep breath, and let out a powerful sonic roar.

This time, Kakuzu couldn't afford to treat the ground ninja as mere inconveniences, and was forced to redirect the stream of water towards their incoming attacks in order to cancel them out. However, that left only the lightning bolts to deal with Fu's wind and Hinata's telekinesis, which was unable to hold them back on its own, and was pushed back. Much to his annoyance, Kakuzu was forced to jump back in order to dodge.

"Well done guys! If we attack all at once from different directions, one of us will end up nailing him!" Fu cheered from above.

Kakuzu, however, frowned at the muscular girl's confidence.

"Let me show you how little that strategy is going to help," Kakuzu snarled.

Displaying frightening speed, Kakuzu dashed towards a startled Shibuki, who generated a water sword to defend himself. Tamaki and the three headed wolf charged from the flank.

"You're wide open!" the cat kunoichi said, as she was about to sink her metal claws into the Akatsuki's flesh.

"Am I?" Kakuzu mockingly asked.

The masks at his sides turned at Tamaki and the three headed wolf, and blasted the former with lightning and the latter with a powerful stream of water, pushing both of them backwards several meters.

"Kiba! Tamaki-chan!" Fu screamed, as she dived at Kakuzu while making hand seals.

"Fu, wait! That's what he wants!" Hinata said, trying to reach Fu, but she wasn't fast enough.

"So predictable," Kakuzu said in the same mocking tone, as several tendrils of threads shoot at Fu.

"Wind Release: Breakthrough!"

Once again, Fu expelled a gust of wind from her mouth, but her target wasn't Kakuzu, but the ground. Using the wind jutsu to alter her trajectory, Fu moved above the Akatsuki in an arc, safely dodging the tendrils, before winding her fist back, which started to swirl with chakra.

"Take this! Hurricane Punch!"

Fu slammed her right fist into Kakuzu's head with such force, not only sinking the Akatsuki into a crater, but producing a shockwave and a gust of wind that expanded outwards. Kakuzu's mass of threads that sprouted from his back started to wiggle.

"Foolish," he said.

The mass of threads shaped into several tentacles that quickly coiled themselves around the jinchuriki. However, before he could catch his prey, Fu was yanked backwards by an unseen force, and the thread tentacles only grasped thin air. The green haired girl found herself at Hinata's side once again.

"Whew, nice catch! That was pretty close," Fu told Hinata, chuckling a little.

"His chakra seems to fluctuate before using those strange threads," Hinata explained. "It may be the key to read his movements."

"If we can do that a few more times, I'll only need a few more hits to put him down for good," Fu confidently stated.

"While that may work, I believe we'll need a more effective strategy. His power is too great for a drawn out battle, we'll need to end this in one hit," Hinata told her.

"One hit, hmmm?" Fu said, as her face adopted a thoughtful expression. "Guess my punches alone won't do it. We'll need everybody here to strike at once."

"Indeed. Let's join up with the others and listen, this is what we're going to do."

...

Not far away from there, at the same time, Naruto and Haku assisted Kakashi with his fight against the crazed Jashin cultist. While the copy ninja engaged him in hand to hand combat and Haku aided the white haired Jonin from afar, Naruto made his favorite hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two clones popped alongside Naruto. Without saying a word, both clones dashed in opposite directions, disappearing among the trees.

"Ha! You must be a pretty shitty ninja even if your clones run away from you, haha!" Hidan laughed, as he delivered a flurry of swipes at Kakashi, who dodged them as fast as he could.

Haku, meanwhile, made several hand seals.

"Ice Release: Ice Dragon Crystal Blast!"

Putting his hands together and casting them forwards, Haku generated a serpentine dragon made of ice that flew at Hidan while letting out a distorted roar, leaving a trail of frost above the ground he passed by. Hidan, however, wasn't impressed by Haku's jutsu. Grinning, he reared his scythe backwards, before delivering an horizontal swipe at the dragon.

"Take this, you piece of shit!" Hidan hollered.

The swing generated a crescent shaped chakra blast that not only shattered the ice dragon, it had enough power and momentum to force through it and reach Haku. The Ice ninja dropped to the

ground, and the wave of chakra harmlessly passed above him. He saw how it cleanly cut a couple trees behind me.

"Such destructive power..." Haku mumbled in awe.

"Did you like that? Well, that's NOTHING compared to what I can do now!" Hidan laughed. "Get a load of this!"

Hidan dashed at Haku at an insane speed, brandishing his blue glowing scythe above his head. Haku had barely time to generate an ice sword on both hands, and used them to parry the blow, which predictably shattered his makeshift weapons, but stopped his momentum in order to give him time to jump back.

Naruto, meanwhile, took advantage of Hidan focusing on Haku to attack the Akatsuki from behind. He formed a Rasengan in his right hand.

"Now is my chance! Rase-"

But before Naruto could strike, Hidan vanished, and reappeared in front of him, scythe ready to skewer the blond to pieces.

"How can be so fast...?" the blond wondered as the scythe, glowing with chakra came down on him.

But before he could be hit, the chirp of a thousand birds filled the air, and the scythe was parried by an electrified hand. It took Naruto and Hidan a moment to notice that Kakashi had appeared between them.

"No matter how fast you are, I can anticipate your movements as long as my Sharingan can see them!" Kakashi boasted, as his other hand crackled with electricity and thrust it at the Akatsuki, who jumped back in order to avoid it.

"Thanks for the tip, idiot! Then I'll make sure to gouge your eyes out!" Hidan shouted.

"Ice Release: Crystal Blade Field!"

A crinkling sound warned Hidan of Haku's attacks, and jumped backwards once again before a row of large ice spikes could skewer him.

"So, that's your tactic, you pieces of shit? One of them attacks from the front, while the others try to catch me off guard? Or wait until I'm attacking you?" Hidan asked in rapid fire, before smirking. "Well, let's see if you can find an opening to attack now! DEMON CUTTER!"

Hidan dashed towards Kakashi with his scythe extended to the side, as he started to spin, becoming a razor tornado. Kakashi dodged the attack, but Hidan charged at him once again from the opposite direction.

"Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

Haku slammed his palms into the ground, using it as a conduct to send chakra towards Kakashi's position. A wall of ice formed between Kakashi and the Akatsuki, but the latter managed to shatter it as if it was thin glass.

"My Ice Jutsu barely faze him..." Haku thought in resignation. He then perked up. *"Thankfully, my Bloodline Limit is far from the only skill I possess... !"*

While Hidan sometimes attacked Naruto and Haku, it was obvious Kakashi was his main target.

"This man seems to be determined to finish what he started with that ritual from before..." Kakashi thought. *"Normally an enemy like this wouldn't be much of a problem, but with the Hero Water boosting his strength and speed, I don't know if we'll be able to hold out until the effects wear off..."*

Hidan charged at him as expected, but much to the Copy Ninja's confusion, he removed his cloak, and tossed it at Kakashi. The silver haired man reacted by cutting it in half with a low powered Lightning

Blade, but after doing it, he realized that Hidan wasn't there anymore.

"So if I understood correctly, all I need is to blind you for a second you can't read my movements, right?" Hidan mocked from behind, as the scythe came down on Kakashi. "This time, you won't escape!"

But Hidan was unable to stab Kakashi, as an orange blur shot out of nowhere, delivering a brutal flying kick to his face, hurling the Akatsuki backwards until he crashed against a tree.

"What the fuck...?" the Jashin cultist groaned, as he pulled himself together. Even if he was immortal, the pain of that attack was very real.

"Sage Mode completed," Naruto stated, as he placed himself in front of Kakashi. "Leave this to me, Kakashi-sensei. My Sage Mode will tip the balance back in our favor."

"Sage Mode...?" Hidan asked, and noticed that Naruto's eyes were yellow with orange pigmentation around them. "Oh, so that's the Sage Mode that made that wimp Deidara to run away like the little bitch he is! Well, you'll find out that I'm nowhere near as cowardly!"

"Don't mistake common sense with cowardice. Soon you're going to realize why your friend decided to flee when he saw me," Naruto boasted.

"Hey, that fucker and I aren't friends, we're just co-workers!" Hidan protested. "And didn't you hear that I'm immortal? No matter how much power you get, you won't be able to kill me!"

"We'll see about that!" Naruto said, making a hand seal. A clone popped into existence. Naruto started to form a Rasengan, while the clone infused it with wind chakra. A whirring sound could be heard, faint at first, but growing progressively louder as the jutsu started to take form.

"Even then, I'm not stupid enough as to take the brunt of your attack," Hidan said, as he prepared to move, but much to his shock, his body didn't move. "What the fuck?"

Hidan started to feel very cold. Suddenly, ice started to grow all over his body, and in a few seconds, his entire body minus the head was encased in a block of ice.

"Thanks for lowering your guard," Haku said, as he kept his hands forming a hand seal.

"Ha! You think this little ice can stop me? I only need to break it with the force my my chakra!" Hidan boasted, as he started to release chakra in hopes of breaking the ice. "What the hell!?"

"You remind me of somebody who tried the same tactic against that, and predictably, it didn't work," Haku replied. He then turned at his teammate. "Naruto, go ahead. He won't move."

"The jutsu is ready!" Naruto said, as he reared the arm holding the wind shuriken back.

"What the hell is going on? How can this ice be so hard!" Hidan said as he futilely tried to overpower the ice with his chakra, but it felt like pushing into nothing. "Wait, if this is ninjutsu, how is that I can't feel the chakra in the ice? Oh shit, don't tell me this is a genj-"

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto threw his most powerful jutsu just as Hidan realized that the ice wasn't really there, and the Ice ninja was just playing with his mind. He send a controlled burst of chakra through his body, and the ice disappeared, but he had no time to avoid the incoming chakra shuriken.

"Shi-"

The Akatsuki's curse was cut short by a massive explosion that created a dome of powerful, razor sharp winds that would have shredded the body of a normal man to little bits. Even then, the pain was excruciating. And Hidan only enjoyed the pain when it was caused by his demonic ritual.

"So, Naruto completed Minato-sensei's jutsu..." Kakashi said in awe. He had heard from others beforehand of such thing, but this was the first time he saw it in action. It truly made the vanilla Rasengan look like an Academy grade jutsu. "Even if I failed to do it in the past, now that Naruto opened the door, I might be able to get it this time around..."

When the dome of razor winds dispelled, Hidan was lying on the middle of a large crater, but his body was unharmed. Slowly and trembling, he got up.

"S-See? It hurt like a bazillion fucking hells, but I'm not worse for the wear!" Hidan boasted, his voice stuttering a little from the massive onslaught. He spread his arms to show his lack of visible injuries. "Nothing that you can throw at me can harm me!"

"The purpose of that jutsu wasn't to harm you, but to distract you," Naruto pointed out.

"Distract me? From what-" Hidan was interrupted mid question as ice started to crept all over his body, slowly encasing him in an ice block. "Oh, I see. Another fucking genjutsu. How retarded do you think I am to fall for the same trick twice?" Hidan asked in a mocking tone, as he made a hand seal, and send a burst of chakra through his body. But much to his surprise, the genjutsu didn't disappear. He tried again, but the result was the same. "What the fuck?"

In no time, Hidan was completely encased inside a block of ice. A realization dawned upon him.

"This is not a genjutsu, this is a real Ice jutsu! Dammit, I need to break free!" Hidan distressingly thought as he began to release his

chakra from his whole body in explosive bursts.

Cracks started to appear in the block of ice, but Haku made a hand seal, and those cracks disappeared. "Naruto-kun, Kakashi-sensei, now's the chance! Go before he breaks free!"

Naruto and Kakashi nodded, rushed at the frozen Akatsuki, and started to slap several sealing tags across the block of ice. Once they judged they had placed enough, they jumped back as they made the same hand seal at the same time.

"Sealing Trap: Activate!"

The seals started to glow, and chains of symbols appeared from the paper tags, spreading around the block of ice, forming a net. The seals, combined with the ice, put Hidan in a state of stasis.

"And done!" Naruto cheered.

"Did we incapacitate him?" Kakashi asked, a bit unsure. "He was still under the effect of the Hero Water, so it's possible that the sealing didn't take."

"He's no longer trying to break the ice," Haku helpfully added. "So I'd said we've won this round."

Naruto walked towards the frozen Akatsuki, and sneered. "What about that? Just because you're immortal doesn't mean that you're invincible!"

"Naruto, he can't hear you, you know," Kakashi pointed out.

"Don't take away my right to boast after a well earned victory, Kakashi-sensei," Naruto grumbled at the silver haired Jonin, as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Suddenly, despite none of them being sensors, the trio felt a massive chakra disturbance. Looking up, they saw the purple colored chakra

dome that covered that part of the forest slowly breaking apart and vanishing.

"Hey, look at that, it seems that he was the one keeping that chakra dome active," Naruto pointed out.

"Unexpected. I never imagined this deranged Akatsuki would be skilled in barrier jutsu so complex and powerful," Haku pointed out.

"Skilled or not, that doesn't matter anymore. Naruto, leave a few clones here to watch over the Akatsuki, then let's go help my students," Kakashi asked.

Naruto nodded, and did as he was asked. He and Haku then followed Kakashi to where the other battle was taking place, hoping that they could reach in time to help their friends.

...

Shortly before Hidan's defeat, Fu, Hinata and Kakashi's students were still fighting against his partner. Kakuzu was still on the offensive, since doing otherwise would be a waste of the boost provided by the Hero Water, but his moves were more calculated than before, in order to stop his enemies from getting anymore hits and ending the fight as soon as possible.

"Lightning Release: False Darkness!"

Kakuzu's demon looking mask released a barrage of thunderbolts at the ground of Konoha and Taki ninja. Hinata stepped forward in order to take the brunt of the attack.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!" Hinata's hands started to crackle with electricity, before she started to move quickly them forward in a pushing manner. "Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!"

As Hinata's arms became blurs due the speed she was moving them, she was able to deflect Kakuzu's electric attack, giving the others a chance to counterattack.

"Come on everybody, let's go!" Kiba called, as he and Akamaru dashed forward, ahead of everybody else.

"Suicidal fool," Kakuzu growled.

Suddenly, multiple tentacles and tendrils made of threads burst from underground around Kiba and Akamaru, and moved to trap them.

"Tamaki!" Kiba called.

"Cat Claw Dash!"

A red and brown blur appeared out of nowhere, and slashed the emerging threads before they had the chance to tangle their prey, giving Kiba a chance to continue forward.

"Thank you!" Kiba said, not looking back, with Tamaki following him.

Kakuzu decided to intercept them mid charge, and dashed towards them as well. But when Kiba and Tamaki prepared to attack, Kakuzu nimbly jumped above them, avoiding their onslaught, and dashing towards a mildly stupefied Shino.

"Shit, Shino isn't that good in hand to hand combat!" Kiba angrily thought as he and Tamaki spun over their heels to pursue the Akatsuki.

Noticing what was happening, Shino jumped back several times to stop the gap between himself and the Akatsuki from getting any wider. He bit his thumb as he made several hand seals as quickly as his hands allowed him, before slamming his hands into the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Kakuzu stopped in his tracks -moving aside to also dodge Kiba and Tamaki coming from behind- as he waited expectantly to see what kind of creature the Aburame had summoned. And when the initial cloud of smoke dispelled after a few seconds, revealing...

... nothing.

Kakuzu snorted. "You Konoha ninjas grow more incompetent with each generation," he mocked, before making a hand seal. "Now die!"

Kakuzu shot multiple tendrils made of threads in every direction, trying to either catch or skewer the Konoha Chunin around him. They tried to jump away, but they were too close to him when he launched the attack, and the mass of threads penetrated their bodies, before they were pinned to the ground.

"You cost me two of my hearts already," Kakuzu menacingly said as he dug his threads deeper into their bodies. "So it's only fair that I take your hearts to replace them, don't you think so?"

"NO!" Fu screamed.

"Guys... attack now!" Kiba shouted, after coughing a bit, as he tried to stop the threads invading his body from ripping his heart out.

At that moment, Hinata, Fu and Shibuki lunged at Kakuzu from different directions. Kakuzu smirked under his mask.

"So, acting as decoys in order to force me to stay still. You must be so proud of such basic strategy," Kakuzu deadpanned. He then made a couple of hand seals. A neck made of threads formed under the masks, and moved away from Kakuzu. The two masks intertwined their necks several times, almost like forming a ribbon. "Take this! Double Elemental Release: Lightning Maelstrom!" Kakuzu shouted.

The masks then untangled at the same time they released bolts of lightning and a stream of water, forming a spiraling barrier of electrified water that stopped the other three ninjas in their tracks, and hurled them backwards.

"Like I said before, even if you have power and potential, your experience is pitiable compared to mine. Once I'm done with you three, catching the jinchuriki will be considerably easier," Kakuzu said in delight.

"You might have much more experience than us, but that also makes you underestimate your opponents," Shino asked, while he grabbed on the tendrils of threads and tried to pull them out of his body.

Suddenly, the ground started to shake, a little at first, but much stronger later. Then, without any warning, a gigantic rhinoceros beetle emerged from underground, hurling Kakuzu high into the air, while snapping the threads that connected him to the three Konoha Chunin.

"Now I believe it's your time to attack," Shino told the others.

Shibuki made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

The young Takigakure leader created several water stars which flew at the Akatsuki. Hinata, meanwhile, unfolded her collapsible chakra bow, and fired several electric arrows at the flying Akatsuki.

Being unable to maneuver while he was mid air, Kakuzu could only wrap the mass of threads around himself in order to form an improvised protective cocoon to shield himself from the incoming projectiles, before finally falling to the ground with a loud thud. When he undid the makeshift cocoon, he saw that Hinata had somehow crossed the distance that separated them, and slipped into a fighting stance.

"You're within my field of divination. Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!" Before the Akatsuki could react, Hinata moved to deliver Kakuzu a series of soft put painful finger strikes. "Even with all his body modifications, he still has a chakra network, and thus he still has tenketsu. They might be arranged in a different way than a normal human, but as long as I can see them, it doesn't matter."

Kakuzu, meanwhile, tried to defend himself from the Hyuga's onslaught, but was finding to control both his chakra and the threads that made up most of his body increasingly difficult. He tried to move in order to block the hits, but Hinata's fierce attacks disrupted his motor coordination, and was unable to.

"This is bad! If she seals all my tenketsu, I won't be able to-"

"... sixty four palms!" Hinata shouted, as she finished her combo with a palm strike to the chest, pushing Kakuzu backwards several meters.

Breathing heavily, Kakuzu tried to stand on his feet. The effect of the Hero Water had vanished, unable to resist Hinata's onslaught. He tried to gather some chakra, but was unable to. Panic started to set as he realized he was defenseless against the Konoha and Taki ninjas.

"I need to reopen my tenketsu," Kakuzu realized, as he focused on a few of his sealed chakra points and tried to force them open. *"If I can gather some chakra-"*

"Quickly, attack now!" Hinata commanded.

Before Kakuzu realized, two human tornadoes flew at him from opposite directions. Instinctively, he aimed his masks at each of them, ready to blast them with water and electricity. But when the masks opened their mouths, nothing came out of them, realizing a second too late that he had no chakra, and a second too late to change course of action and dodge.

"Passing Fang!"

"Drill Claw!"

The two human tornadoes known as Kiba and Tamaki slammed against the masks flanking Kakuzu, shattering them, as well as shredding the external shell of interlocked threads, destroying vital organs, and a heart each. And before the Akatsuki could time to reflect on losing two hearts at once, a shadow loomed over him. Forcing himself to look up, he saw Shino riding the giant beetle he had summoned earlier, diving at him.

The Akatsuki was able to react in time and grabbed the beetle's horn before it could skewer him alive, but the force of the charge pushed him backwards several meters. Shino then commanded his beetle to go back into the sky. Kakuzu thought that he was getting ready for another charge, but what saw next told him otherwise.

The green haired jinchuriki was charging at him, holding a rather large tree -one of those toppled during the fight- with both arms, resting against her shoulder as if it was normal weapon. It was easy to guess what she planned to do with it.

"I'd say something witty now, but I'm way too angry for that, so just die already!" Fu shouted as he swung the tree as if it was a mere club against Kakuzu. The Akatsuki was hit with such force, it was launched high into the air, until it slammed against the forcefield he and his friend had erected either. The gravity did the rest, and Kakuzu's barely alive body fell to the ground.

A moment of silence happened as everybody gathered around Kakuzu -but kept their distance for obvious reasons- and stared at his fallen form.

"Is he dead? Did we win?" Kiba asked.

Hinata shook her head. "I can still see his chakra. But I'm afraid he won't live for much longer," Hinata helpfully said.

"Should we try to keep him alive and take him to Konoha? To have a live Akatsuki prisoner would be invaluable," Shino suggested.

Hinata shook her head. "In any other cases, I'd agree with the idea. But this man has proved himself to be too dangerous."

"Yeah, you saw what he can do. I doubt any of our cells in Konoha would be able to contain him for long," Tamaki agreed with Hinata.

"We kill him then," Kiba concluded. "Anybody willing to deliver the finishing blow?"

Fu grabbed the fallen tree again, and slowly dragged it towards Kakuzu. Despite the lack of words, the message was clear.

"H-how..." Kakuzu began, his voice sounding more like a croak. A pool of blood started to form around his broken body. "How ninjas... so young... could have beat... me..."

"It isn't obvious? You just forgot to take your pills, old man," Fu said with a dark scowl, before it was suddenly replaced by a sunny, bright smile. "Oh, I did it, a witty one liner! They do come better when you're calm. And here's another one: enjoy this 'natural remedy'!"

Displaying once again her monstrous natural strength, Fu raised the large tree above her head, before slamming it against Kakuzu's body with such force, it created a small shockwave, followed by a land tremor.

"I can't see his chakra anymore. He's dead now," Hinata confirmed..

"No shit, I could have reached that conclusion myself without needing to see his chakra," Kiba deadpanned, as he crossed his arms.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise coming from above. All of them instinctively looked up, and saw that the barrier that kept them trapped was breaking apart and dissolving.

"The barrier is gone! That means that Kakashi-sensei must have defeated the Akatsuki with the scythe!" Tamaki cheered.

"At the same time as we defeated this one. How convenient," Kiba observed.

"Now is not time for sarcasm. We should meet with Kakashi-sensei. I presume that Naruto-san and Haku-san aided him in the fight," Shino guessed, confirmed by a nod from Hinata. "They might be wounded and in need of medical assistance."

"Fu and I will stay here watching over the Akatsuki's body until somebody takes it away. Though I doubt he'll go anywhere," Shibuki told them.

...

A few minutes later, the two groups met with each other at the side of Kakuzu's defeat. They were all happy to see that they were okay and had defeated the other Akatsuki. It was quite a surprise when several Naruto clones appeared carrying a block of ice covered in seals with Hidan frozen inside.

"By the way, do you know how was the battle in Taki going before the Akatsuki lured you here?" Shibuki asked.

"I believe we were winning," Shino replied. "Though it's likely that without the Akatsuki leading and supporting them, the forces they gathered wouldn't be of much help against the combined might of several ninja villages."

"Yeah, not even summoning that giant monster was enough to stop us!" Naruto cheered.

"What giant monster?" Tamaki asked.

"There was a giant monster!?" Fu excitedly asked. "Come on, let's go back! If we hurry, I might be able to see it!"

"The monster no longer exists. Naruto-kun, Haku-kun and I destroyed it," Hinata told her.

Fu's face fell, as she slumped forward. "Damn..." she weakly cursed, as she kicked a pebble away, before Hinata patted her back sympathetically.

Kakashi then walked towards the group, holding a storage scroll.

"Alright, I already stored Kakuzu's corpse -or what was left of it- inside this scroll," Kakashi raised the scroll for everybody to see." And with his partner on ice, I believe we're already done here. Let's return to Takigakure and see how things are going there."

"Yes sir!" everybody chorused in unison.

As they began to walk away, Kiba noticed that Fu went back, and grabbed the uprooted tree she had used to smash Kakuzu, and rested it over her shoulder.

"Fu... what are you doing?" Kiba asked.

"I'm taking it home. It was very useful. I think I found my weapon of choice!" Fu happily said, patting the tree with her free hand.

"Your weapon of choice. You plan to fight with a tree?" Kiba incredulously asked.

Fu scowled at him, as she slammed the tree down for added emphasis. "Yeah. Got a problem with that?"

Kiba wasn't going to argue with a girl who could lift and swing a large oak as it was a mere club.

...

Half an hour later, the group arrived at Takigakure. Much to their relief, the battle had already ended, with Akatsuki's forces defeated. The Konoha, Suna and Taki joint forces had occupied the village,

and were now putting out the fires that had been caused by the battle, taking the wounded to the makeshift infirmaries, and rounding up all the thugs, mercenaries and cultists that didn't die and were unable to run away once it was obvious that the battle was lost.

However, even if they had won, Shibuki and Fu couldn't help but feel a pang of sadness upon seeing how their once beautiful village was so ravaged, with damaged or completely destroyed buildings everywhere, craters and burn marks splashing the streets, and dust and debris everywhere.

"Our village... is ruined..." Shibuki moaned, as a tear fell down his cheek.

"Yes, but it's nothing that can't be fixed," Naruto interjected. "Look, it seems that most of the Taki population survived. That's the most important thing."

"Even then, what are we going to do now?" Shibuki asked.

"It isn't obvious? Start rebuilding," Kakashi pointed out. "Listen, we in Konoha are no foreigners to the concept of our village getting trashed. During the past decade and a half, we were attacked by the Nine Tails, had to put down an Uchiha upheaval, and fend off an invasion by Otogakure. But we always remained strong, rebuild and moved forward."

"Yeah! If we can do that, then so can you!" Kiba cheered.

"It's not that easy. Konoha is a Great Village, Taki is not. We don't have that many resources. We were never that strong even at our most powerful," Shibuki insisted.

"So? We will help you. That's why we're allies," Naruto stated with a smile.

"Hey, look, Shibuki-sama is back!" a Taki ninja noticed.

"Yes, it's Shibuki-sama!" another added.

"Not just him! Fu is also back!" a civilian man said.

"They finally defeated those horrible Akatsuki!" a civilian woman said.

Soon, a large crowd formed around the newcomers, that cheered Shibuki and Fu's names in unison. The young leader was amazed at how the gloomy post battle mood suddenly shifted in the opposite direction the moment they returned. Especially since, even if he helped taking down Kakuzu, it's not that his assistance was decisive.

"Shibuki," Fu said, managing to be heard among the cheers. She held both his hands, and looked at him into the eyes. "Even if we won and our home is ours once again, our job here isn't done. Like our Konoha friends said, we need to rebuild. And the people of Taki need a leader. We need you, more than ever. And if you think our village is weak, then work to make us stronger. And if you think your leadership isn't up to the challenge, then work to be better leader."

"Wow..." Shibuki said in awe, before chuckling. "When did you become so smart?"

Fu shot him a playful scowl. "What do you mean? I've always been smart!"

"Anyway, now that the battle is over, we should send a message to Hokage-sama so he can decide what to do next," Kakashi said.

...

Amegakure

Sitting alone on the edge of the top of tower, Pain, the Akatsuki leader, looked the industrial-looking ninja village below. It was his favorite pastime. He didn't know why, but looking over the village from such height was something enthralling to him. Maybe because

there was a time in which said village made him feel small. And now, said village was under his control.

Much to his annoyance, Pain wasn't alone for long. And it wasn't his faithful companion Konan who disturbed his peace, but a spiralling vortex, from which a certain Uchiha emerged from.

"Pain," Obito stated, being one of the few people that didn't address him with the '-sama' honorific. In private, at least.

"Obito," Pain replied, as he stood back on his feet. "What do I owe this visit?"

"I came here to tell you several news. The first one is that Kakuzu and Hidan have been defeated, and Taki has been liberated," Obito stated. "Kakuzu has been reported dead, while Hidan has been neutralized and captured. He's being taken to Konoha as we speak."

Pain's stoicism didn't falter as Obito gave him the bad news. Two more members lost after Sasori's death was troubling indeed.

"I see. Anything else?" Pain asked.

"Yes. I'm planning to capture a jinchuriki myself," Obito stated. "Given the recent developments, I believe we shouldn't take this so slowly."

"Which one?" Pain asked.

"One from Kumo. I have a plan that will make at least one of them leave their hideout and go into the light, where they can be captured," Obito explained. "And I think it's about time we put our newest asset to use."

"Do you think it's a good idea? Doing so would draw even more attention to Akatsuki," Pain replied.

"More than it already has? Everybody knows we have three Tailed Beasts under our control. We kidnapped and nearly killed the

Kazekage's son, and Hidan and Kakuzu took over a minor village. I believe the time for subtlety has long passed. We should try to capture the remaining jinchuriki as soon as possible, before the ninja villages decide to join forces against us," Obito explained.

"I find that unlikely," Pain stoically replied. "The Great Villages are too unwilling to let go of their grudges, and too willing to use them to restart wars. Even the current alliances are tenuous at best."

"Except it already happened. The reason behind Hidan and Kakuzu's defeat and Takigakure's loss was Konoha and Suna joining forces to liberate it," Obito replied. "And from what my informants told me, Kiri would have joined the battle as well if it wasn't for logistical problems."

"To have all villages united against a single enemy... would that be a way to peace better than the one we're walking?" Pain pondered, unclear if he was being rethoric or if it was a geniune question.

Obito shook his head. "The peace will last as long as there's a common enemy. The moment the threat goes away, old hatreds will resurface. That's the way it has always been."

"Thought so. Fortunately, this cycle of hatred has its days numbered," Pain agreed. "Though you'll have to excuse my skepticism in your ability to capture a jinchuuriki. All your efforts to get the Nine Tails ended up in failure."

"I know. My repeated attempts at capturing it made Konoha aware of our intentions, and increased their protective measures. That's why I'm going after a jinchuriki nobody has ever dared to touch," Obito explained. "I will be taking Kisame with me as well, just to be sure."

"Very well then. May you be successful in your endeavor," Pain told him.

"What about you? Don't you plan to capture any jinchuriki yourself? I know you're needed running the organization, but soon we will need

the power of the Rinnegan," Obito reminded him.

"What you say is true, but it should be unwise to reveal all our cards yet," Pain replied. "Let the villages think that they can handle us before they realize how outmatched they are."

"Very well then. But try not to stay idle too long. The sooner we finish this, the less risks there will be," Obito replied. "I'll go and make the preparations for my trip."

And with that, Obito disappeared into a spiraling vortex, leaving Pain once again alone with his thoughts.

...

Three Days Later

As Jiraiya promised, Konoha, Suna and Kiri would lend their help in order to rebuild Takigakure. It would take a lot of time to leave the village in a state similar to the one it was before the Akatsuki arrived, but the morale overall was high. In fact, the Hokage himself went to see the village, and organize the rebuilding efforts.

"So, are you sure you want to stay?" Jiraiya asked Naruto. "The reconstruction could last quite some time."

"I've talked with Hinata-hime and Haku, and they both agree with me. We want to help Taki," Naruto confirmed.

"As you wish. I thought you'd prefer to something less long term in case Akatsuki shows up again," Jiraiya told him.

"Hey, with my Shadow Clones, we'll speed up the reconstruction efforts a lot! The village will be good as new before they realize of it!" Naruto cheerfully said.

As father and son were talking, they realized they were approached by Shibuki and Fu. They both had a solemn look in their faces,

almost as if they were going to give Jiraiya and Naruto some sort of bad news. Upon getting closer, Shibuki was the first one to speak.

"Hokage-sama, let me tell you how grateful I am for the help you and the other villagers are providing to Takigakure," Shibuki said, making a slight bow.

"No need to thank me. We're allies, and allies help each other," Jiraiya said with a hearty chuckle.

"I know... that's why it pains me to do this," Shibuki said, averting his gaze. "To ask for more after all what you gave..."

"Come on, I'm sure it won't be that bad," Jiraiya reassured. "What do you need?"

"It will take time before Taki recovers some of its former strength. But even when before this invasion, we were unable to stop Akatsuki. If it wasn't for Konoha's timely intervention, Fu would be dead right now, and the Seven Tails in the Akatsuki's hands," Shibuki began.

Jiraiya and to a lesser extent, Naruto, started to see where this was going.

"What I want to ask you is... would you mind letting Fu stay in Konoha until this crisis passes? I'm afraid that she won't be safe here anymore," Shibuki asked, almost in a pleading tone. "Yes, I know I'm asking you a lot. You already have a jinchuriki, and another one would be like placing an even bigger target on your village. But honestly, I don't know what to do, and you're the only ones I can trust with this."

"I don't think there would be any problem. Keeping jinchuriki safe is of everyone's interest," Jiraiya admitted. "What about you, Fu? Are you okay with leaving your home?"

Fu nodded, though Jiraiya could see there was some regret in her body language. "It's not an idea I like, but given what Akatsuki did to

my home when they looked for me..." Fu stated, as she rubbed one arm. "Though I can't help but feel guilty if something happened to Konoha because of me..."

"Akatsuki already has Konoha in its sights because of me to begin with, so there's nothing you should feel guilty about," Naruto stated, patting her on the shoulder.

Fu forced herself to smile, and nodded. "If you say so," she replied. "Albeit I'm not going to go immediately. I want to stay here and help with the reconstruction effort. I'm really good at lifting heavy stuff!" she happily added, as she flexed her biceps.

Naruto laughed awkwardly. "Yeah, Hinata-hime told me how you defeated Kakuzu..."

"And while I'm in Konoha, I can continue my jinchuriki training with you and Hokage-sama so when the Akatsuki send another pair of goons to get me, I'll be even better prepared," Fu added.

"Good to see that you're eager to continue. Anyway, it seems the situation here doesn't require my presence anymore," Jiraiya concluded. "So I'll be going back to Konoha."

"We'll better get going back. The sooner we get to work, the sooner we'll be able to return to Konoha," Naruto said.

Fu nodded, and the two jinchuriki left and joined their friends, already working hard on the reconstruction efforts, and enjoy their peaceful time together while it lasted.

And it wouldn't last for too long.

Author's Note: So Fu is safe, and she will be joining Konoha for the time being. Yay! Just like True Potential did in its latest chapter which was updated fucking YESTERDAY, yay!

You know, I had originally planned a different end. Shibuki would have died in the battle against the Akatsuki, and Fu would eventually become the new leader of Taki, with Shibuki returning later as an Edo Tensei zombie. However, that would keep her way too busy and I wouldn't be able to use her as much as I can, so instead I decided to have her move to Konoha (which, as explained in the last dialogue, makes more sense). However, that means I needed Shibuki alive in order to continue being Taki's leader and to officialy "hand" Fu to Konoha. Not to mention that my plan to have him return as a zombie would have no kind of payoff, due reasons I won't say since they're spoilers.

Boy, now it looks like I'm even copying True Potential's author's notes as well, given that DryBonesKing had a similar thought regarding Shibuki.

Though in all seriousness, if you haven't read True Potential, you totally should. It's an awesome fanfic worth of all the reviews and fame it has.

And yes, I'll say it again: unlike canon, Pain knows about Obito's true identity. A future arc will reveal the why of this change. Also, said scene should be a pretty big hint on what the next arc is going to be ;) (though there's going to be a breather chapter in between)

Once again, thanks to grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

So, now that it's over, how did you like my take on the Hidan and Kakuzu arc? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Wedding Bells Among the Chaos

Author's Note: I'm glad that, even if it was to a slow start, the latter half of the Hidan and Kakuzu arc got a better reception. Now, before we move onto the next arc, I decided that another breather was in order. Still, this chapter has some plot and character developments that I'm sure you'll find interesting. Anyway, enjoy:

Chapter 65

Wedding Bells Among the Chaos

or

Here comes the bride momentarily

A Month Later

There was a large gathering in the Sarutobi Clan's private training ground. However, training wasn't the reason all these people were meeting there, despite most of them being ninjas. In fact, rather than their usual attires, said ninjas were wearing more elegant clothes, the men wearing suits and the women wearing kimonos.

Yes, the kind of clothes one would wear to a formal, important event, like a wedding. More specifically, the wedding between Asuma Sarutobi and Kurenai Yūhi. After the latter revealed her pregnancy, the two of them decided to marry as soon as possible. In other circumstances, they might have taken more time to plan things out, but given the looming threat of the Akatsuki in the horizon, they wanted to jump right in.

Attending the ceremony were, as expected, the entire Sarutobi clan, Asuma and Kurenai's students, their ninja friends, and their

respective students if they have them like Kakashi or Gai. There was also Jiraiya, Tsunade and their children.

The ceremony took place without any incident, but there were some whispers -that were quickly shushed- about Kurenai's rather noticeable belly.

When the priest declared them husband and wife, Asuma and Kurenai kissed for the first time as married couple, and the guests erupted in a chorus of cheers, whistles and applause.

...

After the ceremony, they moved to the reception, which also took place in the Sarutobi Training Ground, inside several large sunshade tents that the clan had rented for the occasion.

At that moment, Kurenai was having a talk with her three students. Neither of their drinks were alcoholic, the former because of her pregnancy, and the latter three because of their age.

"I'm glad you guys managed to come," Kurenai told them. "I was afraid that, with how busy you've been in Taki, you might miss it."

"Never!" Naruto energetically stated. "How could you think such a thing?"

"Yes. Regardless of the current state of our team, you will always be our sensei, and we will always be there for you," Hinata added.

"Speaking of which, now that I have the chance to ask... how are you doing without me?" Kurenai asked.

"We manage," Haku laconically replied. "We might not be in the need for a replacement, but I'm sure things will be easier once you come back to us."

"Because... you plan to come back, right? You aren't going to retire?" Naruto asked, a bit of worry dripping from his voice.

Kurenai laughed in return. "Of course not. I'm just thirty. Ninjas only retire at that age when they suffer crippling injuries. Once the baby is born and I get back in shape, I'll be with you. I mean, Shizune had two kids already, and she still a kunoichi."

"Speaking of which, have you think in any name for the baby?" Hinata asked.

Kurenai smiled at Hinata. "No, not yet. Why, do you have any suggestions?"

"Yeah, if he's a boy, call him Naruto jr.!" Naruto chimed in.

Kurenai laughed again. "I don't think I'll be able to survive with two Narutos in my life. Plus I don't want to give my future son such a burden by naming him after an amazing ninja like you."

"Bummer. But you have a point," Naruto admitted, then he chuckled. "I mean, Sasuke's parents named him after the Old Man Hokage's dad, which was one of the Warring States Period's most feared ninjas, and look what it did to him! All ego and no talent!"

"Better than be named after a piece of food!" Sasuke replied from the other side of the tent, sounding rather annoyed.

"Learn to take a joke!" Naruto shouted back. "Maybe he should have been named after somebody with a sense of humor."

"Then again, there's still a lot of time before we have to decide a name," Kurenai said, bringing the conversation back to the topic.

"Whatever name you end up choosing, at least try to be more original than Shizune and Shisui," Naruto pointed out. "And don't name the kid something like Kurasuma or Asurenai or something like that."

Kurenai laughed again. "Don't worry, above all things, I plan to give my kid a name with personality."

"What about the honeymoon? Do you know where you want to go?" Hinata asked.

"I'd always liked to visit the Land of the Moon. I heard is a really beautiful place ideal for such things," Kurenai said, before her face fell a little. "Sadly, with the current situation, we can't afford going that far away, so in the end we decided to go to the Land of the Hot Springs. Not as exotic, but it has a very nice resort, and it's close to the Land of Fire."

"My parents also went there for their honeymoon. They said it was a pretty nice place, so I'm sure both you and Asuma-sensei will have a nice time," Naruto said with a smile.

...

Not far away from there, the groom, now husband, was having a chat with his students just like her wife was doing. Well, the male ones at least, since Ino was somewhere else.

"Man, who would have guessed that the day we met, Ino was right about you, Asuma-sensei," Shikamaru pointed out.

"Yeah, why did you even deny being in love with her? It's not like Kurenai-sensei is somebody to be ashamed of," Choji added, as he put more and more appetizers on a trail he was carrying.

"If you want an answer... well, we both like to keep our personal and professional lives apart. And we don't like people asking about the former," Asuma replied.

"Let me guess: in your case, it was because being the son of the Third Hokage brought you unwanted attention?" Shikamaru asked.

"You could said that," Asuma agreed with a shrug.

"Hey there!" a new female voice chimed in. "What are you talking about?"

The men of the Tactical Squad turned around to see their only female member walking towards them, smiling happily. She had her arm wrapped around the arm of a pale, black haired boy in a suit with an uncannily neutral expression. On the other hand, the boy was holding a folder.

"Oh, hey, Ino. I had lost sight of you for a moment. I thought you left already," Asuma pointed out.

"Please, like I would ever leave a wedding so soon, especially the one from somebody so close to me," Ino replied with a hand wave. "Anyway, do you guys remember Sai?"

As if on cue, the pale boy smiled. "Hello there. Nice to meet you, Ino has told me a lot about you."

"Ah, yes, you've been hanging out with this guy a lot recently," Shikamaru noticed.

"Is he your boyfriend?" Choji directly asked.

"Eh, I think it's a bit too soon for that. So far, I tasked upon myself to make him a little more social. You know, being inducted into ANBU from such a young age can't be healthy," Ino said as she shook her head.

"How did you meet him, by the way?" Shikamaru asked.

"Sai went with us to the mission to liberate Kiri," Ino stated.

"Oh, I remember now!" Choji said in realization. "You're the guy Sakura punched out of the ship, aren't you?"

"Choji! Why did you have to bring that up!" Ino angrily chastised her rotund teammate.

"Sorry, but it was the only thing I remember from him," Choji said, shrugging.

"It's okay, I already put it past me. Ino told me that Sakura can have quite the temper, and my way with words wasn't as good back then," Sai softly said, widening his smile at the end. "Oh, by the way, I came here to bring you my wedding gift, since Ino told me is a custom to give a gift to the newlyweds. I don't have much money, so I decided to do something myself."

Sai then handed the folder to Asuma. The bearded Jonin opened it, and much to his surprise, he saw a picture of both him and Kurenai the moment they were saying the "I do" during the wedding. Despite being only a pencil sketch, it was amazingly realistic and life-like, almost looking like a black and white photograph.

"It looks really impressive, boy. Thanks a lot," Asuma praised, as he closed the folder and placed it under his arm. "But, if it's a picture of the wedding... when did you do it?"

"During the wedding. It was the only time I could have been able to capture the moment," Sai explained. "I had to miss part of the ceremony to do it, but sometimes you have to sacrifice something in order to obtain the better results."

"It's okay, kid. Your gift was really thoughtful and tasteful," Asuma praised.

"Thanks, but part of the credit goes to Ino. She was the one who suggested it," Sai stated.

"And with a good reason! If I didn't say anything, you would have bought him that booklet about how to cope when you stop smoking!" Ino said, mildly angry.

"What? You said that your sensei was going to stop smoking, so something like that would have been useful," Sai replied. "Or it's something that's just functional not a proper wedding gift?"

"See? I still have a lot of work to do with this guy," Ino said, shaking her head. She then smiled brightly again, and turned at Asuma. "But

I'm so proud that you finally decided to drop such an ugly and unhealthy habit! Especially now that you're going to be a dad."

Asuma chuckled, as he sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "Haha, yes. Kurenai said that I either stopped smoking, or that she wouldn't marry me. Guess that the choice was obvious."

"Like I said, before, you sometimes need to sacrifice something in order to obtain something even better," Sai added with a smile.

"The way you talk it seems like you're speaking from experience, kid," Asuma noted.

"All ninjas end up sacrificing something during their careers, sooner or later," Sai replied with his unwavering smile.

"Yeah, I know that too well," Asuma replied, as he briefly reflected on how Hiruzen being the Hokage strained their relationship.

"Come on Sai, this is a wedding, let's talk about something less depressing and a bit more fitting with the situation, okay?" Ino asked, as he nudged him a bit.

"Alright," Sai agreed. He then turned at Choji and Shikamaru. "I see that most people came with a date, but you two seem to be on your own. Do girls find your appearances too ugly or your personalities too disgusting for staying with you?"

Asuma raised an eyebrow, and repressed a chuckle. The sound of Ino's hand slapping her face echoed through the whole village.

"While I don't need to justify myself on such issue, I do have a girlfriend. She's just from Suna, and she isn't here," Shikamaru pointed out. "And yes, I know that's something a lot of single people say in order to boast, but in my case is true. Ask anybody here."

"And while I don't have a girlfriend, I've been in touch from a girl from Kumo I met during the Chunin Exams. Though sadly I don't get to

see her as often as Shikamaru sees Temari," Choji replied.

"Which isn't that much," Shikamaru pointed out.

"You know what? I take back what I said. You're no longer ready to interact with other people on a casual level," Ino stated, as he grabbed Sai's arm and dragged him away.

"It was nice to meet you," Sai stated, as he was pulled away by the embarrassed blond.

...

While some people have been watching with some amusement how Sai embarrassed Ino in front of her teammates with his sheer lack of tact, certain two people have been paying more attention to the exchange than most others.

"Your friend certainly spends a lot of time with that guy, don't you think so?" Sasuke pointed out.

"Indeed. I don't know why. Ino surely can do much better than him," Sakura replied. "She said Sai's pretty nice deep down, but not even she herself seems to be sure of it."

"Are you worried about her?" Sasuke asked, noticing Sakura's tone.

The pinkette nodded. "There's something odd about that guy. Something I can't put my finger on. And that's not counting on how little we know about his past. I'm afraid he might be using Ino for whatever purpose. The idea alone makes me shiver, and that's not even getting into what he might do once he no longer needs her."

"Vapid as she can be, Ino isn't a stupid girl. She might have a reason for spending so much time with that guy," Sasuke pointed out. "If the guy tries something, I'm sure she will see it coming."

"You seem to have quite a lot of trust in Ino," Sakura pointed out.

"She's a ninja, just like you and me. I don't think the Hokage gave her the Chunin rank for her pretty face," Sasuke pointed out. "Plus she can read minds."

"Even then, I think it would be good if we kept an eye on them," Sakura stated.

"Though I think there may be another reason as for why you seem to dislike so much Ino getting close with that guy," Sasuke pointed out.

Sakura placed her hands on her hips, and frowned a little. "And that would be?"

Sasuke shot her an uncharacteristic smirk. "You're jealous that Ino is getting a boyfriend before you."

"What!?" an indignant Sakura replied, a little louder than she wanted. "Here I am worrying about her wellbeing, and you bring up such nonsense!"

"It wouldn't be that weird. Ino and you have always been rivals. You always competed in everything, romance included. It's only natural that you'll feel that way," Sasuke told her.

"Well, what about you and Naruto? You've always been rivals as well, and he got a girlfriend for way longer than you!" Sakura said in a mildly accusatory manner, which Sasuke found worth a chuckle.

"Naruto and I may compete, but not in such topics. Besides, if I really wanted a girlfriend just to rub him in, I could have asked you or Karin -at least before she started dating Neji- out, and I'm sure you would have said yes," Sasuke confidently said.

"You know, this is one of those times in which your confidence in yourself comes out as more obnoxious than charming," Sakura replied, crossing her arms.

"So, if I asked you to be my girlfriend, would you say no?" Sasuke asked.

Sakura grew increasingly uncomfortable. She averted her gaze, as her face reddened. "It's... it's not nice to use my feelings for you in such a way, Sasuke-kun..."

Sasuke grabbed her by the shoulder, and forced her to look at him. "Why the bashful attitude? You never were afraid to let me know what you felt for me."

"Things change, Sasuke-kun. I know that by pushing my feelings, I was only pestering you and making you dislike me more. That's why I decided that it was best to let you be, and if you really returned my feelings, you'd give me a sign," Sakura explained.

"Huh. Who would have guessed that that annoying girl from the Academy would mature so much," Sasuke stated.

Sakura just chuckled. She wiped a strand of hair from her face "Guess we all do, sooner or later. Being closer to you helped to understand you a bit better. I also understood that, if I didn't step up my game, I'd also be the weakest link of our team, and that wouldn't endear you to me much. Not to mention, that I'd put yours, Karin's and Shizune-sensei's life in danger by not pulling my share of the weight."

"Again, another thing I would have never guessed I would see when we first became a team, but guess that life has a knack for challenging expectations," Sasuke noted.

"You were my inspiration. I took a page from Hinata's book and decided that I should look at you the same way she used to look at Naruto. I mean, look at her. She used to be so shy and withdrawn, and not that strong of a ninja, and after graduating she became such a powerhouse... and that was before getting the Tenseigan," Sakura pointed out.

"And what will you do, once you catch up to me? I won't be a good source of inspiration anymore," Sasuke asked.

Sakura let out a mirthless chuckle. "Catching up to you, heh. Who would have guessed you can crack jokes."

"With that attitude, you probably wouldn't," Sasuke said, sounding mildly chastising.

"You can't seriously believe that. I mean, with all the stuff you can do with the Sharingan..." Sakura began.

"Yeah, my clan has a Blood Limit. So what? Look at Tsunade and Jiraiya. They were born without Blood Limits, yet they became two of the most powerful ninjas who ever lived," Sasuke countered.

"Well, you have a point..." Sakura conceded, as she rubbed her arm.

"But what?" Sasuke asked. "You can always push yourself a little harder every day. Limits can always be surpassed. New heights can be achieved. That's what you've been doing so far, why you should stop now?"

"Who said I did stop?" Sakura asked, crossing her arms.

"Your quitter attitude," Sasuke replied.

"Quitter? I'd like you to see training with Gai-sensei," Sakura said, rolling her eyes, before shivering a little at the memory of the beginning of such torture. "Which I still do, by the way."

"The problem here is that you see a big gap between our level of skill and power, and think that since there's no chance of catching up to me, why bother trying? You probably feel pretty comfortable with the level you achieved. But then you realize that such thing may not be enough," Sasuke said. "It's good that you see me as an inspiration, but you shouldn't mistake it for a goal."

"You sound like you talk from experience," Sakura noted.

"And I do. Remember that even before the clan's downfall, Itachi and Shisui were the two strongest Uchihas the clan ever produced. And I felt very frustrated when I was unable to catch up to them, no matter how hard I trained. And in my case, it was justified since unlike you and me, they didn't have anything I did not," Sasuke explained. "Until I realized that I was looking at it the wrong way. I still look at Itachi and Shisui for strength, but I want to improve for my own sake, regardless if I catch up with them or not. Try to surpass yourself with each passing day, and you'll see real progress. And before you realize it, the gap between our power and skill level will be much smaller than you realize."

"Wow, that was... really inspirational," Sakura said in awe.

Sasuke smirked. "To be completely honest, I'm only paraphrasing what Itachi and Shisui told me once."

"That's really good advice. You're lucky to have them," Sakura sincerely said.

"Lucky indeed. Even after losing most of my clan, I still feel grateful for having them. I don't know what I would have done if I lost them as well," Sasuke wondered.

Sakura blushed a little, as she started to rub her arm. "Well... I now it's not the same since I'm not part of your clan, but as long as I'm here, you'll never be alone."

"I know. But that doesn't mean it can change in the future," Sasuke said.

"Wait, what? What do you...?" Sakura's words died in her mouth as the realization hit her like an sledgehammer to the gut. Her eyes were open wide, as her blush intensified. "Sasuke-kun! Are you telling me-"

"Listen, I have a responsibility to the Uchiha Clan," Sasuke interrupted her. "A few years ago we used to be more than one

hundred, now, even with Shisui's brats, our numbers are still in the single digits. I can't let Itachi and Shisui do everything; I have to get married and produce children as well. And I can't marry anybody; the mother of my children must be a strong kunoichi, somebody worthy of the Uchiha name. However, that's not the only thing I'm looking for. I want my future wife to be somebody I can love, somebody who makes my life whole. And somebody I can make happy as well in return."

"Sasuke-kun... that's..." Sakura was at loss for words upon hearing the Uchiha's speech.

"... and I think that you can be that woman," Sasuke finished. "I'm not asking you to marry me on the spot. But I want to see if I'm right and you're that special somebody." Sasuke then sighed. "Sorry, I think I'm being too theatrical. I'm not good at this. What I want to ask you is... do you want to become a couple, and see what fate has for us?"

A star flashed in each of Sakura's eyes, as her brain processed the words coming out of Sasuke's mouth.

"You... you mean it?" Sakura asked, coming close to him.

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't," Sasuke replied, rolling his eyes a little.

"Oh my god! Yes! Yes! A million time yes!" Sakura screamed, as she wrapped her arms around the Uchiha's neck.

Sasuke grew a bit uncomfortable as Sakura's over the top reaction drew the attention of quite a few people. Some muttered something to themselves while others snickered.

"You know, I think I made clear I wasn't asking you to marry me, just to go on a date and see if things work out between us," Sasuke stated, as he gently tried to push Sakura aside.

"Just let me dream, dammit!" Sakura said, still in the same elated tone, strangely enough.

...

Meanwhile, at another table, Kakashi was sharing a table with his students and Rin. However, his students got up to talk to other people, leaving the two members of Team Minato alone.

"Look at them, married already," Rin said with a chuckle. "I knew that there was something more than friendship between them back then, but seeing them married... it feels unreal."

"You can't help but still see them as they were, can you?" Kakashi asked. Despite the wording, he didn't mean to sound accusatory.

"I can't help it. When I heard your names, I picture how you looked before my death. Such disconnect is hard to reconcile," Rin stated.

"I know what you mean. When I think about Obito, I can't help but think in that annoying boy that wanted to become Hokage," Kakashi told her.

"And who had a crush on me. In hindsight, he wasn't exactly subtle," Rin said with a chuckle.

"He felt that since he was in the same team as you, his chances would be greater," Kakashi pointed out. "Which isn't that rare to happen, as Kurenai and Asuma were part of the same team as well."

"Maybe if things were different, Obito and I would have been an item, who knows," Rin said, before directing her eyes towards the newlywed couple, now happily engaged in a chat with Shizune and Shisui. "Still, I'm happy for them. They deserve each other. I can't wait to see how their baby looks like."

"Oh, that means that we have to make them a gift when he or she is born," Kakashi said, sounding a little annoyed. "Man, after it took so

much thinking to find that perfect wedding gift, now I'll have spend more sleepless nights thinking in a proper gift."

"Kakashi, your wedding gift was a book on how to stop smoking, plus several boxes of nicotine patches," Rin deadpanned. "That's hardly an A-Class wedding gift."

"Hey, Asuma said Kurenai forced him to drop smoking, so I decided I could give him something practical," Kakashi replied, not sounding ashamed in the slightest. "Though a gift for a baby is going to be a little trickier."

"Oh, I already have an awesome idea," Rin proudly said.

"Oh? What is it?" Kakashi asked, interested.

"So you can take that idea for you? Sorry but no, Copy Ninja," Rin replied, emphasizing the last two words.

"Aw, you hurt me, Rin," Kakashi mockingly replied. "Come on, I promise I won't copy you."

"Very well then. It's a crib," Rin stated. "I know it's not something overly original, but I'm sure they'll appreciate."

"A crib, huh? A nice gift. Practical as well. Though some cribs can be a bit expensive," Kakashi warned her.

"Oh, I don't plan to buy a crib, Kakashi. I'll make one from scratch with my... special talents," Rin replied, smiling widely.

"So, you got a better hang of it?" Kakashi asked.

"Once we have some privacy, I'll show you how much I progressed since the last time you saw me fight," Rin proudly said, sounding almost like a boast.

"Um, excuse me, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" a new female voice asked.

Kakashi and Rin turned around to see Ino of all people standing in front of them.

"Sorry, I couldn't help but hear your conversation. You were talking about a gift for Asuma-sensei and Kurenai-sensei's baby, right?"

"That, we were," Kakashi confirmed with a single nod. "Why? Do you want advice from us?"

"Yes. You see, I didn't have to think in a gift for the wedding since my clan provided all the flowers for the ceremony for free, but sadly I can't cheat like that again," Ino said, chuckling a little. "So I was wondering, do you mind I borrow Rin a little for some girl talk?"

"Uh, sure. Do you mind staying alone, Kakashi?" Rin asked.

Kakashi replied by pulling one of his many Icha Icha novels. "I know how to make the best of solitude, so don't worry about me."

"I can't believe he brought one of those smutty books to a wedding of all places," Ino disapprovingly said, shaking her head. "Anyway, come on Rin! I want to take a break from this multitude, plus the weather's great for a walk."

"Alright then. See you later, Kakashi," Rin said as she got up, and followed Ino outside of the large tent.

...

"You know, when I was a Genin, I asked myself, 'what kind of dumbass hires a team of ninja to babysit?' Shouldn't it be better just to hire some civilian teen to do the job?" Shisui began. "But now that I have kids myself, I see how easy and practical it is."

"Not to mention fast," Shizune chimed in. "It might be a bit more pricey than hiring a civilian babysitter, but the advantages are surely worth every additional ryo."

"It's kind of funny when you think about it. We can't take care of our kids because of our job as ninjas, so we hire lower ranked ninjas to do that job for us," Shisui said with a chuckle.

Kurenai and Asuma were now having a talk with Shizune and Shisui about their experiences with their kids. After that, they also had planned to ask Yugao and Hayate.

"So... I'm taking your life changed a lot since you got kids, right?" Asuma asked.

"Oh, absolutely. Though it's not as bad as it may seem at first sight. I mean, yeah, you don't have as much free time you used to have..." Shizune began.

"You need to spend much less money on yourself and more on the kids," Shisui continued.

"The sleepless nights when the kids feel like crying for no reason..."

"The constant battle of making them eat their food..."

"And 'battle' isn't an euphemism! Somedays our kitchen ends up in a state comparable to the battlefields of the Third War!"

"And pray they don't get sick! It's all of the above multiplied by ten, plus a stream of vomit!"

"Not that they need to be sick to throw up for some reason..."

Shisui noticed that color was starting to disappear from the newlywed couple's faces. "Uh, honey? I think we're scaring them."

Realizing Shisui was right, Shizune laughed awkwardly. "But don't worry! All of that stuff will be meaningless compared to how much a kid will brighten your life!"

"We hope so, hehe," Kurenai said, laughing a little. "We know that taking care of a kid is a serious endeavor, but for a moment you

made it look as it was more an arduous chore than anything."

"Though, a kid also gives you perspective, you know what I mean?" Shizune asked. "I mean, we're ninjas. We risk our lives with each mission. I can say that all of us here are not afraid to die to complete a mission, or to save a comrade, or something like that. But when you have this little one at home depending on you, and wonder what's going to be of him or her if this time you don't return..."

"Yeah. I know I worried my father when I started my career as a kunoichi, but I believe this is worse. I mean, if I died, even if it would have been devastating, my dad could still take care of himself. But if it was him who died..." Kurenai said.

"Yes. That's why we agreed that I'd take a job that entails less risk and does not require me to leave the village for a long periods of time. If something happened to Shizune -pray it doesn't- our kids would still have me," Shisui explained.

"Plus at least one of us will be in the village if an emergency happens," Shizune continued. "We agreed it would be him since he mostly did solo missions or with temporary teammates. I'm the Jōnin-sensei of a team, so I wouldn't be able to do it without leaving them."

"Which makes me wonder, do you guys plan to do anything similar?" Shisui asked. "I'm bringing this up because, unlike us, the two of you are Jōnin-sensei. The two of you take risky missions that make you spend time away from the village."

"While I don't plan to retire, I think I may give Naruto command of the Assault Squad permanently. That way I won't be so bound to the team, and I'll be able to take some time if the situation calls for it."

"Well, you have it easier. Your students are either Jonin or Special Jōnin, and from what you told me, they all soon will be the former. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if one of them took a team of their own," Asuma stated.

"Hinata has expressed interest in doing such a thing, but she herself admitted that, even if she got the rank shortly, she doesn't feel ready for the task, and think she could use some more experience," Kurenai told the others.

"Wait, isn't Hinata like, the new head of her clan?" Shisui asked, scratching his head. "I mean, clan heads are usually pretty busy. I don't know where is she going to find time to do both things."

"It can be managed," Asuma interjected. "My father was the Jonin-sensei of the Sannin while he was also head of the Sarutobi Clan and Hokage. How did he manage to do all that, I'll never know. But it sure as hell didn't leave him any time to spend with his family," the bearded Jonin said, some bitterness leaking from his voice.

"Asuma..." Kurenai said, as she squeezed his hand with her own.

The bearded Jonin breathed deeply as he forced himself to calm down. He eyed his father the former Hokage, chatting with his fellow clansmen and other guests.

"I know, I know," Asuma apologetically said. "I like to think I put all the bad blood between my father and I behind, but some things are hard to forget. If anything, I want to make sure my relationship with my kid is better than the one I had with father."

"You know I'm on the same boat. My father never approved of me being a kunoichi. He felt such career wasn't befitting of a woman," Kurenai said.

Shizune raised an eyebrow, her face becoming indignant. "Really? What a bunch of nonsense."

"Indeed it was. My father was a very traditional man," Kurenai stated.

"No, being traditional is following some outdated customs because they're part of your clan history or something like that. Women have

been ninjas since the foundation of the Great Villages," Shizune stated.

During the Warring State Period, women were often barred from becoming ninjas. The reason was that due the absurdly high mortality rate of the era, all clans agreed that women should be away from danger, and produce and raise children. They were basically glorified baby factories. With the advent of the Village System, the mortality rate greatly decreased, and it became more acceptable for women to become ninjas or other high risk jobs.

Of course, not everybody was ready to embrace social progress enabled by this new era, and in some places, while not banned, women were discouraged from being ninjas.

"My relationship with my father wasn't the best either. I think that was one of the reasons Asuma and I clicked so easily. A bit said if you think about it," Kurenai sadly chuckled. "Sometimes I wish I had at least tried to make things up with him before he died during the Nine Tails attack."

"I know what you mean. It's not until you lose somebody that you realize that you could have been a bit more understanding to them," Shisui solemnly agreed. "Their memory... it's like a wound that will never heal."

There was a moment of silence following the usually cheerful and laid back Uchiha's unusually serious and deep statement.

Kurenai forced herself to smile as she pushed the bitter memory of the last time her father was alive away. "But enough of such gloom talk, okay? Today is a day of celebration. I want everybody in their best mood."

...

At another part of the large sunshade tent, Jiraiya, Tsunade and their two youngest children were also enjoying the reception.

"Enjoying the wedding, kids?" Jiraiya asked the twins.

"I dunno. I preferred Shizune-nee's wedding. There were less people, and we knew most of the guests," Kaida complained with a shrug. "I don't even know who most of these people are."

"Because we were Shizune-nee's family," Hagane pointed out. "And the groom's family were just two people at the time."

"Yes. A good chunk of the guests are the Sarutobi Clan and Kurenai's family, even if the latter is much smaller than the former," Tsunade pointed out. "Though you should have seen our wedding. It had even less people."

"Less? But you guys are like living legends! I'm sure lots of people would have loved to attend!" Kaida said, visibly surprised.

"And they wanted to attend, make no mistake. But weddings are special and meaningful events, and thus you want to share them with your loved ones, not a bunch of strangers. You see neither your mother nor I had any family left by the time we were married."

"I had Naruto," Tsunade pointed out.

Jiraiya rolled his eyes a little. "Yes, you have Uzumaki blood and all that, but your family ties aren't that close. Besides, Naruto wasn't even four at the time, so he hardly counts as a proper guest."

"And how many people did attend your wedding?" Hagane asked, putting the conversation back on track.

"Just Naruto, Shizune, Sensei, Itachi and Shisui," Tsunade replied. "Sensei was the one who conducted the ceremony. The reception was in our house, when we merely talked about various topics as we had some food with sake in the living room."

"I know I said I didn't like crowds, but that sound pretty boring for a wedding," Kaida said, crossing her arms.

"We like to think it was something intimate. Who cares if it wasn't something grand nor grandiose? It was a memorable day for us, and that's what counted," Jiraiya said.

"I can understand dad not having any family left since he was an orphan and all that, but mom is a Senju! Our clan founded Konoha! Where were the other Senjus?" Hagane asked. "I read a lot about our clan in history books, but they don't detail what happened to it."

"Yeah, I would want my wedding to have more people than you guys, Shizune-nee-chan and Naruto-niisan," Kaida deadpanned.

"Then you know what to do. Marry a guy with a pretty big family. Wanna know which are Konoha's biggest clans?" Jiraiya asked, chuckling.

"DAD!" Kaida protested, turning red. "I don't mean right now!"

"Kidding, kidding! I already knew that," the Hokage laughed, holding up his hands in defense. "Besides, after you were born, I passed a law to make illegal to date the Hokage's daughter until she's thirty, under penalty of death."

"Very funny, dad," Kaida said as she rolled her eyes.

"Funny, yeah..." Jiraiya laughed, as his eyes narrowed, sparkling with a dangerous glint.

"Hey, look at that, they're clearing the middle zone from tables and chairs," Tsunade pointed out.

"I guess it's time for the dance then," Jiraiya pointed out. Then, his face blanched as a realization dawned upon him. "Oh shit..."

Tsunade's face suddenly became sad. "We didn't have a dance in our wedding," she recalled, sounding melancholic.

"Oh god, here we go again," Jiraiya muttered to himself, before placing a hand on Tsunade's shoulder. "Well, like we just said, our

wedding was pretty small, so there was no point it-"

"How the hell did we have a wedding without a dance!?" Tsunade asked, sounding far louder than she intended -but not caring at all-

"Well, it's all in the past and-"

"No! We have to make up for it! Come on, let's dance until our feet start to bleed!" Tsunade insisted, as she dragged Jiraiya to the dance floor. "Then I'll heal them, then we'll continue dancing until they bleed again!"

Jiraiya couldn't repress a groan. The same thing happened in Shizune and Shisui's wedding, and he knew that "dance until their feet bleed" wasn't an hyperbole.

"Uh, hime, this is Asuma and Kurenai's wedding. Shouldn't they start dancing first?" Jiraiya uncomfortably asked.

Fortunately, that question stopped her in her tracks. She huffed and crossed her arms. "Fine. But then we get to dance more than anybody!"

...

As Jiraiya had said, Asuma and Kurenai opened the dance, everybody else watching as they moved, holding each other in their respective arms. After a few minutes of solo dancing, other couples started to join as well.

"Let's dance slow. I don't want to accidentally step on you."

Hinata laughed in return, as she and Naruto danced. "Come on, Naruto-kun, you're not doing it that bad."

"If you say so," Naruto replied with a chuckle.

"Though we can go slow if you want to," Hinata said, bringing herself closer to Naruto, and slowing her movements. "Albeit..."

"Albeit?" Naruto repeated.

"I also want to dance slowly. So I can enjoy the moment the longest. Just the two of us, dancing like this. No missions, no Akatsuki, no friends dying... just the two of us..." Hinata said.

"Well, we can dance like this whenever you want," Naruto replied.

"No, we can't," Hinata replied.

"Huh?" Naruto dumbly asked.

"Well, technically we can, but it's not the same, you know? It's not the same dancing just because you want, than dancing to celebrate a special event like this one. Plus, it's not just us. All our friends are enjoying the moment too," Hinata pointed out. "Plus we'll have to go back to Taki and continue helping with the reparation efforts."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Naruto said, as he continued to dance. "Too bad you don't get to undo Akatsuki's destruction by punching them. Otherwise this would be fun."

"Come on, we're almost finished with that. It can't take more than a week to finish what's left," Hinata said in an encouraging clone.

"Besides, imagine how long we would have taken if you couldn't create so many clones."

"I think that's why I feel it's such a bother. With the clones' memories, it makes me feel as if I've been doing the job of a hundred people," Naruto said with a chuckle, which Hinata echoed.

As they continued to dance, they passed on another couple, Shino and Fu. The usually energetic girl had decided to dance slowly as well, something Shino would no doubt be thankful for. For the event, she had traded her usual scantily-clad appearance for an elegant red kimono with white floral patterns. The Kimono was loose enough that to hid her muscles, but it did little to hide her tall stature, especially compared to the much shorter Aburame. Some would say that they

looked ridiculous, but those who knew them thought that they were adorable instead.

"Thank goodness we managed to save her," Naruto told Hinata. "A few seconds late..."

"But we did save her. Just like we did save Gaara. Try not to dwell on what could have been, It's not healthy," Hinata softly chastised.

"I know. But in both cases, we just barely did it. We need to be better prepared to face Akatsuki. We're bound to run out of luck sooner or later, and there are still four jinchuriki that need to be protected," Naruto insisted. "How's your Tenseigan training, by the way?"

"I'm progressing. Slowly but surely. I think I could go faster if I could be trained by somebody with a Tenseigan, rather than from old books and scrolls," Hinata told him.

"Not to put any pressure on you but... try a bit harder, okay?" Naruto said, trying not to sound imposing. "Look how much trouble Kakuzu and Hidan gave us, and I'm sure they aren't even among the better half of the Akatsuki. Not to mention the one with the Rinnegan."

"I know. I'll train even harder."

"Meanwhile, I'll see if I can get dad to train both me and Fu on using Tailed Beast chakra. That's the best weapon we have against an enemy of such power," Naruto stated.

"Naruto, shh," Hinata said, placing a finger on her lips. "You're getting carried away. Let's enjoy the moment, okay? There will be plenty of time for training and worrying about Akatsuki."

"Oh, right, sorry," Naruto stammered, as he and Hinata continued dancing.

"Now relax, and enjoy the moment," Hinata said, as she rested her head on his shoulder, before giggling. "And the company."

"Aw, the dance already started? I can't believe we missed it!" Ino's voice complained, as she and Rin entered the tent. "Where is Sai? There's no way I don't get to dance at a wedding."

"I think it's over there," Rin said, pointing to a corner of the tent.

"Ah, right! Thank you!" Ino said, as he headed towards the pale brunette, before turning at Rin one last time. "Oh, and keep in mind what we talked, alright?"

"I will, don't worry," Rin said, as she also went to find somebody to dance with.

"Huh. It seems that Ino and Rin became friends," Naruto noticed.

"Despite her somewhat blunt personality, Ino-san is a very outgoing and confident girl. Making new friends doesn't look like a challenge to her," Hinata pointed out.

"Hey, you have nothing to be jealous of. You also have lots of friends," Naruto pointed out.

"I know. I'm not the same super shy, stuttering girl from the Academy. But back then, I wish I could be as open as Ino-san was," Hinata said, before her eyes rested on Rin, trying to mingle with the crowd. "I think Rin has it worse than me, given the circumstances."

"I'm happy for Rin. Given what she went through, she needs a lot of friends to rely on," Naruto pointed out. "And together we will make her feel much better about her situation."

"Yes. Yes we will," Hinata agreed.

And the two of them, alongside the rest of the wedding guests, continued dancing and enjoying the night without any care.

...

Land of Lightning, Southern Border

At the same time the wedding reached its end, something else happened hundreds of kilometers to the north.

Standing over a stone hill, Obito Uchiha overlooked the scenery before him. A mostly rocky expanse, with a river crossing it, and patches of vegetation here and there, mostly near the river. There was a small town at the edge of river, and a Kumogakure outpost built at the base of a nearby mountain.

"I think this place will do," Obito said, as he removed one of his gloves, bit his thumb, and made five hand seals. "Wherever you're hiding, jinchuriki, this will surely force you to come out. Summoning Jutsu!"

And Obito slammed his hand into the ground.

Author's Note: So, Kurenai and Asuma finally married, yay!

Despite the lack of action, I liked this chapter, since it allowed me to focus on many characters that have been absent for quite some time, such as Kurenai herself (told you she would appear from time to time even if she is still pregnant) Team Asuma, Rin, or Sai. Speaking of the latter, I really enjoyed writing Sai much more than this around than in his previous appearances. Guess that he needed a good foil like Ino for his brand of insensitive comedy to work better.

Something I'm not proud of, however, is Sasuke and Sakura's relationship upgrade. I rewrote the scene quite a few times, and honestly, this was the best I could do. I'd like to blame Sasuke being a cold fish and not that good to work with romantic scenes, but then again, I did read quite a few fics in which Sasuke and Sakura's relationship is both interesting while keeping both characters truer to their core. Guess that, since SasuSaku is a couple that I'm mostly indifferent to, I simply didn't have the passion to give it more depth. Oh well, at least I took that out of my hair.

So, anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter full of comedy and fluff, because as the last scene shows, the heroes are for a wild ride. I think you all know what's going to happen in Kumo now.

Thanks a lot to grimlock987 for betareading this chapter.

The arc following Hidan and Kakuzu is the Itachi pursuit arc. But since neither Itachi is an Akatsuki nor Sasuke defected Konoha, what comes next is another original arc, but I'm confident that you guys will love it. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Cats and Foxes, Part I

Author's Note: I hope you all guys had a Merry Christmas. Enjoy the last chapter of 2018:

Chapter 66:

Cats and Foxes, Part I

or

Old Quarrels, New Disputes

...

It was a sunny morning in Konoha. Most people, both ninjas and civilians, were now flooding the streets as they headed towards their day jobs. Jiraiya, however, had been almost an hour in his office. Not working, mind you; working on his next novel. He used the clones for that.

Three days had passed since Kurenai and Asuma's wedding. The morning after the wedding, the newlywed couple left for their honeymoon to a resort in the Land of Hot Springs, the same one Jiraiya and Tsunade had gone for their own honeymoon many years ago. Going by Jiraiya's own experiences with the place, he knew Asuma and Kurenai would have a great time.

They weren't the only ones who left that morning. The Assault and Animal Squads, as well as Fu, returned to Takigakure to help finish the reconstruction efforts. According to the reports, they wouldn't take more than two weeks until they were done. Naruto had faith that nothing terrible would happen while he and his friends were away. And until that point, Jiraiya was sharing his adopted son's optimism.

Somebody knocked at the door.

"Oh come on, I wasn't supposed to have any meetings until ten!" Jiraiya groaned as he quickly hid the draft of his next novel. "Who's there?"

"It's me, Jiraiya. We have an urgent message from Kumo addressed to you," Jiraiya immediately recognized the voice of his sensei and predecessor.

That got Jiraiya's attention. Messages from Kumo were hardly good news. What would the Raikage want now? "Come in! Bring that message!"

Sarutobi entered the office and handed Jiraiya a scroll with Kumo's seal on it. Unfurling the scroll, the white haired Hokage read its contents, and the more he read, the more his face paled. He furled the scroll again and slammed it against the table.

"It is bad?" Hiruzen asked, with a bit of worry in his voice.

"ANBU!" Jiraiya yelled. Four ANBU wearing different animal masks suddenly appeared before him. "Bring Shizune's Medical Squad here, now!" he barked. "Bring me Rin Nohara as well!"

"Yes, Hokage-sama!" the ANBU said, aware of the urgency of the situation, vanishing in an instant.

"I take it is bad," the Hokage-turned-advisor concluded. "Let's hope it's not a repeat of the Hyuga Affair..."

"Not exactly the same, but it can be even worse," Jiraiya said, and to prove his point, he handed the message to Hiruzen.

After reading it, the former Hokage echoed his student's reaction. "This isn't bad... but catastrophic..."

Jiraiya slumped into his chair, and let out a tired sigh. "Of all the times for Naruto not to be in the village..."

...

A few minutes later, Shizune and her three students stood in front of the Hokage and Sarutobi. According to the ANBU, they were at their usual training spot, ready to begin their morning routine.

"Thank goodness they were in the village, or else it would have been a catastrophe," Jiraiya thought. Even if it would have preferred Naruto, the Medical Squad would work as well. Hell, it could work even better. "Good morning to you four. Sorry for calling you with such haste, but there's an emergency. Konoha has to undertake a mission that only you four can accomplish."

"What is it, Hokage-sama?" Shizune asked.

"You see, a few minutes ago we received a message from Kumogakure," Jiraiya said, as he handed the message to Shizune. As the young Jounin read it, Jiraiya continued talking. "The message says that a Kumo border outpost and a nearby village have been attacked and destroyed. The few survivors claim it was the Nine Tails who did it."

"What? That's stupid! The Nine Tails is sealed inside Naruto-niisan!" Karin protested. "And he doesn't know how to control his power to its fullest."

"And even if he was, Naruto has been in Takigakure for the past days! If that wasn't the case, Kakashi-sensei would have sent a message," Sakura added.

"What you said is true. However, we're contemplating another possibility. Sensei, why don't you tell them?" Jiraiya said, as both his and everybody else's eyes rested on the old man.

Hiruzen cleared his throat before speaking. "You see, I was there when Minato sealed the Nine Tails inside his son. I was unable to help, or even see it closer due to the barrier erected by Kushina prior to their deaths. Something I and a few others saw, and what most people don't know, is that Minato only sealed half the Kyuubi inside his son."

There was a collective gasp. Those present opened their mouths to ask questions, but Jiraiya raised a hand, and wordlessly ordered them to remain silent and let Hiruzen finish his tale.

"You see, I presume he did it because Naruto was a newborn baby, and he wouldn't be able to contain the whole fox himself. So using the Reaper Death Seal, he sealed half of the Nine Tails' chakra within himself, before sealing the other half within Naruto," Hiruzen said.

"But... if that's true, then the Nine Tails' other half should be within the Reaper's stomach, right? If I remember correctly, that's how that jutsu works, right?" Sasuke asked.

Both Jiraiya and Hiruzen nodded.

"Then there's no way the other half of the beast should have been able to escape the Reaper," Shizune said.

"Again, that's true. But remember that almost three years ago, when Orochimaru attacked Konoha, he used Impure World Resurrection to bring Minato back to life as an undead puppet," Hiruzen replied.

"Such thing wouldn't have been possible since his soul wouldn't be accessible. Yet he somehow managed to bypass that."

"And by doing so, he also rescued the other half of the Kyuubi's chakra, since it was bound to Minato's soul," Jiraiya continued.

"But you told me that you defeated the reanimated Minato, right?" Shizune asked.

"Yes. And by doing so, his soul returned to the afterlife, where it belongs," Jiraiya said.

"But... the Nine Tails, like every other Tailed Beast, it's immortal," Sakura said in realization. "And even if you manage to destroy one, they will simply be reborn again."

"Yes," Jiraiya confirmed.

"So, the Nine Tails' other half has been resurrected, and decided to attack the Land of Lightning?" Karin asked.

"Here's the thing. If it happened as you suggested, the ninjas in the border outpost would have seen the beast coming. But according to the few witnesses, the Nine Tails suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and attacked without warning," Jiraiya said.

"Which is exactly what happened when the Nine Tails attacked Konoha sixteen years ago," Hiruzen revealed. "This led us to believe that somebody had put the Nine Tails under their control and used it to destroy Konoha, which we later found was Obito Uchiha, believed to be dead back then."

"Wait, if Akatsuki got their hands on the Nine Tails, why did they use it to attack Kumo? Why don't they seal it with the others?" Shizune asked.

"We don't know. My guess is that they want to lure Naruto out into the open with it, so they can have both halves," Jiraiya said.

"If that was the case, why attack the Land of Lightning? Why not the Land of Fire?" Sakura asked.

"The Land of Lightning is hostile territory. We might not be at war, but we aren't friends nor allies either," Hiruzen pointed out.

"Clever bastards," Sasuke grumbled.

"Yes. We do suspect that this might a trap from either Akatsuki or Kumo -do not rule out such possibility- so Jiraiya and I decided not to recall Naruto for the time being," Hiruzen said.

"Still, given what we know, we can't afford to just hope it's a trap and that the Kyuubi's other half isn't roaming the world free. That's why I gathered your team. Sasuke, with your Mangekyou Sharingan, you'll

be able to subdue the beast and put it under your control. Karin's Chakra Chains can be of help as well. Once you rendered it docile, Shizune will seal it. The best solution would be to bring the Fox to Konoha and seal it inside Naruto as well, but having a Tailed Beast released like that, even under Sasuke's mind control, would be too risky so you'll have to seal it immediately," Jiraiya explained, as his eyes rested on Karin.

The redhead was starting to feel uncomfortable. Not only Jiraiya, but Hiruzen also has his eyes fixed on her, looking at her with a mix of pity and fear. "Um... Hokage-sama? Sarutobi-sama? Why are you looking at me like that? You're not planning to-"

"Karin, the Nine Tails is a special kind of beast. Its chakra it's too intense, and the host needs to have a special kind of chakra powerful enough to contain it without letting the fox harm its host. So far, only the Uzumaki Clan fit those criteria," Hiruzen said, his eyes reflecting sadness. "Sorry, Karin, but we have no other options. You have to be the container of the other half of the Kyuubi."

Karin's legs suddenly felt very weak, threatening to make her fall, while her stomach churn.

"No... no..." she said, almost in a whisper.

"Listen Karin, I know I'm asking you a lot, but there is no other options. You're the best candidate to-" Jiraiya began.

"NO!" Karin shouted. "You... you can't make me do it! You can't! No, I won't do it!" The panic-stricken redhead said before she fled the office.

"I'll go talk to her," Sakura said, as she rushed after her teammate.

Jiraiya sighed again. "I knew this was going to be a massive headache..."

Then, an tiger masked ANBU appeared, followed by a certain brown haired teenage girl.

"Hokage-sama, here's Rin Nohara, as you requested," the ANBU stated.

...

Unlike Karin, Sakura wasn't a sensor, but after looking a bit around the tower, jumping from one roof to another, she quickly saw her red headed teammate slumped on a bench, looking miserable. Not without a good reason, Sakura was forced to admit. Rehearsing what she should say, the pinkette landed besides the Uzumaki girl.

"Karin! There you are," Sakura said.

"Leave me alone," Karin cried, not bothering to look at Sakura.

"Karin, listen-"

"No, shut up!" Karin snapped. "Don't even open your mouth! Do you have any idea of what the Hokage asked me to do!?"

Sakura bit her lip. Karin had all the right to be both angry and scared, so she had to choose her words carefully.

"Listen Karin, I can't even imagine what is it to be asked to do such a thing," Sakura decided not to pretend she could empathize with her plight. "But if Hokage-sama asked you to do this, it's because there's nobody else who can do it."

"Bullshit!" Karin angrily replied. "I know for a fact that Tsunade-sama has Uzumaki blood in her! Why didn't he asked her to be her vessel? Or one of their biological children? They're Chunin, just like I am!"

"You know it's not the same. Those children already have a target in their backs because of their blood limits. It would be unfair to make them carry an even bigger burden," Sakura replied, not needing to remind her friend of that rescue mission.

"You know, before arriving here, I spent all of my childhood running away from some unseen enemy," Karin began. She removed her glasses, and wiped the tears coming from her eyes. "Always alert if somebody looked at us funny. Never staying in the same place more than a week. Living on the road. And when we arrived at Konoha, I thought that I finally got away from that. Curse my Uzumaki blood! No matter where I go, it always ruins my life!"

Sakura bit her lip, and forced herself to remain silent. She spent the next few minutes wordlessly comforting the crying redhead by gently patting her back.

"I know you must feel scared but... look at Naruto," Sakura pointed out. "He's been a jinchuuriki all his life, and he turned out pretty good, don't you think so?"

"Y-Yes..." Karin forced herself to admit. She didn't realize that Sakura left out all the situations in which the Kyuubi made Naruto's life more difficult, either directly or indirectly, but Sakura was sure it would be for the better.

"And you have all of us to support you if such thing happens," Sakura said.

"If?" Karin repeated.

"You heard Hokage-sama. We don't know for sure if it's the other half of the Kyuubi. It may just be a farce of Kumo or Akatsuki in order to draw Naruto into hostile territory," Sakura confidently said.

"And what if you're wrong?" Karin asked.

"Like I just said, we will be there to help and support you whenever you need. And not just us, but I'm sure Neji, Naruto and the rest of your family will," Sakura stated. She then grabbed both of Karin's hands. "If you feel you can't do it, think in them, think in all the people you love, and love you. Think that you will do this to protect them to keep them safe, just like Naruto has been doing all his life."

Karin spend a few moments silent, slowly absorbing Sakura's words. After the pinkette released her hands, she put her glasses back on.

"What you said doesn't make me any less scared. Not at all," Karin began, then her face reflected an expression of determination. She closed her hand into a fist. "But you are right. It will be horribly irresponsible to leave half the Nine Tails like that. And if there's nobody else who can carry this burden... then I will."

Sakura smiled, and nodded. "That's the spirit! Come on, we need to go back to the Hokage Tower."

"No need for that," Shizune's voice said. Sakura and Karin turned around, and saw Shizune, Sasuke and much to their surprise, Rin Nohara walking towards them. "We already heard everything we need to know shortly before you left. Are you feeling better, Karin?"

"Not much," the redhead replied. "But I will do this if I have to."

"Don't worry, it's not near as bad as it may think. Look at Naruto," Shizune said, trying to ease the redhead with a smile. "And Hokage-sama plans to give you a huge compensation for this."

"I doubt any compensation can make up for me becoming a jinchuriki, but I'll make sure I enjoy it," Karin deadpanned.

"So, are you ready to go? Hokage-sama said that this mission was urgent and wanted us to leave immediately," Rin chimed in.

Sakura and Karin looked at their fellow medic-nin a bit confused.

"Hokage-sama assigned Rin as backup for this mission," Shizune explained, before Sakura or Karin had a chance to answer.

"No offense to Rin, but how is an additional medic going to help with out mission?" Sakura asked.

"I have special abilities that will be helpful in case we face the Nine Tails," Rin explained. "You'll see what I mean when the moment

comes," the brown haired girl said enigmatically.

"Anyway, enough talking. As Hokage-sama said, this mission is an urgent one. I want you to meet me in the village's north gate in half an hour, understood?" Shizune asked.

"Yes ma'am!" the four other Konoha ninja obediently replied, before they went they scattered.

...

Less than an hour later, Shizune's Medical Squad was already on their way to the Land of Lightning. According to Jiraiya, they were set to meet a squad of Kumogakure that had been dispatched to investigate the incident as well. Said squad was expecting Naruto Uzumaki to be among them, so things would get tense when they saw that it wasn't be the case.

"So, what do you think? Did Obito really got control of that second half of the Nine Tails, or it's just a trick of Kumo? I'm partial to the latter," Sakura said, before the others had time to answer. "I did some research on Kumo, and the whole incident with Hinata wasn't the first time they tried to abduct one of our ninjas."

"Really? What did they try before?" Sasuke asked.

"They managed to kidnap Kushina Uzumaki, Naruto's mom," Sakura replied.

"Ah yes, Jiraiya-sama told us about that," Shizune stated.

"Everybody thought that there would be no way to get her back with the head start the kidnappers had, but Minato-sama managed to both track them and single handedly defeated the kidnappers. Many believe that that was the beginning of their romance."

"Indeed," Sakura nodded. "And as Naruto told us, his mother used to be the previous jinchuuriki before him, so it wouldn't be the first time they showed interest in the Nine Tails."

"It could also be because of her Uzumaki heritage," Rin piped in.

This got Karin's attention. "Uh, elaborate please?"

"Being an Uzumaki yourself, you know that your clan has some rather nifty perks, such as longevity, powerful chakra, and knack for fuinjutsu," Rin explained. "It's possible that besides the Kyubi, they also wanted Kushina-san to start their own branch of the Uzumaki Clan in Kumo."

Karin groaned in an exaggerated manner as she rolled her eyes. "Great, so if they find out I'm an Uzumaki, they'll want to get my hands on me. Great, just great. This mission keeps getting better," the redhead deadpanned.

"Listen, nobody's going to get kidnapped on my watch, got it?" Shizune energetically assured. "Our team is pretty powerful, so if they want to hurt one of us, we'll put them through a world of pain."

"If you said so..." Karin dejectedly replied, obviously unconvinced.

"You know, you should pray it's a trick from Kumo, given that the alternative is to fight an Akatsuki-controlled Kyuubi that we will need to seal inside you," Sasuke pointed out.

"Don't remind me," Karin groaned.

The Uchiha's expression then hardened as he continued talking. "I'm personally hoping for the latter option. Of the Akatsuki, Obito's the only one who can control the Tailed Beasts, meaning that he will be there. With how much powerful I've become over the past years, I'm ready to settle the score. He will pay for the Uchiha Insurrection and making me almost kill Naruto."

Rin's face turned contrite the moment Sasuke mentioned her former teammate. No matter how many times he heard all the evil deeds Obito had done, she was unable to reconcile them with the memory of the energetic, nice and clumsy boy she used to know.

"Guys, if we end up facing Obito..." Rin began, her voice quavering a little. "Do you think there's a chance we might be able to turn him back to our side?"

A deafening silence followed her question. A knot formed into the brown haired girls' stomach, made worse by the hateful glare Sasuke shot at her, before looking forward, and grunting.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked that..." Rin regretfully said.

"It's natural that you did. Obito was your teammate and friend, and you hate to see what he has become," Shizune replied, her tone being that of understanding. "However, Obito has committed multiple heinous crimes against Konoha and its inhabitants. We have proof that it was him the one responsible behind the Nine Tails' attack sixteen years ago that claimed the life of your sensei and his wife, as well as his participation on the Uchiha Insurrection and aiding Orochimaru in the invasion of Konoha.

"Even if Obito truly repented, his crimes are too grave for them to atone. Many criminals have been executed for much less than that. I know this is not what you wanted to hear, but the sooner you accept this, the sooner you'll be able to move on," Shizune explained.

"I... it's okay," Rin forced herself to admit. "Like I said, it was dumb of me to ask that. Obito might have brought me back to life, but he killed lots of other people as well."

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Sakura asked. "There's a big chance that we might end up fighting him. If it's the case and you are not mentally prepared to face him again-"

"No, no! I'm fine! I can do this!" Rin insisted, as her eyes glinted with determination. "I need to do this!"

"Are you sure?" A skeptical Sasuke asked.

"Yes. When I came back, memories of my death stopped me from being a ninja. Then, I decided to face my fears and join the mission to Kirigakure, the very same village responsible of my demise. And after that... I felt I was able to leave that behind. If I'm to leave the old Obito behind, I need to face what he has become."

"That's very brave of you, Rin," Sakura praised.

"As lovable as your intentions are, you should be careful. He didn't try anything during these past years, but seeing you in the open away from the village, he might try to abduct you and lock you up out of his fear of losing you again," Shizune advised.

"Don't worry, I'm aware of that," Rin replied, nodding.

"If what you say it's true, maybe we could use that to our advantage," Sasuke suggested.

"Sasuke-kun! I don't know what are you thinking, but we aren't going to do something that puts Rin in danger!" Sakura angrily chastised her boyfriend.

"I didn't say anything about putting her in danger. But if his presence makes Obito lose focus..." the Uchiha replied. "Shouldn't we take advantage of that?"

"We'll see when the time comes," Shizune said, putting an end to the discussion. "Like Sakura said, we won't take any actions that endangers any of the members of this squad, got it?"

"Tch, whatever," Sasuke growled, as he continued his travel forward.

...

Moon, Toneri's Palace

"Your tea, Pain-sama, Konan-sama," a pale black haired child with creepy white eyes and an unreadable expression said as he placed the two cups on the small table between the two of them. The two

Akatsuki were convinced that that kid wasn't human, or even alive to begin with. Though that wasn't relevant for them now.

Pain and Konan did their best to ignore the extremely luxurious and finely decorated living room they were now in. Having known nothing but the pain of war and misery, it was rather irksome to see firsthand the opulent lifestyle other people were lucky enough to have. Even then, they had to keep their grievances to themselves for the time being.

"So, Toneri Otsutsuki," Pain began, ignoring the tea brought to him. "While I can see that you have a lot to offer to our organization in terms of resources, I'd like to know better why are you interested in joining us."

"Your skepticism is reasonable, Pain-sama," Toneri said with a smile, taking a sip from his own cup of tea. "But the answer is simple. We both want a better world, one that reflects the true wishes of the Sage of the Six Paths. Isn't that enough?"

"In theory, it should be. But experience taught me that the jump from theory to practice isn't as clean as we always expect," Pain replied. "I'll be frank. Prior to Obito introducing you to us, we knew nothing about you. We didn't even know there were people living in the Moon."

"And I will be eternally grateful to Obito for keeping my people's existence a secret until the time was right," Toneri said, still smiling. "Though if you're still doubtful about my commitment and loyalty to your cause, feel free to test me as many times as you wish."

"You certainly have a helpful disposition. If it's genuine, that's it," Konan observed, as she drank from her cup of tea. "And trust me, a test will come in the future."

"Now, while I could ask Obito, I want to hear it from you first," Pain continued. "How did Obito know about you?"

"An understandable question to have," Toneri said with a nod. "But before I answer it, are you by any chance aware of a man named Madara? From the same clan as Obito, I think."

"Madara Uchiha. Yes. He was Obito's mentor. Though he no longer walks among the living," Konan answered. "It was thanks to him that Obito learned everything about the Sage of the Six Paths. And that Pain, as his reincarnation, inherited his eyes, and is the only one capable of bringing true peace to the world."

"In that case, that will save me some explaining to do. You see, Madara Uchiha came to our world many decades ago. I know this because my father told me, I wasn't born yet," Toneri pointed out. "Anyway, we never knew how Madara learned about our existence and our task, but he thought that, since we had a common goal, we should join forces. My then still living grandfather rejected his offer, since he didn't trust people from the Earth, even one that was a direct descendant of Hagoromo-sama.

"Even then, our family knew that this was an opportunity, and we made a deal with the Uchiha. If he could provide us with at least a pair of Main Family Otsutsuki Byakugan, he would consider his alliance offer," Toneri explained. "Of course, my family had no intention to ally with him. We knew about the Uchiha and how prone they are to war and violence, the very things we wanted to eradicate. But it was a golden chance to acquire a Tenseigan. Not that it mattered, since that was the last time we heard of him. Our spies on Earth told us that he died fighting his former friend Hashirama Senju."

"To my knowledge, there is no Otsutsuki Clan on Earth anymore," Pain noted.

"Not by that name, no. They're called Hyuga now," Toneri pointed out.

"Yet, when Obito came here with a pair of Byakugan, you agreed with the alliance," Pain guessed. "Why did you decide to honor the

promise your ascendants didn't?"

"I have to admit, Obito's arguments left me defenseless, and I had no choice but to join forces with him. He proved to be a reliable benefactor, and an alliance with him and his organization was the most logical thing to do," Toneri explained.

"Even if it was Obito who brought you to us, Pain here is the leader of Akatsuki. Your loyalty should be to him and him alone," Konan interjected, as he glared at the white haired man.

"Of course, Konan-sama. Obito made sure to explain me in detail the hierarchy of Akatsuki," Toneri replied, and he looked at Pain in the eyes, and smiled. "I know exactly who I have to be loyal to."

"Good to hear that," Konan replied, but he didn't sound any more convinced.

"Besides, who should I follow other than the one who possess the eyes of the Sage of the Six Paths?" Toneri asked. "And I have Hamura-sama's eyes. And such as Hamura-sama was loyal to his brother, I will follow your guidance, Pain-sama. Together, with the combined power of our eyes, we will cleanse this world of evil and corruption and create a paradise of peace and justice."

"Indeed," Pain nodded. "However, even if I have his eyes, my current power is nothing but a fraction of the strength the Sage of the Six Paths possessed. That's why it's imperative to capture and gather all the Tailed Beasts as soon as possible. They're the fragments of my lost power."

"You can count on me for that, Pain-sama. While my eyes are still developing, once they mature, no jinchuriki will be able to stand before my might," Toneri assured. "But if such wait is unacceptable, I can hunt them whenever you command them. However, I should tell you that, in exchange of my power and vast resources, I have a request."

"A request," Pain repeated. "And what that would be?"

"There's a girl from Konoha, a Hyuga, who has the same eyes as I have. I want that girl," Toneri said. "I'm not asking you to capture her for me, but if by any chance you or your minions encounter her, please try not to kill her. I have no use for her dead."

"I won't promise anything. Akatsuki does not show mercy to those who oppose us. But I will keep your words in mind," Pain said.

"Still, if you worry so much about her, you should try to take her on your own," Konan interceded. "That's it, as long as we don't assign you any task to carry out."

"I would never think to do such a thing, Konan-sama," Toneri said, smiling at her.

Konan didn't smile back.

...

Land of Lightning, a week later

After a week of traveling and crossing both the Land of Hot Springs and the Land of Frost, the Medical Squad finally arrived at the Land of Lightning's southern and only border. It didn't take long to see both the ruins of what it used to be a rural village, and the remnants of a destroyed outpost.

"Alright, here we are," Shizune said, as the five of them set foot on potentially hostile territory. "Karin?"

The redhead nodded, closed her eyes and made a hand seal. "No one around save for four people in the destroyed outpost. All four of them ninjas with powerful chakra. One being specially strong even among them."

"That must be Kumo's group. Okay, let's get this over with," Shizune said, as she rushed towards the outpost, the other five Konoha ninja

following behind her.

It seemed that the kumo ninjas had either seen or sensed them coming, given that they left the outpost and went to meet the Konoha ninjas in the open. They stopped once they were a few meters apart. All of them took some moments to study the four Kumo ninjas in front of them.

The one everybody guessed was the leader was a fairly tall man with dark skin and shaggy blond hair that covered one of his eyes. He was carrying a large sword on his back. Shizune recognized this man as Darui, one of Kumo's strongest ninjas.

Next to him was a white skinned blonde woman with her hair tied on a ponytail. Unlike her partners, she wasn't wearing the typical Kumogakure uniform, but a black and purple short sleeved shirt and black pants. Again, Shizune was able to identify this woman as Yugito Nii, the jinchuriki of the Two Tails.

"Fake or not, the situation must be dire if the Raikage dispatched two of his heavyweights," Shizune thought. "If a fight breaks out, this two might become a problem."

Shizune didn't know who were the other two. Another white skinned woman with blond hair, a stoic and calm appearance, and a comically large bust -Shizune couldn't tell if Tsunade's was bigger or not-, and a younger man, also white and blond, sporting a confident smirk.

"Welcome, Konoha ninjas," Darui greeted them in a polite tone. "My name's Darui. This one's Yugito Nii, and those two are Samui and Atsui."

"Greetings. My name is Shizune Uchiha. These are Sasuke Uchiha, Sakura Haruno, Karin Uzumaki and Rin Nohara," Shizune said, introducing her team in return.

"You took your sweet time to arrive," Yugito pointed out.

"We came as fast as we could. Konoha isn't exactly close to the Land of Lightning," Sasuke snapped.

"We requested the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails to be among you, yet I don't see him," Darui pointed out in a mildly accusatory manner. "Do you care to explain why?"

"Do you really think we're going to bring our jinchuriki, who's also the Hokage's son, to a country that's not an ally of our village?" Shizune replied with a question of her own.

"Then how can we discern if Konoha was behind this attack?" Yugito said, before waving at the destroyed village with her hand. "That village used to house two thousand people. Less than a hundred survived. All of them claim it was the Nine Tails who did it. And as far as we know, the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails is a Konoha ninja."

"We can assure you that, by the time you said the attack happened, Naruto was away on a mission," Sakura interceded. "In Takigakure, to be precise. You can ask them if you don't believe us. Hundreds of both Konoha and Taki ninja can confirm his alibi."

"We will, but that might not be enough for Raikage-sama," Darui pointed out. "Sorry for being this insistent, but a Tailed Beast attack is something that can't be taken lightly."

"Can we go to the attacked town? That way we'll be able to see the extent of the attack, and determine if it was the Nine Tails or not," Shizune pointed out.

"We already inspected the village, hot stuff," Atsui interceded. "And we reached the conclusion that yes, it was a goddamn Tailed Beast the one who did it."

"A second opinion won't hurt," Sakura pointed out.

Darui sighed as he shook his head. "Okay then, whatever. It's not like we're making any progress here. So drab," the dark skinned man

complained, as he extended a hand towards the village, motioning the Konoha ninjas to go.

They nodded, and the two groups headed to the ruined village. Upon entering, Shizune had a flashback of the time she and Tsunade returned to Konoha after the Nine Tails attack. And while the destruction and death caused by the beast have been horrifying, they arrived two weeks after the attack, and much of the damage was in the process of being repaired.

It wasn't the case with this village. This is how Konoha could have ended that day if it wasn't for the Fourth Hokage. And much to her discomfort, the level of destruction was similar to that of Konoha after that fateful day.

"What are we doing here?" Samui asked, interrupting the Konoha ninja inspecting the ruined village. She crossed her arms over her rather large chest. "We do know for a fact it was the Nine Tails who did it. Can you please stop this charade already?"

"Hey, should we remind you that Kumo doesn't have the cleanest record when it comes to Konoha!" Karin snapped. "We still remember the time you kidnapped Hinata Hyuga, and Kushina Uzumaki several decades before."

Shizune, Sakura and Rin cringed upon hearing the blunt way Karin threw Kumo's dirty laundry back at them. Things were getting ugly, and fast.

Darui sighed, and took a step forward. "Listen, sorry if we're putting you in a tight spot, but this needs to be done. As you can see, somebody destroyed a village of the Land of Lightning and an outpost of Kumo. All witnesses say it was the Nine Tails. We just want justice for our victims."

"Yes, and the Nine Tails' jinchuriki is a Konoha ninja," Atsui pointed out. "Unless there's a second Nine Tails running around."

"Actually, there is," Sasuke bluntly stated.

"... say what?" Atsui asked.

"A second Nine Tails. Yeah. Do you think we were born yesterday?" Yugito asked, sounding upset. "The power of the Tailed Beasts is something that can't be replicated. Much less the most powerful of them."

"No, but their power can be split," Shizune pointed out. "The jutsu to do it is a forbidden one but-"

"Shizune-sensei!" Karin called, sounding panicky. Before Shizune or her other teammates could ask what happened, she continued. "Obito Uchiha is here!"

Sasuke's eyes grew wide open, as his hand instinctively gripped the pommel of his katana. "Are you sure?"

"Yes! I'd never forget a chakra like his!" Karin insisted. "And he isn't alone! He brought somebody else with him! Somebody whose chakra level is downright absurd!"

"Hey, cool off over there!" Samui interrupted. "What are you talking about?"

"Akatsuki," was Shizune's only reply, which was enough to make the four Kumo ninjas to tense up.

"And she's right," a new male voice said from above. Everybody turned around from direction of the voice, and saw Obito Uchiha, standing over the roof of a half collapsed building.

"This was a trap from the very beginning!" Darui said in realization, as his visible eye moved towards Yugito.

"Exactly. I was hoping that Naruto would be here as well, but I guess I'll have to settle for just one," Obito said, fixing his eyes on Yugito as

well, before they moved towards Rin, and smiled. "Though it's very helpful of you Konoha bringing Rin back to me."

"Obito..."the distraught brunette said in a whisper.

"Rin isn't your property, you sick fuck!" Karin yelled.

"Listen, Obito is a Konoha missing-nin, so we'll take care of him," Shizune told the Kumo ninjas. "Yugito is his target. Take her somewhere safe while we keep him busy."

Darui nodded, as he motioned his comrades to move out. However, shortly after they started to run, they were cut by a massive torrent of water bursting from underground. A lone figure emerged from the water, a blue skinned man in Akatsuki regalia, holding a large sword.

"Now, now, you aren't planning to leave so soon, right?" Kisame said, giving the Kumo ninjas a menacing grin. "Not before you play a little with me, that's it."

Darui, Samui and Atsui unsheathed their swords. Yugito merely adopted a fighting stance.

"So, that was Akatsuki's plan. They didn't just want to lure out Naruto, but one of Kumo's jinchuriki as well," Shizune thought in realization. *"Still, the odds aren't too bad. Obito and Kisame are powerful, but we do have power on our side as well, not to mention advantage in numbers and a copious amount of medic-nin. "*

"Watch out for Kisame! Don't use ninjutsu against him, his sword can absorb it!" Shizune warned the Kumo ninjas. "We'll take care of Obito! We fought against him before, and know all of his tricks!"

"Thanks for the tip, hot stuff," Atsui said, taking a step forward. "You know, I always wanted to go against one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. We will prove today that Kumo ninjas are the better sword fighters!"

Kisame chuckled, and rested Samehada on his shoulder. "Aren't you biting way more than you can chew, brat? But I accept your challenge. Come here, and see if you can prove your point."

Samui placed a firm hand on Atsui's shoulder. "Cool down, Atsui, he's right. Kisame Hoshigaki is one of the deadliest swordsmen alive. Only by working together we'll be able to take him down."

"Way to ruin my fun, sis. But whatever," the younger Kumo ninja said with a sigh.

"Don't do anything rash. Let's follow Darui-san's lead," Samui suggested.

"Alright, I'll take Kisame head on. You two stay back and protect Yugito. Feel free to assist me if I'm overwhelmed, but keeping Yugito safe is the top priority."

"Yes sir!" both siblings said at once.

"Wait a minute, I can fight you know! I'm no damsel in distress!" Yugito protested.

"Nobody says that you are, Yugito. Sorry, but Akatsuki is targeting you specifically, and it's our job to make theirs as hard as possible," Darui stated.

Meanwhile, the Konoha ninjas were doing similar plans to take down Obito.

"That bastard is mine, so don't get in the way," Sasuke said as he unsheathed his shoto. "Sakura, your combat specialty is melee, so you would be better against Kisame."

"Against Kisame?" Sakura repeated, her voice quivering a bit, as she eyed the scary looking blue swordsman. "Are you sure, Sasuke-kun?"

"I know you can do it. Plus you won't be fighting alone. While I don't trust them that much, I doubt those Kumo guys will turn on us on a situation like this," Sasuke told his girlfriend.

Sakura gathered all the courage she could muster, and nodded. "Alright then, I'll face Kisame. Stay safe!"

"Same goes for you, Sakura," Rin replied.

Obito smirked, as he drew out his own katana. "So, shall we begin?"

Sasuke replied to Obito's taunt by leaping at him at the same time he delivered an horizontal slash to the Akatsuki's throat, which unfortunately, phased through him. Just after Sasuke phased through Obito, he kicked the young Uchiha in the back.

"Poison Mist!"

While Sasuke attacked, Shizune followed him and leaped above the rogue Uchiha. Her cheeks puffed, before releasing a cloud of the familiar purple gas engulfed him. Sasuke, meanwhile, made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke exhaled a massive fireball towards the cloud of poisonous gas, igniting it, resulting in a fiery explosion that destroyed the half collapsed building completely.

"He teleported away!" Shizune warned. Even if it was just a guess, it was a probable one. "There's no way he let that combination touch him. Stay alert!"

"Karin!" Sasuke called.

"On it!" the redhead nodded, as she closed her eyes and made a hand seal. She focused on finding Obito's chakra, which was nowhere to be seen, figuratively speaking. After a few seconds, it

appeared. However, Karin paled upon realizing where Obito planned to show up. "Oh shit-"

"Karin, down!" Sasuke shouted.

Karin threw herself at the ground on instinct, as she barely avoided Obito's thrust from behind. She heard the whirring noise of a few shuriken flying above her, coming from the opposite direction. However, the steel stars failed to touch the Akatsuki. She got up, and quickly rushed back to her teammates.

"Give up. You can't defeat me," Obito said, spread his arms in a taunting manner.

"Did you forget your fight against Tsunade-sama and myself during the Uchiha Insurrection?" Shizune snapped back.

"You don't have any Sannin backing you up this time. Plus I was careless and made plenty of rookie mistakes. Mistakes I'm not planning to repeat here," Obito said, as he scowled. "This operation is to important for-"

"Amaterasu!"

For a split second, Obito was engulfed by a blaze of black flames, before they were sucked by a spiraling vortex.

Sasuke shivered from reliving the time he thought he had killed Naruto. He cursed upon seeing that he made himself relive such traumatic memory for nothing.

"See? That's what I meant. You guys got me monologuing, and got wide open. Thank goodness my reflexes are much better than they used to be," Obito said, smirking. Then he looked at Sasuke, and his smirk widened. "Trouble using the Mangekyo Sharingan, Sasuke? Still having flashbacks to the moment you awakened it?"

"Still? What do you mean, 'still'?" Sasuke angrily asked. "Is there a way to overcome it?"

"You don't know?" Obito said, before rearing his head back, and let out a mocking laughter. "Your brother or cousin didn't tell you it's possible? Of course they wouldn't. They wouldn't tell you something out of fear of 'corrupting' you."

"How it is? Tell me!" Sasuke demanded.

"You expect your enemy to help you? Really?" Obito asked, arching an eyebrow. Then, he smirked. "Oh well, I'll tell you because your reaction will be priceless. The key to stop the Mangekyo Sharingan from making you relieve the moment it was activated is to stop fighting it, and accept it."

"... what?" a dumbfounded Sasuke asked.

"It's exactly like I say. I remember reliving Rin's death every time I used my power. Which was a lot of time, because as you can see it's so useful. But it took such a toll on my sanity. It was then, when I realized the truth. Painful as it was, Rin needed to die," Obito stated in an odd solemn tone.

"What?" Rin asked in disbelief. "If my death was necessary, then why you went through the trouble of reviving me?"

"I said your death was necessary, not you had to remain dead," the Akatsuki punctualized. "When I saw you jumping in the way of Kakashi's Chidori, my eyes were opened. I realized the cruelty of the world we live in. How bad things happen to good people like you and me. And how in order to change the world, drastic measures are to be taken. Only when I accepted those facts and stopped feeling regret for not being able to save her did the flashbacks cease.

"That's exactly what you have to do, Sasuke. You're afraid that next time Naruto, or somebody else, a friend, a loved one, might die for

real. You need to detach yourself from those feelings, accept the power you now possess."

"And become a psychopath like you? No thank you!" Sasuke replied. "There has to be another way to stop the flashbacks. And if there isn't one... I will live with it then!"

"You say that now, but after circumstances force you to rely on the Mangekyo more and more, you'll make anything in order to make the nightmares stop," Obito said with a cruel smirk. "I knew that you weren't going to follow my advice, that's why I decided to share it with you. But ask yourself this, why do you think people said our clan is cursed by hatred? This is why. No power comes without cost. At least, not for the Uchiha."

After that last monologue, Obito resumed the fight against the Konoha ninjas. At the same time that fight happened, Sakura rushed towards Darui, engaged in a sword fighting duel with Kisame, at the top of a mass of water the Akatsuki had generated earlier, while Samui and Atsui stood protectively at Yugito's flanks. Sakura pulled out a sealing scroll, unfurled it, and unsealed some of its contents: a pair of brass knuckles made of chakra conducting metal, with fuinjutsu seals carved into it. Sakura immediately grabbed both weapons, and channeled chakra through them. Two huge fists made of pure chakra appeared around them.

"Alright, it's punching time!" Sakura said, as she leaped at Kisame from the side.

However, even if he wasn't a sensor, thanks to his vast experience, Kisame's battle sense was sharp enough to notice when an enemy was about to ambush him. He quickly disengaged Darui and jumped backwards a second before Sakura's fist could touch him.

"SHANNARO!"

Even if she hit thin air, her punch carried so much force, it projected a shockwave that completely blasted a half destroyed house into tiny

pebbles.

"Damn, failed by this much," Sakura complained, before she looked at the surprised Darui. "Sorry for coming uninvited, but I thought you might appreciate the help."

"I certainly do, but I thought that you'd prefer to help your comrades," the dark skinned man assumed.

"My fighting style focuses mostly on punches, which makes me better suited to deal with an opponent that can absorb ninjutsu," Sakura pointed out.

"Hard to argue with that logic. Shall we continue?" Darui said, smiling a little.

"It will be a pleasure," Sakura said, as she directed her eyes towards Kisame, and smirked. Two fists of chakra appeared around her real ones, and dashed again.

"You think that just because you're a melee specialist you're suited to fight against me? Your overconfidence is insulting!" Kisame said, as he dashed forward to meet Sakura, with Samehada ready to strike.

As the Akatsuki and Konoha kunoichi met in the middle, Kisame delivered a diagonal blow. However, much to his surprise, Sakura aborted her attack, and fell on her knees, sliding through the watery surface past Kisame, and avoiding Samehada swing.

"What!?" the Akatsuki shouted.

"You're wide open! Sorry pal, but this is your end!" Darui said, as he was leaping towards the indeed wide open Kisame, his cleaver crackling with electricity.

However, from the water, a clone of Kisame formed just in time to stop the Kumo ninja's blow. The clone was sturdy enough to resist the attack.

"As long as I have water, I'm never wide open," Kisame boasted, before making a hand seal. Three more clones emerged from the water. "Make sure the jinchuriki doesn't use the fray of the battle as a cover to escape!"

The three clones nodded, jumped from the water, and landed at different points surrounding the three other Kumo ninjas.

"Goddammit, why didn't we think about escaping before?" Atsui said in frustration.

"And leave Darui here on his own?" Yugito pointed out. "Come on, what are we doing? If we fight all of us together, we can defeat these guys!"

"Cool down, Yugito. Darui ordered us not to interfere until he was in trouble. And so far, he and the Konoha kunoichi are doing pretty good," Samui pointed out.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Konoha ninjas continued battling Obito. The rogue Akatsuki's hands flew through hand seals as a spiraling vortex formed around his right eye.

"Fire Release: Blast Wave Wild Dance!"

Obito released a stream of fire that the vortex shaped in the form of a spiral, expanding outwards wide enough to engulf all the Konoha ninja. Rin, however, took a step forward and formed several hand seals of her own in order to counter that attack.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Rin's cheeks puffed, before expelling a large amount of water, forming a torrent that put out the incoming flames, generating some clouds of smoke when the two elemental attacks clashed.

"You truly grew strong Rin. Your water jutsu never had such a scale," Obito said in amazement.

Sasuke appeared behind Obito, no doubt after using the body flicker, and delivered an horizontal slash to his back. Much to his frustration, the blade once again failed to hit him.

"You never learn, don't you-AARH!" Obito hissed, as he instinctively clutched his midsection.

"Wait, did I hurt him?" Sasuke wondered, before something his Sharingan had noticed sunk in. "I swear I saw a flicker of black flames there..."

Obito turned around, counter attacking with his own katana as well. The two Uchihis engaged in a short duel of sword fighting, until another vortex formed around Obito's right Sharingan.

"Take this! Burn and disappear!"

Much to his shock, the vortex expelled in a stream the very same Amaterasu flames that he had absorbed before. Sasuke jumped around, dodging the deadly stream of fire, until Obito had no more. After that, Sasuke rejoined his teammates.

"I was right, it was Amaterasu," Sasuke deduced. "When he used his intangibility, the Amaterasu he had absorbed hurt him. Which means that his ability to turn intangible and store and release objects through vortex might be linked... hell, they might be one and the same. His teleportation as well. But in order to so, I need to do one last test..."

As Sasuke mused about his new findings, Obito prepared to counterattack.

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The ground below them started to rumble, as multiple green wooden vines emerged around Obito, and launched themselves at the Konoha ninjas. Rin and Karin prepared to repel the attack, the two of them weaving the same sequence of hand seals.

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Multiple rocks of varying sizes -albeit the ones summoned by Rin were bigger- appeared above the incoming vines, before falling down and crushing most of them, as the name of the jutsu implied. Even if they didn't stop the attack, they were able to slow it down considerably. And Shizune was going to take advantage of such opportunity.

"Corrosive Cloud!"

The leader of the Medical Squad released another cloud of poisonous purple gas from her mouth, this one having a darker shade than the attack she used before. The moment the gas entered in contact with the vines, the latter started to wither and crumble in a matter of seconds, much to Obito's surprise and anger.

"Do you like my new poison? I prepared it specifically for you. No amount of regeneration will save you from it," Shizune taunted.

"I see you didn't spend these past years lazing around. But for your poison to work you still have to hit me with it. And tricking me with a clone won't work this time, I can assure you that," Obito replied, unable to hide his anger.

The cloud of corrosive gas ate through the vines as it advanced. Seeing no other option, Obito teleported away.

"His chakra signature disappeared!" Karin warned the others.

"Okay. Stay alert and warn us when he shows up again," Shizune told Karin.

"I think I know how his power work, and how we can bypass his intangibility," Sasuke said, taking advantage of Obito's temporary absence so he couldn't hear his plans.

"Really? That's great!" Karin beamed.

"We used to think that his intangibility, store and release objects from a pocket dimension and teleporting were different abilities, but they might be just one. We can take that to our advantage. However, in order to do so, I need Rin to do something," Sasuke said, looking at the brown haired medic-nin. "I need you to let Obito capture you with his ability."

"WHAT!?" Rin replied in shock.

"That's NOT great!" Karin protested.

"Sasuke-kun! What did we say about putting Rin in danger!?" Shizune scolded him.

"I know, but no one here can do it. I know I'm asking a lot, but I need you to trust me on this. If this works, we will deprive Obito of one of his biggest advantages," Sasuke argued.

"And if it doesn't work?" Rin asked.

"I don't know. But it's possible that we won't be able to get you back," Sasuke bluntly stated. "I'm not going to force you. The decision is yours."

"Obito is back! There!" Karin pointed to the opposite direction Obito was standing, and indeed, a vortex was starting to form.

"Time's up. Like I said, your choice," Sasuke said, as he adopted a fighting stance.

It seems that Rin made up her mind, as she drew out two kunai, and charged at Obito, letting out a high pitched yell.

"Come on Obito, leave them alone! This is between you and me!" Rin shouted, as she prepared to attack.

Rin leaped at him, ready to slash the rogue Uchiha. Obito didn't make any attempt to defend himself, and used his intangibility to

make Rin phase through him. Fast as lightning, he turned around and grabbed Rin by one of her wrists.

"Don't worry, I'll send you somewhere safe," Obito said, as a vortex appeared around his right eye, absorbing Rin.

"NOOOOOOoooooooo... !" Rin yelled as she was sucked into another dimension.

Obito turned at the rest of the Konoha ninjas, and smirked. "Like I said before, thank you so much for bringing Rin back to me. Now I can finally fight without distraction."

"Attack from range, or we might end up like Rin!" Sasuke said, as he pulled out a rather large Fuma Shuriken and tossed it at Obito.
"Karin!"

The redhead nodded, and made several hand seals. "Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

Multiple Fuma Shuriken appeared along the original, flying towards Obito, who once again made no effort to dodge, and let the giant steel stars phase through him. He was about to taunt them once again, but suddenly, he felt the pain of sharp metal stabbing into his flesh. A trickle of blood came from his mouth, as he instinctively clutched his stomach.

"WHAT?" a bewildered Obito screamed, before he felt another stab.
"AAARGH!"

"It worked, we hurt him!" Karin cheered, pumping her fists.

"We didn't hurt him," Sasuke said, smirking at Obito. "Rin did."

"Rin? No it can..." Obito replied, as he vanished into his own spiraling vortex.

...

Obito's Pocket Dimension

Turns out, Sasuke was right. Obito didn't so much turn intangible, but somehow could phase parts of his body to another dimension. And as Sasuke expected, said parts were vulnerable in the other side. The moment Rin saw most of Obito's body appear before her, she drew out a kunai and stabbed it into his chest, then a second one for good measure, before he returned his body back to the real world.

A vortex appeared before her, meaning that Obito, the whole Obito was coming. She drew another kunai, and breathed out, trying to calm down. She only had one chance to carry out what she wanted to do, and no room for mistake.

"Rin! Are you-"

The moment her former teammate appeared, Rin tossed the kunai at him, aiming for his face. Obito managed to catch it thanks to his reflexes befitting an Uchiha. Just like Rin expected.

"I see that you have no-"

Once again, the Akatsuki was interrupted, this time by the kunai transforming into another Rin, with another kunai in her left hand. As fast as she could, Rin stabbed the kunai into the edge of Obito's right eye, while using her right hand to pluck said eye from its socket. Obito let out a deafening scream as both he and Rin were sucked back into reality.

...

Shizune, Sasuke and Karin saw Obito and Rin appearing once again, falling into ground, with Obito screaming as he held his bloodied empty eye socket, and Rin carefully held something in her hand.

"Rin!" Shizune said, as she rushed towards her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. A bit shaken, but okay," Rin replied. She then smiled at Shizune. "Tell your husband I got his missing eye back."

Shizune's eyes widened as Rin opened her hand, and saw a bloodied Sharingan on it. Wasting no time, Tsunade's first apprentice took the eye and quickly sealed it inside a scroll, which she hid under the folds of her kimono. She smiled back at Rin.

"Thank you, Rin. I'm sure Shisui will be very happy," a smiling Shizune told her.

"I could have gotten the other eye, but I think that depriving him of his ability to mind control people was better than the intangibility and teleportation," Rin replied, justifying the unsaid question.

"It's okay Rin. You did the right choice. Besides, had you gouged the other eye, you would have had no means to return," Sasuke reassured her. He then turned back at Obito, who was fuming. "But I think you made him quite mad."

And indeed, Obito was staring at the Konoha ninja, more specifically Rin, with a hateful frown and his teeth clenched in an angry snarl.

"I can't believe your betrayal, Rin. I brought you back to life! Is this your way of thanking me!?" Obito angrily asked.

"You were the one who betrayed me first, by turning on our village and murdering sensei!" Rin shouted back.

"Very well then, no more holding back," Obito took a drop of blood from his empty eye socket, and made several five seals. "If this is how things are going to be, then you and your new friends can die the same way sensei did! Summoning Jutsu!"

Obito slammed his hand into the ground, producing an explosion of smoke. However, the burst of smoke was much more powerful than with most summons, creating a cloud big enough to cover most of the village, with gale force winds blowing in every direction.

The smoke quickly dispelled, revealing the creature Obito had summoned: a giant fox with dark red fur, and nine tails. All the Konoha ninja could do was stare in awe and terror at the other half of the beast that once almost destroyed Konoha a decade and a half ago.

Author's Note: After so many chapters since his introduction, the other half of the Nine Tails finally makes his proper debut! Yeah, our heroes are pretty much screwed. Or not, given that they have Yugito on their side, but will the Two Tails be enough to tip the balance in their favor?

Also, sorry if some of you are a bit disappointed that Naruto and his team are absent and the focus is on Sasuke and his team instead, but I think that Naruto and Hinata needed a rest, and some other characters could get some spotlight for a change. Besides, this arc has more emotional impact with Sasuke rather than Naruto.

Also, even if she appeared here and there, Rin finally gets some action after the Kirigakure Invasion! Again, did I mention how much I like writing her? Because man, she was a character with so much potential, it was so sad that she only existed to die in order to make Obito a villain and give Kakashi even more things to angst about.

Even if it isn't part of the current plot, I also enjoyed a lot writing the scene between Pain, Konan and Toneri. Mostly because I love writing for Pain and I can't wait to write him in action scenes. Keep that conversation in mind, because what they discussed there (especially what Toneri said) will be very important for future arcs. Oh, and before you ask, no, Pain isn't aware that Toneri is mind controlled, if that wasn't obvious enough.

Thanks to grimlock987 for betareading this chapter. Speaking of which, he won't be able to betaread anymore, so once again I

have to ask for somebody else to become my betareader.

So, that's all. See you in 2019, and I hope you have a Happy New Year! Remember: there's no better New Year's gift you can make me than a leaving a review on this story! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Cats and Foxes, Part II

Author's Note: So here we are, folks, first chapter of 2019. With this chapter, we also break the 600K words milestone, wohoo! Hope you guys enjoy it:

Chapter 67:

Cats and Foxes, Part II

or

And Sharks and Panthers too

"Fire Release: Mouse Hairball!"

Yugito expelled several blue fireballs from her mouth, which quickly took the shape of fiery mice, as they flew towards one of the Kisame clones surrounding her and her partners. The Kisame clone merely smirked, and swung his Samehada in order to block all the incoming projectiles, resulting in a series of explosions. But when the smoke receded, the Kisame clone was any worse for the wear.

"The hell? You're a clone, your sword isn't supposed to work just as good as the original!" Yugito snarled.

"I wouldn't be a very good clone if that was the case, don't you think so?" the Kisame clone replied with a taunting smirk, before he dashed to strike the jinchuriki.

"Okay then, if I can't use ninjutsu directly against this guy, I'll use it in a more indirect manner!" Yugito thought, dashing forward as well, making several hand seals.

Jinchuriki and Akatsuki met in the middle, with Kisame pretending to deliver a swing, before placing the sword between himself and

Yugito as if it was a shield, just when the jinchuriki was ready to attack.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

"Do you think you can catch me off guard with such an amateurish trick? Disappointing," Kisame said, fixing a stare of contempt on the Kumo kunoichi.

However, much to his surprise, the stream of fire coming from Yugito's mouth wasn't aimed at him, but at the ground, propelling herself into the air. Spinning her body, she placed herself just above Kisame, before letting gravity pull her down. She extended her arms downwards as her fingernails elongated into claws.

However, Kisame was quick to react to the strategy, and managed to parry the blow coming from above. He smirked at the jinchuriki, her claws now stuck inside Samehada.

"This is way to eas-"

But the clone was silenced by another Yugito, who impaled him from the front with her elongated claws. The effect of the blow was instant, and the clone dissolved into a puddle of water.

"Fire Clones. They never expect them," Yugito said, shaking her head, before she noticed Samui and Atsui still struggling against the other two clones.

"I think we should help those two," the clone pointed out.

"You took the words from my mouth," the original replied as she and the clone dashed towards Samui and Atsui.

The Kisame clones didn't realize that Yugito and her clone were going towards them, and saw too late the cross slash aiming at them. The eviscerated Akatsuki clones dissolved in yet another two puddles of water.

"Thank you, Yugito," Samui told her teammate. "These were way more powerful than the average clone."

"Yeah, I don't know how Darui-sama and that Konoha girl are holding so well against the original," Atsui added.

"Because they aren't his target, and isn't fighting at full power. But when he does, they will be in trouble. Come on, we need to help them," Yugito insisted.

"But Darui-sama said-" Atsui tried to protest.

"I KNOW what Darui said, dammit!" Yugito snapped. "But we need to help him before-"

"SUMMONING JUTSU!"

Yugito froze, as a sense of overwhelming dread washed over her body. She could feel the Tailed Beast inside her shaking with a swirl of emotions. Turning around, she saw a massive cloud of smoke forming where the Konoha ninja were fighting that other Akatsuki, followed by a powerful wind that threatened to blow her away.

And then, the smoke cleared, and he appeared.

Time seemed to stand still as every Konoha and Kumo ninja stared at the giant nine tailed fox that had appeared in the ruined village. Their looks were either of terror, bewilderment, or shock. Or all three, in Atsui's case.

"The Nine Tails..." Samui said in awe.

"Guess that solves one mystery," Yugito dryly remarked, as she started to walk towards the beast. "Turn out those Konoha brats weren't lying when they said that there was a second Nine Tails running around."

"H-Hey! Where are you going?" Atsui told his partner.

"Where do you think, dumbass? I'm the only one who can deal with that monster," as Yugito said this, orange chakra started to burst around her body, forming an aura around it. "Now I want you to stay away from us. I can't fight and take care of you two, and I'd never forgive myself if you two got killed because of me."

"You can count on us, Yugito," Samui replied.

The Two Tails jinchuriki nodded in return, as she rushed towards the other Tailed Beast.

Speaking of said Tailed Beast, Obito was standing on its head, smirking down at the Konoha ninjas below him. The girls looked terrified, while Sasuke was shooting him an angry glare, as he gripped the pommel of his katana.

"Honestly, I have absolutely no idea how this is possible, since last time I checked, the blond brat still has the Nine Tails inside of him," Obito admitted, shrugging a little. "But hey, I'm not going to complain about something that benefits me. Now, Nine Tails, CRUSH THEM!"

The Demon Fox let out a deafening roar before raising his right paw. The Konoha ninjas snapped out of their terror and shock in time to avoid the paw coming down at them, creating a large crater and destroying several already ruined houses in a large area.

"Sasuke, it all depends on you! Use your Mangekyo Sharingan to tame the beast!" Shizune urged.

Sasuke nodded, doing his best to push back the memory of Naruto being impaled that was being forced into his brain, Sasuke's Sharingan changed into their advanced form, and locked eyes with the giant fox. However, when he tried to force his will upon the creature, another force repelled it back.

"Argh!" Sasuke grunted, as he winced, grabbing his head. "I can't!"

"Of course you can't!" Obito laughed. "As long as the Nine Tails is under my control, he's shielded from outside influences!"

"In that case, we'll need to take care of Obito first," Sasuke stated.

"Easier said than done. That will be hard to do with that monster trying to kill us!" a panicked Karin pointed out.

"I think this is my cue to play my ace in the hole," Rin interjected, making several hand seals, as she took a couple of steps forward. "Wood Release: Great Forest Emergence!"

Suddenly, the earth started to shake, and green thick wooden vines emerged all around the Nine Tails, wrapping themselves around his legs, tails and neck, immobilizing it. The effort of restraining such a large beast soon made itself evident in Rin, who winced and started to sweat heavily. Sasuke and Karin stared at Rin in awe.

"Wait, what?" the redhead asked. "You can use Wood Release? How? Why?"

"We can talk about that later! Come on, now is your chance!" Rin urged the others.

Shizune nodded, and she launched herself at Obito. The Akatsuki, however, jumped off the Fox's head before Shizune could catch him. He then pulled out a Fuma Shuriken. The steel star burst into flames before he tossed it against the Nine Tails, and made a hand seal.

"Fire Release: Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

Multiple flaming shuriken appeared near the first one, all of them flying towards the Tailed Beast. Many of them embedded themselves into the vines restraining him, while others stabbed into the fox's flesh, not that Obito cared.

"Now's my chance!" Sasuke said, as he made several hand seals.
"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke exhaled a fireball which flew towards Obito with flawless accuracy. The Akatsuki, however, turned intangible, and the fireball phased through him. More fireballs were shot, the effect was the same, and they disappeared into the sky.

"You might caught me off guard back then. But as long as I don't send anybody to my pocket dimension, my abilities should be safe to use," Obito confidently stated.

Rin gathered her chakra as she tried to repair the damage Obito had done to her vines, but it was too late, and after several snapping sounds, the tailed beast managed to break free. His eyes, morphed into Sharingans, shot a hateful glare at Rin, and moved to attack. But before he could do anything, he was rammed by another being of the same size. The clash of giants produced a shockwave that knocked all those nearby back

"What the...?" a confused Rin asked as she fell on her butt.

Both she and her Konoha companions saw a giant cat, made of what appeared to be blue and black flames. Her eyes were of different color, one green and another yellow. Two tails lashed at the end of her body.

"Yugito," Shizune said aloud, albeit mostly to herself. "Hokage-sama said she had full control of her Tailed Beast, but seeing it with my own eyes..."

"Stay away from us!" Yugito's voice boomed from the giant two tailed cat, as she wrestled the Nine Tails. "Even if you want to help me, don't! I don't want to put you in danger!"

"Ah, there it is, the longed prey. I knew that I did good in bringing my Nine Tails here, Yugito," Obito said, as he started to teleport away.
"Your Tailed Beast will be mine!"

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Darui and Sakura continued fighting Kisame. Even if the fight was going well, the two of them had the impression that the former Kiri ninja wasn't giving his all and was just merely toying with them, if his careless attitude was any indication.

"Hey, sorry for not believing you at first when you guys told us about a second Nine Tails," Darui said, as his cleaver clashed against Samehada. "For all that it's worth."

"Save the apologies for when we have won!" Sakura replied, trying to capitalize on Kisame being focused on Darui to land a punch, but the blue skinned swordsman skillfully avoided it.

"You're adorable, thinking you have a chance to win. When it was the boy and I, maybe you had a tiny little chance, but with that monster on our side..." Kisame laughed.

"We have our own jinchuriki to stop it!" Darui countered, as he delivered a swing the shark ninja avoided.

Kisame chuckled once again. "Tell me, brat, don't you think that's exactly what we wanted? Kumo is fiercely protective of their jinchuriki, but we knew you'd deploy at least one of them if an attack by another Tailed Beast was involved. We were planning for this. And you fell right into our trap."

"Soon you're going to see that plans don't always go as intended, specially one so dull as yours," Darui replied, as he reared his cleaver sword backwards. The wide blade started to crackle with electricity, as the Kumo ninja dashed forward.

Kisame received the onslaught with a smirk, as he expertly parried all of Darui's blows. With each blow of his cleaver, lightning bolts were released in every direction, but sadly those aimed at Kisame were absorbed by his bandaged sword, much to his chagrin.

"Not only that sword can absorb ninjutsu, but even when it's used in an indirect way, like being channeled through a sword," Darui noted, deciding it would be for the better a change of strategy.

"My turn then," Kisame's toothy grin expanded, as he raised his sword above his head. Thousands of droplets of water started to gather around Samehada from the air's moisture, forming a liquid mass around the weapon. "Water Release: Tsunami Sword!"

Slamming his sword into the ground, the water gathered by Samehada was released in the form of a brutal and massive torrent, that in no time flooded the entire village, including the zone where the two Tailed Beasts were fighting. Darui and Sakura used the rubble and half destroyed buildings as footing to jump above the incoming wave, before they landed on the water's surface with a splash.

As they did, they noticed that Kisame was leaping at them, Samehada raised above his head. Darui was about to hold his own in a defensive position to parry the blow, but Sakura beat him to the punch by jumping and, well, throwing a punch at the incoming Samehada. The resulting impact caused a powerful shockwave that pushed both ninjas back several meters.

"The power behind his water jutsu is unreal. My skills look pretty dull in comparison," Darui thought, as his brain tried to come up with a proper strategy, before he noticed Samehada. "I wonder how much power comes from him and how much from that sword. Regardless of the answer, taking that sword off the picture will improve our chances."

"You look thoughtful. Desperate to look for a way to beat my unstoppable power?" Kisame taunted. "Don't bother. Even the most cunning strategies are useless in the face of the overwhelming strength of a tsunami."

"Don't be so coky. I haven't show you yet my best moves," Darui said, as he sheathed his cleaver while starting making hand seals.

He leaned towards Sakura. "I'm going to attack now. Try to land a punch the moment you see an opening."

Sakura nodded. "Got it."

"More ninjutsu? I thought that you'd know it's useless by now," Kisame mocked. "But hey, I'm not going to interrupt an enemy when he's making a mistake."

"Storm Release: Laser Circus!"

Darui brought his hands forward, both indexes and middle fingers aiming at Kisame. A blue light orb formed around them, before it exploded in a multitude of beams of the same color that flew at the shark ninja. Kisame merely smirked, and placed Samehada between himself and the incoming attack for protection.

"So, you have a Bloodline Limit. Not that it's going to help-"

Suddenly, much to Kisame's shock, the beams changed their trajectory just before they were going to crash against Samehada, arching around it and Kisame, before blasting the Akatsuki's back.

"AAAARRGH!"

"I think that's my cue!" Sakura said, as she launched herself towards Kisame. She reared a fist back, which started to swirl with chakra, taking the form of an even larger fist surrounding it. "SHANNARO!"

However, Kisame wasn't as defenseless as she thought. The shark ninja managed to jump backwards as he made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Shark Bullet Jutsu!"

A gigantic shark made of water formed between Sakura and Kisame, opening its jaws to crunch the charging pinkette. However, Sakura's incoming punch packed so much power it shattered the elemental animal into tiny droplets, and still had enough momentum to keep forward. But the jutsu made it job, and softened Sakura's blow

enough for Kisame to safely parry it with Samehada, even if it pushed him backwards a few meters.

"Not bad, definitely not bad," Kisame complimented, once he came to a stop. "But sadly not good enough to beat somebody of my level!"

With a swift motion of his sword, Samehada split Sakura in two...

... before she dissolved into water.

"The hell? Where did she-"

Kisame barely had time to react as Sakura burst underwater below him, her chakra-enhanced fist aimed for his chin. If Kisame didn't move, that punch alone would have separated his head from the rest of his body. But even if it didn't connect, the shockwave it produced was strong enough to hurl him even further backwards, making him drop Samehada.

"Yes! Well done, Sakura-san!" Darui praised as he rushed forward. His hand expertly caught Samehada before the falling blade could even touch the water. "This sword belongs to Kumo now. Let's see how well you do without-AAAGH!"

Much to the Kumo ninja's surprise, spikes sprouted from Samehada's handle, forcing him to drop the blade. Blood was pouring from the holes his now useless right hand had.

"Darui-san!" Sakura cried, as he jumped back towards him. "Quickly, give me your hand!"

"Are you a medic?" Darui asked. Sakura's answer came in the form of the Mystical Palm Jutsu. In a few seconds, the bleeding stopped and the holes were healed, making his hand look like it was never damaged. "Thank you. Wow, you're really good."

Sakura smiled at the compliment. "Thanks. Kumo might have the best swordsmen, but no village tops Konoha when it comes to medics."

"Good thing that you're on our side then," Darui said, still taking a look at his hand, before his eyes focused on Samehada, floating besides him. "Though apparently I'm not a good enough swordsman for that sword. If that thing is a sword to begin with."

Suddenly, as if Kisame was pulling an invisible string, Samehada flew towards him, and the blue skinned ninja casually caught his sword back.

"You're right, Samehada is more than just a special sword," Kisame said, grinning again. "It was created by the first jinchuriki of the Three Tails, using the chakra absorbing coral the Three Tails produces to build it. The result was a sword that could absorb ninjutsu and transfer it to its wielder. Eventually, due being made of living matter and all the chakra it consumed, Samehada became sentient and grew a mind of its own, though it still remained a weapon. It only obeys one ninja at once, and has its ways to punish little thieves that want to get their hands on it. Samehada will never belong to another ninja as long as I'm alive."

"Don't worry, that has an easy solution," Sakura replied, frowning at Kisame.

"Did I tell you that you're way over your heads trying to fight me? You have seen only an iota of my true power," Kisame taunted.

As Kisame, Sakura and Darui continued to fight, Yugito fought as the Nine Tails, transformed into the beast she was carrying inside. The scale of such battle made it all but impossible for the rest of the ninjas to intervene in much capacity. The Konoha and Kumo ninjas watching the battle discussed what they could do.

"Come on, there has to be something we can do to help Yugito," Atsui insisted.

"She told us not to interfere. The scale of this battle is way above us, so please cool down," Samui told her brother.

"I'm with Atsui here. Our power might be insignificant compared to them, but that does not make us useless. We can turn the tide of the battle," Sasuke interjected.

"Rin, do you think you can immobilize the Nine Tails with your Wood Release?" Karin asked, before she realized what she just said, and chuckled. "Wood Release... not happy to come back from the dead, she also has Wood Release of all Bloodlines..."

"I could try, but it's moving way too fast," Rin pointed out.

"For the time being, let's be cautious and watch. Sooner or later, an opportunity to intervene will present to us," Shizune stated.

"Or maybe we could try and create those opportunities ourselves," Sasuke said, as he bit his thumb before he started to walk forward while making hand seals.

"Sasuke-kun, wait! Don't do anything reckless!" Shizune asked.

"Doing something reckless is still a better alternative than doing nothing at all," Sasuke snapped, finishing the seal sequences, slamming his hand into the water surface. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, a giant hawk emerged, flapping his wings as he took off, with Sasuke riding on his back. Sasuke commanded the bird to fly towards the two fighting tailed beasts. Shizune sighed, and shook his head.

"That boy's going to get himself killed," the older medic-nin said.

"Okay, Sasuke took the choice from our hands. We'll approach with caution and move when there's a chance to act, or if our side is losing."

"Whatever, just let go with the action already," an impatient Atsui stated, before Samui smacked him the back of the head. "Ow!"

"Thank goodness they aren't using Tailed Beast Balls, or else we could easily end up as collateral damage," Shizune pointed out.

"Tailed Beast Ball?" Karin repeated.

"It's a Tailed Beast's most powerful attack," it was Rin who answered. "The Tailed Beast gathers a lot of chakra in their mouth forming a ball, which is then released in the form of said ball that can explode upon contact, or in the form of an energy beam or wave for a more focused area of destruction."

"You know an awful lot about Tailed Beasts," Karin commented.

"It was because of Minato-sensei. He used to study them in a very thorough fashion," Rin explained. "Though the fact that Kushina-san was a jinchuriki does explain where that interest came from."

"If that's the case, then I guess it's because they're fighting too close to each other for an attack of such magnitude," Samui guessed. "If they do, there's a big chance they might hurt themselves."

"Not to mention all the unwanted attention that such attack would bring to this place," Shizune added.

"Wouldn't be that a good thing?" Karin asked. "If more Kumo ninja came to help Yugito..."

Samui shook her head. "We need quality, not more quantity. If Killer B-sama or Raikage-sama came, they could easily turn the tide of the battle. But other Kumo ninja would barely make a difference. If somebody sees this fight, it would be better if they warn Kumo about what's going on, rather than join the fight themselves."

"But by the time reinforcements arrive, it might be too late," Rin pointed out.

Meanwhile, above the two fighting giant beasts, Sasuke's hawk was flying in circles, as the Uchiha on top of it carefully analyzed the clash, Sharingan activated in order not to miss any detail, as small or insignificant as it might be.

"Cat Flame Roaring Fire!"

The Two Tails opened her jaws, and fired several large fireballs at the Nine Tails. The Fox, however, deflected said fireballs with a flick of his many tails, some of them being redirected into the sky, while others fell on both the ground and water around them. After that the Nine Tails charged at the Two Tails.

Yugito decided to return in kind and charge at him as well. However, just before the two could meet in the middle, the Nine Tails abruptly stopped and spun over himself, delivered a nine-tailed tail blow at the surprised jinchuriki, who was hurled backwards.

"Well done, Kyubi," Obito said, reappearing besides his subdued Tailed Beast. He quickly made several hand seals. "Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

Multiple wooden vines emerged around the still dazed jinchuriki, wrapping around her neck and limbs, immobilizing her and binding her chakra.

"That should take care of it. Now, let's deal the finish blow!" Obito said.

The Nine Tails opened his maws, and started to gather chakra into an ever expanding sphere. The Konoha and Kumo ninjas still in the ground knew the Kyubi was charging a Tailed Beast Ball, and if the attack hit, it would mean the end for Yugito. Sasuke had left before hearing the explanation on what that attack was.

Not that he needed it to know that it was bad news and, if it wasn't stopped immediately, the Akatsuki would win. Almost on instinct, the

youngest Uchiha jumped from his flying summon, and aimed his fall towards the fox's face. He made a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Sasuke wasn't stupid enough to use his real self as a human missile towards a Tailed Beast, not when a clone would do just fine. He then transferred all his momentum to the clone by pushing it downward the moment he appeared. In the couple seconds before the clone would hit his destination, he made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Burning Man!"

The clone was surrounded by an aura of fire just before it crashed against the Nine Tails' left eye. The beast howled in pain, losing control of the forming Tailed Beast Ball, which exploded in his mouth, hurling him backwards.

"No!" Obito yelled.

"Atsui, let's release Yugito while the Nine Tails is incapacitated!" Samui suggested, as she unsheathed her tanto while rushing towards the immobilized giant cat.

"Alright!" her brother said, following Samui and unsheathing his katana as well.

"Now's our chance!" Shizune said, as she rushed towards the beast, with Karin and Rin following her. "Rin, try to subdue it now!"

Rin nodded, and her hands flew through hand seals once again.

"Wood Release. Deep Forest Emergence!"

More wooden vines emerged around the Nine Tails and wrapped around him, just like they also bound his two tailed sister. Though the damage caused by the failed Tailed Beast Ball wasn't as severe as it appeared, as the Kyubi had enough strength to trash against the restraining wooden vines.

"Karin, help her subdue him!" Shizune said.

Karin took a step forward, and made a hand seal. "Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Multiple chains of chakra emerged from her back, and they wrap themselves around the Nine Tails' limbs, just like the wooden vines did, and combined their suppressing effects to subdue the angry monster.

The Kyubi trashed again, but his movements were much slower and sloppy, as he progressively became less and less active. The combined power of both jutsu was too much for him to handle.

"Very good! Keep going like that, girls!" Shizune cheered.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

A volley of fireballs rained upon Karin and Rin, seemingly out of nowhere, blowing the two girls away, and in Karin's case, forcing her to release her chains from the incapacitated Fox.

"I won't let you interfere any further!" Obito said, as he landed in front of them. He then turned around, and started to throw more fire jutsu at the vines still pinning the giant Fox down.

...

Meanwhile, at the other side of the flooded village, Darui and Sakura continued their two on one fight against Kisame.

"Things are looking grim over there," Darui said, who had just glanced back to the two Tailed Beasts duking it out, before his visible eye rested on Kisame. "Sorry man, but I'm afraid we'll have to end this pretty quick. We're needed over there."

"I was having a lot of fun, but if you want me to end this quickly, I can do that as well," Kisame grinned, as he suddenly disappeared.

Darui tensed, as he gripped the handle of his cleaver. "Where did he-"

"From underwater! Watch out!" Sakura warned.

Both the blond haired man and pink haired girl jumped in time before a shark jumped out of the water, its jaws full of teeth wide open. Another one jumped immediately afterwards against Sakura, but the kunoichi managed to punch it in time, sending it skidding across the water surface, before it disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Another one met the same fate when Darui sunk his electrified cleaver into its flesh.

However, more and more sharks started to come out of the water, in greater numbers and higher frequency. It was becoming increasingly harder for the two ninja to keep up the pace. In no time they would be overwhelmed.

"I can see the bastard below us," Darui told Sakura, as he slashed an incoming shark. "Summoning more sharks. Hell, I bet these sharks aren't even real. He just plans to tire us out before delivering the finishing blow."

"In that case, we should ignore these fishes and go after him directly," Sakura suggested.

"I had the same idea," Darui asked. As he sheathed his cleaver. "Protect me for a few seconds, will you?"

Sakura nodded, and pushed her body as much as she could in order to fend off the sharks coming from every direction. Fortunately, a few seconds is all what Darui needed to weave the necessary hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Black Panther!"

Darui's hands crackled with black electricity, which condensed into a mass of dark lightning that took the shape of a panther. The panther

dived underwater headed for Kisame, but it was intercepted by several of the sharks he was constantly summoning.

"Damn, such a failure," Darui complained. "Reaching him underwater is going to be a challenge."

"Not that much. I have a way that will open a direct path to the Akatsuki, but it will only last for a few seconds," Sakura told the Kumo Jonin.

"Sorry for being skeptical, but what do you plan to do? Punch the water really hard so the shockwave creates a vacuum zone?"

Sakura smirked in return. "You just read my mind."

Dauri's visible eye widened. "Are you... are you serious?"

"You might want to take a step back," Sakura said as she leaped into the air, her fist wound back.

Darui did as Sakura was told. However, as he was the only one touching the water surface, now all the sharks were aiming for him. Unsheathing his cleaver once more, the Kumo Jonin went into the defensive.

"SHANNARO!" Sakura hollered, as she came down, her fist impacting against the water surface.

The effect was immediate. The force released by the impact created a shockwave that pushed all the water aside in every direction, creating a rather large "hole" in the water, with a genuinely surprised Kisame at the bottom.

"Damn. That girl looked pretty dull, but she packs quite the mean punch. If Konoha has more ninja like her, we might be screwed," Darui said, mostly to himself.

"Come on, attack, he's wide open!" Sakura shouted.

Darui nodded, and jumped into the hole the pinkette had literally punched in the water. Unfortunately for him, Kisame was able to shake off the shock and expertly parry Darui's blow with his much bigger sword. Before the Kumo ninja could force the blue skinned Akatsuki into the defensive, Kisame wasted no time and counterattacked with a series of rapid swings of his massive blade.

The dark skinned ninja replied by jumping backwards, while making several hand seals.

"Storm Release: Laser Circus!"

Joining his hands together, Darui fired another salvo of light blue beams at Kisame. The Akatsuki smirked and prepared to defend.

"You're not going to catch me off guard with your little light show again," Kisame confidently said, and when the beams were close to him, he delivered a very wide swing, Samehada absorbing them. "As I said-"

"You're wide open!"

Another Darui appeared before Kisame, his cleaver ready to slash the Akatsuki to bites. However, Kisame was fast enough to parry the clone's blow as well, and deliver another swing that knocked the sword out of his hands.

"You expected to catch me off guard with a clone? I'm starting to feel insulted," Kisame chuckled, as he delivered another blow to the clone.

But much to his surprise, the clone caught Samehada, wrapping his arms around it. Samehada grew several spikes in order to eviscerate the clone, but much to Kisame's shock, not only the clone did not dispel, but the spikes even failed to pierce him, as his skin was extremely hard.

"Now I got you," The Darui clone burst in smoke, revealing that it had been Sakura all along. Her skin was now a metallic brown while her hair was silver. "Did you forget about me already? Come on Darui-san, before the sword absorbs my Iron Skin Jutsu!"

"You don't have to tell me twice," Darui replied, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Lightning Release: Double Black Panther!"

Darui's hands generated a mass of the aforementioned black lightning, which took the shape of two panthers, ready to pounce on Kisame.

Seeing that there was no point in struggling, Kisame dropped Samehada and jumped away, just as the water started to fill the hole while it formed a whirlpool. The shark ninja decided to counter Darui's ninjutsu with one of his own.

"I don't need Samehada to beat opponents of your level!" he shouted, as his hands quickly formed hand seals, before thrusting them forward. "Water Release: Great Shark Bullet Jutsu!"

Kisame created a gigantic shark made of water before sending it towards Darui and Sakura.

"This jutsu can absorb the chakra of other ninjutsu and add it to its own power as if it was Samehada. I don't know what those black panthers do, but they won't touch me!" Kisame boasted, as his face formed a grin of confidence.

However, much to his surprise, the black panthers maneuvered around the shark-shaped missile, gracefully avoiding it.

"What!?" Kisame asked in shock.

"I'll take care of that!" Sakura said, placing herself in front of the shark bullet. She spread her arms wide, as two giant fists made of chakra appeared around her fists. "Cherry Blossom Thunderclap!"

Sakura slammed her fists together, creating a powerful shockwave forwards, which easily shattered the water shark bullet when crashed against it.

"Just as I thought. I can use my chakra enhanced strength to create shockwaves, but since they lack chakra, they can't be absorbed," Sakura thought, pleased with her deduction.

That moment, a lightning bolt fell from the storm clouds above, landing somewhere near the spot the rest of her teammates were fighting Obito and his Tailed Beast. Sakura saw that the Nine Tails was down, and smiled. She turned her sight back to the enemy at hand.

"Lightning Release jutsu packs a lot of power, but they're usually hard to control and direct. Black Lightning has no such problems. And as you're going to experience, it's also more powerful than regular lightning as well," Darui explained, enjoying Kisame's predicament.

Unable to defend or even dodge the attack, the two lightning panthers crashed against Kisame, engulfing him in an explosion of black electricity. When the electricity faded, Kisame was still there, his clothes and skin badly burn, but still in condition to fight. The Akatsuki extended his right hand, and Samehada flew to it.

"Hehehe... I'm going to admit, that hurt a lot," Kisame chuckled, sounding oddly nonchalant. "But these wounds will stay here very little. I can use Samehada for-"

Kisame was interrupted by a massive explosion coming from behind. Both him and his opponents forgot about each other for a moment, as their eyes were focused on the massive blast. The Akatsuki grinned.

"Oh look at that. It seems that Obito is finally done playing," Kisame laughed.

Sakura and Darui looked horrified at the other battlefield.

"Just... what happened over there?" Sakura cried.

...

As Darui and Sakura's fight against Kisame was winding down, the fight of the giants had been halted by both Rin and Obito incapacitating the other side's Tailed Beast with their wood release. Not that they were going to just leave things that way.

"Let's release Yugito!" Atsui said, as made a couple of one handed hand seals, as his other hand held his katana. "Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Atsui's katana was coated in fire, as he dashed towards the giant incapacitated cat. He quickly started to slash the vines with his flaming blade, but they proved to be more resistant than their appearance suggested.

"Don't go all by yourself, let's work together!" Samui replied, as she made several hand seals, before unsheathing her tanto. "Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Samui's tanto started to crackle with electricity, and the blond rushed towards the vines, cutting them in one swing each. Her brother, who was having more trouble, noticed this, and frowned.

"Hey, how the hell did you took so little to cut so many vines?" the indignant blond complained.

"Wood Release is a combination of water and earth, both elements weak to lightning," Samui replied matter-o-factly.

"Aw man, that's not so hot..." he complained.

Suddenly, more vines started to emerge, replacing the ones the Kumo siblings had cut.

"What the hell?" Atsui protested. "Aw come on! This is NOT so hot!"

"Quit complaining! If the vines regrow, we will cut them faster than they can regenerate!" Samui insisted, as she pressed on.

As the Kumo siblings liberated their jinchuriki, or at least tried to, Obito was doing the same with the Nine Tails. Unlike the Kumo siblings, Obito had to contend with the Konoha ninjas attempting to keep the Kyubi incapacitated.

"I never thought that you'd use the gift I gave you against me, Rin. Your disloyalty knows no limit," Obito said with an angry snarl.

"You never thought?" Rin replied, just as angry. "In what world would I approve of everything you're doing? All these meaningless deaths! All the suffering you're spreading!"

"Sometimes you need to cut a limb in order to stop a disease from infecting the rest of the body. Given that you're a medic, I thought you'd understand that," Obito fired back.

"Not before I did everything to save that limb first!" Rin shouted, as she dashed towards Obito.

The two former teammates engaged in a hand to hand duel. Due to his experience and height advantage, Obito thought Rin wouldn't be much of a challenge, but he was surprised by the brown haired medic-nin's skill and physical strength.

"All I need is to knock her out, and she won't be able to keep the Nine Tails incapacitated," Obito thought, as he ducked a roundhouse kick from his former crush. "I knew about her physical enhancements, but when did she become such a good fighter?"

As he was fighting Rin, he failed to see Shizune coming at him, who delivered a painful kick to his temple, sending him flying several meters to the side, skidding on the watery surface.

"Just as the other time. If he wants to hit us, he needs to be corporeal. There's our chance to hit," Shizune said. "We can take advantage of our numerical superiority."

"You think you're so clever, do you?" Obito said as he stood up, rubbing the spot Shizune had kicked in. "Let's see what do you think about your numbers after this! Wood Release: Wood Clone Jutsu!"

Several clones made of wood started to grow from Obito's body. Once fully formed, they split from his body, placing themselves in a circle around the Konoha ninjas, and adopting fighting stances. They counted nine clones in total.

"You're not the only one who can do that!" Rin replied, as she echoed Obito's actions. However, the brown haired girl was only able to produce three clones of herself.

Obito couldn't help but chuckle. "Even if you have the same power as me, my skill is far superior to yours. Take care of them while I release the Nine Tails!" Obito commanded.

"Oh no, you won't get away!" Sasuke yelled, as he leaped at the original. One of the clones jumped to intercept Sasuke, but the youngest Uchiha easily sliced him in two with a swing of his katana. "Fire Release: Burning Edge! Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Holding his katana in one hand and his shoto in the other, the former's blade was coated in flames while the later's started to crackle with electricity. Obito started to weave hand seals, a chain that he had used before a couple times, and that Sasuke had memorized thanks to his Sharingan. He knew what attack would come next.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

Sasuke was ready to destroy whatever wooden vines Obito threw against him, his senses looking for the first sign of the attack to come. Except, much to his surprise, the attack didn't come. Or better

said, it did come, just not from the direction the youngest Uchiha was expecting.

Even more vines emerged around the Nine Tails. Though rather than wrap themselves against him, they started to pull the first vines Rin had summoned. And while the brown haired medic was busy fighting the clones, she was unable to direct chakra to keep her vines in place. In no time, the Nine Tails was free again.

"Didn't see that coming, Sasuke?" Obito mockingly asked, as he jumped onto the fox's head. "Ninjas nowadays seem to focus too much on power and forget about the subtle art of misdirection."

"Damn you..." was all what Sasuke could said, gritting his teeth. Looking up, he saw that his hawk summon was still flying above the Nine Tails in circles. He let out a whistle to call it down.

"No! The Nine Tails is free!" Shizune cried, as she was fighting the remaining clones.

"I'll subdue it again!" Rin said, as her hands started to form the same hand seals she used before. "Wood Release-"

"You think I will let you!?" Obito spat.

The Nine Tails delivered a wide swipe with one of his tails. The Konoha ninjas jumped in time to avoid it, but the sheer force of the swipe was so great, the shockwave it created as enough to hurl them backwards. Sasuke managed to jump onto his hawk's back, and even if it was caught in the burst of wind, the giant bird was able to maneuver around it much better.

"Alright, this ends here," Sasuke said, as he sheathed both his bladed weapons, as his left hand started to crackle with electricity. "The next jutsu will finish this fight."

Obito couldn't repress a laugh. "You're delirious, Sasuke. No jutsu, no matter how powerful, can subdue a Tailed Beast, other than

Wood Release."

"You might be right, but it's worth a try," Sasuke said, raising his electrified hand towards the sky. "Do you think that if I gathered several dozen lightning bolts and threw them all at your pet, would he survive?"

"While I admit you have grown powerful over the years, no jutsu of your own can have the strength you claim. No human being could gather that much power," Obito countered.

"Oh, I'm aware of that. But if instead of lightning generated by my chakra, I merely used my chakra to redirect natural lightning towards you?" Sasuke asked.

Suddenly, a bad feeling washed over Obito. Looking up, he realized that the sky had turned really dark, with several lightning bolts jumping from one cloud to another.

"Where... where did those storm clouds come from?" Obito asked, a bit surprised.

"I admit this jutsu requires a bit of a setup. You know, all the fireballs I threw at you from below, that when you dodged, kept flying upwards into the sky? Yeah, they true purpose was to stir the clouds into storm clouds. The Two Tails' fireballs that you deflected into the sky were of real help as well," Sasuke explained. Suddenly, all the lightning in the clouds merged in the form of a serpentine dragon.

"The name of the jutsu is Kirin. Now begone."

Sasuke brought his hand down, and in a split second, the Kirin fell down, blasting into the Kyubi. The fox let out a loud and long howl of pain, before he succumbed to the power of several lightning bolts condensed into one, falling to the water with a loud splash. Obito was nowhere to be seen. Sasuke deduced that he had teleported away.

"My most powerful jutsu, the Kirin. Stronger than the Annihilation Nova, with only consuming a tiny fraction of its chakra cost," Sasuke reflected, as he examined the results of his attack. He then turned at the rest of his teammates, looking at the downed Tailed Beast with a flabbergasted look. "Quickly, seal the beast within Karin, before it wakes up!"

This seemed to snap the three women out of their stupor, who nodded and rushed towards Sasuke.

"Okay... how do we do it?" a nervous Karin asked.

"Like this," Shizune said, taking a step forward, while making a hand seal. "Eight Trigram Divination Seal!"

In a poof of smoke, Shizune summoned an octagonal platform with an altar in the middle, and eight lit candles on each of its corners.

"Now, Karin, lie down on the altar," Shizune instructed. The redhead looked at the altar, her lips quivering, but she didn't move. Noticing it, Shizune added: "Karin, everything's going to be okay. It's normal to feel afraid, but I promise you your life won't change that much. We're all here to support you."

"Karin, come on, we have no time!" Sasuke urged.

Letting out a sigh of defeat, she conceded and walked towards the altar. "I wish mom or Neji-kun were here. Alright, let's get this over with."

"Rin, immobilize the Nine Tails again. I'm not as skilled in sealing as Hokage-sama or Naruto-kun, and I'm going to need some time to do the ritual. We don't want it to wake up in the middle of the sealing," the oldest kunoichi told her.

Rin nodded, and walked towards the unconscious beast, ready to perform the same jutsu she had used several times before, and started making the hand seals.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest-"

Suddenly, the Nine Tails' eyes snapped open, and with a loud growl, quickly stood on its legs. It raised one of its paws ready to crush the shocked medic nin. Fortunately, Sasuke appeared before Rin and the fox.

"Everybody, behind me!" Sasuke yelled, as a giant, ghostly purple ribcage formed around the group as the same time the paw came down.

Even if Sasuke's Susanoo absorbed most of the impact, it was unable to withstand such a powerful blow, and Shizune's Medical Squad plus Rin were swiped away as if they were flies.

"Did you really think that jutsu of yours would be enough to subdue a Tailed Beast?" Obito mockingly asked, as he reappeared on top of the fox's head. "Pitiful. If you weren't so afraid of using your real power, the outcome of this fight might have been different. But there won't be any more chances for you. While I'm sure Rin will survive this attack, I can't say the same for the rest of you lot."

The Nine Tails opened his jaws, and started to gather chakra into an ever growing sphere. Everybody panicked. They were still recovering from the brutal blow the Nine Tails had delivered them. There was no time for counterattacks, and dodging an attack of such magnitude would be useless.

The Tailed Beast Ball charged, the Kyubi fired it forward. Sasuke tried to shake off the feeling of anguish washing over his body in order to summon another Susanoo for protection, but found himself unable to.

"This can't be my end... not like this..." Sasuke said, gritting his teeth in impotence.

But the end didn't come. Suddenly, a black and blue blur dashed between the Tailed Beast Ball and them. He didn't need his

Sharingan to realize it was the Two Tails, or better said Yugito, who for some reason had decided to become a human shield and take the blast herself, being engulfed by the ensuing explosion, which was thankfully cushioned enough that the Konoha ninjas were merely hurled backwards a few meters by the shockwave.

When the explosion was over, the Yugito was no longer in her Two Tails form, but had reverted back to human. Her body was floating in the water, being rocked by the small waves created by the exploding Tailed Beast Ball.

"Just as expected," Obito smirked, as he landed besides the unconscious Yugito with a splash, and carried her over her shoulder.

Two voices cried as Obito did this.

"Yugito!"

"NO!"

The now one eyes Uchiha saw Samui and Atsui desperately rushing at him, their weapons drawn, ready to rescue their comrade. But in their haste, they didn't take into account the Nine Tails' presence, who, with a flicker of one of his tails, hurled the two Kumo nin backwards.

"I think we can assume the fight is pretty much over," Obito said, before making a hand seal, causing the Nine Tails to disappear in a cloud of smoke. "Farewell." A spiraling vortex appeared around Obito's eye, and the Akatsuki and his captured jinchuriki were gone in an instant.

A few seconds later, Obito reappeared behind Kisame, and spirited the other Akatsuki away.

...

For about ten minutes, nothing happened. Both Kumo and Konoha ninjas remained silent, at most exchanging questions like "are you okay?" and offering to heal wounds, mostly those from Samui and Atsui, who got several broken bones from the Nine Tails' tail swipe. They felt so lost and dazed, especially the Kumo ninjas. It was Rin who broke the silence.

"Why," she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

"Why what?" Samui asked back.

"Why did she save us," Rin replied. "Why did she take that attack aimed for us? She could have used the chance to escape. Now she's going to die, just because she wanted to save a bunch of ninjas from a non-allied foreign village that didn't know that much."

"Yugito didn't do it just to save you. She saved all of us," Atsui replied.

"What?" a confused Rin asked.

"A Tailed Beast Ball is no dull attack. If she didn't use her own body to shield us, the resulting explosion not only would have killed you, but all of us as well," Darui explained. "Sorry for rushing you, but how long until you finish healing them? We need to go back to Kumo and plan a rescue party."

"If Akatsuki plays their cards well, Obito is on his way to take Yugito out of Lightning Country," Shizune sourly thought, but decided to keep those thoughts to herself. Nobody would gain anything by demotivating the Kumo ninjas.

"Almost there," it was Sakura who replied, as she finished healing Samui's arm. "Broken bones can't be properly healed with medical ninjutsu alone. We patched you up as well as we could, but you should go to a hospital as soon as you return to your village and get proper treatment there."

"I see. Thanks for your help then," Samui replied. "And thanks for helping us against Akatsuki, even if in the end it was for naught. We'll make sure to tell Raikage-sama about how you fought alongside us."

"If it can help to ease the relationship between our villages, please do so," Shizune interjected, sounding almost pleading. "The threat of Akatsuki is too big for a single ninja village to handle."

"We will," Darui assured, before turning to his two remaining squadmates. "Alright, Samui, Atsui, let's go!"

And thus the three Kumo ninjas leaped away, rushing north towards their village.

"I think we should head back to Konoha as well," Shizune somberly said. The rest agreed.

...

Konoha, a few days later

On the way back, the mood didn't improve. They still felt the weight of the defeat at the hands of the Akatsuki. Even if they didn't have any personal ties with the jinchuriki, who wasn't even from an allied village, the outcome of the mission weighted heavily on them. They barely talked, and only traded words when necessary.

For some reason, Karin looked the gloomiest of them all, even more than Rin if it was possible.

"Konoha is up there," Shizune pointed out.

And yes, just like the medic Jonin said, the walls of Konoha could be seen in the distance. This seemed to lift the mood, even if it was just a little.

"Finally, home," Sakura said, letting out a sigh.

"Okay, I know you guys are exhausted, both physically as well as emotionally, so you can go home. I'll go to the Hokage Tower and give Hokage-sama the mission report," Shizune offered, something her subordinates greatly appreciated.

However, there was still one last obstacle they had to face before they could rest and put this disastrous mission behind. The moment they crossed the gates, they saw a certain blond ninja rushing towards them.

"Shizune-nee-chan! Karin-nee-chan!" Naruto cried before landing in front of them. "I arrived as soon as I got the message from dad regarding the mission! How did it go?"

The somber look on the Medical Squad and Rin's faces was all the jinchuriki needed to know their answer. Unfortunately, he barely knew half of the story, and once again, it was Shizune who took up as her duty to deliver the bad news.

"Naruto-kun... I was going to the Hokage Tower. Come with me and I'll tell you what happened. We have some bad news... news that you need to know," Shizune said, as she and an apprehensive Naruto headed towards the Tower.

...

A few minutes later, Sasuke returned to his apartment. As expected, Itachi wasn't there. It would be at least a week until he returned from that mission. Hopefully, his brother would be more successful than he had been so far.

At first, the youngest Uchiha merely dropped himself onto a couch, hoping to get some rest and put this mission behind him. But he found himself unable to.

"I don't get it," he said to no one in particular. "This wasn't the first mission I failed. I had no ties with the jinchuriki. I don't care what

happens to Kumo or its ninjas," Sasuke said out loud. His hand clenched into a fist. "Then why does it hurt so much?"

Author's Note: Sorry to all Yugito fans who were expecting her to have a bigger role in the story, but alas, I just can't save every jinchuriki. At the very least, I hope you guys enjoyed her in these two chapters, were she gets to show a little of her personality and badassery. I was originally planning to have her being captured offscreen, but I a fellow Naruto writer convinced me not to make the same mistake as Kishimoto. Now I kind of regret not giving Han his own mini-arc as well, even if it would have made the story even longer.

Have to say, I was quite surprised how most readers reacted negatively at the prospect of Karin becoming the jinchuriki of Kurama's second half, which in hindsight makes me glad I changed my mind while I was writing this arc. The reason, thought, is that it would make Obito way too incompetent. Not only did he fail three times to capture a jinchuriki, but the one time he succeeded it would be at the cost of another Tailed Beast. And even then, he didn't come out of the battle unscathed, since he lost Shisui's eye (though gotta say, a lot of people enjoyed Rin gouging his eye out).

So yeah, not only Akatsuki scores another victory, increasing the number of Tailed Beasts they have to four (the other three are the One, Three and Five Tailed beasts, if somebody needs a reminder), but Sasuke came out of that mission a complete mess. The next chapter will deal with the fallout of this mission (meaning it also be pretty Sasuke-centric), and will close this arc for good, before we move back to Naruto's team once more.

Thanks a lot to Ookami88, my new betareader, for proofreading this chapter.

Anyway, while you guys wait for the next chapter, don't forget to leave your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really,

really happy!

Aftermath of a Failed Mission

Author's Note: With the Yugito Arc finally concluded, we can move forward with other issues. I'm glad how well received said arc was, even if in hindsight I should have put more focus on Yugito, given that she was going to die. Oh well, at least I have another chance to showcase her in the future when she returns as an Edo Tensei zombie.

Anyway, enough ramblings. Enjoy the new chapter:

Chapter 68:

Aftermath of a Failed Mission

or

Not All Cats Have Nine Lives

Amegakure

Despite the fact that he hadn't finished his shift yet, the Ame Genin known as Yudachi was in a bar having some drinks. He had an average appearance, with spiky brown hair, black eyes, and a scar crossing his face being his only distinctive feature.

His unprofessional attitude contributed in a big way to his status as Genin despite pushing thirty. Not that he would even admit it. Besides, today it was a rather slow day. Nothing would happen if he drank a little. Little did he know, that was going to change soon.

"Hey there, handsome. Are you alone?" a soft female voice said.

Yudachi was almost startled by the voice, he swore there was no other patron in the bar except him, yet that woman had sneaked

upon him without him none the wiser. But those distressing thoughts were replaced the moment he laid his eyes on the new patron.

The woman was tall, with pale white skin and long, wavy black hair, full lips and onyx eyes. She was wearing a red spaghetti dress that came down her knees. Her red high heels accentuated her height.

"Cat got your tongue?" the woman asked, giggling a little.

"N-No," Yudachi replied, snapping himself from his stupor. "And yes, I'm alone. Well, not anymore, now that you're here, hehe."

"So, you're a ninja, right?" the woman asked, looking at her forehead protector.

"Indeed I am!" Yudachi proudly replied.

"I love ninjas," the woman replied in a sultry voice, licking her lips. "I love strong men in general, but ninjas are the strongest, don't you think?"

"Indeed!" the Ame Genin enthusiastically agreed.

"So, why don't we show me how strong you are?" the woman replied, caressing his facial scar with the tip of her finger.

...

He didn't know how it happened, but Yudachi didn't care in the slightest. Rushing to one of the rooms for rent in the upper floor - thankfully all of them were vacant-, the Ame Genin and his conquest started to passionately kiss and make out, while they removed each other clothes.

He didn't want to think about how lucky he was. He was never very popular with the fairer sex, so having a woman so out of his league throwing herself at his feet was like a dream come true. That woman had everything to make her perfect.

Her smooth skin...

Her wavy, elegant hair...

A body most women would kill for...

Those thick, wet lips...

Her deep crimson Sharingan eyes, staring into his very soul...

... wait what?

But by the time he realized of what had happened, it was too late. Yudachi felt his whole body succumbing to paralysis. He could still feel his limbs, but they refused to obey his brain's commands.

The woman merely poked his forehead with a finger, and he fell backwards like a tree whose trunk had just been chopped, the bed behind him thankfully cushioning his fall.

"You're under my genjutsu now. Resistance is futile," the woman said, and in a poof of smoke, she turned into a man. A Konoha Ninja. He didn't need a bingo book to know that this ninja was Itachi Uchiha, one of Konoha's deadliest assets. "Judging by your expression, you know who I am," Itachi said, as he wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "So now that we know each other, let's get to business. Specifically, you're going to tell me who's the one in charge of this village. I know it's an Akatsuki, but I need to know which one. And no, there's no way you can't convince me that Hanzo the Salamander still holds the position. If I were you, I wouldn't do anything to push my patience."

Yudachi cursed internally for letting himself fall for such an old trick. He knew that woman was dangerous the moment he displayed a level of stealth way above any civilian, but his hormones had silenced his instinct.

That was one of the reasons Yudaichi was still a Genin.

...

Konoha

Above the village of Konoha, three young girls soared the sky. While the first time they appeared surprised the shocked villagers from below, in time they got used to them.

"Boy, I can't believe that I lived most of my life without knowing the wonders of flying," Hanabi gushed, before spinning a few times. "WHEEEEEEEE!"

"I know, right? Once you know the skies, the land suddenly stops being enough," Fu agreed, smiling at the youngest Hyuga.

"And the view from here is spectacular," Hinata added. "And with the Tenseigan, even more."

"So, do you see somebody? Somebody we know?" Hanabi asked.

Hinata nodded and smiled. "Yes. Quite a few people. Some of our clansmen doing their daily tasks at the village. Some of my friends training..." her eyes drifted towards the Senju Park. "Oh, there's Naruto-kun!"

Fu chuckled. "Took you long enough to find him."

"It's not that hard. Naruto-kun has a very powerful chakra, and through my eyes finding him it's as easy as finding a bright star in the middle of the night," Hinata replied. She then noticed something odd about her boyfriend. He was just sitting alone in one of the park's benches. Naruto was somebody who tried to keep himself occupied at all times. If he wasn't with his friends or family, he was usually training. "I think something's wrong with him. He looks kind of gloom. Fu-sensei, do you mind if I take a moment to talk to him?"

"I'm not going to get in the way of love," the green haired girl replied with a sincere smile, as she flew away followed by Hanabi.

Hinata made her descend, before finally landing just a few steps in front of Naruto. The blond naturally immediately took notice of his girlfriend.

"Hey," Naruto greeted her, in a rather subdued manner.

"Hello," Hinata greeted back. "I was flying with Fu-sensei and Hanabi-chan, and I saw you from above."

"While I appreciate it, you don't have to interrupt your flight lessons just to tell me hi whenever you see me," Naruto replied, chuckling a little.

"I know, but greeting you is not the only reason I wanted to talk with you," Hinata replied, placing her hands on her hips. "What are you doing here, Naruto-kun?"

"I'm just enjoying the calm of the park. Is something wrong with it?" Naruto innocently asked.

Hinata let out a sigh, before crossing her arms over her chest. "Naruto-kun, both you and I know that you don't do calm. You usually have too much pent-up energy for that. Unless there's something that's draining your energy. Something emotionally exhausting."

Naruto chuckled again, except this time it sounded a bit sadder. "I just can't hide anything from you, can I?" Naruto asked, before moving aside and patting the space besides him.

Hinata took the hint and sat beside him. "Now, tell me what's wrong. Whatever happened, I'm sure it can be fixed. If not, you'll feel better after talking about it with someone."

"Okay. You see, yesterday afternoon, Shizune-nee-chan's squad returned from a mission. Rin was with them," Naruto began.

"Something happened to either of them?" Hinata guessed, worry seeping into her voice.

Naruto shook his head. "All five were fine, thank goodness. Sadly, that's the only good part of their mission. You see, while we were in Taki, they were dispatched to Kumo because the Nine Tails had been seen there attacking a village near a river..."

Before Hinata could ask about such impossibility Naruto explained about how the Fourth Hokage sealed only half of the Tailed Beast into Naruto, and the other half into himself, which was released after Orochimaru reanimated him with the Impure World Resurrection.

"And turns out Obito took control of the other half," Naruto explained.

Hinata's normally pale face turned even whiter. "But that's... that's horrible! If Obito decides to do the same with Konoha, or even other villages... !"

"And you know what? That's not even the worst part," Naruto added, much to Hinata's shock. "The whole thing was just a ruse to make Kumo deploy one of their jinchuriki, and capture them when they were in the open. They succeeded."

Hinata took her hands to her mouth. No wonder Naruto looked so gloom.

"I promised myself that I wouldn't let any other jinchuriki fall prey of the Akatsuki, yet another one went down, with me not even aware," Naruto said, curling his hand into a fist.

Hinata placed a hand on her boyfriend's shoulder. "Naruto-kun, while what had happened is indeed terrible, it's not your fault. You can't save everybody. You're not almighty."

"I know but... but I can't still feel guilty. Feel that I could have done more. If I wasn't busy helping rebuild Taki, maybe we could-"

"Naruto-kun, no," Hinata firmly said, interrupting him. "Don't think what could have been, or what could have you done. Focus on the

future, and how to make things better. Don't torture yourself like that, it won't help anybody."

"There's also the fact... I didn't even get to know her," Naruto replied, as a single tear fell down his cheek. "Her name was Yugito Nii. She was a Jonin. Same age as Kurenai-sensei. And the Akatsuki will be slowly killing her by removing her Tailed Beast from within her as we speak."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata said. "I'm not going to say not to grieve, because grieving it's human. But try not to feel guilty over her death. You know, I used to feel like that regarding my father's death. Had I been stronger, maybe I could have helped defend the clan from the Uchihas and make a difference..."

"You were like eight at the time. No offense, but I doubt you'd make a difference," Naruto told her.

"I know. But the emotional, irrational part of my mind insisted otherwise," Hinata replied. "Just like it's happening with you."

A shadow passed above them. Looking above, they saw it was Fu and Hanabi, doing another lap above Konoha.

"Thanks for talking with me, Hime. Even if it's not much, I do feel a little better now. Though you'd better return to your flight lesson. I'd feel horrible if I distracted you from your training."

Hinata smiled. "Don't worry. You can talk to me whenever you want," the Hyuga Clan Head said, before saying her boyfriend goodbye with a kiss to the cheeks, and returning to the sky with her instructor and younger sister.

...

A few days later, Shizune and Shisui's apartment.

While Itachi was out doing his mission, Shizune and Shisui had asked Sasuke to spend some days with them until his older brother returned. While they knew that Sasuke was more than capable of taking care of his own, his Jonin-sensei had seen that the outcome of the mission had affected Sasuke far more than she had expected, and upon talking with her husband, they decided that it was better not to leave Sasuke to his own devices.

The younger Uchiha had turned down the offer at first, but after much insisting, he reluctantly agreed.

If there was something good that came out of that disastrous mission in the Land of Lightning was that Rin was able to recover Shisui's lost eye, and bring it back to Konoha. After that, Shizune wasted no time in placing her husband's lost eye in his empty eye socket. Naturally, Shisui's mood improved dramatically the next few days, the opposite of his younger cousin.

"Man, it feels so good not to rely on the Sharingan for depth perception anymore!" the formerly one eyed man happily claimed.

But much to Sasuke's chagrin, it seemed like Shisui's good mood was contagious. Or, more specifically, he wanted to infect Sasuke with his newfound cheerfulness and optimism -not that his cousin did not have obnoxious amounts of such traits before. And naturally, his wife was on his side, pressuring Sasuke to open up about his feelings.

"Sasuke, I know what you're feeling. I have failed my own share of missions in my life, and the guilt is unavoidable," Shisui insisted.

"And these cases, the best you can do is open up and talk to other people about it. I know that you're not to most extroverted person out there, but please make an effort."

"Yes, Sasuke. I was there. You gave your all in the mission, like you usually do. You have nothing to be ashamed of," Shizune continued.

"You're wrong, sensei," Sasuke replied. "I didn't give my all. I could have done better, but I was unable to. Shisui," Sasuke called his cousin, before locking eyes with him. "You knew there's a way to overcome the traumatic flashbacks every time you use the Mangekyo Sharingan, right?"

Shisui's good mood immediately evaporated, replaced by a similar gloom that plagued Sasuke.

"Obito told you, didn't he?" Shisui dejectedly asked.

"Yes, but that's irrelevant. The actual question is why neither Itachi nor you told me if you knew about it," Sasuke asked.

"First of all, tell me exactly what Obito told you," Shisui requested.

Sasuke complied, and told the oldest Uchiha about how learning to detach yourself from the guilt of the moment that awakened the Mangekyo Sharingan ends up pushing the flashbacks away.

"And can you blame me for not wanting you to know that?" Shisui asked.

"I can blame you for keeping information hidden from me," Sasuke stated. "I know it's a big price to pay, but had I complete control over the Mangekyo Sharingan, maybe this mission would have been a success."

"No mission is worth you losing away your humanity, Sasuke-kun," Shizune intervened. "Never forget that."

"Sasuke, trust me, you don't want to be like Obito. You might start with good intentions, but in the end you'll end up following the same dark road as him," Shisui seriously stated.

"That doesn't change that this is not the first time you and Itachi withhold information from me regarding the Sharingan," Sasuke spat back at him. "Do you trust me that little?"

Both Shisui and Shizune flinched upon hearing such an accusatory question. And deep down, Shisui had to admit there was a degree of truth there. He and Itachi had the best intentions. They didn't want Sasuke to be corrupted by the darkness that plagued the Uchiha clan. The Coup d'etat had been a real eye opener. But by not trusting Sasuke and giving keeping him in the dark they were risking losing him.

"I admit you're right, Sasuke," Shisui told him. "That's why I'm going to share you something Obito didn't tell you: there is a way to overcome the flashbacks that does not involve total detachment from your feelings."

"And you tell me that now?" Sasuke asked, still indignant.

"I didn't tell you because I thought that you knowing it wouldn't do you no good. I was afraid you'd misunderstood what I wanted to say and do something stupid," Shisui explained. "But you know what? It wasn't my place to decide that. You deserve to know it, and whatever you do afterwards with such knowledge, it will be on you."

Sasuke crossed his arms. "Alright then. I'm all ears."

Shisui opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. He opened it again, but he didn't speak. He muttered something about this being far more complicated to put into words than he thought, before his eyes suddenly lit up, as if an idea dawned upon him.

"Shizune, this week I didn't pay Shunichi-san a visit, did I?" Shisui asked his wife.

"Unless you did it when I was out, then no, you didn't," Shizune replied.

"Alright then, I just had an idea. Sasuke, you're coming with me to visit an old acquaintance of mine," Shisui enthusiastically said, standing up. "Before you ask, yes, it has to do with the topic at hand. Knowing about Shuinichi-san will help you with your problems."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. His doubtfulness was evident in his face, but decided to comply.

"Alright then, cousin. I'm seriously hoping this isn't some menaingless distraction or ruse to keep the truth from me," Sasuke warned in a rather icy tone.

"I'll swear on my life if it makes you feels better. Now come on."

...

Training Ground Seven

As usual, Kakashi's Animal Squad was training in their regular training ground whenever they didn't have any missions. What wasn't usual, however, was the intensity of the training that they were doing. Seeing the sheer power of Naruto and Fu, as well as their fight against the Akatsuki made them realize that while they were stronger than the average Chunin, they weren't strong enough to deal with the threat that was Akatsuki. And thus, they asked Kakashi to give them a more intense training.

"If that's what you want, I have no problem with it. Actually, I praise your desire to get better," the silver haired Jonin had said. "However, I don't want to hear you complain if I'm too hard on you. Killing or permanently crippling you are the only lines I won't cross for obvious reasons."

And boy, did the Copy Ninja stay true to his word. At first sight there was nothing that made you think Kakashi was anything out of the ordinary. His usually bored expression, relaxed pose and nonchalant attitude didn't raise any danger flags. But upon seeing him fighting, one could appreciate the saying "appearances are deceiving". And while his students had seen him fighting at full power against enemies, it wasn't the same as having to fight him themselves.

"Aburame Secret Art: Insect Tornado!"

A swarm of beetles emerged from under Shino's sleeves, and flew towards Kakashi with an angry buzz. Kakashi made several hand seals while quickly jumped backwards.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Before Kakashi could exhale the fireball, Shino was already commanding his hive to move aside, in order to dodge the incoming fiery missile. However, the fireball still managed to kill many of his insects with residual heat. Jumping aside, the Aburame dodged the fire projectile.

"Now's my chance!" Tamaki thought, rushing towards Kakashi, before leaping at him with her claws facing forward. "Cross Slash!"

Despite appearing wide open, Kakashi easily dodged the cat kunoichi's assault. Undeterred, Tamaki continued her assault, delivering vicious swipes, that the Copy Ninja easily dodged.

"Damn Sharingan!" Tamaki cursed.

Kakashi then closed his left eye, and continued dodging her attacks just as easily.

"As you can see, no, it's not the Sharigan. You're too slow, and your technique lacks finesse," Kakashi calmly but sternly said, before grabbing Tamaki by her wrists, and hurled her against a tree. Wiping his hands, he started to look around. "And where the other could be...?"

The ground briefly shook for second. Most people wouldnd't have sensed it, but Kakashi wasn't "most people". His hand was coated in electricity the moment Kiba burst from underground.

"Got y-"

"And there he is," Kakashi happily said, as he impaled the Inuzuka runt through the heart with his signature ability. "Lightning Blade!"

After piercing his chest "Kiba" crumbled into many smaller rocks, as the real Kiba and Akamaru were leaping at Kakashi from behind. Though as this was happening, Kakashi's hands were flying through seals at an inhuman speed.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Turning around, Kakashi blew a powerful wind blast at the attacking ninja and dog, pushing them backwards. They immediately got back on their feet, but rather than attacking, Kiba shot his sensei an indignant look. "What the hell, man, a Lightning Blade? What if that was the real me? You would have killed me!"

"Oh, you worry too much, Kiba," Kakashi replied in an infuriating cheerful tone, giving him his trademark eye-smile. "I was one hundred percent sure that wasn't the real you. I know your fighting style too well to let you make me think you would attack from underground, and without Akamaru."

"So you're saying I'm too predictable," an unamused Kiba replied, frowned.

"No, of course not!" Kakashi cheerfully reassured. "... actually yes, that's what I'm saying. The only way you could be more predictable was if you told me beforehand what you were going to do. Something your movements already tell me."

"Kakashi-sensei has flat out told you an area of your fighting style that needs improvement," Shino interjected. "You should take his advice as it is rather than an insult."

"Actually, that goes for all of you," Kakashi pointed out. "All of you seem to be pigeonholed into a very tight fighting style, and your enemies will catch wind of that. You need to find a way to improve your styles and change them to adapt to multiple situations. Though I admit that this is in part my fault for not training you as good as I could. But make sure such thing is about to change."

"Uh, hello," a new voice said.

The members of the animal squad turned around, and saw Rin Nohara, looking a little bashful, walking towards them. Tamaki welcomed her with a bright smile.

"Rin, hello!" the cat kunoichi happily greeted her. "Did you come here to train with us?"

"That would be awesome!" Kiba agreed, with Akamaru barking in agreement.

"I'm afraid I didn't come here for training," Rin said, rubbing her arm a little. "If I'm interrupting your training, I can come in another moment."

"It's okay, we were going to take a break," Kakashi stated. "So, what can we do for you?"

Rin sighed a little, and swallowed. This was going to be a bit hard to tell.

"Kakashi... during my latest mission, I fought against Obito," Rin revealed.

Even within his mask, everybody appreciated how Kakashi's mood changed, despite his best efforts to maintain a stoic expression.

"Go on," he said.

"During the fight, Sasuke-san discovered how his intangibility power works," Rin began. "His Mangekyo Sharingan is linked to a pocket dimension. He can send and release objects, up to people, inside. He can also send parts of his body to that dimension in order to avoid damage, that's how he turns intangible."

"That's a very valuable information to have," Tamaki praised.
."Sasuke-kun did a good job, as usual."

"I think I'm starting to see what you're going to say next," Kakashi guessed.

Rin nodded. "I know you have a Mangekyo Sharingan. Obito told me he awakened his when he saw you killing me with your Chidori. Meaning that you must have awakened it as well."

Kakashi remained silent, before he let out a sigh. "Yes, you're right. I have a Mangekyo Sharingan. But if Obito told you about it, then you probably know why I don't use it much. Besides the fact that it leaves me pretty drained due my lack of Six Paths chakra."

"Yes, but you have Obito's other eye. Logic says that your Mangekyo Sharingan should be linked to that pocket dimension as well. If we use it to our advantage, we might be able to counter his biggest trump card," Rin insisted.

"I'm trying to find holes in that reasoning," Kakashi said, as he rubbed the back of his head. "But I don't see any."

"You don't want to use that power, don't you?" Rin asked. "You don't want to relive my death like that."

"I try to tell myself that you're alive and well, and that your death is the equivalent of a bad dream but... it's not enough. The pain, the anguish, it still feels so real..." Kakashi started. "But if there's a chance I can help bring Obito down, I'll do it."

"I'm glad to hear it," Rin smiled. "Though, I want you to know that I know this is painful, and I wouldn't ask you to do it if there were other options."

"It's okay, I'm old enough to know the kind of stuff this job entails," Kakashi replied. "And given that you literally died for the sake of the village, how could I refuse?"

...

Downtown Konoha

Sasuke followed Shisui through the crowded streets of Konoha. Hands buried inside his pockets, the younger Uchiha had a sullen expression, trying to figure out how this mysterious friend of Shisui was going to be of any help with their matter at hand, if he wasn't an Uchiha.

"You know Sasuke, since you know me, you probably think I'm a pretty cool guy," Shisui began, his cheerful attitude being the complete opposite to Sasuke's. "Someone charismatic, kind, friendly, skilled..."

"Not to mention humble," Sasuke deadpanned, as he rolled his eyes.

"Yes, that too," Shisui happily agreed, oblivious to Sasuke's sarcasm. Or pretending to be oblivious, with Shisui it was hard to tell.

"The thing is, I wasn't always like that," Shisui admitted. Sasuke noticed his voice suddenly losing its usual warmth. "When I was younger, I was arrogant and full of myself. Basically, a standard Uchiha. Even more, given that people praised me for my skills, calling me a genius among a clan of geniuses."

"What does that have to do with anything?" an annoyed Sasuke asked.

"You'll see, be patient," Shisui replied. "Anyway, back when I was a brat, Minato Namikaze was a rising star among the Jonin. The fact that he came from a civilian family inspired many kids of similar backgrounds to become a ninja and join the Academy. Among them was a boy called Shuinichi. And just like the Yellow Flash, he was incredibly gifted for a civilian kid.

"Naturally, the two of us butted heads many times and became heated rivals. We competed for the spot of Rookie of the Year, which eventually went to him. Neither him nor the other Uchihes let me live that down."

As Shisui talked, Sasuke realized that they were leaving the urban area of Konoha, and heading somewhere else.

"Uh, Shisui, are you sure this is the right way?" Sasuke asked.

Shisui ignored Sasuke's question and continued talking about his childhood.

"Even after graduating and being assigned to different teams, we still tried to outdo the other. Sometimes, even at the cost of the mission. Must say, I'm not especially proud of my attitude back then," Shisui admitted, chuckling a little while rubbing the back of his head.

"Anyway, after the Third Ninja War ended, being two of the strongest Chunin Konoha had, the two of us were dispatched to deal with some Kumo ninjas that were still giving us some trouble in the border. Naturally, we were going to use this mission as another opportunity to outdo the other.

"We located the enemy ninjas and engaged them. However, things didn't go as planned: thanks to faulty information, there was an ANBU captain among the Kumo ninjas. Even if going back and return with reinforcements would be the most sensible course of action, we continued the fight. Shunichi called dibs on the captain while I dealt with the underlings.

"However, despite his talent and skill, an ANBU captain was too much for Shunichi. He was quickly overwhelmed, and called for my help. I decided to drag my fight on in order to make him suffer a little and teach him some humility -as if I was any better-. I could have ended my fight much quicker and provide him with help. Between the two of us, we could have defeated that captain."

Sasuke then saw that they were heading towards the Konoha Cemetery.

"Shunichi was killed before I could lend him my help," Shisui finished, his voice now completely devoid of all his usual warmth and joviality. "I could have helped him, and I didn't. It wasn't that Kumo

ANBU who killed him, but me, even if indirectly. That revelation, and the subsequent guilt and despair, made me awake the Mangekyo Sharingan."

Sasuke was left speechless. He was completely unaware such side of his obnoxiously cheerful cousin even existed. He was really good at masking his emotions. Guess it was a proof that not everything is what it seems and that a ninja must learn to see through deception.

The cemetery was mostly empty. Sasuke followed Shisui until he stopped in front of a grave he guessed was that of Shuinichi. The name on the tombstone confirmed it.

"I try to pay Shuinichi a visit every week, at the very least. To never let myself forget what my haughtiness caused. Heh, it's a good thing his family doesn't come here often. As you can imagine, they aren't exactly fond of me, and the Uchiha Insurrection didn't made things any better," Shisui sadly chuckled. "The Uchiha Insurrection. Even my failure to stop that it's only second to this one."

"How can you say that? Not to disrespect Shuinichi's memory, but he was just one person. Lots of people died in the insurrection, and its effects are still felt today," Sasuke stated.

"Because, even if I fail, I did try my all in stopping it," Shisui replied. His fist clenched. "Sasuke, life is paved with failures, and nothing will change that. But as long as we give our all, there's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Now you're sounding like Naruto," Sasuke pointed out, sounding mildly annoyed.

Shisui shrugged. "Eh, I'm married to his older sister," he nonchalantly said, before his mood turned somber again. "But with Shuinichi, I didn't. I let my arrogance and jealousy get the better of me, and somebody else paid the price. That's why, from that moment onwards, I vowed to be not only the best ninja I could be, but also the best person. It wasn't easy, but I was able to change myself for

the better. And to this day, I use the power his death awakened in order to save as many lives as possible.

"And by honoring him, and being the best I can be as both as a ninja and as an individual, over time, the flashbacks I suffered from using the Mangekyo Sharingan stopped ."

Naturally, this did draw Sasuke's attention. "So that's it? That's what I have to do? Be a better person?"

Shisui shook his head. "You're not getting it, Sasuke. Not the part about being a better person -please always strive for that-. In order to overcome the flashbacks, you need to learn to forgive yourself."

"But how I can do that?" Sasuke asked. "I asked Naruto and his family for forgiveness. They said there was nothing to forgive and that they understood why I did that. But it's not enough. The guilt persists. The pain persists."

"I'm afraid I can't help you with that, Sasuke. At least not more than what I already did. While we had help and support from others, both Itachi and I had to walk this road on our own. And so you will have to find yourself what you have to do until you can forgive yourself," Shisui finished. "I'm sorry if this wasn't the answer you were looking for. Though I can still tell you this: do you know what they say about a broken vase?"

"Yes. That even if you glue the pieces together, the cracks will always be there, to remind us that there was a time it was broken," Sasuke replied.

Shisui nodded. "True. But what most people don't realize is that, if properly glued, the vase can still be used as before, cracks and all. You might have some cracks, Sasuke. But that doesn't make you any worse person or ninja. Never forget that."

"I... thank you, Shisui," Sasuke replied, sounding genuinely touched. "Thank you for telling me this."

Shisui smiled. "Don't sweat it."

...

Unknown Location

In a dark place full of light blue blocks of varying sizes, a spiraling portal opened. From it, Kakashi Hatake came out. He briefly inspected his surroundings -there wasn't much of interest to see- and nodded.

"So, this is where I send all that stuff with the Kamui," Kakashi said, before he disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Another spiraling portal opened, this time, it was Kakashi again, accompanied by Rin Nohara.

"And you never thought in sending a clone until now?" an incredulous Rin asked, as her feet touched a large concrete platform. Or what she thought was concrete.

"Truth be told, I was too afraid to know what this place could be," Kakashi admitted. "So, is this the place you were when Obito abducted you with his Kamui?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Rin confirmed. She then looked around, just to be extra sure. "Well, maybe the blocks were arranged in a different way, but it was pretty much the same."

"I see. So if I send somebody here -or just myself-, we'd be able to hit Obito whenever he tries to use his intangibility," Kakashi said.

"Yeah, that's the idea," Rin replied.

"Well thought," Kakashi praised. "The problem is, though, that we don't know when Obito is going to appear. Especially if he realizes that I'm the key to counter his ability."

"Yes. Last time he personally took part in the jinchuriki's capture, but from what it appears it's never the same. Next time they may send other Akatsuki to do the job," Rin stated.

"In that case, we'll have to guess when Obito will show up again," Kakashi said.

"I have a good idea about that. From what you told me, he's been trying to abduct the other half of the Nine Tails three times in the past. After so many failures, it had to be something personal for him. Not to mention that with the other half under his control, he might feel emboldened," Rin explained.

"So Obito will come for Naruto," Kakashi replied, with a sigh. "Guess we'll have to keep our eyes open when that happens."

"Indeed," Rin agreed, then she looked around, before rubbing her arms. "This place gives me the creeps. I think we tested it enough. Can you get us out of here?"

"Eh... you see..." Kakashi began, as he sheepishly smiled from under his mask, while rubbing the back of his head. "I know how to send things into this dimension, but I haven't tried taking them out."

"Kakashi!" Rin yelled.

"Kidding, kidding! I know what to do!" Kakashi replied, holding his hands in defense. "... I think."

...

Training Ground Nine

In the Medical Squad's usual training ground, a sparring was taking place between two members of the Uzumaki clan.

"Earth Release: Mud Trap!"

The grass around Karin started to change into mud. The bespectacled kunoichi made several backflips in order to avoid the spreading mud, as well as putting some distance between herself and her opponent.

"You know, you won't do anything by dodging alone," Naruto taunted with a smirk of superiority.

Karin replied to Naruto's smirk with one of her own. "Good thing these element is so good for ranged attacks," Karin said, as she pulled out several shuriken. "Wind Release: Vacuum Wave!"

Karin tossed the shuriken forward, which were covered in an aura of wind that made them both spin and fly much faster, while increasing their range.

The Uzumaki cousins have been teaching each other the basics of Wind and Earth release, elements each one was expert and the other wanted to learn. In Naruto's case, Earth Release was the only element he had to master, while Karin wanted to learn Wind in order to have a counter against Earth's natural weakness, Lightning, as well as helping herself into obtaining a promotion.

After that, they had the idea of hosting sparring matches in which Naruto and Karin were limited to Earth and Wind respectively, in what ninjutsu entailed, so they could ease themselves into the new elements. So far, it worked really well and helped them master what they had learned from each other.

"Not bad, nee-chan, not bad," Naruto praised, as his hands formed hand seals in return, before slamming them into the ground. "Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

A wall of earth started to rise in front of Naruto. But much to his horror, it stopped midway.

"The hell!?" the blond asked indignantly, before seeing the wind-enhanced shuriken flying at him. "Oh shit!"

The steel stars hit their mark, and if Naruto didn't have a Body Replacement prepared in advance, he could have suffered serious injuries.

"I think I take this round," Karin cheered, pumping her fist into the air. "I think I'm better at Wind than you're at Earth."

"Of course," the real Naruto said, as he emerged from behind a group of trees. "The more elements you master, the harder it becomes. Anyway, I feel like taking a break. How about you?"

"Sure," Karin replied.

Both Uzumaki decided to rest under the shade of a large tree, setting into a comfortable silence. However, as they rested, thoughts started to invade Karin's head. Thoughts she has been trying to silence or push away, but were now coming back. Specially since she was now in her cousin's presence.

She couldn't take it anymore, and decided it was time to talk about it. Plus Naruto was the ideal person to discuss such topic.

"Nii-san?" Karin asked.

"Yes?" Naruto replied.

"You know my latest mission, right?" Karin asked, stammering a little.

Through her chakra sense, Karin could feel how Naruto's mood dampened. She didn't want to poke such fresh wounds, but it was inevitable.

"Yeah. What about it?" Naruto asked, trying to keep a neutral tone.

"You see, since you were in Taki and we couldn't afford waiting for you to get back, Hokage-sama and Shizune-sensei planned to use me as the vessel of the other half of the Nine Tails," Karin stated.

"I didn't know that," Naruto admitted.

"And as you can guess, we failed," Karin told him.

Naruto nodded. "Don't worry. Nobody expected you to win against somebody that commands a Tailed Beast."

"That's not the problem," Karin said, her lips quivering a little. She could sense Naruto's confusion. "Despite our defeat and everything that it entailed... I was glad we failed."

"What?" Naruto shouted. She feared this reaction. "Explain."

"I was afraid of becoming a jinchuriki. So, so afraid," Karin confessed, trying to hold back her tears. Albeit they weren't tears of fear anymore, but of shame. "And not just because of the thought of having a demonic beast living inside my body. When I saw Obito taking Yugito away, I thought, 'that could have been me'. All jinchuriki have massive targets painted in their backs, and the idea of being the prey of a dangerous criminal organization... my blood freeze of just thinking about it."

Naruto didn't say anything, and let Karin's words carefully sink in. He had to admit the redhead was rather brave for showing such a vulnerable side of her, though on the other side he couldn't help but feel little sympathy for her apparent cowardice.

"You must think I'm a coward," Karin continued, as if reading his mind. "But... I just don't want to go to that life again. I can't."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"I think I already told you about my childhood. Until I was eight, I never knew a permanent home. It was always going from one place to another, hiding our identities, not being able to trust any strangers, because so many people wanted both me and my mom for our genetic abilities... when we settled in Konoha, I thought that we finally left that life behind. But then, when we discussed the possibility of becoming a jinchuriki, I realized the implications besides the obvious one," Karin explained, as tears streamed down

her face. She removed her glasses in order to rub her eyes. "Sorry, given what you are, you probably don't think too high of me right now."

"No, it's okay. I don't have the same perspective since I've been a jinchuriki literally from the day I was born," Naruto replied. "This life is all what I know, so I can't tell what a normal person must feel when he or she is forced to become like me. And I don't blame you nor anybody else for being afraid."

"Still... I can't help but feel awful for letting myself be so cowardly. I'm a ninja, for Kami's sake! I should be able to make a sacrifice for the village that make so much for both me and my mom!" Karin protested, as her fist hit the grass.

"But you were willing to become the other half's container, right?" Naruto asked. "Shizune told me what happened. She was going to seal him inside you, when he suddenly woke up and everything went to hell."

"Yeah, but-"

"No buts," Naruto firmly interrupted. "Being afraid in your situation was natural. Yet you managed to keep that fear under wraps and do what was necessary. Don't blame yourself for the failure of that mission."

"But if you feel that's not enough, then listen to me: you might be one of the few people on earth who can contain the Nine Tails, but you're under no obligation to do so. Hell, you don't even need to be a ninja to begin with. Given your background, it's very selfless of you to take such path," Naruto praised.

"My mom said it's important we show appreciation for the village that took us in. Plus being a ninja sounded kind of cool," the redhead admitted.

"See? There you have. You're not selfish nor coward. It's natural to feel overwhelmed under certain circumstances," Naruto said.

"If you say so," she replied, before smiling a little. "Thank you for telling me this."

"Anytime," Naruto said, smiling back.

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Undisclosed Location, That Night

Kabuto was sitting on a large tree branch, his back resting against the trunk. Unable to stifle it, a yawn escaped his mouth. He hated to do these kind of errands. At first he always felt a bit uneasy due the other part's potential treachery -there were many Sound Ninjas hidden around in case of foul play- . But after some time, he always ended up boring.

"I don't know why we even bother with scheduling an hour if these guys are always late," the silver haired medic-nin complained, and he looked up at the night sky.

Until he heard it. The sound of leaves rustling. His reflexes kicked in, jumping to his feet as his hand pulled a kunai from one of his weapon holsters, just when an individual landed in front of him. A figure wearing a black hooded cloak that hid his whole body, while his face was obscured by a mask similar to those wore by Konoha's ANBU.

"Sorry for being late," the masked figure said, revealing her feminine voice. "Kabuto Yakushi, I presume."

"You guess right," the bespectacled ninja replied. "You're not the usual contact."

"I'm new," the woman replied, as if that explained everything.

"If that's the case, then you'll know the password," Kabuto told her in a challenging tone.

"White orchids. Three birds flying above an icy mountain. Red sunset in the sea," the woman stated.

Kabuto couldn't help but smile. "Password correct."

"You're too trusting. I could have killed the actual messenger and force them to give me the password," the masked woman replied.

Kabuto couldn't help but chuckle. "Trust me, I find that very unlikely. Anyway, what news do you have pertaining the jinchuriki?"

"The jinchuriki of the Seven Tails, Fu, remains in Konoha. While she's allowed plenty of freedom, and the village does little to hide her presence, neither her nor those close to her suspect a team of Konoha ANBU watching every one of her moves," the woman began.

Kabuto nodded. "As expected. Jiraiya-sama is no fool. Capturing her will much harder this time around. But knowing her location is still valuable intel. What else?"

"You're going to like this. Apparently, Kirigakure ninja had finally located Utakata, the jinchuriki of the Six Tails," the woman stated.

Kabuto couldn't help but smile at such good news. "That's a very valuable information, indeed."

"That's not all. We know they send a letter for Konoha asking for help. Apparently, they want to borrow the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails to get close to Utakata and convince him to return to the safety of Kiri."

"So Akatsuki has the chance of capturing two jinchuriki at once. Excellent. Any other news on the other jinchuriki?" Kabuto asked.

The masked woman shook her head. "We found the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails has vanished. We suspect that after Yugito's abduction, the Raikage sent him to a hidden refuge in order to keep him safe," the woman continued. "We still don't know where the jinchuriki of the Four Tails is."

"Oh well, guess it was too much to ask. Still, information on Utakata was vital to obtain, so thank you for that," Kabuto said, making a slight head bow. "If there's nothing else to discuss, I think our meeting should come to an end,"

The woman nodded, silently agreeing, and both she and the Oto ninja left in opposite directions.

OMAKE: Itachi's Torture Methods

After the effect of the paralytic genjutsu disappeared, Itachi tied Yudachi to a chair. The Ame Genin, however, didn't show any hints of being intimidated by the Konoha Jonin.

"I don't know what you plan to do with me," Yudachi defiantly said. "But it won't work! You won't get any information from me!"

"That's what everybody says, until they find out what I plan to do," Itachi's Sharingan changed shape to a curved, triple bladed shuriken against a red background. "Tsukuyomi."

The two ninja were transported to a nightmarish, red and black landscape, which would fit into the popular description of Hell. Suddenly, a large, flat screen TV appeared in front of the Ame Genin. The TV turned itself on and started to play something.

"Let your torture begin. Do you recognize this series?" Itachi asked his prisoner.

"Yeah, it's Haruto! The shonen about a young ninja who wants to prove everybody his worth. What, you plan to use this series to

torture me?" Yudachi asked, laughing a little. "Yeah, I know this series has some bad rep, but I think it's pretty good. So tough luck, hater."

"Watch closely," Itachi added. "Don't you recognize this opening?"

Yudachi had a bad feeling, as he tried to recall what season this opening belonged to. All trace of color left his face when he remembered the answer.

"No... no! It's can't be! It's-"

"The almost one hundred episode long filler season set between Parts I and II," Itachi finished Yudachi's sentence All the bravado the Genin had displayed was all but gone, replaced by sheer, primal terror. "Enjoy seventy two hours of mediocre writing, forgettable characters, cheap animation and nonsensical yet predictable plots."

"No! NO!
NOOO
OOOOO!"

Author's Note: It's been a while since my last Omake, isn't it? I hope you guys enjoyed it. Though, to be fair, I acknowledge that the filler hell had some hidden jewels among the garbage, such as the Bikouchu arc (which left quite a lasting impression on the Naruhina side of the fandom) or the Yakumo Kurama arc.

That scene with Shisui and Sasuke had been in my head for literally months, and you have no idea how glad I was when I was able to put it on proverbial paper. I always love how when a somewhat cheerful comedic character reveal more about themselves and you can see that there's more to them that meets the eye. Though in many cases it's revealed that the cheerful attitude is a façade to hide their inner turmoil, which is something I don't really like. Shisui's funny and easygoing personality is genuine here.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

As hinted by the last scene, the next arc will be about the Six Tails Jinchuriki. While you wait, leave your thoughts on this episode in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Trail of the Six Tails

Author's Note: Here we are with another chapter of Son of the Sannin, beginning a new mini-arc, starring UtaKata! You know, I watched the filler arc about him in order to write this arc, and have to say, while it wasn't bad, despite being titled "Six Tails Unleashed" it was more about Hotaru than UtaKata, with the latter playing more of a supporting role to Hotaru, rather than the other way around. Still, I liked Hotaru enough as to include her in the story. Now, enjoy!

Chapter 69:

Trail of the Six Tails

or

Being stubborn isn't something unique to Naruto

Hokage's Tower

As usual, Jiraiya was in his office, accompanied by a couple clones, doing the work his position demanded. Somebody then knocked the door. Without waiting for the Hokage to answer, a lizard-masked ANBU entered the office, carrying several scrolls.

"Hokage-sama, these are today's letters addressed to you specifically," the ANBU said, placing the stack of scrolls on the table, and then he picked one. "But you should read this one first. It's labeled as 'urgent', and carries the personal seal of the Mizukage."

Jiraiya nodded, and after breaking the seal, he unfurled and read the scroll. His eyes started to widen as he read its contents.

"Quickly, find my son and his teammates! Tell him I have an urgent mission to them!" Jiraiya asked.

The ANBU nodded. "Yes, Hokage-sama!" he said, before vanishing.

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Sarutobi State

The residence of the Sarutobi Clan wasn't something the Assault Squad was used to visit. Still, in just a few months, they dropped by so often, everybody felt as if they've been there their whole lives. The reason for this, naturally, was that their sensei was now a member of the clan.

"I thought that nobody had bigger place than the Hyugas, but this one is pretty big as well," Naruto pointed out, as he took some moments to admire the state while they walked across the front patio.

"The Sarutobi Clan is one of the largest clans of Konoha. Naturally, they'll need a big place to house all of their members," Haku replied.

"Even then, I like this place. It feels far more livelier than the Hyuga State," Hinata pointed out.

"Yeah, People here greet you with a smile. It's like they don't have a stick up their butts," Naruto pointed out, before shooting a quick glance to her girlfriend. "No offense."

"None taken," Hinata replied with a hand wave. "Though, you know, sometimes I wonder if I would have been able to make you fall for me if I was as stiff and overly formal as the rest of my clansmen."

"If that was the case, I doubt you would have been interested in me to begin with," Naruto pointed out. "But I'm sure you would have. You still have plenty of other admirable qualities."

For a second, Hinata could swear she saw Naruto's eyes locked onto her chest.

"Oh, look. Kurenai-sensei's there," Haku noticed.

And indeed, their Jonin sensei was leaving the main building just as they were about to head in. The Genjutsu Mistress was now wearing a sleeveless red cotton dress over a green short-sleeved t-shirt. Her stomach had now a noticeable bump.

The former leader of the Assault Squad smiled upon seeing her students. It wasn't hard to tell why they were here.

"Naruto, Hinata, Haku! What a nice surprise," the red eyed woman warmly greeted them. "Did you come here to see me?"

The three of them nodded in unison.

"Indeed. But I see that you're about to leave. Do you have any chores or tasks to do? Because if this is a bad moment, we can come another moment," Hinata said, in an apologetic tone.

"Yes, I was going to leave, but we can spend some time together," Kurenai suggested. "If you want, you can come with me to the place I'm heading."

"Sounds nice," Haku agreed. "Where are you going?"

"First, I'm going to stop at the Yamanaka Flower Shop to buy some flowers. Then I'm heading to the cemetery."

Her three students blinked in surprise.

"Uh, are you sure you want us to go with you? I mean, cemeteries aren't the kind of places you go with friends," Naruto uneasily said, as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"On the contrary. I think they're places when one needs the support of your friends and family the most," Kurenai countered. "Since in those places, we're at our most vulnerable."

Her three students looked pensive upon those words sunk in. They always thought that when one was with their deceased loved ones, it

was a moment of personal privacy, not to be shared with other people.

"Besides, that way I can talk you about a certain somebody I would have loved for you to meet," Kurenai said.

"Alright then," Naruto said with a shrug. "Let's go then."

"Since we're at it, I might visit Father's grave as well," Hinata said, before she rubbed her arm. "I admit that I don't pay him as many visits as I should."

Their first stop was the Yamanaka Flower Shop to buy some flowers. At the counter was Ino's mother, who, after some light talking, told the members of the Assault Squad about Ino's recent streak of doing solo missions, much to her sensei and teammate's concerns.

"I'll tell her about it the next time I see her," Hinata had promised Mrs. Yamanaka.

Naruto's reaction, or lack of thereof, didn't go unnoticed by his perceptive girlfriend, as if somehow Ino's behavior didn't surprise him. She made a note to ask Naruto if he knew something about Ino. After pushing those thoughts to the back of her mind, Hinata bought some carnations to leave at her father's grave. Carnations meant admiration for a loved one and acknowledging their great deeds, something befitting for her proud father. She saw Kurenai ordering some white roses, which symbolized innocence, and made her wonder who was this person she was going to visit.

"Hey, Hinata, I was going to buy some flowers to leave at my biological parents' grave. Do you have any suggestions?" Naruto asked. "Though something different from yours. I don't want to copy you."

"Try gladiolus. They symbolize strength, honor and loving memories," Hinata replied. "I'm sure that's how both you and everybody else remember the Fourth Hokage and his wife."

Naruto smiled at her suggestion. "Thank you, I'll do that."

In the end, Haku was the only one who didn't buy any flowers. He explained them that after his father killed his mother, and he killed his father in self defense, he left their hometown fearing for his life, and thus he doesn't know what has been of their bodies.

"Have you thought about them?" Kurenai asked. "Maybe return to the Land of Water, and see if at least they were given proper burial?"

"Sometimes," Haku said, sounding oddly neutral. "But I was so little when they went away... I have no lost love for my father, but I don't even remember what my mother used to look like."

"That's so sad," Hinata emphatically said.

"I guess it is. But it's not so bad anymore. I do have a new home and a new family. Yugao-san and Hayate-san took care of me when I came to live here, and there's Zabuza-sama. They're as much family to me as my mother was, even if we aren't related by blood."

A few minutes later, they arrived at the cemetery. While Kurenai, accompanied by Haku, went to visit her father's grave, Hinata and Naruto went to visit the grave of Hiashi Hyuga.

"Do you think in your father?" Naruto asked.

"Sometimes," Hinata replied. "I'm twice as old as I was back when he was taken away from us. And Hanabi-chan hardly remembers him. Can't blame her for that, since he was not even four."

"I do have some vague memories of him," Naruto told her. "He looked quite stern and imposing. He made quite the first impression when I first met him."

"Yes, father was strict. Though he could be loving and understanding as well," Hinata replied. "I guess he had to appear strong in order to maintain order in the clan."

"Wonder what he would have thought had he seen your speech when you were appointed the new clan head," Naruto said, chuckling a little upon recalling the memory.

"I like to think he'd be proud of me," Hinata said, a bit unsure. "He was a man of high expectations. But I'm sure that he would have loved to see the clan united."

"He would be more than just proud," Naruto added.

After spending a few more minutes, the couple moved to the graves of Minato Namikaze and Kushina Uzumaki. Naruto placed half of the flowers on each grave, and stood there without saying anything.

"I admit that I should have visit them more as well. But hey, I didn't even get to know them, so it's kind of hard," Naruto said, trying to sound justified, before his face softened. "Still, they were my birth parents and died to protect me. Plus I'm their only living relative. They deserve as much."

"Jiraiya-sama used to be the Fourth's sensei. Did he tell you about him?" Hinata asked.

"Yeah, plenty of stuff. He was a pretty cool guy and a badass ninja. The ideal all ninjas should strive for," Naruto said, chuckling a little. "Or at least, that's what dad used to say."

"There's also Kakashi-sensei and Rin, who studied under him," Hinata reminded her boyfriend.

"Yeah, I asked Rin a few thing about him. Makes me wish I was able to meet him," Naruto sotly replied, his voice laced with some melancholy. "I can't believe it was one of his students who caused his death. I could never picture neither myself or any of you guys doing something like that to Kurenai-sensei."

"From what Rin told us, Obito's case was far more complex than what we think," Hinata replied, and realizing that she sounded like

she was defending Obito, she quickly added: "Not to say that's an excuse for all the atrocities he did. It's just that... we like to think we know both ourselves and those close to us, but everybody can change or do something out of character in a dire situation."

"Still, how one does go from wanting to be Hokage to setting a Tailed Beast loose in the village and not caring how many people die?" Naruto questioned.

Hinata placed a comforting hand on Naruto's shoulder. "I don't know. But I think it would be best if never found out."

"Guess you're right," Naruto admitted, before something caught his attention. "Oh look, there are Haku and Kurenai-sensei!"

"Let's go meet with them then," Hinata said, removing her hand from Naruto's shoulder.

The group of four gathered together, and the raven haired woman lead them to a certain grave in the most recent part of the graveyard. Apparently, it was from the heir of a certain clan, whose symbol was a wing segmented in three parts as if there were feathers. Kurenai's three students read the name in the tombstone.

HERE LIES YAKUMO KURAMA

LAST MEMBER OF THE KURAMA CLAN

"So, a clan died with this girl," Haku noted, grimly realizing that he could have been in a very similar predicament.

"How did you know this girl, Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked.

"The Kurama was a clan specialized in genjutsu, thanks to their Bloodline Limit, which made their illusions so lifelike, the body would react as if it was the real thing. For example, a genjutsu of fire would cause actual burns in the skin," Kurenai explained.

"Amazing," Naruto gushed upon knowing such a bloodline exists. Or existed.

"However, not all members manifest this bloodline. In fact, this bloodline hasn't been manifested since the times of Hashirama. This caused the clan to dwindle in both size and importance over the decades. Until Yakumo was born, and much to their parents joy, she had the bloodline. However, there were complications. She had some health problems, and had a lot of trouble keeping her powers under control.

"That's why Hokage-sama tasked me to personally train this girl -it was a year or so before I became your sensei-. I made a lot of progress with her, and her health improved thanks to a treatment developed by Tsunade-sama, and had hopes that she could become a Genin. However, before she could be examined, tragedy struck; her house was caught in a massive fire, killing both her and her parents." Kurenai finished her explanation.

Kurenai's words were followed by a long moment of silence as her students absorbed them.

"While the charred corpses of her parents were found, there was no trace of her body," Kurenai stated. "At first I had hopes that maybe she escaped and was alive somewhere out there, but in the end I was forced to admit the truth. Yakumo and her clan were gone forever."

"How is that you never told us about this other student of yours, Kurenai-sensei?" Naruto asked. Though he sounded more curious rather than indignant.

"Yakumo was my tragedy, not yours. I didn't see the need to get you involved in this," Kurenai replied.

"Even then, I'm glad you told us about her," Hinata chimed in. "That way, more people will remember her. Even if we didn't get to meet her when she was alive."

Kurenai smiled a little. "Yes, that's a way of seeing it, I guess."

At that moment, a lizard-masked ANBU appeared before them.

"Naruto Uzumaki, Hinata Hyuga, Haku Yuki. Hokage-sama requires your presence for an urgent mission of utmost importance," the ANBU told them, his tone being stoic but at the same time conveying urgency.

Kurenai's three students exchanged knowing glances, realizing what such mission was going to be.

"Guess we'll have to continue our talk another time, Kurenai-sensei," Naruto apologized.

"Don't worry. I know that when duty calls, you must heed said call. Come on, go," the Genjutsu Mistress said.

Her three students quickly waved her goodbye before leaving for the Hokage Tower.

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Hokage's Tower

The three younger members of the Assault Squad were in the Hokage's office, standing in front of Jiraiya, sitting in his desk. His face sported a serious look, and was holding a scroll in his hand. The crest of Kirigakure was visible on the scroll.

"A few moments ago, this message arrived from the Mizukage," Jiraiya began, showing them the furred scroll. "She said that her forces had located the jinchuriki of the Six Tails, Utakata."

Naruto instantly beamed the moment the news reached his ears.

"That's great!" Naruto beamed. However, his expression turned serious the moment a certain thought sunk in. "But she didn't write that message just to tell us that Utakata is safe, right?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "She send a team of ANBU lead by two of her swordsmen in order to retrieve and escort him back to the village, but he refused. A fight ensued, and eventually the ANBU were forced to retire, since they couldn't risk harming him in any way. Upon seeing the outcome of the mission, Mei realized that maybe the word of another jinchuriki might be make Utakata see reason and return to the safety of Kirigakure."

"And that's where I enter the picture, right?" the blond guessed.

Jiraiya nodded. "Yes. According to this message, Utakata and some girl that travels with him are currently in a place called Nagi Island. The Kirigakure team will be waiting for you," the Hokage pulled out another small scroll and tossed it to Naruto, who easily caught it. "This scroll contain additional information on the mission. Now that you know the essentials, you should hurry and head towards Nagi Island as soon as possible. You will take several days to arrive there, and it's possible that by that time Utakata might have left. If that happens, the Kiri ninja will follow him as to not lose his track. Not to mention the constant threat of the Akatsuki."

The three of them nodded, but it was Naruto who replied. "Leave it in our hands, dad. Akatsuki will go home empty handed this time around!"

After bidding Naruto farewell and hoping he had luck on his mission, Jiraiya returned to work. Given that there were no scheduled meetings for that day, Jiraiya decided to try to finish the paperwork for the day as soon as possible with the help of Shadow Clones, and then spend some time writing the next Icha Icha novel -he was way behind schedule, but he was sure his fans would understand- and after that, do something with Tsunade and the kids.

The twins' kidnapping attempt made Jiraiya realize how easily somebody could take your loved ones away from you, and he wasn't going to let anything to enjoy every moment he could with his wife and kids.

At that moment, somebody knocked the door. Jiraiya suppressed a groan, he wasn't in the mood for a surprise meeting or any bad news. It'd better be important.

"Come in!" Jiraiya said.

The door opened, revealing Itachi Uchiha. Yep, it was important.

"Hokage-sama, I finished my investigation in Amegakure," Itachi began. "I managed to abduct one of its ninjas, and bring him here. I left him at Torture & Interrogation, but I took the liberty of interrogating him myself to see what he knew."

"Please take a seat," Jiraiya said, waving at one of the chairs in front of him. "And tell me everything. Leave no details out."

Itachi nodded, sat down, and gave Jiraiya a detailed recollection of his infiltration in Amegakure, up to the interrogation part.

"Your suspicions turned out to be correct, Hokage-sama. As Torture & Interrogation will more than likely confirm, Hanzo the Salamander is no longer the leader of Amegakure, and hasn't been for at least the past five years," Itachi stated. "Akatsuki controls the village."

Jiraiya let out a long sigh, as he leaned back on his chair. Those weren't good news in the slightest. Hanzo might have been a loose canon and a warmonger, but at the very least he was easy to both predict and appease.

"And since the ninja you interrogated was a mere Genin, I'm going to assume that such knowledge is both public and supported by the population," Jiraiya guessed. This definitely wasn't going to be the same situation as with Taki.

But much to his surprise, Itachi shook his head. "No, the man has no idea what Akatsuki is, even if he already met one already. Apparently, the village leaders are someone they call 'God' and his 'Angel'. He did meet the latter."

"Do you have a description?" Jiraiya asked, fearing the answer.

"A woman in her thirties. Shoulder length blue hair in a bob haircut with a small bun, decorated with an origami flower. Light brown eyes. A piercing under her lower lip. The woman seems to have some sort of power over paper. If it's a Bloodline Limit or a secret jutsu, I can't tell," Itachi explained.

Another long sigh. Yes, he feared that answer for a very good reason. Naturally, such obvious reaction didn't go unnoticed by somebody so observant as Itachi.

"Hokage-sama? Is everything okay?" The Uchiha asked. "Is the woman familiar to you?"

"Sadly yes, she is," Jiraiya replied. The possible suspects of who this 'God' might be was pretty small, and Jiraiya knew he could reduce it to just one name.

"Do you... want me to do something about it?" Itachi offered.

"No, you already did enough. I need to check a few things and talk with some people before further action can be taken on this issue," Jiraiya replied. "Take a few days to rest. I heard that your brother was particularly upset after his latest mission, so maybe spending time with you might do him some good."

Itachi stood up, and made a bow. "Thank you, Hokage-sama. Do not hesitate to call me if you have another mission only I can complete."

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Nagi Island

As Jiraiya had said, it took them almost a week to reach Nagi Island, since they had to travel all the way to the coast of the Land of Fire, and find and board a ship that could get them to the place in question. Luckily, Mei had already foreseen this and took the liberty

to rent a ship that was already waiting for the Konoha team. Still, even if the ship was fast and the wind and waters were favorable, the trip by sea took four days.

As they got off from the ship and walked into the small port town, the three Konoha ninja took a moment to examine it. So far, the port town, while unremarkable at first sight, it was busy and teeming with activity. Being a neutral country, people from other nations saw Nagi Island as a nexus to do deals with other countries in a safe way.

"Alright, here we are," Naruto said. "Dad said that somebody from Kiri should be here. Hinata, use your Tenseigan to-"

"HEY, YOU GUYS! OVER HERE!" a female voice yelled among the crowd of people.

Turning in the direction of the voice, they saw Miyako and Suigetsu, wearing the Kirigakure Jonin uniform, as well as carrying their respective swords, the Helmet Splitter on Miyako's back and the Sewing Needle attached to Suigetsu's belt.

"Well, that was easier than we expected," Naruto pointed out.

"The mission demands for us not to waste any time. I appreciate that they took the effort to look for us," Haku said. The others couldn't help but nod.

As they walked towards the two young Swordsmen of the Mist, Suigetsu and Miyako greeted them with a polite bow.

"Naruto-san, Hinata-san, it's nice to see you again," the blue haired woman said, before turning to Haku. "It's good to see you too, Ambassador."

"The feeling is mutual," Haku replied, returning the bow.

"Sorry for my bluntness, but shall we skip the pleasantries and go directly to the matter at hand?" Naruto interjected, growing a little

antsy at the exchange.

"Sure," Suigetsu said. "Come on, let's go."

...

After leaving the port town, they advanced into the island, which was composed mostly of very thick forests, that would remind the Konoha trio of the Land of Fire, if there wasn't for the many rivers and lakes that crossed the mass of land. One certainly could feel peace and harmony while being in such natural paradise.

"Even if you guys took some time to arrive, Uakata is still in the island," Suigetsu spoke. "Fortunately, despite our initial confrontation, we made him believe that we're not going to try anything."

"But that may change soon," Miyaki continued. "Uakata never stays in the same place for long, so it's a good thing that you arrived in time. As far as our last report goes, he's stil here."

"And where is he, might I ask?" Hinata said.

"He and the girl he travels with -we believe she's an apprentice of some sort- set a camp at the edge of a small waterfall lake. Our Hunter-nin watch his every step," Suigetsu said.

"Man, you send *Hunter-nin* after him? No wonder the guy reacted so bad then!" Naruto indignantly pointed out.

"Hey, what were we supposed to do?" Suigetsu said with a defensive shrug. "Hunter-nin are usually dispatched in these kind of situations. Anyway, that's why we requested your presence here. Maybe another jinchuriki might make him change his mind and see reason."

"Before Naruto-kun can attempt anything, we'll need to know more about this person," Hinata interjected. "What can you tell us about him?"

"Utakata was a very skilled ninja. He graduated the Academy at ten, got a promotion to Chunin the next year, and Jonin when he was just sixteen. While we don't know the exact date, we believe he was made into a jinchuriki when he was a small child. Though such thing was never a problem for Utakata," Miyaki explained, as if she was recalling the text of a Bingo Book. "Until one day, when he was twenty one, he lost control of his Tailed Beast, killing his sensei and many other ninjas in the process. After that, he fled Kirigakure and became a vagrant ever since."

"Do you know what caused to lose control of his Tailed Beast?" Haku asked, being the question in the minds of Naruto and Hinata as well.

Both Miyaki and Suigetsu shook their heads. "Whatever happened, he refuses to tell."

"Also, it's worth noting that at some point about a year ago, he started to travel with a girl. Younger than him, I'd say about eighteen to twenty years of age," Suigetsu added, before the white haired swordsman's lips formed a toothy grin. "Guess a man can't be alone that much time, hehe."

"We aren't sure what their relationship is," Miyaki punctualized, shooting Suigetsu a disapproving look. "Anyway, when we arrive at his location, I think it would be for the best if you got close to him alone. Our approach has to be as nonthreatening as possible."

"What if Utakata attacks Naruto-kun?" Hinata suggested, worry creeping through her spine. "How strong is he, by the way?"

"Like Miyako said, very strong," Suigetsu stated. "And that's not even counting his jinchuriki powers. We do know he has some degree of mastery over them."

"It's okay. There won't be a fight. I know I'll be able to convince him of the threat that hangs over his head. Over all of our heads," Naruto corrected himself.

"Several Kiri ANBU are heading towards our position," Hinata stated.

"They must be our Hunter-Nin," Suigetsu stated.

The two groups meet on the middle, and the Konoha ninja could see five ANBU, all of them wearing masks minus one, who appeared to be the leader of the small squad, a middle aged man with long dark brown hair, and a small beard and a moustache.

"Suigetsu-sama, Miyaki-sama. I see that you brought the Konoha ninjas at last," the man said, smiling a little. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Tsurugi, ANBU Captain."

"I'm Naruto Uzumaki, and these are Hinata Hyuga and Haku Yuki," Naruto stated. "I'm the jinchuriki, by the way."

"I see. It's good to have you here," Tsurugi said, before his eyes rested on Haku. "You must be the ambassador appointed by Mizukage-sama at the end of the civil war, right? It's an honor to meet you."

"The feeling is likewise. But unfortunately, pleasantries will have to wait. Do you know where the jinchuriki is?" Haku asked.

"Yes. He and his apprentice set their camp at the edge of a river. They've been there for the past few days, but for the look of it, it seems like they're ready to move out. You guys arrived just in time," Tsurugi explained.

"Good. Tell me where they are, and I'll go. But please, have your men stand back. I need to be alone for this work," Naruto said.

"That's not a good idea, Naruto-san," Tsurugi countered. "Jinchuriki or not, you are still a stranger to Utakata. You won't be able to win him with words alone. I know that man. I think I should go with you."

"If you do that, he'll smell a trap," Naruto pointed out.

"And what do you think he's going to think when he sees a Konoha jinchuriki so far away from his home nation?" Tsurugi asked. Naruto blinked, not taking into account such possibility.

"Still, I think it's for the best if I'm alone. Even if he guesses my intentions or that we're in cahoots with you guys, if I go alone he won't feel as threatened," Naruto replied.

Tsusugi crossed his arms over his chest, and appeared to ponder Naruto's reasoning. He had to admit that, even if his intentions could be obvious, Naruto was right. His appeal would sound much more sincere and nonthreatening if he was alone.

"Okay then. But we'll be near you in case something happens," Tsurugi stated.

"Is Utakata-san a sensor?" Hinata chimed in. "He might sense our presence if it's the case."

"As far as I can tell, no," it was Miyaki who answered. "But that man has been running away from people like us for years, so the guy does know when somebody is following or spying on him. Meaning that we should be extra careful while masking our presence."

"Understood. Then, I'll watch from the skies. I doubt he'll be able to realize somebody's up there," Hinata said, before she took off into the sky, much to the Kiri ninja's amazement, and Naruto and Haku's nonchalance. Which didn't go unnoticed by the former group.

"Did that... did that girl just... flew into the sky?" a flabbergasted Suigetsu asked.

"Yeah, she did," Naruto happily said, placing his arms behind his back. "Man, I never get tired of seeing people's reactions when they see her fly for the first time."

"She didn't fly when I first met you guys," Miyaki pointed out, still looking upwards.

"No. That's something she learned to do recently," Naruto replied.

Miyaki pouted a little. "The Civil War would have ended much sooner if we had a ninja that could fly..."

...

Naruto tried to lower his guard as he walked towards the campsite. It was a foolish thing for a ninja to do, but being nonthreatening was key, and the last thing he needed was the other jinchuriki attacking him out of the blue. As he walked, not even bothering with stealth, even making sure that the two people in the campsite heard him coming, the blond took a look at the two people in it.

A man and a woman. The woman was a little older than him, with long dark blond hair and blue eyes, wearing a pink, sleeveless kimono that reached down her hips. She was setting up a small fire. This woman had to be his apprentice/partner/lover/whatever.

The man, whom Naruto guessed was Uta-kata, was pretty tall. He had short brown hair, with a bang covering his left side of the face, leaving a light brown eye visible. His lithe and svelte body was covered by a long light blue kimono -loose enough to reveal his bare chest- tied by an orange sash.

"Hotaru, stay here. I'll deal with him," Naruto heard him say as he handed her a handful of recently caught fishes.

"Hey there!" Naruto said, happily waving at him. He hoped his cheerfulness didn't come off as too fake.

"I don't know who you are," Uta-kata cut him off, as he walked towards the incoming blond. "And I don't know what do you want either. But if you appreciate your life, you'll turn around and go back to when you came from."

"Whoa, there!" Naruto said, bringing his hands up in defense. "You didn't even let me talk!"

"Because I have no interest in what you have to say," Utakata repeated. "Now leave. This is my last warning."

"My name is Naruto Uzumaki. Listen, I know you're a jinchuriki," Naruto stated. The woman gasped a little upon hearing this, though less from the fact itself and more for Naruto knowing it. Utakata, however, remained impassible. "So I am."

Utakata was taken a back a little, but his frown soon returned. "Liar."

"I don't lie. Tailed Beasts share a special link. When two jinchuriki are together, they can feel that link. I'm sure that you can feel it as well," Naruto insisted.

Utakata was ready to deny such thing, but he was unable to. He did feel a weird connection to the blond, something he only felt with another person in his whole life. Still, that didn't change much. The blond was still suspicious to him.

"I admit that you're right. I feel a connection with you. But that leaves the question of what a Konoha ninja," he started, taking a look at Naruto's headband. "Is interested in a vagrant like myself. It can't be just because we're jinchuriki."

"Actually, that's exactly the reason," Naruto replied. "Some Kiri ninja contacted you in the past days, right?"

"Yes, they wanted me to return to Kiri," Utakata replied, before a realization dawned upon him. His frown turned into a scowl "Wait a minute... you're with them, right? They called you to convince me to return to Kiri? In know that, after the Civil War ended, Konoha and Kiri became allies."

" *Damn, this guy is good. Better try to be honest so he has no reason to suspect me of anything funny,*" Naruto thought, as a trickle of sweat ran through his neck. "Yes, they called me. And it's very important that you listen to them. You're in grave danger. All of our kind are."

"Danger? What kind of danger?" the woman asked, as he walked towards the duo.

"Don't listen to him, Hotaru. They're lies to make me go back to my old village," Uakata told her, before turning his gaze back to Naruto. "Like I said before, leave. Or I'll make you leave by force."

"No!" Naruto shouted, his previous goodwill evaporating. "I'm not going to let another one of us pointlessly die! You have to go back to the safety of your village! You're in danger here! And if you refuse, I'll make you return by force!"

Hotaru immediately placed herself between the two men, hoping to avert a needless fight. "Please, no! There's no need to fight!"

"You heard him, Hotaru. He threatened to bring me back to Kiri by force if I don't do as he says. I think a fight is inevitable at this point," Uakata seethed.

"No, it's not! Let's listen to what he has to say, okay? He doesn't look like an untrustworthy person." Hotaru insisted. Uakata didn't say anything, but judging by his body language, he appeared to agree with the girl. Hotaru then turned to Naruto. "What kind of danger are you talking about?"

"You see-"

"But first," Uakata cut him again. "Tell all the people with you to come out. If they're doing this for my own good and don't have any kind of ulterior motives, there's no need to stay hidden."

"I came here alone. The other Kiri ninjas are not here," Naruto stated.

"Come out, I know you're there! Tsurugi! Miyaki! Suigetsu!" Uakata shouted.

And much to Naruto's surprise -and chagrin- the Kiri ninja and Haku emerged from behind the trees. Naruto let out a defeated sigh.

"Guys, I told you not to come with me. Now you ruined it," the blond pouted.

"Sorry, but this was too important. In case you failed, we need to be prepared in order to take Ukatata by force to Kirigakure," Miyaki stated, ignoring the glare the jinchuriki of the Six Tails was shooting her.

"But such thing won't be necessary, because Ukatata will come to us of his own volition once he hears what's at stake," Naruto insisted, glaring at the blue haired swordswoman as well.

"If all of us are here, then there's no point in Hinata watching the sky," Haku said, waving upwards.

Much to Ukatata and Hotaru's surprise, they saw a blue haired girl with glowing teal eyes slowly descending from above.

...

Sometime later

Night fell upon Nagi Island.

While Ukatata was on edge at first, after some time he got used to the presence of the Hunter Nin. The masked ninjas did nothing other than stay silent and watch the campsite's surroundings, on the possibility that an enemy might appear before they could evacuate the jinchuriki. The rest were sitting around a fire while they enjoyed some dinner.

"And this Akatsuki people, you said that they already captured four jinchuriki?" Ukatata asked.

Naruto nodded energetically. "We managed to save one of them after his Tailed Beast was extracted, but it was mostly luck. I doubt we'll

be able to do that again."

"Akatsuki seems to learn from experience. After we rescued Gaara-san, it appears that they got better at hiding their lairs and bases," Hinata added.

"That's why it's so important we find all the remaining jinchuriki and put them in a safe place. And so far, the Great Villages are our best bet. Being in the open alone it's an invitation to the Akatsuki," Naruto urged.

"Are they that dangerous?" Hotaru asked. "Because Ukatata-sensei is very strong. If those Akatsuki came for him, I'm sure he'd be able to kick their butts."

"Akatsuki is comprised entirely of S-Rank criminals," it was Miyaki who spoke. "They know their prey are dangerous ones, that's why they made sure their members are able to face jinchuriki and win."

"Remember that they have defeated four other jinchuriki already," Haku added.

"So, why are they after us to begin with? Because of the Tailed Beasts?" Ukatata asked. Naruto nodded once again. "And how do they expect to control them? Few are the jinchuriki capable of such feat. I'm able to control some degree of the Six Tails' power, but too much and I lose control of it."

"Actually, they don't plan to become jinchuriki themselves. You see..."

Naruto told Ukatata everything he knew about the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, and how if all nine Tailed Beasts were sealed inside it, the Ten Tails would be revived, which would spell the end of the world. How Akatsuki planned to take control of the best, Naruto didn't know, but in either case that monster couldn't be allowed to be reborn.

Both Utakata and Hotaru took a few moments to let the blond's tale sink in. While they looked surprised at first, they were now pensive. The jinchuriki more than his apprentice, though.

"What you say is indeed troubling. But I still can't help but think that this is part of an elaborate ruse to get me back to the village," Utakata stated.

"Come on man, we left you alone for years! We didn't even try to recruit you when we were fighting against Yagura -and your help would have speed things up a lot-, so please tell me why did we change our mind now?" Suigetsu hotly protested.

"Yes. And I doubt the jinchuriki of Konoha could have bothered to come all the way to this place just to sell you a lie," Miyaki added. "This is serious, Utakata-san. Words alone can't convey the threat Akatsuki is. Besides their power, they also have influence. It was them who controlled Yagura and turned our village into the so called Blood Mist."

"Hell, we don't even want you to come to Kirigakure in particular. If you want to stay in Konoha or Suna, then fine," Suigetsu suggested. "Our orders were to make you go to any of those three villages. But why would you prefer Konoha or Suna over your own home, well, I couldn't really tell."

Hotaru tugged Utakata's sleeve. "I think they're telling the truth, sensei. Besides, what would the Mizukage win by having you go to another village?"

The stubborn jinchuriki had to admit they had a point. Still, all the mistrusts and misanthropy built over his years of isolation after his sensei's apparent betrayal weren't easy to ignore. Even then, there was still a part of him that was constantly warn him of an impending danger.

"What do you say then? Will you let us protect you?" Naruto hopefully asked.

Utakata took a few moments to think his answer before he opened his mouth. "For the time being, let's wait until tomorrow morning. I need some time to think about what you guys told me."

While all of them were cautious and didn't get their hopes up, the fact that the jinchuriki had at least listened to them and was going to take their words into consideration was indeed a small victory. All that was left was to hope that Utakata would agree to take shelter in one of the three Great Villages.

After the tense discussion, people on both sides started to calm down. In order to maximize their chances, Naruto approached Utakata in order to make some small talk and bond with him, while also being careful not to mention anything that made it obvious he was trying to sway his decision. Empathy was the best course of action.

As they talked, Hotaru decided to do the same and sat closer to Naruto's two teammates. She put on her friendliest smile when greeting them.

"Hello there. I don't think we've been introduced to each other. My name is Hotaru, and I'm Utakata-sensei's apprentice," Hotaru began.

"Hello, Hotaru-san. My name is Hinata Hyuga, and this is Haku Yuki. We're Naruto-kun's teammates, though you probably guessed that already," Hinata replied. "Besides his teammate, I'm also Naruto-kun's girlfriend."

"Really? Cool. You make a cute couple," the dark blonde complimented, before switching topics. "So, you think Naruto will convince Utakata-sensei to return to his home?"

"We hope so. Naruto-kun has the ability to reach people's heart with his earnestness. I have faith he can do it," Haku replied. "Though I wouldn't be surprised if he failed this time. While things are better now, the Land of Water used to be a pretty dangerous place, in no small part thanks to the Blood Mist."

"Are you from the Land of Water?" Hotaru asked. "You wear both a Konoha and Kiri forehead protector. I didn't know a ninja could be loyal to two villages, even if they are allied. I mean, if war broke between Konoha and Kiri, who would you side with?"

"To answer your first question, yes, I was born in the Land of Water, but I grew up in Konoha, that's why I wear Konoha's crest around my forehead. However, I was made ambassador of Kiri in Konoha after the Civil War ended, hence the Kiri forehead protector in my neck," Haku explained. "And to answer your second question, it's my job to make sure such thing doesn't happen. But if war eventually broke out, I wouldn't take sides; I'd try my best to make sure both sides stopped fighting and reached an agreement."

"I see. Let's hope that such thing doesn't come to pass then," Hotaru replied, smiling at him.

"What about you, Hotaru-san? How did you become Ukatata-san's apprentice?" Hinata asked. "I might be judging him too hastily, but he doesn't look to be a man patient enough to have an apprentice."

"Your judgement isn't that far off, Hinata. I met Ukatata-sensei when he protected me from a group of ninja, though they were actually after him. I took him home and treated his injuries, and after seeing how strong he was, I asked him to be my sensei. At first he gave me overly difficult exercises in order to make me give up, but I was determined to complete them," Hotaru began.

"Such as?" Hinata asked.

"He first asked me to walk on water, when I hadn't have any kind of chakra control," she explained, while Haku and Hinata winced.

"Though with perseverance, I managed to do it!"

"But that wasn't the end of it, was it?" Haku guessed.

"Not by a long shot!" Hotaru replied, laughing a little. "He then had me do a water jutsu, despite the fact that I didn't even know if my

affinity was water to begin with, or even doing the basic exercises first. But once again, I proved my worth!"

"He really did want to get rid of you," Hinata stated, sounding a bit dazed.

"He did. But in the end, I proved I had the resolve to be her apprentice, and in the end he accepted me," Hotaru stated. "I like to think that he grew to appreciate my company and saw me as a worthy apprentice."

"If he allowed you to stick with him for so long, I believe that's the case," Haku stated. "I know a thing or two about hard teachers. Albeit in my case Zabuza-sama never wanted to get rid of me, just make me as strong as possible in the shortest amount of time."

"You mean Zabuza, as in the current leader of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist?" Hotaru asked, genuinely surprised. "Wow! And here I thought that I was so lucky to have somebody as Utakata-sensei as my teacher!"

"*Lucky?*" Hinata thought. "*But Utakata-san wanted to get rid of her...*"

"Also, sorry for asking you this. We know Utakata-san's stance, but what about you? Do you have any opinion on what Utakata-san should do?" Haku asked.

"As his apprentice, I'll follow him no matter what he decides. But honestly, I'd prefer if he decided to stay in one of the villages," Hotaru replied. "Not just for the sake of being safer, but because while traveling the world and meeting new people is fine, I'd like if we decided to stay in the same place more than a couple weeks. Both him and I could make more permanent friends."

"And you think you could convince him to do that?" Hinata asked.

Hotaru chuckled a little. "You already met Utakata-sensei, and know how stubborn he is. I can try, but don't expect much. I'm more interested in traveling with him than he is in having me following him around, and he's very aware of that," Hotaru admitted, averting her gaze. "If I told him that I want to live to one of the villages, he'll say that I'm free to do it."

"Still, it would be great if you tried," Haku insisted. "The stakes are really high."

"Don't worry, I didn't say no. I'll try to get on his case once he stops talking with Naruto-san and we can be alone," Hotaru promised. "But like I said, don't expect him to put much weight on my wants."

"Thank you for your effort, Hotaru-san," Hinata replied. "We don't ask more than that."

...

Nagi Island Port Town

Most ships usually avoided travelling during the night, since it was an incredibly dangerous thing to do. Without natural light, it was very hard to see rock formations in the coast that could sink a vessel. And sadly Nagi Island lacked a lighthouse to guide ships in the dark of the night.

Even then, a small ship managed to arrive at the island. It didn't stop at the dock, since its occupants didn't want to draw attention to their presence. Instead, they dropped the anchor when they were close to the shore, jumped into the water, and using chakra, they walked, or better said, ran, towards the island.

"So, the Six Tails Jinchuriki is somewhere in this island, according to the intel," one of the figures that came out of the ship stated.

"Indeed he is, Konan," the other one replied.

"How are you so sure?" Konan asked.

"If he left this island, we would have been warned. No, he is here, and he's unaware of the danger that hangs over his head."

"I see. What is the plan, Pain?" Konan asked.

"For the time being, let's track the jinchuriki. Find if he's alone, or if there's anybody accompanying him. Then, we'll devise an strategy, and attack," Pain replied.

"We must be swift and careful. I wouldn't put past the Great Villages to start gathering the wandering jinchuriki as well just to stop to our plans," Konan sagely advised.

"Let them try," the Akatsuki leader replied. "Nothing but pain will await to those who stand in our way."

Author's Note: If there's something I like about this arc, is that I finally get to write my favorite villain. Here comes the Pain! Our heroes are indeed in a bad situation, given what's coming for them. Will they be able to save Utaakata, or will he follow Yugito and die at the hands of the Akatsuki?

It was also nice to bring back a couple of the characters from the Kiri arc. Too bad I couldn't bring as many as I could. Still, there will be more chances in the future for them to shine as well.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, will our heroes survive against Pain, given that they have to face him much earlier than they did in canon? Share your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Facing a God

Author's Note: It seems that a lot of people enjoyed Utakata's debut. Let's hope that the continuation is just as well received, especially since it features my favorite villain. Enjoy:

Chapter 70:

Facing a God

or

Here Comes the Pain!

Nagi Island, Morning

"As I said, I've been thinking about what you told me. The threat of Akatsuki, and what should I do in order to avoid it," Utakata began.

Everybody listened to him intently. What he would say next would determine if the mission could end here and there and finally take the jinchuriki to a safe place, or if the Kiri and Konoha ninja would have to subdue him by force.

"At first, I thought that if I did what I've been doing this past years, moving from one place to another and never staying in the same place for long, I'd be able to evade the Akatsuki," Utakata stated. "However, you finding me is evidence that such plan isn't going to work. I also thought that, in the case they got me, I could defend myself from whoever they send to capture me. But again, the fact that Akatsuki captured other jinchuriki already also means that it'd be foolish if I was so overconfident."

Both Miyaki and Suigetsu looked hopeful.

"Does that mean...?" Miyake began, almost holding her breath.

"Yes. I decide to let myself to be taken into the Great Villages' custody," Utaka finished.

Everybody cheered upon hearing the jinchuriki's response, Hotaru included, much to Uakata's surprise, who raised an eyebrow at this. He cleared his throat to indicate that he wasn't finished.

"However, I do have a condition," Uakata stated.

The cheering abruptly stopped, and the mood died down. Miyaki, however, kept a positive attitude.

"Whatever it is, Uakata-san, I'm sure we can provide it," she said in a conciliatory tone. "As long as it's something reasonable, that's it. So, what do you want for Kiri to offer you?"

"I want nothing from Kiri," Uakata stated, his voice laced with some venom. "I don't want to return to that place. You told me that I was able to go to any of the Great Villages, right? In that case, I want to go to Konoha. That's my request."

"Really? That's awesome!" Naruto cheered, pumping a fist in the air.

"May I ask why do you wish to come to our village, Uakata-san?" Hinata asked. "Don't you prefer to return to your own home?"

"Not that we won't welcome you," Haku helpfully added.

"If you need to know my reasons, well, the first one is that I have way too many painful memories attached to Kirigakure, and I do not wish to return there. Second, Konoha already houses two jinchuriki, as far as you told me," the brown haired man looked at Naruto. "The only jinchuriki I ever met was Yagura, and he wasn't a very pleasant man. Now that I have this opportunity, I wish to know both you and the other jinchuriki better. And third, of all the available options, Konoha seems to be the safest." Uakata then looked at Haku. "And from what you told me, I won't be the first Land of Water native to move there."

"You're not going to regret it, I can assure you that," Haku replied while nodding.

"Then it's settled! Utakata and Hotaru will move to Konoha!" Naruto shouted, as excited as a little boy with a new toy.

"Hey, I said that I'd be there as long as the Akatsuki threat persists. Once this is over, I'll go back to the road," Utakata interjected.

"Fair enough. But I wouldn't be surprised if you changed your mind over your stay there," Haku added, smiling a little.

"I also want to state that I don't plan to become a Konoha ninja nor do missions for your village. That part of my life is already over," Utakata firmly stated.

"Don't worry. Nobody will force you to do anything you don't want to," Naruto assured him, before he shot his fellow jinchuriki a foxy grin. "Not that I won't try to change your mind."

Utakata grimaced a little. "I'm already regretting this decision."

"Come on, Utakata-sensei! I'm sure being in Konoha will be fun!" Hotaru chimed in. Her sensei just sighed.

As they watched the happy exchange, the Kiri ninjas looked less excited than their Konoha counterparts, but they were content nonetheless.

"We were hoping we could convince you to come back home. I'm going to admit we wanted to have a jinchuriki again," Suigetsu stated.

"But we will be happy to know that our enemies won't be able to lay their hands upon you," Miyaki stated. "And who knows, maybe in the future, once Mei-sama wipes away every trace of the Blood Mist, we can convince you to come back."

"You're planning way too much ahead," Uakata stated in annoyance.

"Anyway, now that it's settled, I believe we should get going. The more we stay in the same place, the bigger the Akatsuki's chances of finding us," Suigetsu stated. "We should go back to the port town, get a ship that goes to the Land of Fire, and escort Uakata to Konohagakure."

Miyaki nodded. "We will tag along until Uakata-san is safe behind Konoha's walls. Is that okay with you?" Miyaki asked.

The Konoha ninja looked at each other, looking for their mutual approval, and quickly nodded.

"Yeah, the more we are, the better," Naruto said. "Now, let's pack everything up as fast as we can and get moving."

...

True to Naruto's words, they picked up the campsite and got moving in record time. Jumping from one tree branch to another -except Hinata, who flew close to them-, the group of Konoha and Kiri ninjas made their way back to the port town. They needed to get back there and get into a ship as soon as possible. Once in the sea, the chances of an ambush happening would be close to zero. And in the Land of Fire they'd be safer than in a small island in the middle of nowhere.

"If we keep this pace, we'll reach the port town in little more than half an hour," Miyaki stated.

"Let's try to make it into less than that," Naruto suggested.

Everybody nodded, and increased their pace. Despite the good mood, they wanted to finish this mission as soon as possible, since they felt like they were carrying a potentially dangerous cargo that

could blow up at any second, and that filled them with a feeling of uneasiness.

And true to that, the metaphorical cargo was about to blow up.

"SHINRA TENSEI!"

Nobody knew where it came from, but one second, the group was moving forward, and the next a powerful shockwave blasted them upwards, while tearing down several trees in the process, creating a clearing in the area. All of them landed painfully in the now clear ground with several painful thuds.

"Oww..."

"Where did that come from?"

"No time to groan! Everybody, get back to your feet and ready to fight!" Suigetsu called, as his body, which had been partially liquified by the blast, started to reform.

"Hinata-hime, find the enemies!" Naruto asked.

"I'm on it!" his girlfriend replied, as she expanded her field vision in order to find said enemies. She took no time to find a figure wearing a black cloak with red clouds standing in their path. "Akatsuki is here!"

"Of course, this mission would be too easy if they didn't show up," Naruto groaned, as he rolled his eyes. "How many of them? Where are they?"

"They're..." Hinata began, but cut herself as something caught her attention. Another Akatsuki, flying above them. But most distressingly was what she was about to do. "Explosive tags coming from above! They're without number!"

Instinctively, everybody looked up, and indeed, they saw hundreds upon hundreds of explosive tags floating above them, around a

member of Akatsuki that kept herself in the air thanks to a pair of wings attached to her back that appeared to be made of paper. The Akatsuki motioned her hand downwards, and the explosive tags rained upon them at such speed they appeared to weight as much as kunai.

"Oh shit!" Suigetsu cried.

"Everybody, get close to me!" Haku called, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Ice Release: Ice Rock Dome of Magnificent Nothingness!"

As everybody clustered around Haku, three domes made of ice quickly formed around them, just in time as the explosive tags reached them, unleashing a chain of explosions. The chain lasted several painfully long seconds, making the ground tremble with each blast. Those sheltered inside prayed for the domes to resist, while Haku struggled to keep them strong.

Eventually, the explosions ceased, and Haku allowed himself to stop channeling chakra into the jutsu, which quickly started to thaw. The Ice Ninja fell to his knees, a bit exhausted.

"Good job, Haku-san. If it wasn't for you, who knows how many of us would have perished," Miyaki praised, as her hands reached her Helmet Splitter.

"So, those our enemies, right?" Suigetsu said, also grabbing his sword, the Sewing Needle. "I never fought against an Akatsuki, but if this is how they open a fight... damn, we're for a fun time."

The Akatsuki on land was a man in his early thirties with spiky orange hair, his face and ears loaded with thick black piercings. He was wearing a slashed Amegakure forehead protector. But the trait that drew the most attention were his eyes, completely purple with a concentric ring pattern. The other Akatsuki, a blue haired woman the same age, with blue hair decorated with a flower, descended upon being close to him.

"You've been found at last, jinchuriki of the Six Tails," the man spoke. His voice was deep and ominous. "Now, I shall take the beast that you bear inside your body. Resisting is futile."

"The Nine Tails jinchuriki is also here," the woman observed. "We can capture the two of them at once. This opportunity it's too good to pass, Pain."

"You may be right, Konan," the man replied. "But for the time being, our main priority is the other."

Naruto made a hand seal, and two clones popped into existence. Without waiting to receive any order from their creator, the clones rushed in opposite directions, vanishing among the sea of trees.

"You said you fought Akatsuki before," Utakata told the Konoha ninja as he grabbed his bubble pipe. "Are these people familiar to you?"

"No, we never met them before," Naruto replied, growing tense. "But they look even more powerful than the ones we did."

"Your assessment is correct, Uzumaki," the man added. "Because in the past, you only fought against regular men. You're against a god now."

"We only want the jinchuriki. Surrender them, and we'll spare everybody else's lives," Konan offered.

"If you think we're going to do that, you're more stupid than you look!" Hotaru angrily replied.

Pain noticed that Naruto was staring at him intensely. More specifically, he was looking into his eyes. Something the Akatsuki didn't find unusual, but decided to ignore. That's it, until the blond opened his mouth.

"Those eyes... they're Rinnegan, correct?" Naruto solemnly asked.

Pain's lips curved into a small smile. "You're right. These are the eyes that once were wielded by the Sage of the Six Paths. As I carry them now, it is my duty to continue with the Sage's mission to create a world without war or strife."

"And how do you plan to do that? By hunting jinchuriki?" Naruto angrily replied. "Reviving the Ten Tails will only cause the end of the world!"

Konan opened her eyes widely when Naruto mentioned the name of the monster they were planning to restore.

"How do you... where did you...?" she blabbered.

"Their knowledge of the Ten Tails is irrelevant to our mission, as it will do them no good," Pain told Konan, sounding as omnious as confident as before, before his eyes turned towards Naruto again. "But if you need to know, the Ten Tails is the key to create that world. If somebody harnessed that vast power, that person would be without equal, and could use that power to put an end to all wars and misery in the world."

"But that wouldn't be real peace! If you know about the Sage and the Ten Tails, then you must know about Kaguya too!" Hinata heatedly interjected. "Such peace isn't bound to last!"

"And what is the alternative? Trust that people will stop hating and warring each other on their own?" Konan asked, scowling angrily at the Hyuga. "You foolish, naive children..."

"Konan is right," Pain continued. "People will never understand each other. Only by knowing each other's pain can understanding be reached. And even if you know the other's pain, hatred may make understanding impossible. That's why there are wars even if most people don't want them. The only way to stop this cycle of hatred is by force."

"I don't care what you believe. I'm not going to let you-" Suddenly, Naruto's eyes snapped wide open. "Uh?"

"Naruto-kun...?" Hinata worriedly asked.

"My clones... they disappeared..." the confused blond replied.

"What? How?" Haku asked.

Hinata made a hand seal, and her Tenseigan flared for an instant. Her eyesight expanded to cover the entire area, her eyes also opened wide upon seeing what had killed the clones.

"More Akatsuki! Five of them! They're surrounding the clearing!" Hinata distressingly informed. "All of them have the same orange hair, multiple facial piercings, and those purple eyes."

"We've studied your fighting style for when the time to capture you arrived, Naruto," Pain replied. "Before a fight begins, you create two clones that go into hiding, making your opponent believe that you're preparing an ambush. Then, in the middle of the fight, you'll go into Sage Mode, despite the fact that in order to gather nature energy one needs to be still for a long period of time.

"But by using clones, you can gather nature energy unimpeded as you fight, then the clone will dispel itself, transferring the nature energy to you, with the added benefit that your opponent's attention is now divided, waiting for an ambush that will never come. Is my guess a correct one, Naruto Uzumaki?" Pain asked.

Naruto gritted his teeth, as a frustrating feeling of impotence washed over him. *"I've never fought an Akatsuki without Sage Mode before. What I'm going to do now? No! Stop the quitter talk! You're a great ninja with or without Sage Mode! I can win this! I HAVE to win this!"*

The blond's scowl of frustration disappeared, as it was replaced by a confident smirk. "So, you were able to counter one of my many,

many jutsu and techniques. Let's see if you can do the same with the others."

"Boasts are useless if one lacks the power to back them up," Pain replied, as he raised an open hand towards them. "I believe there's no point in conversing anymore. Now, it's your turn to know pain. Shinra Tensei!"

Once again, a powerful shockwave blasted the group of Konoha and Kiri ninjas backwards with overwhelming force. Though now they realized it wasn't a normal shockwave. A second before being pushed away, it was almost as if they weighed nothing, as if somehow the Akatsuki could manipulate gravity itself.

They rushed to get back on their feet as the two Akatsuki menacingly approached.

"Hinata-hime, you can take make somebody else fly as well, right?" Naruto asked. His girlfriend nodded. "In that case, take Utakata to a ship, and get the hell out of here!"

"But... I can't leave both you and Haku-kun with those Akatsuki!" Hinata protested. "You're a jinchuriki too! You're in danger as well!"

"Don't worry, we'll divide his attention by rushing in a different way. Let's see which one of us he'll go after," Naruto replied. "Now go, quickly!"

Hinata nodded, and made a hand seal. Utakata's feet stopped touching the ground.

"What the...?" the brown haired jinchuriki asked, as he started to flail.

"Sorry Utakata-san, but no time to ask for permission. We need to leave now!" Hinata urged as she took off into the sky, with the unwilling Utakata being carried behind.

"I won't let you," Pain replied, but oddly enough, made no effort to stop the flying ninja.

Suddenly the air was filled with several whistles, and much to her shock, Hinata's Tenseigan caught a cluster of missiles flying right at her and Uakata. Wasting no time, her hands started to form several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Multiple lightning bolts fired from Hinata's fingertips, catching the incoming barrage of missiles, making them to detonate prematurely. Unfortunately, while Hinata was doing this she was unable to notice another danger that was coming to them.

"Watch out!" Uakata called.

As if appearing from thin air, a gigantic, deformed bird with gray plumage and a massive, jagged beak dashed at them. Hinata wasn't able to maneuver in time, and the impact sent the two of them back to the ground, tumbling.

"Hinata-hime!" Naruto cried, as he ran towards her.

"Sensei!" Hotaru cried, following Naruto.

The two of them groaned, as they got back on their feet, helped by their respective partners. So far, they didn't look injured.

"Are you okay?" Naruto asked.

"I'm fine, don't worry. I was able to cushion our fall with my kinetic abilities," Hinata explained.

"Guess that's why it didn't hurt as much as I expected," Uakata said, as he took out the bubble pipe he was carrying on his belt. "No option but fighting, I see."

"Unfortunately, yes," Naruto bitterly agreed, as he glared at the incoming Akatsuki.

"We'll need to take care of the other Akatsuki surrounding the clearing, or else we're going to get blindsided," Hinata stated.

"Leave that to me. I'll try to force them out in the open, while getting some intel on their abilities," Naruto said, as he made his favorite hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

An army of a hundred Naruto clones popped into existence, as they spread out and went to seek and fight the other four Akatsuki. If Pain and Konan were perturbed by this, they didn't show it.

"Konan, make sure none of the jinchuriki leave," Pain instructed his partner.

"What about the others?" Konan asked.

"The closest ninja village is hundred of kilometers away. Even if they go away and call for reinforcements, it would take days to arrive," Pain assured her.

"Very well then," Konan nodded, and flapping her artificial wings, took off into the sky once again.

A black rod emerged from under Pain's sleeve, which the Akatsuki grabbed and wielded it as if it was a weapon. He raised it towards Naruto and Utaakata.

"Now, let the hunt begin," Pain omniously declared, before raising his other hand. "Basho Ten'in!"

Suddenly, Utaakata felt completely weightless for a second, before he was pulled towards Pain by a violently unstoppable force. He tried to react, but the suddeness and the sheer force he was being pulled stopped him, and his neck was gripped by Pain's open hand.

"You're mine now," Pain said before slamming Utkata into the ground, and readied his black rod to stab him with it.

While this happened, Naruto pulled out several shuriken with one hand while making hand seals with the other. The steel starts started to crackle with electricity just before he threw them at the orange haired Akatsuki.

"Leave him alone!" Naruto shouted.

Pain was forced to release Utkata and jump backwards while either dodging the incoming shuriken, or deflecting them with his black rod. Despite being enhanced with Lightning Release, they failed to cut through Pain's mysterious weapon.

Taking advantage of Pain's predicament, the jinchuriki of the Six Tails quickly got back on his feet, and started to weave hand seals. His apprentice landed besides him, also doing hand seals.

"Hotaru, let's attack at once!" the brown haired man commanded, the girl nodding in agreement. "Acid Scattering!"

"Water Release: Water Hail!"

Utkata expelled from his mouth a stream of an extremely corrosive acid, while Hotaru cupped her hands forward, releasing a barrage of water bullets. However, before the two attacks could hit their target, another Akatsuki got in the way. Casting his hands forward, he created a glowing shield of chakra that absorbed both attacks the moment they made contact, much to their bewilderment.

Realizing that they were in danger if stayed close to the Akatsuki for longer, Utkata and Hotaru jumped back, rejoining the others.

"Who is that guy?" Naruto asked, as he stared at the new Akatsuki, a very portly man. Like Pain, he had orange hair, thick facial piercings, and most distressingly, a pair of Rinnegan. "How can he have a Rinnegan too?"

"Your minds cannot hope to comprehend the power I possess," Pain boasted once again.

A high pitched shriek came from the sky, as the giant bird from before loomed over them from above, menacingly nose diving at them. This time, however, Hinata's Tenseigan managed to catch the aerial threat in time, and replied before it could cause any harm.

"Vacuum Palm Wall!"

Thrusting both palms upwards, Hinata launched a massive vacuum shell upwards, hitting the giant bird in its beak with such force, it made it deviate its course to the side, before losing its balance and crashing into the ground, tearing some trees apart in the process.

Immediately, there was a light rumble followed by the sound of more trees teared apart, as a gigantic ox and equally large rhino plowed through the trees, charging at them. Like the bird, all them noticed that these animals also had Rinnegan eyes, as well as thick, black stakes piercing their bodies.

"The hell? Where all these summoned animals are coming from?" Suigetsu asked, as he narrowly dodged being eviscerated by the giant rhino's horn.

"Naruto-kun, I think it's time to bring some summons of our own!" Haku called.

The blond nodded, before biting his thumb, and making the usual five hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto slammed his palm into the ground, producing a massive burst of smoke. When the smoke dispelled, Naruto was now standing at the top of Gamaken's head.

"Greetings, Naruto. I'm honored that you have summoned be to battle once again," the soft spoken toad said.

"It might be too much for you to handle, but I need your help to deal with those animals," Naruto said, pointing at the incoming rhino and ox.

"Leave that in my hands, Naruto. I've been training these past years in order to curb my clumsiness," Gamaken replied, as he readied his shield and sasumata.

"Meanwhile, we'll deal with the others," Naruto said, as he jumped down to rejoin his friends. "I'm getting information from my clones on the other guys. One of them is some sort of mechanical being, like a puppet. Another is the one summoning these animals, but it seems is the only thing he can do. I don't know about the other two."

"We can't let everything in the hand of the clones," Miyaki decided. "Tsurigi, you and your ANBU unit go and stop those guys! Or else we'll get blindsided!"

"Right away, ma'am!" Tsurigi replied. "Everybody, go!"

"Suigetsu and I will help the giant toad take care of the summons," Miyaki suggested. "Naruto-san was the one who helped Mei-sama take down Yagura, and his teammates don't lack skill nor power either. They're our best bet against these Akatsuki."

"Alright then. But don't think I'm going to be happy with just the leftovers while the Konoha ninja have the real fun!" Suigetsu replied, as he and Miyaki went to face the giant ox.

Meanwhile, the Konoha ninjas, Utakata and Hotaru decided that they have had enough of being on the receiving side, and went onto the offensive.

"That man is able to absorb ninjutsu attacks. I'll keep him distracted while the rest of you deal with the other one, understood?" Hinata asked. Everybody else nodded.

"Whatever you've planned, I can assure you it won't work," Pain confidently stated.

"We'll see about that!" Hinata replied, as she dashed towards the ninjutsu-absorbing Akatsuki, while delivering a palm strike forward. The Akatsuki jumped backwards, and Hinata's palm ended up hitting the ground, producing a small crater. "You won't be able to dodge the next one, since you're within my divination range! Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!"

Just as Hinata said, the Akatsuki was unable to dodge the Hyuga Clan's signature taijutsu combo, and was pushed backwards with each palm strike as he tried in vain to dodge it.

"Now is our chance, attack at once!" Naruto commanded, as he started to make hand seals. Utakata, Horaru and Haku nodded, proceeding to do the same.

"Ice Release: Multiple Icicle Piercing Shots!"

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

"Water Release: Bubble Jutsu!"

"Lightning Release: Lightning Stab!"

Haku conjured and shot forward multiple ice stakes, while Hotaru exhaled a powerful stream of water from her mouth. Utakata blew several innocuous-looking bubbles, while Naruto pulled out several kunai, infused them with electricity and tossed them forward.

Even the most veteran Jonin would have felt at least a bit distressed upon being on the receiving end on so many elemental ninjutsu. However, Pain was above any average ninja, and was about to show why.

"Pathetic," Pain said, raising an open palm at the incoming elemental barrage. "Shinra Tensei!"

Pain's open palm produced a repulsive shockwave that was easily able to repel -and in the soap bubbles' case, prematurely detonate- the incoming attacks at him, and still keep enough force to push the casters and make them fall on their backs.

"Such power!" Hotaru shouted, mildly distressed. "If all of us together aren't able to overcome that jutsu of his-"

"Watch out!" Naruto called out, pointing upwards.

Everybody looked in the direction the blond was pointing at, and saw Konan looming above them.

"Paper Drizzle!"

Flapping her makeshift wings once, a barrage of razor-sharp paper tags rained from them. The ninjas below her quickly rose to their feet and scrambled to dodge the deadly shower, with each missing projectile stabbing itself into the ground as if it was made of sharp metal.

"Not bad," Konan stated, her face remaining neutral. "Now let's see if you can-OOF!"

Suddenly, Konan was slammed into the ground by an unseen force, her body making a loud noise as if it crashed down.

"Konan!" Pain yelled, expressing some sort of emotion for the first time since the fight began.

"I'm... I'm fine..." Konan said, coughing a little, as she got back on his feet. "What did-"

"She did," Pain finished her question, as his eyes drifted to Hinata. "So, that's the power of the Tenseigan. Impressive, but still inferior to the Rinnegan."

"You know the Tenseigan?" Hinata asked.

"One of our newest members possess a pair," Pain replied, causing Hinata to tense. "I believe that you already met him, didn't you?"

"So it's true. That Toneri guy is somehow part of the Akatsuki," Naturo muttered, mostly to himself.

"Indeed. I have been unable to test the extent of his powers, but given that you have the same eyes as him, an assessment of your abilities will be a valid substitute," Pain stated.

"Alright then, I'll show you the power of my eyes. No, *my* power," Hinata replied, as she started to make hand seals. "Tenseigan Chakra Mode!"

Hinata's body started to glow with a purple aura. Pain looked unimpressed. Not that she expected any other reaction, given that it was the most basic stage of the Mode. However, the next part would tip the battle in their favor.

"Now..." Hinata placed her hands as if holding an invisible object. A sphere of lavender light formed between them, and started to grow as she moved her hands outwards. "Truth Seeking Balls!"

The violet sphere split into two smaller ones, before losing their light, revealing two fist sized black spheres that reflected a dim purple light. As if they had life of their own, the spheres placed behind Hinata's back.

"Just two? I was hoping I could produce more when the push came to shove," Hinata inwardly lamented. *"With Naruto-kun unable to use his Sage Mode, it falls on me to carry the weight of the fight."*

Despite her disappointment, her display did impress the Akatsuki.

"Truth Seeking Balls? That's not something you see every day," Pain praised. "Congratulations, Hyuga, You now have my attention."

"Very well then. Take this!" Hinata said, as she motioned both hands forward. The Truth Seeking Balls launched themselves at Pain while spinning around each other.

Pain raised his hand forward, but rather than a Shinra Tensei like Hinata was expecting, several black rods fired from under his sleeve. Two of those rods collided with the Truth Seeking Balls, deflecting them backwards.

"If he knew that Truth Seeking Balls can nullify ninjutsu,, then he knew his shockwave wouldn't work," Hinata realized. "But how did those rods repel the balls? It should be impossible! Unless they're-wait a minute, where did he go?"

The short time Hinata took to muse, Pain launched himself forward, with a longer rod in his hand. But she wasn't his prey; instead, he was now onto Utkata, ready to sink that black rod inside his flesh.

A loud metallic noise was heard, and Naruto was standing between Pain and Utkata, his rod being parried by the blond's Wind Blade.

"My Wind Blade is able to cut through pretty much everything," Naruto pointed out. "Just what the hell is that thing made of?"

"Good one, Naruto! Keep him like that!" Utkata said, as he jumped backwards while taking his pipe to his lips. "Water Release: Drowning Bubble Jutsu!"

Utkata flew a flurry of bubbles, which quickly converged around Pain's head, encasing the Akatsuki's head in a spheric blob of water. The effect was immediate, and the orange haired Akatsuki started to suffocate.

"Pain!" Konan shouted, as he dived to assist her partner.

"Not so fast, miss!" Hotaru claimed, as she quickly formed hand seals. "Water Release: Water Hail Jutsu!"

The suddenness of the attack forced Konan to fall back, much to her frustration. And now that Pain was vulnerable, Haku decided he should better speed up the process. He leaped at Pain while his hands flew through hand seals.

"Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Haku exhaled a gust of extremely cold wind, covering Pain in frost but, most importantly, freezing the blob of water the Akatsuki's head was encased into. After a few moments of weakly trashing and trying to break the ice, the Akatsuki fell on his back, lifeless.

"His chakra vanished!" Hinata pointed out. "He's dead!"

"YES!" Naruto cheered, pumping a fist into the air. "Haha, so much for the Rinnegan!"

Suddenly, there was a loud rumble, and the Konoha and Kiri ninjas were startled to see more giant animals coming their way. This time, they were a giant, multiple headed dog, and oddly enough, a giant panda. There were other two Akatsuki on top of each animal's head. One of them had long, orange hair tied in a ponytail, multiple facial piercings, and the Rinnegan. The other hardly looked human to begin with, and just like Hinata said, his appearance reminded one of a puppet. He also had facial piercings and Rinnegan eyes.

"Watch out!"

The giant animals charged at them, forcing the Konoha and Kiri ninjas to scatter. Taking advantage of this, Konan took Pain's corpse, and jumped away.

"You have seen nothing yet!" was the last thing they heard Konan saying.

"Even if we defeated Pain, it seems that these guys can act on their own," Haku observed.

"You're no closer to defeating me than you were at the very beginning of this fight," the Akatsuki with the ponytail said, sounding as if he was also Pain even if his voice was different.

"So... this guy is Pain too? How is that even possible?" Utakata asked, as he looked at the other Akatsuki, the one who looked like a puppet. "All of them are Pain then?"

"We fought an Akatsuki member that had five hearts, split among five bodies, each with a different elemental affinity," Hinata recounted. "That's why the Akatsuki are so dangerous. They aren't merely strong ninja, they possess abilities that defy both logic and morality."

"That means that we need to kill all the Akatsuki with Rinnegan eyes to defeat the actual Pain," Haku deduced. "The Rinnegan is truly an astounding power."

"You have no idea, kid," the Ponytail Pain said, as he nodded to his other self.

The Puppet Pain raised an arm against them, which split in two to reveal what appeared to be a canon. Light particles started to gather around the canon's end, forming a ball, before being released as a beam, producing an explosion when it hit its targets. However, once the smoke dispelled, the Akatsuki could see that the Konoha and Kiri ninja were okay, protected behind a strange black mass. The mass then shrank and reformed into a pair of spheres, and placed themselves behind Hinata's back.

"You seem to forget that Truth Seeking Balls can nullify all kind of ninjutsu," Hinata stated. Suddenly, her expression became one of panic when her Tenseigan caught something a second too late. "Utakata-san!"

The startled jinchuriki felt something wrapping itself around his body, before being pulled upwards by an invisible force.

"Sensei!" Hotaru screamed, as she futilely dashed towards him.

"Hotaru-san, wait!" Hinata called, grabbing her by her arm. "There's another summoned animal there! One who can turn invisible!"

As if to prove Hinata right, a giant chameleon made itself visible. Like all of Pain's bodies and animal summons, the giant reptile also had Rinnegan eyes and several black thick stakes stuck on its body. Oddly enough, its tail ended in a snake head.

"But we need to help sensei!" Hotaru urged.

"Don't worry, Hotaru, I can get out of this mess by myself," Utkata confidently stated. His cheeks then puffed before releasing a corrosive acid from his mouth, spraying the chameleon's tongue with it.

The chameleon hissed as it retreated its hurt tongue into its mouth, releasing Utkata in the process. As he fell, the jinchuriki blew more bubbles from his pipe.

"Water Release: Explosive Bubbles!"

The bubbles started to gather around the giant reptile, and as the name of the jutsu implied, the bubbles exploded upon touching its skin. The chameleon hissed further in pain, before the damage forcefully unsommoned him, leaving a cloud of smoke behind.

"Yes! That was so great, Utkata-sensei!" Hotaru gushed, happy to see her beloved master safe and sound.

"Don't celebrate yet, Hotaru. I got rid of one enemy, but there are still many others left!" Utkata told her, almost in a chiding tone.

As if on cue, the giant animals charged at them. Ponytail Pain stayed where he was, while Puppet Pain jumped from the head of the giant centipede in order to engage the enemy ninjas himself. His left up

opened up in multiple places, revealing hidden missiles that he fired at the Konoha ninja.

"Scatter!" Naruto commanded, as he made several hand seals.
"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto poured as much chakra as he could into the attack, creating a huge wind vortex that sucked all the incoming missiles inside it, and made them prematurely explode.

The giant dog headed towards UtaKata while the centipede lunged at Naruto, who was wide open. Fortunately, the giant canine was stopped in time by Gamaken, while a giant needle pierced the giant arthropod multiple times, trapping it in a tangle of ninja wire.

"And got ya!" Suigetsu boasted, as he pulled the ninja wire with all his strength, in order to keep the multiple legged animal in place.

"I'll bring it down in one hit!" Haku claimed, as his hands flew through a particularly long sequence of hand seals, clapping his hands in the end. "Ice Release: Sword of Winter!"

Suddenly, the temprature abruptly dropped, and a blizzard started to blow, slowly covering the area in snow. A few seconds later, several gigantic icicles fell from the sky, impaling the centipete through several areas, forcing it to cancel the summon, disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

"Way to go, Haku!" Naruto cheered.

"This jutsu still have enough momentum for more," Haku added, his palms still together, as his sight moved onto the giant dog fighting Gamaken. "Toad-san, move out!"

Gamaken jumped backwards just before more gigantic icicles impaled the dog as well. But much to everybody's surprise, rather than dispelling it like it happened with the arthropod, the dog split into multiple copies of itself.

"What the hell!?" Naruto asked in shock.

Gamaken tried to fend off the pack of monstrous dogs, but in the end, the poor toad was overwhelmed.

"I'm sorry, Naruto," Gamaken croaked, as multiple jaws bit into several parts of his body. "I'm still more clumsy than I thought..."

And the giant toad disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Their prey gone, the giant dogs looked at Naruto, and chose him as their next prey.

"I'm not afraid of you, you overgrown mutts! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A clone of Naruto popped into existence. Both the original and the copy flew through a different sequence of hand seals.

"Let's see how much you like this combination!" Naruto said, as he prepared his attack. "Cyclone Vortex!"

"Fire Release: Flame Bullet!"

Naruto created a tornado aimed at the dogs, while the clone blew a fireball into the cyclone, creating a massive twister of fire which caught most of the dogs inside it. However, some of them managed to dodge it or escape with some minor burns and chase the blond.

"It seems we won't be able to defeat this summon the conventional way," Uakata observed, before his gaze locked onto the Pain who summoned it, now perched on a tree branch. "But there are more ways to get rid of a summon."

"Like defeating the summoner, right?" Hotaru asked.

Uakata nodded, and smiled at his apprentice. "Exactly, now let's go!"

"Alright, go after him, we'll try to keep these goddamned mutts at bay!" Naruto said, as he made his favorite hand seal, creating a

multitude of clones.

Hotaru took the initiative, making several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Joining her hands with both index fingers aiming at the Pain with the ponytail, Hotaru fired water missiles from her fingers. The summoner Pain jumped from the branch he was standing on, and continued running, trying to dodge the water projectiles, powerful enough to blow holes in the tree's bark upon hitting them. As he jumped, he motioned his arm towards Hotaru, firing several black rods from under his sleeve that blocked the water shots.

"You're wide open now!" Uta kata said, as he ran to close the gap between him and his enemy. "Water Release: Bubble Jutsu!"

Uta kata blew a barrage of explosive bubbles at the now unprotected Pain. However, before the jutsu could make contact, the portly Pain appeared out of nowhere, landing between his fellow self and Uta kata's attack, and absorbed all the bubbles before they could even explode.

"What the...?" Uta kata asked, jumping back before his orange haired enemies could counterattack. "Didn't Hinata-san deal with this guy already?"

At that moment, Miyako leaped from one of the surrounding trees, Helmet Splitter in both hands, ready to hack the chakra-absorbing Pain to bits. Her ambush was seen by the summoning Pain, but he wouldn't be able to warn his partner in time.

"Die!" the blue haired swordswoman said as she lowered the axe half of her weapon.

But much to her surprise, the chakra-absorbing Pain dodged her blow without even turning around, almost as if he had eyes on his

back (or a Byakugan). Still, Miyaki didn't cease her onslaught, and continued to deliver blows to the portly Akatsuki.

As that happened, Puppet Pain reentered the battle. A compartment opened on his arm, deploying a metallic cannon, which fired a massive stream of flames at the jinchuriki of the Six Tails and his apprentice.

"Too broad to dodge! Counter it with a water jutsu!" Uakata ordered.

Hotaru nodded, and the two of them formed the same chain of seals.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Master and apprentice expelled from their mouths a torrent of water, Uakata's being larger, which managed to successfully stop the Akatsuki's fiery attack. However, the brown haired man noticed Hotaru was starting to pant heavily.

"Hotaru, are you okay?" Uakata asked.

The dirty blond girl needed a second to answer.

"I am, but..." she wheezed. "My chakra is starting to run low..."

Uakata nodded, remembering that normal people don't have the immense chakra reserves and seemingly unending stamina jinchuriki possess. Even if he could continue fighting, the battle would become much harder to win if his allies started to drop off. Glancing back, seeing the Konoha ninjas fighting the giant dogs -which kept multiplying- he could see that the Ice Release ninja was also breathless. That huge jutsu from before must have taken a good chunk of his chakra.

As this happened, Miyaki continued fighting the chakra-absorbing Pain. It seemed he got tired of just dodging, and pulled a black rod under his sleeve. A loud clang echoed through the forest when the axe half of the Helmet Splitter was parried by said chakra rod.

Miyaki's lips curved into a wide, extremely smug smirk.

"Sucker," she laughed.

She quickly slammed the hammer half into the backside of the axe. The result was the black rod shattering, unable to withstand the sheer force of the attack, and the axe embedding itself into the Akatsuki's chest, killing him instantly.

"You guys won't have to worry anymore about your ninjutsu being absorbed," Miyaki triumphantly said. "This one won't trouble us anymore."

"Good job, Miyaki-san," Uakata praised. "Though do make sure he's dead. He recovered from a seemingly lethal attack before."

Suddenly, Hotaru's opened wide, as she pointed somewhere forwards.

"Sensei, watch out! More summons incoming!" the blond girl shouted.

Uakata turned around and saw that, indeed, the summoning Pain had finished the Summoning Jutsu seal sequence.

"Summoning ju-"

"Lightning Release: Lightning Flash Arrow!"

A blue flash happened, and the next instant, the summoning Pain was impaled by a huge arrow made of electricity. The Pain barely have time to try to understand what happened, before he fell to the floor, lifeless. He was followed by his currently summoned animals, which all instantly vanished, leaving a poof of smoke behind.

Turning from the direction the impossibly fast arrow came from, Uakata and Hotaru saw Hinata, perched on a tree branch, holding a composite bow with glowing seals carved on it and a string that appeared to be made of chakra.

"Another one down," Hinata said, as she folded her collapsible chakra bow. "Now only half of the Pains remain."

"Good job, Hinata-hime!" Naruto praised his girlfriend.

"Yes. Victory is within our grasp," Haku replied, smiling, before his eyes rested on the puppet-looking Pain. "Dealing with this enemy will be easy. Then we can move to help the Kiri ANBU with the other two and Konan. If they stayed behind, I deduce it's because they aren't suited for direct combat."

"I believe you're right, but-" Hinata said, before she interrupted herself when her Tenseigan caught something from the corner of her vision. "HAKU, WATCH OUT!"

"Uh?"

The warning came too late, and the Ice Ninja was impaled by several black rods that were fired out of nowhere, with such force that they pushed Haku backwards, as if he had been kicked by a giant beast, until his lithe body was slammed against a large tree.

"HAKU!" both Naruto and Hinata screaming in unison, with the Hyuga flying towards his position. "Don't worry, I'll help you!"

"I don't think so," a familiar, chill-inducing voice said. "Basho Ten'in!"

While in mid air, Hinata was pulled with incredible force towards Pain, the one with the gravity based powers. The one who should be dead. His strong hand gripped against her throat.

"You... how...?" the Hyuga managed to ask.

"Do you honestly think you can kill a god?" Pain asked, as Konan landed behind him. Despite such boastful question, his tone wasn't one of smugness or superiority. "Toneri requested me that, should our paths cross, I spare your life, for you're dear to him," Pain said, as another black rod appeared in his other hand. "However, his

foolish romantic desires are secondary to our goal, so I made no promises."

And then, Hinata followed Haku's fate, her gut being impaled by the black rod, before Pain lazily tossed her body away. A pool of blood started to form around her.

"Hinata... no..." Naruto said in a whisper. His body tensed, as his hands clutched into fists. "How dare you... how dare you... !" Naruto began. His eyes turned red with slitted pupils. His teeth and nails grew longer and sharper, and his cheek marks became bolder. A red aura started to form around his body. **"HOW DARE YOU!"**

The aura took the shape of a fox, with two tails forming behind him. The grass around him started to burn as a strong wind started to blow in every direction.

"You made him mad, Pain," Konan observed. "This will make things much harder for us."

"Not necessarily," Pain countered, as he extended his hand, his fingers curled as if they were holding something. "Stand back, Konan, I'm going to do it."

Pain opened his hand, revealing an object the size of a small marble, colored pure black. As if it weighed nothing, it started to elevate into the air the moment Pain released it. Just at that moment, the feral Naruto charged forward.

"Chibaku Tensei!"

The earth started to rumble, as chunks of the ground were teared apart and pulled towards the black orb in the sky, as well as fallen branches, pieces of wood, leaves and anything light enough not to resist the gravity pull. Unfortunately, human beings were in this category.

Naruto's charge was abruptly cut as he was pulled upwards. Claws made of red chakra grew from his fingers, and used them to remain attached to the ground, while slowly advancing towards Pain, resisting the gravitational pull, fueled by sheer anger alone.

" Yes.. *this man hurt your friends, and want to exterminate your kind...*" the Nine Tails voice said within him. ***"Now take my power! Give into your anger! Make sure he won't be able to hurt you again!"***

The jinchuriki let out a feral, inhuman roar that chilled the blood of all of those who heard it, except the orange haired Akatsuki, who remained as stoic and nonplussed as ever.

"Your power is incredible, Nine Tails. But the power I wield transcends even that of a Tailed Beast," Pain boasted.

Naruto's anger grew each second, and with it, the power coursing through his veins burned stronger. A third tail formed along the other two, as his eyes turned solid red. Burns started to spread across his body.

And then, something distracted him from the blinding fury that compelled him to go towards Pain and tear him to shreds: Hinata and Haku's bodies, flying towards the forming planetoid. He saw Hinata's eyes. Her Tenseigan still glinted with a white light. Could that mean that Hinata was still alive?

" No! Don't let her distract you! Your girlfriend is dead! Pain killed her! Now revel in my power in order to become strong enough to kill him! Let the anger guide you!" the Kyubi commanded, his voice growing increasingly desperate.

But the tailed beast's voice didn't have the intended effect on Naruto. The number of tails went down to just two, and as the anger within Naruto subsided, his focus became more clear, and making his choice, let the gravity well pull him as well.

" NO! Don't do that! If you do it, you will die!" the Kyubi called.

Of course, Naruto had no intention to die. He used the rocks flying towards the planetoid as stepping stones, until he reached Hinata, and wrapped her between his arms. He then did the same with Haku, which he used his two tails to grab him, before he tried to take them away from the forming planetoid.

Unfortunately, as Naruto did this, he was unable to provide aid to the Kiri ninjas, not even in the form of Shadow Clones, as his mind was too focused on saving his friends and teammates, while keeping the Nine Tails' from poisoning his mind.

"Oh shit!" Suigetsu yelled, as he was pulled towards the forming sphere of rocks. Overcoming the shock and panic, Suigetsu threw the Sweing Needle towards a tree, and maneuvered the attached ninja wire as to wrap it around its canopy, creating an anchor.

"Hang on there!" Miyaki replied, as she stabbed the axe half of the Helmet Splitter into a nearby tree, in order to anchor herself as well. "Everybody, grab onto either Suigetsu or me!"

Unfortunately, there was somebody unable to anchor themselves to the ground like the others were doing, and was pulled towards the forming planetoid.

"AAAAAAHHHHH!" Hotaru screamed, as she was pulled upwards.

"Hotaru!" Uakata shouted.

The jinchuriki of the Six Tails instantly leaped to her rescue, letting the gravitational well pull him as well in order to gain speed, and using the flying chunks of earth and ground as stepping stones, just like his counterpart from Konoha had done so moments before to save his comrades.

"Got you!" Uakata said, as his fingers clamped over the young woman's wrist.

"Sensei!" Hotaru screamed again.

"Just hold on! Don't worry, I won't let you go!" Uakata promised, as he began to now move away from the gravity attack, still using the flying stones as improvised platforms.

However, at that moment, butterflies started to appear, fluttering around the tall brown haired man, as if they were unaffected by the gravity field. A feeling of dread washed over him as more and more butterflies gathered, some of them perching themselves on Uakata. Then, the former Kiri ninja learned two things, neither of them good.

First was that those butterflies weren't real, but origami figures.

And second, that they weren't made of ordinary paper, but of explosive tags.

Which led to a third, more distressing revelation: He wouldn't be able to get rid of the explosive butterflies while holding Hotaru. Two options were now in front of him, but he took no time to make his choice. To him, it was obvious. His hand reached his pipe.

"Hotaru, I can't save the both of us," Uakata began, as he took the pipe to his mouth. More butterflies gathered around him. "In the past, I would have chose my life over yours in an instant, but that was before getting to know you better. I'm glad that you were so persistent of being part of my life, and that I ended up giving up and let you in. Now I see that I could have been a better teacher, but I think I have time for one last lesson."

Uakata blew a rather large bubble, which he used to encase Hotaru inside it. The bubble managed to resist the gravitational pull and slowly floated away from the danger, much to Hotaru's incesant protest.

"No, sensei, don't do it!" Hotaru screamed, as tears fell down her cheeks, while she futilely banged the surprisingly hard wall of the bubble with her fists.

"Live," Uakata said, a small smile formed in his lips. "Enjoy life ot its fullest, don't be chained by the past, and make sure that when your time comes, you can look back and smile knowing that you have no regrets."

"SENSEI!"

Uakata's last words were followed by a chain of explosions, engulfing the unlucky jinchuriki, before his unmoving body was pulled by the gravity core. Konan quickly flew towards him and intercepted him before he could become part of the still growing planetoid, which was large enough to partially block the sun.

"Are you sure he's still alive?" Pain asked. "Those were quite the explosions."

"I'm positive," the blue haired woman replied, as she landed besides her partner, with the burned and uncosncious Uakata on her arms. "I know the amount of force I have to use to neutralize a jinchuriki without killing him."

"YOU!" Naruto yelled, as he landed in front of them with a loud thud. The two-tailed chakra cloak burned with intensity around his body. "Do you think I'm going to let you go away with him!?"

"What we do we do, Pain?" Konan asked her partner. "Should we capture him too?"

"I think for the time being, we should stay safe and retreat with the one we have captured," Pain's raised hand curled into a claw. "But don't worry, Nine Tails, your time will come as well."

"Bastard! You're not going to-"

"One last thing: tell Jiraiya-sensei that I send our regards," Pain replied, before quickly motioning his outstretched hand down.

"Jiraiya... sensei?" Naruto asked, dumbfounded. The shock caused by such statement was enough to stop him on his tracks.

A few seconds, he finally realized of the situation he was in. A massive rock was falling down on both him and all his friends and partners. Though judging by Suigetsu's screams, it seems that they had noticed and were taking the steps to avoid being crushed to death, while Hotaru slowly floated away inside a large bubble. He was about to run, though not back, but forward. He couldn't let Pain get away with Utakata. But before he could resume the chase, he realized of something.

"Hinata-hime and Haku. They're too wounded to run by themselves. They'll die if that thing falls near them!" Naruto distressingly thought.

Glancing one last time with hate-filled eyes at the retreating Akatsuki, Naruto turned around, and rushed towards where he had left his friends and teammates, hoping that they would be safe while he and the remaining ninja finished the fight.

But alas, this time victory would go to Akatsuki as well.

...

Sometime Later

When Naruto woke up, it was nighttime already. He had very vague memories of what happened after the man-made asteroid hit the ground. The blond guessed the Nine Tails' chakra combined with the exhaustion from the battle made him lose consciousness.

And once again, his thoughts went to his teammates and girlfriend.

"Hinata-hime! Haku!" Naruto yelled, as he quickly rose up -not even realizing he was lying down a moment ago-, and started to frantically look around in panic, his eyes still adjusting to the growing darkness. "Where are-"

"Calm down, Naruto," a female voice gently said near him. "They're besides you, and safe."

Naruto realized that Miyaki was crouching besides him. Looking to the other side, he was Hinata and Haku, both of them unconscious, lying down on white sheets. Despite how pale and sick they looked, the fact that he could see their chests heaving up and down was reassuring.

"We tried to patch them up as best as we could, but they're in need of medical assistance," Miyaki explained. "Sadly, our group of ANBU has no medic nin."

"Utakata," Naruto said, now that his mind was at ease -relatively speaking- when it came to Hinata and Haku's status. "They got away with him."

"And he isn't our only loss," Miyaki sadly added. "Tsurigi died in the fight, as well as one of our ANBU. By the time we can mount a rescue mission, Utakata shall be dead. This mission has been a massive failure."

Naruto couldn't help but nod in frustration, before his eyes once again rested on the sleeping forms of his girlfriend and friend. They had been very close to lose their lives today. Even if Naruto knew that Akatsuki was a dangerous enemy, he always believed that the Assault Squad was powerful enough to beat them no matter what. That childish notion, no doubt engorged by their past victories against them, had been shattered when the rogue organization decided to dispatch one of their heavyweights.

Through the corner of his vision, the blond saw Hotaru, sitting on the grass, hugging her knees against her chest, her sad eyes lost into nothingness. Shaking the pain, Naruto stood up, walked towards her, and decided that maybe she should say something to the distraught girl.

"Hey," Naruto awkwardly greeted the girl. "Are you... are you okay?"

She took a few moments to answer. Her voice sounded cracked.
"Yes, I am, thank you. But Uakata-sensei is not."

Naruto didn't say anything, and sat besides her. While Naruto was sad for losing a fellow jinchuriki, this girl knew and probably loved Uakata on a more personal level.

"It would have been better if I weren't here," Hotaru sadly said.

"What? Why do you say that?" Naruto asked.

"It was my fault sensei got captured. He was busy saving me, so he couldn't save himself," Hotaru explained, her eyes starting to swell up with tears. "If I wasn't so weak... if I were a better apprentice to him... none of this would have happened. He was right trying to push me away from him."

"No!" Naruto replied, surprised by the volume of his voice. "Don't you dare to think that. It wasn't your fault that Uakata got captured," despite Naruto's choice of words, it was obvious to the girl that her sensei was as good as gone. "Akatsuki are the only ones at fault here. They're the ones who took Uakata away. That's why we must do everything in our hand to stop them before more innocents suffer."

"I'd like to do that but..." Hotaru began, sobbing a little. "I'm not that strong. I'd only get in the way. My uncle was right, being a ninja was just a childish whim. I should better return home..."

"It's that what you truly want?" Naruto asked.

"No," she replied. "But what else can I do?"

"What do you want?" the blond repeated.

"I want..." Hotaru began, fighting back the tears. "I wanted to be a ninja. To be strong, to be able to take care of myself, as well as

protect others. That's why when I met Uakata-sensei and saw how strong and skilled he was, I did all I could to make him teach me."

Naruto smiled a little. "Hey, those are pretty good reasons to be a ninja. Plus I saw you fight and you're really good. Why let Uakata's teaching go to waste? Continuing your ninja training could be a good way to honor his memory."

Hotaru looked at Naruto a bit surprised, before her eyes shrank a little, and her lips formed a sad smile. "I guess you're right. But what can I do? I no longer have a sensei."

"You can get a new one. There's always time to become a ninja," Naruto kindly said. "The offer from before still stands. The gates of Konoha are open for you if you want to join us."

"That's... very generous of you," Hotaru thanked him. "But for the time being, I need some time alone... to do some thinking, to grieve Uakata-sensei, and plan what I'm going to do next."

"Oh, okay," Naruto replied, as he stood back to his feet. "But try not to wallow in grief too much, okay? Uakata would have wanted you to move on with your life."

"I know," Hotaru nodded. "Thanks for the talk."

Naruto nodded, and walked away. He heard Suigetsu and Miyaki talking about how they'll head back to Kirigakure with the first light of dawn, and that they'll have to make sure all the wounded were taken care of. Though the blond quickly lost interest in their mundane talk, the last thing the Akatsuki said before leaving with Uakata replayed in his head.

" Tell Jiraiya-sensei that I send our regards."

As Naruto pondered those words, an image appeared in his mind. A picture of his dad, only much younger, with three kids: a redhead, one with orange spiky hair, and a girl with chin length blue hair. He

didn't remember where or when, but he saw such picture in his house, some time ago. He had dismissed that picture as just another trio of Genin his father had trained in the past. Now he was completely sure two of those kids were the same Akatsuki he just fought.

"Dad... what did you hide from me?"

Author's Note: Sadly for our heroes, Akatsuki wins again, and Uakata becomes the latest of their victims. You know, even if it would have made an already long arc even longer, now I kind of regret not including Uakata in the Kirigakure Civil War arc. He could have bonded with Naruto, and that way his death could have have a greater emotional impact, both for the blond and the story as a whole. Oh well, at least I'm more satisfied with his performance than Yugito's, since he got to be more involved in the arc.

I had to wait a whooping seventy chapters, but I finally got to write for my all time favorite Naruto villain, and boy, that felt good! I hope I made Pain's justice, and that you like him, both personality and badassery wise. Though given that he nearly killed Hinata and Haku, I'm afraid that some people are going to get mad at him. Oh well.

Yeah, speaking of Hinata and Haku, due the injuries they sustained in this chapter, they're going to be out of commission for some time, leaving Naruto as the only remaning member of the Assault Squad. Don't worry, while they recover, Naruto will get assigned a new team for the next arc. All of them being characters I think are popular, which people have been asking more of them (though I can tell you already it's not going to be Team Gai. Yes, I know I'm neglecting them, but I'm kind of struggling with where and when I should use them).

Also, there was something curious about this chapter: Naruto's Sage Mode. I pretty much had to find ways to remove Naruto

from many fights so he wouldn't just crush the enemy in an instant, to the point that I regretted giving him Sage Mode so soon (so no, stop asking about the Kurama Chakra Cloak, he isn't getting it before he did in canon). However, Naruto getting Sage Mode much earlier played against him here, given that it gave the Akatsuki time to observe it and develop a way to counter it, while in canon, Pain pretty much had to guess how it worked as he fought Naruto (and lost quite a few bodies in the process).

And yeah, Naruto finally found about Pain's connection to Jiraiya. Which means that Jiraiya's greatest fears are going to be confirmed next chapter. It's going to be a "fun" one, hehe.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading the chapter.

Only four jinchuriki left! Which ones will fall to the Akatsuki, which ones will survive? As this question is in the air, don't forget to leave your thoughts on this chapter in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Heavy Rain

Author's Note: Hey Hektols, if you are reading this (and I know you aren't), with this chapter, Son of The Sannin has surpassed New Chance in terms of wordcount! Yeah! Now, I think it's going to take more time to surpass it in terms of reviews, favorites and follows, hehe ^^U

And if you ARE really reading this... goddamit man, when are you going to update New Chance!? It's almost two years since the last actual chapter!

Anyway, enjoy this chapter:

Chapter 71:

Heavy Rain

or

Drinking and Planning

The journey back to Konoha did nothing but make Hinata and Haku's already precarious condition even worse.

Naruto's first idea to speed the journey was to summon a giant toad and have it give them a ride. But it was soon made evident that the constant leaps wouldn't sit very well with the heavily wounded Konoha ninja. Naruto's next idea was to carry them on the back of clones, but the problem ended up being the same. In the end, Naruto ended up making two makeshift stretchers, and carried them with the aid of clones.

Despite being able to run at a respectable speed, Naruto was unable to leap through the trees as he usually did, which ended up making his trip back home much longer than the justifiably impatient blond

wanted. Not helped by all the times he had to stop in order to change the bandages or close a wound that wouldn't stop reopening.

Naruto couldn't be thankful enough when he saw the gates of Konoha. Finally, this nightmare of a mission could come to an end.

...

Konoha Hospital, a couple hours later

"Your teammates are indeed lucky. Either lucky, or crazy strong. To survive such a long journey with such grievous wounds," Tsunade commented, as she looked over the unconscious Hyuga.

Thankfully, after an intervention of proper medical ninjas -her mother among them- Hinata and Haku were finally out of danger, and placed in a room each.

Naruto sighed, and shook his head. "If we were strong or had luck on our side, Akatsuki wouldn't have won."

Tsunade placed a comforting hand on her adoptive son, and gave him a sympathetic smile. "Don't beat yourself too hard, Naruto. I'm sure all of you did what you could. But no matter how good you are, you sometimes end up facing an unexpectedly strong opponent. Did I mention the time your father and I fought against Hanzo the Salamander?"

That made Naruto chuckle a bit. "You did. Hundred of times. Not that I ever get tired of hearing it."

"So you should know that even the best of the best fail at times," Tsunade pointed out.

"Oh, I do know that," Naruto replied. "It's just that..." he trailed off, as his eyes rested on Hinata's unconscious form.

"It doesn't make failing any less painful, right?" Tsunade finished his sentence. Naruto silently nodded. "Sorry if I sound blunt, but get

accustomed to it. Be thankful that at the very least, your temmates came back home alive. Others aren't as lucky."

Naruto nodded. He knew exactly what his adoptive mother was talking about. While she was obviously not as eager to share such memories of the war as with the epic battle against Hanzo, Tsunade lost her fiancée and little brother during the Second Ninja War. It was what caused her to leave the village with no other company than a four year old Shizune.

That moment, the door opened. It wasn't a slam, but it had more force than it was acceptable in a hospital. Naruto and Tsunade turned around, and saw another two female Hyugas entering the room, concern and worry written all around their faces.

"My daughter!" Hikari Hyuga said, as she ran to check Hinata, followed by her youngest daughter.

"Don't worry, Hyuga-san. Hinata is fine, even if she may not look like it now," Tsunade interjected, reassuring the former Hyuga Clan Head. "We estimate she'll be completely recovered in three or four weeks."

"Oh, thank goodness she's going to be okay," she said, sighing in relief. "Thanks for your efforts, Tsunade-sama," Hikari replied, bowing at the Sannin. She then looked at Naruto. "And thank you for taking care of my daughter, Naruto-kun. I know that have you not been there, maybe she would have never returned."

"I doubt that's the case, given that she's in that state because of me," Naruto dejectedly said.

"Naruto, I told you that-" Tsunade began, before being interrupted.

"What do you mean, Naruto?" Hanabi asked. "How can you be responsible of her condition? That would mean that you attacked her, and I can't imagine you doing that."

"No, I didn't attack her, but not that it mattered," Naruto replied. "I wasn't strong enough to protect my teammates, and they ended up paying the price. Had I been better prepared, the Akatsuki wouldn't have defeated us and leave Hinata-hime and Haku like that."

Hikari couldn't help but smile a little. She placed a comforting hand on Naruto's cheek. "Naruto-kun, while I appreciate your feelings for my daughter, her injuries are not your responsibility. Hinata is a ninja, just like you are, and knows the risks such position entails."

"But we're teammates-" Naruto tried to protest, but Hikari raised a hand to silence him.

"Naruto, I've known you since you were a child. I know how much you care about my daughter, and how much you push yourself to be the best possible ninja," Hikari continued. "However, no matter how hard you try, there will be times that you will fail."

"See? That's exactly what I told you," Tsunade agreed, nodding vigorously.

"I'm not winning this one, am I?" Naruto asked in defeat. He then looked at his adoptive mom. "We should leave Hikari and Hanabi alone with Hinata-hime, mom."

Tsunade nodded in agreement. "These rooms are too small for so many people, and we've been here for quite some time already," she said, before both blondes left the room.

As Tsunade went to other parts of the hospital to continue with her daily work, Naruto moved to the next room, the one they put Haku in. Upon opening the door, the jinchuriki saw the unconscious Ice Ninja had already somebody paying him a visit: a woman with long purple hair, holding a baby of a few months old, also with purple hair, albeit in a lighter shade.

"Hey there, Yugao," Naruto greeted the ANBU. The woman was wearing a dark blue shirt and green knee length pants. It was one of

the few times the blond saw her wearing other than her job uniform.

Yugao turned at Naruto, and smiled. "Hello there. Came to see Haku?"

Naruto nodded, while repressing the urge to apologize to Haku's foster mother for failing to keep the Ice Ninja safe. He knew he would answer in a similar way to Hikari and Tsunade, and that would only made him feel even worse.

"You know, seeing Haku like this..." Yugao began, as her eyes drifted towards the baby in her arms. "Makes me wonder if I should allow Seiichi-kun to become a ninja like his father and I. If something happened to either of them..."

"Your perspective surely changes when you're a parent, right?" Naruto asked the purplette.

"Yes. You're aware of the dangers you go through with every mission, and even if you don't regret your choices, you wish your children would take a different path," Yugao explained, as she rocked Seiichi a little. "But in the end, it's them who have to choose, regardless of what we think."

"Yeah..." Naruto said, almost in a whisper. "Do you want Seiichi to become a ninja, then?"

"I want him to be whatever makes him happy," Yugao replied. "If being a ninja is his call, then I won't stop him. It'd be hypocritical of me if I did such a thing."

Naruto nodded at her response, and the two of them fell into a comfortable silence, with only Haku's slow breath being heard. That's it, until Naruto opened his mouth to ask something.

"Hey, Yugao, may I ask you something?" Naruto asked, not waiting to see the purplette's answer. "What made you and Hayate adopt Haku to begin with?" Naruto asked.

Yugao seemed to be taken aback by such direct question, but her surprise didn't last long. Her smile put Naruto at ease, knowing that the question wasn't as personal as he feared.

"At first, I admit it was the money," Yugao told him.

"Huh?"

"Hokage-sama announced that the village was going to take in a refugee from the Land of Water who happened to have a powerful Bloodline Limit," Yugao started to explain. "And offered a considerable amount of money for the kids' upbringing until he reached adulthood, almost twice as much as he would need. Hayate and I were saving to buy a place of our own, so that drew our attention.

"But it wasn't just the money. Hayate and I also wanted to have kids of our own one day," Yugao smiled at the sleeping child in her arms upon saying this. "And thought that maybe this could be a good opportunity to practice, you know? Even if Haku-kun was almost ten. Though, we grew to love Haku as our own child. While we know we could never replace Zabuza, I hope he at least return some of that love."

This time, it was Naruto who smiled. "Trust me, he does. He wouldn't have grown to love this village as his home if it wasn't for both you and Hayate."

"That's reassuring to hear. Isn't it, Seiichi-kun? How your older brother loves his adoptive family?" Yugao bably talked her child.

"Naruto," a familiar voice said behind him.

The blond turned around, and saw Jiraiya standing in front of the door. He turned back to the purplette one last time. "Nice to speak with ya, Yugao. I'll come to visit Haku whenever I can."

"It was a pleasure. I'm sure he'll appreciate it," Yugao replied, before addressing the white haired Sannin. "Hokage-sama."

Jiraiya nodded back in return, before closing the door.

"Naruto, the ANBU told me of your arrival and the state your teammates were in," Jiraiya replied. "I came to see you as soon as I heard it."

"Well, I got lucky. As you can see, I'm not any worse for the wear," Naruto replied. Jiraiya could detect some bitterness in his voice. "Can we go somewhere more private? There's stuff I need to talk you about. Important stuff about the mission."

"You want to give me your mission report already? Sure, let's go to my office-"

"Actually, I preferred if we went somewhere else," Naruto cut him. Such request surprised the Toad Sannin. Naruto never had any trouble with his office in the past.

"Uh sure. Where do you want to go?"

...

Ten Minutes Later, Above the Hokage Monument

Jiraiya and Naruto were sitting at the top of the cliff where the Hokage Monument was carved. The whole village spread before their eyes. It was, indeed, a magnificent view of Konoha. Unfortunately, neither father nor son were able to enjoy it much.

"So, Akatsuki already has another jinchuriki in their grasp," Jiraiya said, letting out a tired sigh. "That makes five. More than half."

"Yes. But that alone isn't the worst part," Naruto said.

"I don't know if I want to hear it," Jiraiya replied.

"Too bad, because it concerns you specifically," Naruto stated, some anger seeping from his voice. Anger that was directed at Jiraiya. Something the Sannin noticed, and didn't like one bit. "The Akatsuki that fought us were a man with spiky orange hair and a woman with blue hair that had paper related jutsu. Do those descriptions ring any bells? Because the man called you 'Jiraiya-sensei'."

Jiraiya let out another sigh, the longest so far. "I was wishing for it to be just a rumor, or a misunderstanding. I've been trying to ignore it, but guess I have to face the facts."

"So, you know them, then," Naruto said, sounding mildly accusatory. The Sannin nodded. "Did you know they were Akatsuki?"

"I had some reports that said that, yes. But I wanted to make sure it was really them before taking any course of action," Jiraiya admitted.

"And why didn't you tell me!?" Naruto shouted, letting more of his built-up anger seep.

"They... they are two people who were dear to me..." Jiraiya admitted, sounding hurt. "I didn't want to think that they had fallen so far..."

"What's so special about them? I thought that you had nowhere like that in your life other than mom and the Old Man Hokage," Naruto asked, throwing his hands in the air.

"Those two were children from Ame that, alongside a third one, became my very first students. I admit that the reason I decided to train them was because one of them had the Rinnegan," Jiraiya said, much to Naruto's shock. He always believed that Jiraiya only trained Naruto's biological father and his teammates. "I lived with them in Ame for two years, and taught them enough ninjutsu and necessary skills in order to survive such a harsh place like Ame."

"A few years later, during the Third War, I heard that they formed an organization with the purpose of bringing peace to their homeland."

Unfortunately, they drew Hanzo's attention, and not in a good way. That... that was the last time I heard of them. Until recently."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"There were rumors regarding Ame, the biggest were two that I thought could be related: one, that Hanzo had been quietly disposed and no longer ruled the village, even if that was Ame's official position. And second, that the village was secretly controlled by the Akatsuki. I sent Itachi Uchiha to check if those rumors could be true.

"As expected, they were. Hanzo has been dead for Kami knows how long, and indeed, two Akatsuki members were the one in charge now, which people in Ame called 'God' and his 'Angel'. I could confirm that 'Angel' is indeed Konan, one of the children I trained back then."

"The other goes under the name of Pain. And he claimed to be a God," Naruto told him. "Though given the power of the Rinnegan, that claim wasn't that far off. If you could only see the jutsu he used to finish us off..."

Jiraiya nodded. He had never seen the whole extent of the Rinnegan's power, but he remembered that that boy was one of the most talented and powerful kids he had ever seen. However, his memories were interrupted when he realized that there was something about Naruto's tale that didn't add up.

"Naruto, you said that the other Akatsuki, Konan's partner, had orange spiky hair, right?" Jiraiya asked, now sounding curious.

"Yes. Is that important?" Naruto asked.

"It is. You see, the true name of that man is Yahiko," Jiraiya began. "That *wasn't* the kid with the Rinnegan."

Naruto's eyes opened wide. "Come again?"

"The kid with the Rinnegan was Nagato. He had pale skin and bright red hair. Just like your cousin. In fact, he could be an Uzumaki," Jiraiya pointed out.

Naruto's mind once again recalled the allegedly stolen Uzumaki Seal Barrier that Akatsuki had used to protect their lair while they extracted the One Tail from Gaara, as well as the Moon Acolyte's revelation on how an Uzumaki could awaken the Rinnegan if they had Uchiha ascendancy. But what his father said... it made no sense.

"No, I'm pretty sure what I saw," Naruto insisted. "The man had orange spiky hair, and his skin was fair but not pale."

"It is possible that Nagato died and Yahiko took his Rinnegan?" Jiraiya suggested. Naruto noticed the Sannin's wording, leaving out the possibility of Yahiko killing Nagato for his doujutsu. Though it was understandable, since it would be like Naruto killing Hinata to have her Tenseigan.

"No, that can't be, unless that Yahiko was also an Uzumaki or a Senju," Naruto replied. "According to the Moon Acolytes, only somebody with Six Paths chakra can wield the Rinnegan or the Sharingan properly. Kakashi-sensei can only use his Sharingan during short intervals, and he's usually pretty winded after that. Pain had not one but two Rinnegan, and he didn't show any kind of signs of fatigue by using it."

"I was hoping that once we had information on every Akatsuki member we could answer all our questions. But it seems that now there are even more questions to answer," a frustrated Jiraiya sighed. He massaged his temples as he tried to put his thoughts in order. No, it was not time to make conjectures, there were some questions that could be answered. "Alright, we'll care about Pain's potential identity later. You saw him fight, right? Tell me what kind of powers he had so we are prepared for the next time we face him."

Naruto nodded, and told his adoptive father about Pain. How he somehow spread his conscience across six bodies, each with one ability. One that could summon multiple animals, another one that could absorb ninjutsu, another that was like a living puppet full of weaponry, and lastly, the "main" one, who used powerful gravity based attacks.

"You said there were six bodies," Jiraiya pointed out. "What about the other two?"

"We neever saw them. They stayed behind. My clones and the Kiri ANBU fought them, but other than using those black rods and basic ninjutsu, they didn't have any kind of unique or amazing ability," Naruto said.

"Or maybe they had, but they didn't show them," Jiraiya pointed out. "The fact that they decided to remain in the background makes me think two possibilities: either their abilities are oriented towards support rather than direct combat, or they're too valuable to risk in a fight. Probably both."

"I think that one of them is able to revive the other bodies," Naruto stated. "Utakata and Haku managed to kill the Pain with the gravity attacks. Hinata checked, his chakra network was down. Then, the woman, Konan took his body away, and later he was back and kicking, as if nothing happened."

"If one of the bodies can resurrect the other ones, then it makes sense that he'd try to keep that one away from danger. That may be the key to defeat Pain," Jiraiya said.

"What about the other?"

"An escort?" Jiraiya suggested, not completely sure. "I mean, that body is important, so it makes sense that he'd try to keep it guarded. Given what you told me, the other four bodies already have powerful and outstanding abilities."

"It could be, but given that all five bodies have any kind of unique ability, we should think the sixth one is no exception, right?" Naruto suggested.

Jiraya placed a hand under his chin, pensive. "I think you may be right. Besides, thinking that the sixth body is any less dangerous than the other five is not a wise thing to do."

"Yeah. Though next time I face them, I'll keep an eye on that one," Naruto said. "Though... with Kurenai-sensei pregnant and Hinata-hime and Haku out of comission, I'm the only member of the Assault Squad. Which isn't much of an squad," Naruto dejectedly said.

Jiraiya smiled at his son in a reasuring manner. "Don't worry, you won't be teamless for long. For the time being, just go train and get ready for the next time Akatsuki shows up, okay?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah. We aren't the only ones who have been doing research. The Akatsuki knew about my Sage Mode and how to stop me from achieving it."

Jiraya's eyes widened in shock for a second. "That's... rather troubling."

"They gathered intel from all my fights. They know that I send two clones away to gather nature energy. Pain had two of his bodies kill my clones before they could do anything," Naruto explained. "I need to find a way to enter Sage Mode without relying on clones. Or diguise clones while they gather energy. Maybe I could have them Transform as rocks or stumps or something like that?"

Jiraiya shook his head." In order to gather nature energy, you need to be perfectly still. That means that you can't be performing any kind of jutsu either, even one just as easy as simple as the transformation."

"Dammit," the blond cursed, as he lightly punched the ground besides him. "Then what kind of options do I have?"

"Sage Mode is indeed powerful, but in my opinion you had become far too dependant on it," Jiraiya pointed out.

"Sage Mode gives me a huge advantage over my opponents, why I shouldn't use it?" Naruto asked the Sannin. "In the war against Akatsuki, the stakes are too high not to use everything I have."

"Again, that's true, but you shouldn't rely on one thing too much," Jiraiya rebutted. "Until recently, I never mastered Sage Mode completely, that's why I saved it as a last resort in case everything else failed. Why don't you try to improve on your other areas in case you have something to rely on? When was the last time you developed a new elemental jutsu? Or a seal?"

Naruto opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out of it. He tried to recall the last time he devised a new jutsu but that was... far longer than he remembered. The blond had learned quite a few elemental ninjutsu of all five basic elements during the past years, but those were mostly direct blasts, used to counter whatever element the opponent used. Nothing too fancy.

Naruto reflected on his fighting style: mostly wind jutsu for ranged attacks -maybe add another element if the situation calls for it-, his trusty Wind Blade for melee combat, lots of clones, and his trump card, the Rasenshuriken. All of them powered by up Sage Mode.

However, as the fight against Pain showed, the Rasenshuriken was out of the equation if Sage Mode is unavailable, depriving Naruto of his most powerful jutsu. Not to say that Naruto was defenseless without it, not even close. But against foes of Akatsuki's caliber, maybe he needed more jutsu that have the same potency and destructive power.

And not just that. He needed more jutsu that were more than just elemental blasts or barriers. Something that could be used in a nonconventional way, something that could give him some sort of tactical advantage, like flying. Hinata and Fu were able to fly, and so was that Akatsuki woman, Konan. Flight give battles a whole new

dimension. But if flight was so easy, somebody would have created a jutsu decades ago, right?

"No, that's quitter talk," Naruto inwardly said. *"I'm sure that there's a way I can make it work."*

"So, if my intelligence is correct, besides Fu and you, the other jinchuriki left are the Raikage's brother, and one of Iwa's two jinchuriki," Jiraiya stated. "If we look back at Akatsuki's operations, they will take some time to strike again until they find out where the jinchuriki are."

"I'm pretty sure they do know Fu and I are in Konoha," Naruto dryly said.

"Yes, but in order to capture you, they'd have to launch an invasion on the village," Jiraiya replied. Naruto opened his mouth, but Jiraiya beat him to the punch. "And before you bring Taki up, remember that Taki was a minor village with a low number of ninjas that rely on hidden passageways to keep their enemies out of their gates. If Hidan and Kakuzu had tried that crap against us, their so called army wouldn't have gotten past the main gate."

"You seem to be confident in the village's defenses. That's good, I guess," Naruto observed.

"Hey, after the Nine Tails attack, the Uchiha Insurrection and Orochimaru's invasion... you know they say, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If Akatsuki will come for us, we will be ready," Jiraiya stated, sure of himself. "But I don't think they'll go for either you or Fu right now."

"What do you mean?" Naruto asked.

"The other jinchuriki of Kumo, Killer B, pretty much disappeared from the face of the Earth after news of Yugito's capture arrived Kumo," Jiraiya revealed. "My guess is that the Raikage sent his brother to some sort of ultra safe and secret underground bunker until Akatsuki

is dealt with. That leaves the other jinchuriki, the one from Iwa, as the more logical Akatsuki will target next. Regardless if it's either Han or Roshi, they both left their villages, so they will be the most vulnerable to capture."

"I see. I presume you have people looking for him?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya frowned a little. "Do you really need to ask? I know this is a life of death situation, and not just for the jinchuriki."

"Good to hear that. Let's hope that what happened to Utakata won't repeat again," Naruto said, getting up. "Man, the journey back left me exhausted. I think I'm heading back home."

"I think I'll join you. Today has been a slow day in the office, and I doubt anybody will complain if I decide to leave a little earlier," Jiraiya added.

...

Senju Residence, later that night

"When was the last time we did this?" Tsunade asked.

It was late in the night, probably midnight. Naruto, Hagane and Kaida were already asleep in their bedrooms -or so both Sannin hoped-. Jiraiya and Tsunade were sitting in the living room's couch, holding each a cup of sake. There was a tray with a couple bottles of sake and more cups sitting on the coffee table in front of them.

"I don't know, but I need it," Jiraiya said, as he downed his cup of sake in one go, before pouring himself another one.

"I think we only do this when there's some serious shit going on," Tsunade stated. "And since nothing too bad seems to be going on on my end... I'm guessing you want to share with me something that's troubling you?"

"You always read me so easily," Jiraiya replied.

Tsunade snorted, and rolled her eyes. "Because you're an open book."

"I think we already had a conversation like this before, hadn't we?" Jiraiya asked, as he took a sip from his cup. "Or it's the alcohol?"

"Eh, it may be both," Tsunade said, as she pured herself more sake. "Now come on, spit it. What's eating you on the inside? Are those kids from Ame?"

Jiraiya chuckled sadly. "Once again, you nailed it. I got confirmation from both Naruto and Itachi that at least two of those kids are still alive, and they aren't just part of the Akatsuki, but everything seems to point out that they're the fucking leaders," Jiraiya said, as he angrily downed the rest of his cup. "Such a great sensei I am, right? It's a miracle our kids came out as normal as they did with me as their dad."

Tsunade's face formed a scowl, and angrily punched her husband in the shoulder -thankfully, it wasn't a chakra-enhanced punch-. "Don't say that! You're a great father and teacher! If you were such an awful person, I would have never married you!"

"But Hime..." Jiraiya tried to protest.

"No buts!" she cut him. "What happened to those kids is tragic, but it's not your fault, you hear me?"

"Whose fault it is, then?" Jiraiya retorted.

"I don't know. But not yours. You did your best to help those kids. You're the last person that should be guilty of what happened to them," Tsunade insisted.

"I know what I did. I don't regret helping them or teaching them ninjutsu," Jiraiya replied, before sighing a little. "It's just... now I felt I could have done more for them."

"I know how you feel," Tsunade replied, as her face softened a little. "When Dan and Nawaki died... I hated myself. I thought it was my fault."

"Because of that necklace?" Jiraiya asked, incredulous. "Come on, that had to be a-"

"At first it was for the necklace, yes," Tsunade interrupted him, scowling at Jiraiya's jumping to conclusion. "But Naruto showed to me that it was just an incredible, and tragic, coincidence."

"Then why? Nawaki died instantly, and you tried your best to help Dan's life. You did all what you could," Jiraiya stated.

It had been a while since the last time Tsunade remembered the deaths of his little brother and fiancé. Strangely, doing so caused her far less pain than it did in the past. Maybe because, over the years she spent in Konoha, she had moved on and filled the void they left in her heart with a husband and children.

However, it also left her with a feeling not of dread, but of unease, of thinking what would she do if something happened to them. The ninja world was dangerous after all.

Pushing those negative thoughts aside, Tsunade replied: "Precisely. I was there, yet I was unable to do anything. If I was a better ninja, a better medic, I used to tell myself that I could have saved them."

"So then why..." Jiraiya was about to ask, when a realization dawned upon him. "Oh, I see. That's how I'm feeling right now, yet I should know the guilt is undeserved. Cheeky woman."

Tsunade couldn't help but smile a little at the compliment., before continuing. "When Naruto told me that he was going out of the village for his first C-Rank mission, I was terrified," Tsunade confessed. "I thought 'that's it, there he goes, and I'll never see him again. Just like Dan and Nawaki'. But in the end, I knew I couldn't

keep Naruto locked in the village forever. I had to trust in both him, his teammates and his sensei."

"Though your fears weren't that unjustified," Jiraiya interjected. "Who would have guessed that our son would end up fighting fucking *Orochimaru* of all people during his first C-Rank mission."

"Don't remind me," Tsunade said, rolling her eyes. "The same thing went with Hagane and Kaida when they were kidnapped. With their secret out of the bag, they would always live with a target painted on their backs. But again, we couldn't keep them in a cage out of fear of something that could happen to them."

"Actually, that's what I did with the Ame kids," Jiraiya felt the need to point out. "Maybe I should have taken them with me to Konoha."

"But you didn't because Konoha wasn't their home. Ame was," Tsunade pointed out, as she took a sip from her sake cup. "And you couldn't stay with them forever. You did the right thing."

"In light of recent news, I don't feel I did the right thing," Jiraiya told her, lowering his head a little.

"Of course you don't. Some guilt is unavoidable. I'm not going to pretend you can bury those feelings in hopes of getting rid of them. But don't wallow in them either. Don't run possible scenarios of what could have been in your head. What is done is done. All we can do now is try to fix the mistakes we made in the past, and learn from those we can't."

Jiraiya chuckled upon hearing Tsunade's words. Tsunade frowned again, and leaned towards Jiraiya.

"What? Do you find anything I said funny?" the Slug Princess asked, unamused.

"Oh no, quite the contrary. Those were quite the inspiring words," Jiraiya praised his wife. "It's just that I have a hard time picturing

them coming out of your mouth, even if they just did."

In another time, Tsunade would have rewarded such jest with a punch, maybe with some chakra on it, but the Senju Matrairch merely smiled at her husband. "It's called growing up, Jiraiya. Try it when you're ready."

"Aren't we too old to still be growing up?" the white haired man asked.

His wife shook his head. "That's why I thought at first," Tsunade said. "Before coming to Konoha, I thought that my life had reach its final point. I thought that I'd spend the rest of my days gambling and running away from creditors, waiting for a strike of luck that would never come, until I died of alcohol poisoning on some alleway."

"Geez, that's bleak," Jiraiya noted, grimacing. He emptied his sake cup, and pouring himself another one.

"And you weren't much better than me, should I remind you," Tsunade replied. His face softened again, as her lips curved into a sweet smile. "What I say is, don't let past mistakes consume you, like we used to do before returning to Konoha. Now what we should ask ourselves is 'what are we going to do regarding those kids?'"

"I don't know if they're too far gone to be saved," Jiraiya admitted. "I like to think that it's not too late, but I can't let personal feelings get in the way. I'm the Hokage after all."

"And who's going to deal with them?" Tsunade asked, and scowled before Jiraiya could answer. "And please don't tell me you're thinking in dealing with them yourself!"

"I would have done that in another circumstances," Jiraiya confessed. "But like I said before, I'm the Hokage now, I can't rush into things. Naruto and Fu are jinchuriki, meaning that either them or the other Akatsuki will go after them. So the best thing I can do is to make sure they're strong enough to deal with this threat. Given what

Naruto said, it was luck that he didn't end as bad as his teammates, or even as bad as Utakata."

"Speaking of Naruto, what about his teammates?" Tsunade asked. "Hinata and Haku will be out of commission for a few weeks, and there's still a couple months until Kurenai gives birth."

"I've been thinking about that as well," Jiraiya told Tsunade with a nod. "But in the light of how the latest mission went, I'm afraid that traditional four man squads won't do against Akatsuki."

"Do you plan to send bigger teams to deal with them?" Tsunade asked, raising an eyebrow. "Can we afford it?"

"Don't worry, it won't stop the village from taking as many missions as usual," Jiraiya reassured her. "And even if it did, I think this takes priority than some cash money."

"I see," Tsunade said, as she downed her sake cup. She grabbed the bottle to pour herself another, but much to her annoyance, the bottle was now empty. "Dammit."

"Eh, maybe that's a sign that we should stop drinking and go to bed," Jiraiya told her.

"You said that because you drank more than me," Tsunade protested.

...

Akatsuki Hideout, Undisclosed Location, a few days later

Utakata's body was floating mid air, held by a chakra forcefield that came from the Demonic Statue's mouth. Wisps of red chakra came from the jinchuriki's mouth and eyes, each time smaller and less noticeable, until there were none. The statue's mouth clamped shut, dispelling the forcefield and dropping the now dead jinchuriki onto

the ground. A fifth eye opened on the Statue's grotesque visage before it sank to the ground.

"With the Six Tails sealed, five out of the nine Tailed Beasts are under our control," Pain said in a congratulatory manner. "Our task is more than halfway done."

"Unfortunately, the few jinchuriki left out there know about us and will hide themselves better," Obito reminded both Pain and everybody else.

"It won't matter, in the end they will also fall to us again," Pain ominously declared.

"Besides, don't we know that two of them are already in Konoha, hn?" Deidara pointed out. "We should go after those next."

"No," Pain shut down the blond's suggestion, much to his annoyance. "We will leave those two for last right now. For the time being, let's focus on the other jinchuriki. Zetsu, what have you found about them?"

"I still know nothing about the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails," White Zetsu stated. "After Obito and Kisame captured the Two Tails, the Raikage send his brother out of the village to one of the many safe houses they have across the Land of Lightning. Finding him won't be easy."

"Maybe we should create a threat that forces them to send the jinchuriki to fight us," Kisame suggested. "It worked the first time after all."

"Which is why it won't work a second time," Konan rebutted. "The first time it worked because they didn't know we had the Nine Tails, and the possibility of Konoha being behind the attack was real. However, the next time they know of the Nine Tails attacking, they'll know it's us and they will be prepared."

"How, may I ask?" Orochimaru asked, amused. "Dealing with a Tailed Beast isn't exactly an easy task."

"Kumo has a lot of experience in that regard, due how many times the Eight Tails escaped its container and went on a rampage," Pain told the Snake Sannin. "Plus I can guarantee you that they will be expecting us to do the same move. No, even if it will cost us more time and effort, we need to find out where the jinchuriki is. In order to keep his location a secret, his escorts will be few in numbers."

"Very well then," Obito agreed. "What about the other?"

"According to our intel, the other jinchuriki is a former Iwa nin that's walking the world, and never stays in the same place for long," White Zetsu replied. "Kinda like Uta-kata."

"Which means that capturing him will be much easier," Black Zetsu added. "At least, if we manage to find him first."

"Don't worry about that. My spies will have his location in no time," the Uchiha assured.

"Good. Once those two jinchuriki are within our power, we can focus all our attention to the ones staying in Konoha," Pain decided. "Now, if nobody has anything else to add, let's conclude this reunion."

As those words left Pain's mouth, the spectral projections of the Akatsuki started to vanish one by one until there was no one left.

...

Amegakure

Pain and Konan opened their eyes, finding themselves once again inside the safe room at the top of the highest tower of Amegakure, which they use for whenever they need to meet with the rest of the Akatsuki members via astral projection. Without saying anything, they got on their feet and got out of the room. The ninja guarding the

door stood to attention, and remained silent as they saw their God and his Angel walking away.

"Five Tailed Beasts already in our possession, and we only lost three members so far," Pain started to speak. "Though thankfully we've been able to fill one spot with an even more powerful member."

"What about Hidan and Kakuzu's spots? Are there any plans to fill them as well?" Konan asked, shooting Pain an inquisitive stare. "From now onwards things are going to be even more difficult. It would be beneficial to have all our spots covered."

"Unfortunately, we were unable to recover Hidan and Kakuzu's rings," Pain told her. "They must be in Konoha's possession. Even if Konoha is unaware of their significance."

"Guess eight members will have to do then," Konan said in resignation.

"Eight members, plus all the assets each of us possess. We command an entire village, and so does Orochimaru. The others also have their own minions that serve our cause," Pain confidently said.

"So, I guess that once we're done with the Four and Eight Tails, we will focus our attention to Konoha," Konan guessed.

"That is correct."

"Where... he is the reigning Hokage," Konan said, narrowing his eyes at Pain.

Pain shot Konan a cold stare. "Is that a problem?"

"Are we ready to face him?" Konan asked her partner. "After all what he did for us? Will we be able to fight him?"

"I certainly am," Pain replied, his voice lacking uncertainty. "And so should you. Experience should have taught you already that nothing

goes before our mission. Whatever our personal feelings for Jiraya-sensei were, they don't matter anymore."

"Speaking of which," Konan replied, her tone changing. "I don't think you should have told Naruto about our relationship with Jiraiya-sensei. Konoha will know about us."

"At this point, such knowledge is irrelevant," Pain declared. "We wouldn't even need the Tailed Beasts to crush any of the Great Villages, Konoha included. If anything, it will make Jiraiya-sensei more prone to make a mistake."

"If you're confident it won't be a problem, then I'll believe you," Konan stated, though she didn't sound entirely convinced. "Since it was thanks to both your power and guidance that we were able to come this far."

"Good to hear that, Konan," Pain replied. "It wouldn't do us any good for you or any of our members to wager now that we're so close to victory."

"Of course not, Pain," Konan agreed. "Though speaking of members, I think we should also keep an eye on some of them."

"Obito?" Pain asked.

"That's the most obvious," Konan replied. "But I also meant Orochimaru and specially Toneri. I believe that they're only using Akatsuki as means to their own ends."

"A possibility, yes," Pain admitted. "But as long as they keep working for us, whatever hidden agenda they may have it's irrelevant. Now come on, there's much to do. We need to plan our next steps."

...

Orochimaru's Lab, Undisclosed Location

Just like Pain and Konan, Orochimaru also had a designated safe room that he used whenever he was called into a meeting with the rest of his esteemed colleagues. Exiting the room, he removed the Akatsuki cloak and handed it to one of the two Oto ninja that were guarding said room. Said ninja nodded, and went to store the cloak somewhere else, with his partner trailing behind.

"Orochimaru-sama," Kabuto's voice said, and just like the Snake Sannin expected, he saw his silver haired minion walking towards him. "How did the meeting go?"

"Boring as usual," Orochimaru replied with some disgust on his voice. "After literal days sealing the Six Tails, we spend several hours babbling about how little do we know about the rest of the jinchuriki."

"Don't we know for sure that two of them are in Konoha?" Kabuto asked.

"Yes, but they want to leave them for last," Orochimaru replied. "On the flipside, that means that we'll be able to invade Konoha again. I hate to leave a job halfway done, you know."

"With the rest of the Akatsuki backing us up, the result will be different this time around," Kabuto optimistically replied. "Also, I'm sure this piece of news will brighten your mood: The Sound Five have just returned from their mission, and they're successful."

"Those are good news, indeed," Orochimaru said, as a creepy smile formed in his face. "Were they seen?"

"They left no witnesses alive, per your orders, Orochimaru-sama," Kabuto informed him.

"Good, good," Orochimaru nodded. "I'm pleased to see that this incarnation of the Sound Five is far more efficient than the original."

"Your children are quite the force to be reckoned with on their own, and as a part of a unit lead by Kimimaro-kun, nothing stands in their way," Kabuto said.

"This success will bring my main project one step closer to its completion."

"Indeed," Kabuto nodded. "Maybe once your project is complete, we'll be able to use Impure World Resurrection without any kind of drawbacks this time around."

Orochimaru nodded. "It always ate me on the inside having such a powerful jutsu at my disposal, yet not being able to use it. With it, I wouldn't even need Akatsuki to realize my ambitions."

"Though for the time being, it would be wise not to deviate too much from the organization's goals," Kabuto advised. "Obito already watches you with keen eyes."

"Obito-kun doesn't worry me," Orochimaru replied, chuckling a little. "Deep down, he's still a child, one that plays a game far more dangerous than he realizes. But even in this case, it would be unwise to underestimate an enemy, so we'll do as you say."

"One last thing," Kabuto asked. "Did you make any progress in replicating the Rinnegan?"

Orochimaru shook his head. "Sadly, all the experiments have been a failure. Neither of the other two Uchiha that we kidnapped from Konoha were receptive to the procedures, and didn't survive. I still have their bodies, but their use is very limited now."

"Pity. I was sure we'd be able to, given that we have both Uchiha and Hashirama's DNA at our disposal," Kabuto replied. "So, back to the original plan?"

"Yes," Orochimaru said, as his lips formed a sadistic smile. "I'll have to take the Rinnegan from Pain's eye sockets myself."

Author's Note: A more calm chapter following all the action and intensity of the previous one. Yep, Uakata is now officially dead, and Naruto is officially teamless. But don't worry, the latter situation won't last for much longer.

Other than his guilt over his teammates' current condition and his talk with Jiraiya, there was very little Naruto in this chapter, with most of the focus being on Jiraiya, Tsunade and the Akatsuki. Man, I need to use Tsunade more often, given that I'm billing her as a main character. Maybe I should have stuck to canon and made her Hokage instead...

Not much to say here. Next chapter, Naruto will address the beatdown he got from Pain by seeking additional training under other teachers.

Thanks a lot to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

That's all folks, see you in two weeks! In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Steps to Become Better

Author's Note: With the previous chapter, this story now reached more than ONE. MILLION. VIEWS. Thanks a lot to everybody who read this story, for making this possible! I didn't even DREAMED of writing a story that reached one million views!

Chapter 72:

Steps to Become Better

or

Naruto vs Ino-Shika-Cho

Sarutobi Estate

Dawn came over Konoha. As the still sleeping village was bathed by the first rays of sunlight, a single figure walked its empty streets.

In the past days, Naruto found himself crossing the gates of the estate belonging to the first clan who joined Konoha after its foundation. All the time accompanied by his teammates, and to see their pregnant sensei. Today, however, wasn't like any other. For starters, Naruto was alone, something not that unusual if one knew the outcome of his team's latest mission. And two, while he was planning to pay his sensei a visit, it wasn't the only reason to be there.

"Kurenai Sarutobi?" a maid asked when Naruto told her about his sensei." I believe she should be in the mess hall, having breakfast with the rest of the clan."

"Oh, I see. Can you tell her I'm here to see her?" Naruto asked.

"Sure," the maid said, but before turning, she asked: "Would you like to have breakfast with them? The clan would to have you as their guest."

Naruto shook his head. "Nah, I already had breakfast. Plus I don't want to intrude. I'll wait somewhere else. Oh, and can you tell her that I also wish to speak with Asuma-sensei?"

The maid nodded, and told Naruto that could wait in one of the main living room, usually the place she and her students had their meetings. And after half an hour of waiting, Kurenai and her husband entered the living room.

"Naruto! What a nice surprise," a smiling Kurenai said, as she went to greet the blond. "What does it bring you here? While I love your visits, I didn't expect you to be here this soon."

"Not to mention that you also wanted to see me as well," Asuma pointed out. "Do you want to get to know your sensei's political family a bit better?"

"It's not that. Well, I don't mind getting to know you better, but I'm having some troubles that I think the two of you may be of help."

Kurenai and Asuma took a seat in a couch in front of the blond.

"Tell us then, and we'll see what can we do," Kurenai told Naruto.

"Well, you see... after the failure of our last mission, I decided that it's about time to get stronger. Well, no, maybe that's not the word," Naruto said, as he tried to rearrange his thoughts. "More like... more versatile? Yeah, that's about it. I think I need a more diverse skills so I can have more fighting options."

"And let me guess, since I'm the only other Wind Element user, you want me to train you, is that it?" Asuma asked.

"If it's not asking much," Naruto replied, trying not to sound imposing.

But much to the blond's relief, Asuma smiled in return. "Sure! Any student of Kurenai who wants to train under me is welcome to do so."

Kurenai, however, frowned at her husband. "So, if Naruto wasn't my student, you wouldn't help him?"

"Of course I would!" Asuma replied, sounding a little indignant. "He's the son of the Hokage after all!" Asuma laughed, but upon seeing his wife scowl, he changed his tune. "Kidding, kidding! Come on honey, you know I'd help a fellow wind user no matter what."

"Nice!" Naruto cheered. "Thanks a lot for this, Asuma-sensei!"

"Don't sweat it," Asuma said. "By the way, how is that you want to train under me now? I thought that the training Hokage-sama gave you was more than enough."

"And it has been so far," Naruto replied, as he started to rub the back of his neck. "Not to badmouth dad's training, but when it comes to Wind Release, his training only goes so far. I think I can only progress if I train under somebody who has mastered such element."

"Don't worry, Naruto, nobody will think any less of Hokage-sama just because you seek additional help," Kurenai helpfully added.

"Well, I better get going. I need to do some stuff at the Hokage's Tower before our morning training," Asuma stood up, and walked out of the living room, but turned at the blond before leaving. "If you want to train with my team meet us at Training Ground Ten in about an hour or so."

"Will do, and thanks a lot for this!" Naruto repeated.

Asuma just nodded, and left the living room, leaving Naruto alone with Kurenai, and they fell into a somewhat awkward silence. Naruto's eyes drifted towards her pregnant belly.

"So..." Naruto began. "You must be pretty bored, right? Not being able to go on missions or train or do any fun stuff..."

"Who says I can't train?" Kurenai asked.

"You... you train? Like that?" Naruto asked, pointing at her belly.

"Not in the way you do, obviously," Kurenai replied. "But even if I can't train my body, I can still hone my skills with genjutsu. I've been reading and practicing a lot since my temporary retirement."

"Heh, can't wait to see you in action," Naruto said. "How long until the baby's born?"

Kurenai giggled a little at the question. "Oh, I see you want me back into the team as soon as possible, right? The burden of leadership is too much for somebody so young," Kurenai said, with Naruto chucking a little. "According to the medics, in about two months or so."

"Truth be told, I do want to have you back in the team," Naruto admitted. "Not just so we can be a four man squad again, but you're right about the burden of leadership. I liked to think that I did a good job leading Hinata and Haku. But the last mission... I can't help but think how it was my fault that Hinata-hime and Haku ended up as bad as they did."

"Not to sound rude, but get used to that sensation," Kurenai replied. "Many ninja are brave enough to risk their lives for a mission and the village. But when you have other people under your care, everything takes a different perspective. Suddenly the mission takes a backseat to make sure your subordinates return home safe, and balancing both things become a near impossible task."

"You tell me," Naruto dejectedly said.

"But if it's any consolation, I think you've been doing a great work so far, Naruto," Kurenai praised, shooting the blond a reassuring smile.

"From what I could heard, the Akatsuki you fought against was out of the ordinary, even among S-Class criminals."

"Still, I take pride in being one of the strongest ninja of my generation," Naruto said. "I used to think I had become stronger than most Jonin of this village. Now I see where such a train of thought lead me."

"There's nothing wrong in taking pride in one's abilities, as long as that pride doesn't blind us," Kurenai told him.

"No, you dont understand," Naruto replied, shaking his head. "You see, the reason I was so strong was because of Sage Mode. Such secret allowed me to surpass most ninjas before I even turned fourteen. But if I'm unable to enter such mode... well, I realized that I'm far more lacking than I had expected."

"But you're taking steps in rectifying such mistakes," Kurenai told him. "It's never too late to improve yourself."

Naruto was about to reply that it was if your comrades died, but decided not to pursue such gloom train of thought. He pushed all the negative thoughts aside and smiled.

"You're right, Kurenai-sensei! This time we were lucky, but next time I'll make sure luck is not a factor in our victory."

"See? That's the spirit!" Kurenai cheered. "Now go show my husband how skilled my students are!"

"Right!" Naruto replied, now in a more energetic manner, before leaving the living room.

...

Hyuga Estate

Naruto wasn't the only one who was planning to train. After spending a few days in the hospital, both Hinata and Haku were finally

discharged, albeit they were temporarily removed from active duty until they fully recovered, and were also banned from doing any strenuous physical activity, which, naturally, included training.

Not that they could do much training in their current shape. Haku had an arm on a sling, while Hinata needed a crutch to walk.

Of course, Hinata's condition and her word that she wouldn't train wasn't enough, so Hikari had assigned an Hyuga Branch member, or better said, somebody who belonged to the Branch Family when the clan was still split, to watch over her. Her caretaker was a green haired woman a few years older than her named Natsu Hyuga, who used to be Hanabi's caretaker when she was little.

So Hinata now spent most days either in her bed, or sitting in a couch, and the only exercise she was allowed to do were a couple of walks around the estate during the mornings and another couple during the afternoons.

Fortunately, there were more ways to train that didn't involve physical exercise. Hinata wasn't going to spend the time doing nothing and waiting until she was healed enough to go back into active duty.

"Hinata-sama, here I brought what you asked," A woman Hinata recognized as Natsu entered the living room. She was wearing a white apron under a black kimono, which made her look like a maid, with only her Konoha headband identifying her as a ninja. She was carrying a few scrolls under her arm, and a tray with a teapot and cups. "I brought you some tea as well."

"Thanks a lot, Natsu-san," Hinata thanked her with a nod. "And please, drop the '-sama'. The Branch House is no more. I'm no longer your superior."

"I beg to differ, Hinata-sama," Natsu said, as she placed the tray on the coffee table in front of Hinata, and the scrolls besides it, albeit at a prudent distance. She started to pour some tea into the cup. "You

might have abolished the clan's castes, but you're the clan head, meaning that you're still my superior, Hinata-sama."

Hinata couldn't help but smile a little. She knew this was a battle she wasn't going to win. "If you say so, Natsu-san."

Hinata raised a hand, and a scroll flew towards it. As she unrolled the scroll and started to read it, she noticed Natsu taking a seat in another couch next to her. She suppressed an eye roll. While she knew that Natsu was just following Hikari's orders, she couldn't help but feel a little frustrated over having a nanny again.

"If you're going to stay here as well, you might as well serve yourself some tea," Hinata offered the older woman.

"Thank you, Hinata-sama. I think I could use some," Natsu said, as she got up and poured some tea onto another cup.

At the very least, Natsu was silent enough to let Hinata read her scrolls in peace. Hell, she couldn't even hear her sipping her tea. She wondered what kind of training did they give her in order to achieve such level of silence. Not that such skill wasn't necessary for a ninja, even if she rarely did missions out of the estate, much less the village.

Soon, the Hyuga Clan Head found herself engrossed in the scrolls she had with her. The powers that the Tenseigan hid were beyond fascinating, and Hinata was a bit miffed that she wouldn't be able to put to test the knowledge she was gaining so far. Even then, there were a few jutsu that were small enough she would be able to discreetly practice

As Hinata read, she was unaware of the time that had passed. She took a sip from her cup of tea, but she realized it was empty.

"Oh," was all what Hinata said, but that was enough for Natsu to spring into action.

"Allow me, Hinata-sama," the maid-dressed kunoichi said as she got back on her feet.

"That won't be necessary," Hinata said, raising a hand. With a motion from that very hand, her cup floated back towards the tray. The teapot elevated into the air, and refilled both Hinata and Natsu's cups. Finally, she recalled back her cup while placing Natsu's into her hands. "There, easy and fast."

"Impressive, Hinata-sama," Natsu praised, before chuckling a little. "Though I think it would have taken me less time to refill your cup the old fashioned way," she giggled.

"It's okay. Besides, it serves me as a little training," Hinata replied.

A slight frown developed on the green haired woman's face. "Hinata-sama..."

"It's not strenuous, I swear!" Hinata said defensively. "Come on, there's no way I can get hurt by doing something so insignificant as moving a teapot."

"Still, it would be better if you limited yourself to reading, Hinata-sama," Natsu advised.

"If that's going to stop you from being worried..." Hinata said. She was about to continue her reading, until a thought dawned upon her. Putting the scroll down once again, she looked at the older girl.

"Natsu-san, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course, Hinata-sama. You can ask me anything you please," Natsu replied, smiling widely.

"Well, it's a bit personal in nature, but I want you to answer me with honesty," Hinata added.

"I'd never answer you any other way," Natsu assured her.

"Very well then," Hinata replied, nodding. "What do you think... of the Hyuga Main House?"

Natsu was clearly taken aback by the question, as her body language betrayed her. She hesitated for a few moments, while trying to come up with the best way to word it.

"I can assure you nobody outside this room will know about your answer. And said answer won't have any repercussions on my part, whatever it is," Hinata assured. But upon seeing Natsu stammering, she added. "Though if this question makes you uncomfortable, you're not forced to answer-"

"No, no!" Natsu cut her. "It's just... well, it's a delicate matter, and I wanted to look for the proper words in order to express myself correctly. While I hold no contempt for either you or Hanabi-sama, I admit I felt resentment for the Main House. For making us their servants. For taking our choices away from us. For branding our bodies with *this*, " she put extra emphasis on the last word as she removed her forehead protector, showing Hinata her Caged Bird Seal, before quickly putting it up again. "I will forever be thankful to you, Hinata-sama, for releasing us from this yokel, even if only partially. But even today, the Main House members still look at me and my fellow former Branch House members with contempt. They don't see us as equals, and hate that you made us so."

Hinata nodded. "I know. Unfortunately, change can't happen overnight. I always thought that I could close the rift that separated the clan, but I never realized that a scar would take its place."

Natsu smiled at Hinata. "Don't stress yourself over that, Hinata-sama. All in the Branch House know that you're doing your best to help us. Who knows, maybe one day in the future, once the scar is fully healed, our descendants will forget that the clan was once divided."

"And for that to do so, I also need a way to remove the Caged Bird Seal," Hinata said, as she took one of the scrolls. "The Otsutsuki

Clan created it, so there must be a way to remove it. Even if the Hyuga Clan erased such knowledge, there must be something here."

However, before she could resume her study, a booming noise followed by a tremor interrupted her. Then another. And another. And another .

"What's going on?" Natsu asked, as she activated her Byakugan. It took her little to find the source of the disturbance. "It seems that Hanabi-sama is sparring against Neji-san. Albeit such fight seems way too intense for a mere spar."

Hinata also expanded her sight, and saw her little sister and cousin training. Hanabi was using the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak in its most basic level. She mostly attacked from the air, while Neji defended from her attacks and countered her when she was within hand to hand range.

"I see," Hinata said, as she telekinetically called her crutch, and walked out of the room. "I want to see them fight in person."

"Hinata-sama, no!" Natsu protested. "It's too dangerous to get so close to them like that. You can see them from here if you want."

"You worry too much, Natsu-san," Hinata dismissed Natsu's concerns with a hand wave. "Come on, let's go see my little sister and my cousin,"

Natsu let out a sigh of resignation, and followed the Clan Head.

...

Turns out, Hinata wasn't the only one interested in Hanabi and Neji's spar. Several Hyuga had gathered in the small training ground in order to witness such high level battle. Of course, they all moved aside whenever Hinata arrived, in order to make room for the Clan Head.

So far, none of the two appeared to be too exhausted. Hanabi was floating above Neji with her hands on fire, while the older boy had his eyes locked on her, his body placed in a defensive stance.

"Fire Release: Eight Trigrams Phoenix Fire!"

Hanabi thrust her arms downwards in a rapid fashion, releasing a fireball with each thrust. Neji, however, was undeterred and deflected the incoming fire bolts with precise chakra coated palm strikes, sending them to the ground. Seeing that it didn't work, Hanabi tried a different approach.

"Fire Release: Eight Trigrams: Double Burning Palm!"

Hanabi placed both palms forward, and dived at Neji from above, as her whole body was coated in fire. Neji, however, merely smirked.

"Is this the extent of your skill, Hanabi-sama?" Neji mocked, as he started to spin while streams of chakra shot from his body. "Heavenly Spin!"

However, Hanabi didn't look astonished or shocked, but much to the onlookers' surprise, she smirked. Just when she was about to crash against Neji, she managed to correct the trajectory of her dive and spin around Neji instead of diving into him. Hanabi continued to fly spins around Neji, and as she did, a tornado of fire started to form. Meanwhile, Neji's own rotation was starting to slow down.

"That was some rather quick thinking on Hanabi-sama's part," Natsu commented. "Neji is in trouble now."

"Don't count Neji-niisan out yet, Natsu-san," Hinata replied. "Hanabi-chan might beat him in raw power, but Neji is still her superior when it comes to skill and experience."

Hanabi stopped spinning as the tornado of flames fully formed, engulfing the older Hyuga within it. While the fire wouldn't hurt him much, the building heat would force him to concede.

"Of course not, Neji. See?" Hanabi cockily replied. "That's what happens when you-"

"Gate of Opening: Open!"

Everybody could see a massive burst of chakra coming from Neji's body, which managed to dispel the fire tornado in an instant, much to Hanabi's shock. A faint green aura surrounded the Hyuga prodigy's body.

"You were going to say something about underestimating the opponent, right?" Neji said, his smirk not disappearing.

"I'll never dream of underestimating you, Neji. That's why I'm going to throw at you the best I have," Hanabi replied, as her hands flew through hand seals, before clapping them together. "Truth Seeking Balls!"

Hanabi slowly separated her hands, forming two black orbs between them. Said orbs quickly placed themselves behind Hanabi.

"So it's not just Hinata-sama the one who managed to learn that jutsu," Neji observed, but his smile didn't falter. "You're very talented indeed, Hanabi-sama."

"Ha! I'm not going to let your flattery make me lower my guard!" Hanabi fired back, as he motioned an arm forward, and the two black spheres shot themselves at Neji.

The Hyuga genius brought his palms together before motioning them forward.

"Mountain Crusher!"

Neji released a powerful wave of chakra from his palms that not only engulfed the Truth Seeking Balls, but it had enough power to reach Hanabi, violently hurling the younger Hyuga's backwards.

"Waaah!" Hanabi sputtered as she tried to regain balance.

"I might lack Six Paths Chakra, but my knowledge of advanced Gentle Fist techniques, combined with my-" Neji started to say, before he was interrupted by a pair of black orbs that smashed right into his gut, with such force it felt like Hanabi threw a building at him. "OOOF!"

Neji lost his balance, and fell on his back. During the couple seconds he took to hastily get back on his feet, he could see that Hanabi appeared behind him.

"Ha! You forgot about the Truth Seeking Ball's biggest strength: it nullifies any kind of chakra based attack!" Hanabi boasted, as she slipped into a familiar stance. "The match's over, you're within my divination range! Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Palms!"

Neji did try to block Hanabi's strikes, but the unexpected force of the Truth Seeking Balls' impact had slowed his reflexes, and was too slow to parry them. As Hanabi completed the combo, Neji's chances of victory became smaller, until they hit zero at the same time Hanabi delivered the last set of strikes.

"... sixty four palms!" With a well placed thrust, Hanabi dealt the finishing blow, ending the match.

Those gathered there started to clap and praise the younger Tenseigan wielder for her impressive victory over the clan's resident genius. And while Hanabi reveled in all the praise, there was one person she appreciated it the most.

"Nee-chan!" Hanabi cheered, after locating Hinata among the small crowd, and rushed towards her. "Did you see that? I beat Neji!"

"Indeed you did. That was quite impressive of you, Hanabi-chan," Hinata praised.

"A truly spectacular match, Hanabi-sama," Natsu added.

Hanabi giggled at the compliments, blushing a little.

"Excuse me, but would you be so kindly to help me?" Neji said, still sprawled on the ground. "I can't barely move."

Wordlessly, Hinata walked towards Neji, crouched down, and started to heal his injuries and bruises while reopening the chakra points Hanabi had closed.

"You certainly need to step up your training, Nii-san," Hinata said in a mock chastising tone. "What would people say if they find out the pride of our clan was defeated by my little sister?"

"We all know that I'm no longer the pride of the clan, Hinata-sama," Neji rebutted. "Not after both you and Hanabi-sama awakened those eyes."

"Come on, you know you're the most skilled ninja the clan has ever produced, even if you don't have Six Paths chakra," Hinata stated. "That has to count for something, right?"

As Hinata repaired his body, Neji could feel he was able to move again. He sat up, and sighed.

"The Truth Seeking Balls caught me off guard. I was unaware that they could nullify chakra," Neji commented. "Guess it was my fault for treating them as any other ninjutsu, instead of play safe and see what they could do."

"Now that you know that, maybe next time you'll be able to beat Hanabi-chan," Hinata pointed out. "It's not that such jutsu makes one invincible. If that was the case, that Akatsuki wouldn't have defeated us during my last mission."

"Still, the ability to nullify ninjutsu or other chakra based attacks is sort of impressive," Neji commented. "If used correctly, it might mean the difference between victory and defeat. Or life and death."

Hinata agreed with a nod, feeling that another self-deprecating comment wouldn't add anything to the conversation.

Still, Neji brought a good point. No matter how big a ninjutsu would be, the Truth Seeking Balls would be able to nullify it. Recalling the battle against Pain and Konan, she wondered what she could have done to take advantage of such assets. It seemed those gravity attacks couldn't be countered in any way, though they were similar to their telekinetic abilities, so maybe she could do something with that.

Then there was the Pain that looked like a puppet, whose attacks weren't chakra based, or didn't appear to be. There was also the summoner. Could Truth Seeking Balls undo summonings? She'd had to test that one. Thankfully her boyfriend could be of help with that.

She didn't know how to counter chakra absorption or being able to revive other bodies. Plus there was that last body they didn't know anything about.

And then there was Konan. She appeared to be a long ranged fighter specialized in ninjutsu using papers. She wondered if the Truth Seeking Balls could nullify those as well. Plus there was her many, many, many explosive tags. Could those be nullified? Explosive tags were fuinjutsu rather than ninjutsu. But other chakra absorbing abilities were also capable of absorbing those kind of explosions, so there was no reason as for why fuinjutsu couldn't be nullified as well.

... fuinjutsu could be nullified...

"Hinata-sama?" Neji asked, noticing his cousin zoning out.

Suddenly, something clicked inside her mind. The solution to one of her potential problems was right before her very eyes. It has been before her very eyes for so long. She felt so stupid. But there was no time to feel stupid. She had to act.

Getting up and grabbing her crutch, Hinata headed back inside as fast as her damaged legs allowed her to.

"Hinata-sama, don't run! You're going to get hurt!" Natsu cried, as she went after her. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

...

Training Ground Ten, An Hour Later

"Hi there, everybody!" Naruto greeted as he entered the training field.

"Just in time. Excellent," Asuma greeted Naruto back, pleased, before turning to the others. "Today Naruto will be joining us for our daily training. I hope none of you mind."

All of them nodded and muttered something to express their approval

As Asuma had said, the whole Tactical Squad was present in the designated Training Ground to start their morning routine. Well, not just the Tactical Squad, as Naruto could see he wasn't the only guest there.

"Uh, Choji?" Naruto asked the rotund body. "Who is that guy?"

Naruto pointed to a pale skinned brunnete wearing midriff baring black clothes that hung with Ino.

"Oh, that's Sai," Choji explained, as he happily munched some chips. "He's Ino's boyfriend. Ino usually brings him to our training sessions."

"But don't even dare to say that out loud when she's within earshot," Shikamaru advised, as he walked towards the duo. "Ino gets rather mad if you say that. Even if they're rather close."

"Why is that?" Naruto asked. Looking at the blonde, she seemed rather chummy with the body, who nodded and smiled at everything she said.

Shikamaru merely shrugged. "Beats me. Troublesome woman." He huffed.

While Sai looked familiar, Naruto couldn't tell if he really knew him or not. Maybe he saw him a couple times in passing, but didn't ask his name.

"Is he strong?" Naruto asked, deciding it was good to get some info on the newcomer.

"He's a long range fighter, kinda like Ino and myself," Shikamaru explained.

"He has this jutsu that can bring anything he draws to life," Choji continued.

"The living pictures aren't that though and usually go down after a single hard hit," Shikamaru said. "But if used wisely, those living pictures can be quite a pain in the ass."

"Not to mention that he can overwhelm you with numbers," Choji added.

"So, kinda like my Shadow Clones?" Naruto asked.

"Can your Shadow Clones fly? Because some of his pictures can," Shikamaru dryly asked.

Naruto's eyes opened wide upon hearing such thing. *"So, another ninja besides Hinata and Fu can fly as well. I need to find a way to do that."*

Asuma's claps snapped Naruto from his brief thought, as the bearded Jonin drew everybody else's attention to him.

"Alright everyone, besides Sai, who by this point has been a common sight," Asuma said, looking at Ino and Sai, the blonde smiling at her sensei. "Today Naruto will be training with us. I'd like to

take this chance to make several team exercises, before we move onto individual training."

Asuma's statements were met with a chorus of "yes!" and head nods.

"The fight will be Naruto versus everybody else. Fight as if it was a real battle. Don't worry, I'll stop the fight before the worse comes to pass," Asuma said, as his students and Sai mplaced themselves in front of Naruto, and all of them adopted fighting stances.

Naruto carefully eyed his opponents.

" It's been long since I've sparred against or even saw the Tactical Squad fighting. Neither of them are higher than Chunin, so this won't be too hard," Naruto thought, as his eyes drifted towards Sai. *"Other than what Shikamaru told me, I have no idea what that guy can do. I should worry about him the most."*

As his eyes jumped from one side of the spar to the other, Asuma decided it was time to start. "Now... begin!"

The moment the order left Asuma's lips, everybody slipped into position and prepared to attack using their usual abilities. Naruto began the fight with his signature jutsu.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Roughly fifty Naruto clones popped into life, and without waiting for their boss to order them, they charged forward.

Far from being impressed, Shikamaru chuckled and shook his head upon seeing the orange and black tidal wave coming at them.

"Typical Naruto. Choji, shall we begin ourselves?"

"You can bet on it!" the Akimichi heir said as he clapped his hands together. "Partial Multi-Size Jutsu!"

Choji jumped into the air just as his arms grew to giant size. As he fell into the mass of clones, he slammed both arms into the ground, instantly destroying the clones unfortunate enough to fall victim to the brutal assault -so brutal, it opened a crater in the ground-, while creating a shockwave that sent surrounding clones flying.

"Good one, Choji," Shikamaru praised, as he crouched while interlocking his hands into the Nara's most used hand seal. "My turn: Shadow Sewing Jutsu!"

Threads of shadow emerged from Shikamaru's own, launching themselves towards the clones. But unlike the Nara's usual jutsu, these threads didn't travel across the ground, but the air, meaning that they were actually solid. Its purpose was made evident when the thread impaled several charging blondes that were unable to break in time. The clones coming from behind managed to avoid them, but between Shikamaru's shadow threads and Choji's rampaging attacks, their charge was swiftly aborted.

Naruto, however, wasn't worried in the slightest. After all, that charge of clones was a mere distraction to keep Shikamaru and Choji occupied. However, Shikamaru and Choji were countering the charge in the most aggressive way possible in order to distract Naruto. Something Naruto was aware of.

"I was wondering when you guys would show up," Naruto casually mentioned, as he started making hand seals. Looking up, he saw Ino and Sai flying above him atop one of Sai's ink birds. *"Hmm, so that's Sai's jutsu. It looks quite versatile indeed."*

"Damn, he spotted us!" Ino cursed.

"It's okay. Let's go with the plan as we agreed," Sai told the blonde.

Ino jumped from the bird, making a hand seal as she fell.

"Mind Control-"

"Too slow, Ino," Naruto laughed, as he prepared to unleash his own jutsu. "Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto thrust both hands upwards, lining up both the descending Ino and the still airborne Sai, and cast a huge tornado that engulfed all of them.

"You're going to need more than that to distract me, you know," Naruto cockily said.

Sai fell from his bird, the latter exploding into ink as it was destroyed. However, much to Naruto's confusion, Sai and Ino also burst into blots of ink, as they were carried away by the powerful wind jutsu.

"What?" the blond dumbly asked.

"Mind Scourge Jutsu!"

Naruto felt as if somebody hammered his brain from the inside. Clutching his head, the sudden pain bent the jinchuriki down to his knees. But as soon as the pain came, it went away, much to Naruto's confusion.

"Liked that?" Ino's voice said from behind. Naruto turned around, and saw the Yamanka smirking at him.

"I wasn't expecting for you to be dumb enough to be fooled by an ink clone," Sai said, as he landed besides Ino. "Guess I overestimated you."

"And now, you're at our mercy!" Ino claimed, as he slipped into a fighting stance.

"Ha! You'd wish!" Naruto made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone-AAAAHHH!"

There it was. The mental pain was back. Except this time it was ten times worse. As if somebody cut his brain with a searing knife. What did Ino do to him?

"Enjoy my Mental Scourge jutsu? As you have noticed, it triggers whenever you use ninjutsu, so unless you have an exceptionally high tolerance for mental pain, I wouldn't recommend you using that," Ino told Naruto, clearly pleased with herself. "I created it myself!"

"Let's finish this already," Sai neutrally stated, as he unfurled a blank scroll, and started to draw several animals. "Super Beast Imitating Drawing!"

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Still clutching his head, Naruto got up and tried to get away, just as Ino fired several water bullets from her index finger, while several ink tigers emerged from Sai's scroll. Fortunately for Naruto, several of his nearby clones noticed the original's predicament, and quickly rushed to his aid. Some of them jumped in front of Ino's water jutsu, while the others wrestled and fought against the ink tigers, while another one helped Naruto to move away.

"Man, I wasn't expecting these guys to be this crafty!" Naruto thought, cursing his own overconfidence. *"And now I can't even use ninjutsu? How the hell I'm going to fight them?"*

"Very well, all of you! Great teamwork when executing your tactic!" Asuma's raised his voice to praise his students, while clapping slightly. "Come on Naruto, I know there's still fight in you! I refuse to believe my wife is such a lousy sensei!"

"He was expecting this. He knew that, despite not being that strong individually, the Tactical Squad becomes a monster when they fight together. Plus they have Sai as additional reinforcements," Naruto thought, as the realization dawned upon him. *"He knew they'd push me against the ropes, and get ready to counter my usual tactics. Meaning that there's only one solution left... I need to improvise and make the most of what I still have!"*

"Everybody, come back!" Naruto called.

His few remaining clones stopped fighting Shikamaru and Choji, and followed their boss into a cluster of trees, running away from the Tactical Squad.

"After him! Don't let him escape!" Shikamaru called, as he and the rest of his teammates converged to catch the fleeing blonds.

The clones, however, pulled several smoke bombs from their ninja tool pouches and tossed them in multiple directions, engulfing the whole zone in smoke, stopping the Tactical Squad in their tracks.

"I can still sense him! Let's go after them!" Ino called.

"Ino, watch out!" Shikamaru called out, as he pulled the blonde away.

At that moment, a chain of explosions rocked the area, hurling Shikamaru and Ino backwards. The two of them coughed a little, before helping each other stand out. They were joined soon afterwards by Sai and Ino.

"Good eye, Shikamaru. Didn't notice the explosive tags," Ino said, as she wiped some dust from her top and skirt. "Man, Naruto isn't pulling any punches, is he?"

"You pushed him into a corner with that jutsu of yours," Shikamaru pointed out. "And you know what they say about cornered animals."

"He recalled his clones," Choji pointed out.

"Because thanks to Ino's jutsu, he won't be able to create more for some time," Shikamaru told Choji. He then turned at Ino. "How long does your jutsu last?"

"It varies. Between ten and thirty minutes, depending on the target's stamina and mental fortitude," Ino explained.

"Ten minutes it is," Shikamaru said.

"Even then, it's safest to assume that the jutsu will run out sooner rather than later," Sai said. "Can you sense him?"

Ino closed her eyes and made a hand seal. After several seconds, she opened her eyes again. "Got him. He and his remaining clones, I think there are seven, are gathered at the top of a tree, hidden behind its canopy."

"He's probably planning how to ambush us as we speak. Let's go, I'll tell you what are we going to do to bring him down," Shikamaru said.

The other three nodded, and headed towards Naruto's position.

...

Meanwhile, at the top of a large tree of the training ground, Naruto and his remaining clones planned what to do next.

"Man, this is bad. I can't use ninjutsu, I can't create more clones," Naruto moaned, as he pulled out his Wind Blade, and activated it. "Head not feeling as if it's about to explode. I guess that I can still use chakra to some extent. That's good. What else do we have?"

"Kunai and shuriken," a clone said.

"Fuma Shuriken as well," another clone said.

"A few explosive tags and elemental tags," a third clone asked.

"And some smoke bombs and ninja wire," a fourth clone concluded.

"Okay, I may not be Shikamaru, but I'm smart and resourceful. I'm sure I can make the most of what little we have," Naruto said, in an effort to gather some courage for his task ahead. "Guess that this situation will be the norm when I fight Akatsuki in the future."

"Watch out! Up there!" a clone urgently whispered.

Everybody looked up, and they could see Sai and Ino, riding one of the former's ink birds, flying in circles around the area. Naruto instantly knew that he had been found -not that surprising, given that Ino was a sensor, but he was hoping for some more time to plan-.

"Is that the real Sai? Or is he an Ink Clone? I don't want to fall for that trick again," Naruto said.

"I think we should let them make the next move. We got into this mess because we rushed into things," a clone suggested.

"Good idea, me. We'll wait, see what they do, and counterattack," Naruto decided.

...

While Naruto wasn't aware of it, those flying above him in circles were the real Sai and Ino. Like Naruto, they were waiting for the blond and his clones to come out to fight them, but he knew better than that.

"It doesn't appear that he's coming out from his hiding place," Ino guessed, as she looked down.

"We'll have to force him out then," Sai decided, as he unfurled another scroll, and with practiced ease, quickly drew several birds. "Super Beast Imitating Drawing!"

The birds jumped out of the scroll, and without waiting for a verbal command, they all dived at the tree where Naruto was hiding.

"Very well then. I'll tell Shikamaru and Choji to be prepared," Ino said, before making a hand seal and closing her eyes.

...

The result of their tactic became evident. Naruto and his clones jumped out of the tree, fleeing from the flock of ink birds that were badgering them with painful pecks and scratches.

"Aw!"

"Goddamn pests!"

"Go away!" a clone yelled, throwing a kunai at one of the ink birds.

"Shadow Sewing Jutsu!"

Once again, Naruto and his clones were assaulted by a mass of black shadowy threads, forcing the group to split in several directions, in order to force Shikamaru to choose between several targets. They could see Shikamaru not that far away from them, standing below the shadow of a large tree.

"Stop running! Attack Shikamaru!" Naruto ordered.

A trio of his clones nodded, and pulled several shuriken, which they threw at him. Shikamaru, however, created more shadow threads which he used to deflect the shuriken away.

"Quickly, now! Let's flank him! He can't attack us if we're spread wide around him!" Naruto said, as he and his clones charged towards Shikamaru in an expanding circular formation.

"That's not a half bad plan to counter my jutsu, Naruto," Shikamaru praised with a grin. "Too bad I'm not the only opponent you're against."

As if on cue, Sai and Ino dived at what they presumed was the original Naruto. The blond quickly turned around, unsealed a Fuma Shuriken from a small scroll, and tossed it at the bird. The ink construct instantly burst into several black blots, spraying them everywhere. Sai and Ino managed to jump in time, the former unsheathing the tanto strapped to his back.

"Oh, so you know how to fight in close range?" Naruto asked, as he parried the blow with his Wind Blade.

"A good ninja can fight both close and from afar. Anything less is unacceptable," Sai replied, as he struck Naruto with quick and precise blows.

"Damn, this guy is pretty good in close combat as well, I can hardly keep up," the blond distressingly thought, as Sai pushed him back with each strike.

"Boss, we're getting a bit overwhelmed here!" a Naruto clone who was trying to hold off Shikamaru's shadow threads called, before he was pierced by one of them. "OUCH!"

Naruto could feel the clone's few memories entering his mind as it was dispelled, which caused nothing but more stress to the original.

"Dammit, dammit! What do I do? I can't go down so soon, I barely did anything!" Naruto distressingly thought. *"It was a good thing that I had these clones before Ino nailed me with that jutsu, but how can I use them in a way that... hey, wait a second, that's it!"*

"Boss, any ideas?" a clone asked, who tried to fend off another thread.

"Yes, ninjutsu! Use it!" Naruto called. Upon sensing their hesitation, Naruto insisted. "Come on, do what I say!"

The clones obediently nodded, and started to make different sequences of hand seals.

"Naruto, what are you doing? You can't use ninjutsu, unless you want to experience the biggest headache ever!" Ino called out. While it wasn't smart to stop your enemy when he was making a mistake, the Yamanaka kunoichi was so baffled that she couldn't help but ask.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

"Fire Release: Fire Bullet!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

The Tactical Squad found themselves at the wrong end of several gusts of wind, bolts of fire, and a torrent of water, forcing them to disengage Naruto and fall back. And much to their shock -Ino's in particular- none of the clones were suffering from any ill effect of Ino's jutsu.

"How... how is it possible?" a bewildered Ino asked. "Are clones immune to my jutsu?"

"Those clones were created before you used your jutsu on Naruto, therefor they're exemt from it," Shikamaru explained, coming with such realization that very moment. "Sorry, I should have realized it earlier and plan for a countermeasure in advance."

"Thank goodness we didn't show all of our cards yet," Ino replied, as she closed her eyes. *"Choji, your turn now."*

" *On it!*" Choji's voice replied in her mind.

With all the chaos surrounding him, Naruto hadn't realized that Choji wasn't among his attackers. The Akimichi heir had shrunk himself to the size of a doll, and was flying on a smaller ink bird drawn by Sai. The bird started to fly in circles around the original Naruto, surrounded by his clones, who were pelting the rest of the Tactical Squad and Sai with elemental ninjutsu.

"Alright then, here we go!" Choji said, as he jumped from the bird, and started to fall towards Naruto. "Reverse Multi Size Jutsu: Cancel!"

Bringing his palms together, Choji undid the jutsu, and instantly returned to normal size. Naruto saw a shadow falling over him, and looked up, but it was too late.

"What the-?"

"Got you!"

Choji slammed against Naruto, painfully pinning the blond to the ground. And if such brutal attack wasn't enough, the Akimichi wrapped his arms around the jinchuriki's body, pinning Naruto's arms against his body, leaving him completely immobilized.

"ACK!" Naruto could barely scream.

The clones noticed what happened, and turned around.

"Boss!" several clones said in unison, as they tried to help the original.

This proved to be a fatal mistake, as it gave Shikamaru, Ino and Sai ample chance to destroy all of them with their ninjutsu, or with tanto slashes in the case of the former.

"Can't... move..." Naruto breathed out, as he futilely struggled to break free from Choji's bear hug.

At that moment, Asuma landed besides them, watching everybody with analitical eyes.

"Alright then, I think I saw enough. Good job, guys," Asuma praised his students and Sai, before looking at Choji. "You can release him now."

Wordlessly, Choji released Naruto, before standing on his feet. He then offered Naruto a hand to stand up, a hand Naruto gratefully accepted.

"Thanks," Naruto told the Akimichi. "Good match. You guys are a force to be reckoned with."

"Of course! That's the Ino-Shika-Cho for you!" Ino proudly said, before moving closer to Sai. "With some little assitance!"

"It's amazing how well you guys can coordinate. I barely heard you exchanging words!" Naruto exclaimed.

"That's thanks to Ino's Mind Fragmentation jutsu," Choji told him.

"Huh?"

"It's another jutsu I created," Ino explained, beaming with pride. "It allows to split my mind into tiny pieces and temporarily transfer them to my teammates. That way, not only our minds are connected, but I can see and heard everything they see and hear. You could say our minds become one!"

"Wow, that jutsu is really impressive!" Naruto praised.

Even if it wasn't some flashy or destructive ninjutsu, Naruto could see how useful such an ability was. That was the kind of new skills he sought to develop. Something that allowed him to become a more versatile ninja.

"Before we start the training, I want you to reflect on the spar, Naruto," Asuma began, as he walked towards him. "You'll agree with me that the moment things started to go south for you was when Ino hit you with her Mind Scourge Jutsu, right?"

"Yeah. Not being able to use ninjutsu was a real bummer," Naruto replied, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head.

"And why did you allow Ino to sneak close enough to use her jutsu on you?" Asuma asked.

"Sai fooled me with a bunch of clones," was Naruto's reply.

"And you didn't had the possibility in mind? Weren't you on guard from a potential attack from behind?" Asuma sternly asked, as he crossed his arms.

"Boy, this is embarrassing..." Naruto chuckled, as he ran a hand through his hair. "Usually, I have Sage Mode, which gives me

sensorial abilities. Or if that fails, I usually rely on Hinata-hime for such things."

Asuma nodded. "Guess this is why you wanted additional training, right? You were starting to become complacent, and that attitude started to erode your skills. I mean, you didn't even notice that Choji wasn't there during the second fight."

"This was a real eye opener. If you guys were Akatsuki..." Naruto uneasily said.

"That's what these spars are for," Asuma said, sounding now a little more friendly. "Not only we will help you with your initial concerns, we'll make sure you're a great ninja no matter the situation. There's a reason as for why my team it's called the *Tactical Squad*."

Naruto enthusiastically nodded, and smiled widely, his inner fire returning. "Alright then, let's begin!"

...

Gekko Residence

"You know, it's kind of weird seeing you in the house so often," Yugao said, as she entered the living room.

There she saw her adopted soon reading a book.

"Given that I'm not fit for any physical training," Haku motioned his arm on a sling for added emphasis. "There's not much I can do. Though if I'm being a bother, I can go outside. It's a nice day, even if it's a bit cloudy."

"Of course not, Haku," Yugao reassured, as she sat besides him. "I love to have you here more often."

"Well, given that I can't be of much help here with house chores nor taking care of Seiichi-kun..." Haku said, leaving the sentence hanging.

"Again, don't worry. You should focus on getting yourself better," Yugao insisted, before taking a look at the book he was reading. "What is that?"

"Advanced Genjutsu Theory," Haku explained. "I may not be able to training in taijutsu nor ninjutsu, but at the very least I can do this. That's what Kurenai-sensei was doing during her pregnancy."

"That's very diligent of you, Haku," Yugao nodded, as she smiled at him.

"That's what's so good about genjutsu. You can practice it even if you can't be physically active," Haku stated. "Just like now, for example. You think you're talking to the real Haku, but this is just a genjutsu."

Yugao shot the Ice Ninja a look. Haku returned the stare, and smiled at her. Yugao conceded, and made a hand seal, releasing a burst of chakra through her body. Haku was still there. The boy giggled.

"I can believe I tricked you like that," he said, chuckling softly. "Some ANBU you are."

Yugao scowled playfully, before lightly punching Haku in the arm - thankfully the one that wasn't on a sling-.

"Once you get back to normal, I'm going to make you pay for that in a sparring match," Yugao promised him.

"Good. It will be a nice way to get back into shape after all these weeks of inactivity," Haku earnestly replied, smiling at her.

Yugao sighed. "I can't just win with you, can I?"

"Besides you and Hayate-san, and I was also trained by Zabuza-sama. And of course, I was able to tell which training method was the most brutal," Haku explained. "I doubt there's anything you can do to me worse than anything Zabuza-sama put me through."

Yugao was about to answer something when somebody knocked the door. Wordlessly, the purplette got up and left the living room. A minute later, she returned accompanied by somebody else.

"Hey, Haku-kun, look who came to see you," Yugao told him with a wide smile.

Haku returned the smile. "Tenten!"

"I think I'll leave you alone," the ANBU said before leaving.

Tenten thanked her, before sitting besides her boyfriend.

"Hey there," Tenten said.. "My team and I came from a mission earlier than we thought, so I decided that maybe I could spend some time with you."

"I'm really glad to hear it," Haku replied. "I could use some company other than Hayate-san and Yugao-san."

"Good. Because Gai-sensei and Lee have been particularly obnoxious with their self imposed challenges, and I need to vent some steam," Tenten grinned, as she placed both arms around the Ice Ninja's neck.

"As long as you're careful, I'm all yours," he said with an eager smile.

...

Training Ground Ten

After the fight against Asuma's students and Sai, Asuma had created a clone to train with Naruto, while the real one went to train the rest.

Naruto felt the training with Asuma was fruitful, even if truth be told they haven't done much in the way of training, more like trading ideas for new, innovative wind jutsu. He felt that this would be the set up for something big.

"I wonder why we never had a talk like this before, given that we're the only two wind element users in the entire village," Asuma had said with a laugh.

After that, Asuma had told everybody to take a short break to catch their breath and stretch their muscles. Shikamaru used such opportunity to lie down and watch the clouds, Choji to eat another bag of chips, while Ino was filing her nails. And lastly, Sai was resting against a tree, drawing something on his sketchbook.

Naruto didn't know much about the weird, pale looking boy, so he thought it would be a good chance to meet him.

"Hey there!" Naruto greeted as he walked to him. "I don't think we've been introduced. My name's Naruto."

"I know who you are. I don't think anybody in this village doesn't know about the elder of the Hokage's children," Sai replied in a confusingly polite tone, while he continued working on his picture. "And I think you know who I am, since Ino and the others told you about me."

"Well, yeah, but even with that, we never spoke to each other before, so I think introductions were in order," Naruto tried to justify.

Sai stopped drawing, and smiled at him. It was a smile that unnerved the blond. "Of course. A social convention. Ino told me of those. I try to follow them as much as I can, but most of them don't make much sense to me."

"They don't have to, just go with the flow," Naruto said with a shrug. He had the feeling that trying to get to know this guy better was going to be an uphill battle. He wondered what the hell did Ino see in him in order to become so close.

"I heard about your last mission," Sai bluntly stated, taking Naruto aback a little. "It's a pity that it ended in such failure."

Naruto sadly nodded. "That's why I'm here. I want to get all the training I can so the next one has a different outcome."

"I hope you do. Konoha could certainly benefit from having a third jinchuriki among its ranks," Sai stated.

Naruto frowned, and crossed his arms. He didn't like where this conversation was going. "Hey, it's not a matter of collecting jinchuriki, but saving lives, and making sure Akatsuki doesn't get their dirty hands on the Tailed Beasts."

Sai's smile didn't falter, and nodded. "Of course, such things are important too. But wouldn't Konoha be able to face its enemies, such as this Akatsuki, if we had powerful ninja like jinchuriki among our ranks?"

Naruto wanted to rebutt that question, but found himself unable to. "... I guess you have a point there. But like I said before, that's not the main goal of the jinchuriki rescue."

"It seems you care about them on a personal level," Sai noted. "Even if you never met them. Why is that?"

"Because we're the same," Naruto replied.

"That doesn't make sense," Sai said, shaking his head. "Do you feel such a strong bond with every blond haired person on earth? With everybody who has blue eyes? With everybody who has a penis?"

"What the...? No!" Naruto angrily snapped. "Being a jinchuriki goes beyond something so shallow! A jinchuriki bears a huge burden. Not only carrying a Tailed Beast is a constant source of danger for us, but people tend to fear and avoid us, due said danger. And what's worse, none of us chose to be jinchuriki. It was the villages that forced such burden upon us."

Sai had stopped smiling, and stared at Naruto intently with his black eyes, as if he was slowly reflecting Naruto's words.

"I see," he said, averting his gaze. "And do you hate the people who sealed the Nine Tails within you?"

"No, I don't," Naruto replied, his anger subsiding. "I know the circumstances behind the sealing. Only a member of the Uzumaki Clan can hold the Nine Tails, and back then, I was the only one available. There weren't other options. So in the end I had to accept this and move on."

"Of course. Sometimes sacrifices need to be made for a greater good," Sai said, nodding, as he went back to his drawing. "In the end, the two of us aren't that different."

"Huh? What does that mean?" Naruto asked, as he scratched the side of his head in confusion.

"It's nothing," Sai waved off. "Shall we resume the training?"

...

Land of Earth

Trekking through a forest near the base of a mountain, there was an old man. He sported a red beard, a blue mark that crossed his face in an horizontal manner, and wore an Iwakagure forehead protector. A voice resonated within the man's head.

" You know, we're pretty close to your former home, Roshi. Have you ever thought about going back?"

"You should know already that I'm not going back. At least, not yet, Four Tails," Roshi replied.

The Tailed Beast growled upon being called such a thing, but kept the frustration to himself. This was more important.

" I've felt another one disappear. This time, it was Saiken," the Tailed Beast replied. "Something is happening, Roshi. Somebody is hunting us. I think we might be in danger."

"Of course. The villages, major and minor, always went after us. You're not telling me anything I don't know, monkey," Roshi rebutted.

" This is not like the other times! I can't sense my siblings anymore! This serious! Will you listen to me just for once in your life, you stubborn old man?" the Four Tails roared.

"Are you afraid that somebody might have find a way to take you out permanently?" Roshi asked, enjoying the fear the normally proud and haughty monkey was feeling.

" That's not possible. There's only one reason my siblings would disappear like this," the monkey warned. **"And that doesn't spell anything good for your kind."**

Author's Note: So yeah, another chapter dedicated to both training, and setting up future plots. I often fear that readers might find these chapters boring, but it's not rare to see them getting more and better reception than the action-packed chapters. So I'll be hoping for a warm reception for this one as well.

I hope you enjoyed Naruto's fight against the Ino-Shika-Cho trio (plus Sai), and you're not too miffed over the fact that he lost. Not only it was four versus one, but I also wanted to showcase the deficiencies Naruto had developed over relying so much on Sage Mode (such as not being attentive to his surroundings since Sage Mode gives him powerful sensorial abilities).

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

And as the last scene showed, this chapter was the introduction to the Roshi Arc! This arc will also introduce Naruto's new team for the mission, which, as said in a previous chapter, it will be bigger than the usual four man squad. With this new team, will Naruto be able to save Roshi, or will he also fall prey to the

Akatsuki? In the meantime, leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Search For Roshi

Author's Note: Okay, here we are with another chapter. This chapter features the return of two teams that have been in the background for quite some time, and people has been clamoring for them. Hope you enjoy:

Chapter 73:

The Search for Roshi

or

Monkey See, Monkey Do

For the past couple of weeks or so, Naruto had been training with Asuma Sarutobi in order to perfect his Wind Jutsu and develop new ones. While he hadn't been able to create a jutsu that would allow him to fly yet, he had the feeling he was making some good progress on that as well.

His teammates weren't slouching either. Even if they were physically unable to train, they busied themselves training their minds, Hinata reading more about the powers of the Tenseigan and Six Paths Chakra, while Haku studied about genjutsu, and tried to think in new and innovative ways to use his Ice Release. Unfortunately, unlike Naruto, there were no other Ice Release users in Konoha that could train the Land of Water native.

And today, he was expecting another productive day of training. He was full rested from a good night of sleep, and was ready to have breakfast. But when he got down to the kitchen, he was surprised to see only his mother there.

"Good morning, Naruto," Tsunade said, as she finished her cup of coffee. "Slept well?"

"You can bet I did," the blond grinned. "So, Kaida and Hagane left already?"

"Yeah. Tenzo came here to pick them up. Apparently, they had an important mission," Tsunade explained. "And so do you."

Naturally, this caught the blond's attention. "Really? But I have no team!"

Tsunade just shrugged. "You're a Jonin already, Naruto. It's not rare for a Jonin, or even a Chunin, to do missions on their own. Though you won't be team-less for long. I've been checking on Hinata and Haku's progress, and they're almost fully recovered. I think they'll be able to rejoin active duty in one or two weeks at most."

"Really? That's awesome!" Naruto cheered, pumping his fist into the air. "Too bad we can't wait that much for them."

"Sadly things rarely go the way we want. Still, I'm sure you'll manage without them this time around," Tsunade said in an encouraging tone.

"Did he tell you what the mission was about?" Naruto inquired, as he took a bite from a slice of toast with honey. "It's related to the jinchuriki?"

"I don't know, Jiraiya didn't tell me anything, but if he requested you, then I guess it has to do with them," Tsunade guessed, shrugging.

"I'll finish breakfast as soon as possible then!" Naruto said, as he shoved another toast into his mouth.

"Whoa there! Slow down, Naruto, or going to choke. There's no hurry," Tsunade told him. "There's something I want to talk with you about. You've been training with some other people during the past few weeks. Why haven't you asked me to train you?"

Naruto almost choked on his food. This was a very delicate question. He couldn't say that he still had nightmares from his adoptive mother's brutal training methods.

"Er..." Naruto began, as he tried to come up with a believable excuse. "Aren't you training Hagane and Kaida? Yeah, you were busy with them, and I didn't want to take you away from them."

"I can train the three of you just fine," Tsunade insisted, as she crossed her arms over her chest. "Plus that way, you could do some more bonding with your siblings. You barely get to do anything with them these days."

"I know but... I'm kind of busy, with all the stuff with Akatsuki," Naruto replied.

"Listen, I'm not telling you do forsake your other responsibilities and duties, that would be idiotic," Tsunade told him, her tone softening. "But being a ninja is a dangerous career. You will lose loved ones, and then you'll regret not having spent enough time with them."

"You talk as if Hagane and Kaida are going to die any day now," Naruto said, rolling his eyes.

"Did you forget already how close we were to lose them forever to Orochimaru not even four years ago?" Tsunade reminded Naruto. "I try not to think about it, as well as not being overprotective but... as long as we're alive, I want to enjoy our company."

Naruto suddenly felt like a jerk. He's been avoiding Tsunade's training, while the Slug Sannin only wanted to spend some time with her son. The blond had been training with Jiraiya in order to gain a better hold of the Nine Tails' chakra, and maybe Tsunade was a bit jealous of that.

"Okay. Maybe once I'm back, I can find some time to train under you again?" Naruto weakly suggested.

"I'd love to," Tsunade smiled. "Come on, go already. I'll clean this up."

"Thanks mom!" Naruto said, before giving Tsunade a kiss on the cheek, and running out of the house.

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Hokage Tower

Just as Naruto was told, Jiraya had indeed a new mission for him. And just like the blond had thought, it was about the topic he had guessed. Though what he didn't guess was that Jiraiya wasn't alone; standing besides him was Itachi Uchiha.

"My spies have located one of the other two remaining jinchuriki not under our custody," Jiraiya began, as he handed Naruto a folder.

Naruto opened the folder, and saw the picture of an old Iwa ninja with red hair and bear. The name of the file figured merely as "Roshi".

"This is the jinchuriki?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya nodded. "Itachi?"

"Roshi was seen crossing the border into the Land of Earth. However, we have no confirmation that he planned to return to Iwagakure, so it's likely that he's still roaming the land," the Uchiha explained Naruto. "We need to secure him and bring him to Konoha."

"Understood. I guess that the two of us are going after him now?" Naruto asked. Even if it was just one man, Itachi Uchiha was among the most skilled and powerful ninjas Konoha had among their ranks.

"Not just the two of you," Jiraiya said, as he pressed a button on the intercom sitting on his table. "Tell them to come in."

A couple minutes passed before the office's door opened, and eight people entered. He recognized half of those people.

"Tenzo's All Purpose Squad is present!" Tenzo said as he and his students entered the office.

"Anko's Assassination Squad is present!" the other adult in the group said, a purple haired woman wearing a trenchcoat.

"Whoa! Hagane and Kaida! And Hanabi!" Naruto said upon seeing Tenzo's Team. He then looked at the other newcomers. "Er... and you're Anko, right? I think I remember you from that mission to the Land of Rice Fields. Kurenai-sensei sometimes told us about you."

"Let's hope she only said good things, or else the two of us are going to have a long talk," Anko replied, chuckling a little. "Anyway, meet my students! Aren't they the cutest?"

Naruto raised an eyebrow at Anko's choice of adjective, as his eyes moved towards Anko's students. For some reason, it felt like he had met them before, but couldn't tell when. And he was sure he would remember somebody who was entirely covered in bandages.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Naruto Uzumaki. And you guys are?" Naruto asked.

The trio of young ninjas composed of two boys and a girl shot him a look between annoyed and astonished.

"Did you really forget about us? Wow, we had to make such a weak first impression upon you," the girl huffed, as she crossed her arms.

"We fought against you and your teammates a couple times in the past," the boy covered in bandages said. "First in the Land of Sound, then during Orochimaru's attempt at kidnapping your siblings."

The boy looked at Anko, who looked back in approval, much to Naruto's confusion. Little did he know that Anko had spend quite

some time breaking their habit of using the "-sama" suffix with Orochimaru. Failure to do so had resulted in excruciating punishment.

"I'm Dosu, and those are Zaku and Kin," Dosu waved to his teammates. "And while we used to be Sound Ninjas, after our capture we've been... persuaded into joining Konoha."

"Oh..." Naruto said, as conflicted feelings clashed within him. On one side, he was mad that these people used to work for Orochimaru and helped him kidnap his siblings, but on the other, they appear to have turned a new leaf. Plus given that they weren't very high among Otogakure's hierarchy, he decided to forgive and forget. "Well, nice to meet you. Glad to see that you're working for the good guys now."

"Yeah, whatever," Zaku huffed, whose reaction was mimicked by Kin. Dosu remained impassible.

"Anyway," Jiraiya interjected, drawing everybody's attention. "Now that you're together and introductions are over, let's go to the matter at hand. All of you have been told you're going to become part of a larger squad for an S-Rank mission. I choose all of you because of all our current forces available, you're the best suited for this mission. Tenzo's squad has two Wood Release users that can bind a Tailed Beast should an Akatsuki decide to throw the other half of the Nine Tails at us, and if that fails we have Itachi's Mangekyo Sharingan, while Anko's squad will provide additional support and firepower. Itachi will be the leader of this ten man squad. Itachi?"

Itachi nodded, and took a step forward. "Our mission is simple: We will infiltrate the Land of Earth, locate the jinchuriki, and either escort him to Iwa, or if he refuses, bring him back to Konoha using any means necessary. However, do not rule any kind of unforeseen setback, and be prepared of all times. Chances of Akatsuki knowing this are high, so be ready to fight against S-Rank ninjas. Any questions?"

"Are we really going to operate on a foreign land under the protection of a Great Village?" Tenzo asked. "Shouldn't we warn them first?"

"We did, but we got no response," Jiraiya replied. "While the possibility of a war with Iwa is high, I think it's worth the risk if we can keep another jinchuriki safe from Akatsuki's hands."

"What if Iwa also sends ninjas to retrieve the jinchuriki?" Hagane asked.

"In that case, we'll let them take him away. Our goal is to keep the jinchuriki safe. Even if Iwa is not allied with us, that's better than Akatsuki," Jiraiya told them. "But like I said, chances of Iwa sending ninjas to retrieve the jinchuriki are small. They will think this is some sort of trick on our part."

"Even then, we'll try our best to avoid causing a war between our villages," Itachi firmly added. "If those are all the questions, then let's meet up at the western gate in an hour. The Land of Earth is far away, so pack for several weeks."

All of them nodded, before they exited the office. That's it, all of them except Naruto, who stayed behind to have a talk with his father.

"So, what do you think?" Jiraiya asked, guessing his son's thoughts.

"It looks like a powerful team," Naruto replied. "Not to mention that we won't be outnumbered as easily now as with four man squads."

"I think this is going to be the procedure for the time being until we beat Akatsuki. Four man squads won't do anymore," Jiraiya explained. "Are you okay with the picks, or would you have suggested somebody else?"

"Itachi is an obvious choice. Though I'm surprised that you choose Hagane and Kaida's team for a mission involving Akatsuki."

"They may be my kids, but they're also ninjas of this village, and as Hokage I must treat them as such. Plus Tenzo's Squad is one of the most powerful teams we currently have available," Jiraiya told Naruto with a firm tone. "Plus it's not that they're Genin anymore."

"What about Anko's squad? They used to be Orochimaru's lackeys, they might betray us," Naruto pointed out.

Jiraiya, however, smiled confidently at his son. "Trust me, both Anko and I made sure such thing won't happen. Besides, I've read the reports Anko gave me on their progress, and it appears that they got used to Konoha and started to prefer it over Otogakure, even if they don't say it out loud."

"You know, I think that maybe we could have taken Fu with us as well. She's pretty strong," Naruto suggested.

"She is," Jiraiya agreed. "But if sending a jinchuriki to deal with Akatsuki is already a big risk, you can imagine what would be sending two at once. That would be like inviting all of Akatsuki to go after you. It's better to keep at least one jinchuriki in the village."

"Makes sense, I guess," Naruto said. "Well, let's better get going. Hopefully, once we come back, old man Roshi will be among us."

"I'm sure you'll be successful this time, Naruto," Jiraiya said. "Good luck, and come safe."

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Half an Hour Later, Senju Park

Per Naruto's request, Hinata and Haku had met him on that spot in order to talk. It seemed that Tsunade hadn't lied to him: both his teammates looked good enough to return to active duty. Hinata could now walk without a crutch, and Haku had no longer his arm on a sling.

"Thank goodness I can have some clones prepare my backpack, or else I wouldn't be able to do this," the blond thought.

Wasting no time, Naruto told the other two about his mission to track and secure Roshi, the jinchuriki of the Four Tails, as well as who was going to go with him.

"So that's the mission Hanabi-chan is going to do?" Hinata asked, worry in her voice being evident.

"I know how you feel. Hagane and Kaida are also coming as well," Naruto pointed out. "But don't worry, I'll make sure that this mission won't be a repeat of what happened the last time."

"Still, I can't help but wonder if she'll be okay. This will be her first S-Rank mission," Hinata said.

"I don't have siblings who are also ninja, so it might not be my place to speak," Haku began. "But if Hanabi is as powerful as you're now, she should do just fine."

"That's what worries me," Hinata replied, looking at the confused Ice Ninja. "I think she's letting her new power get to her head."

"Yeah, I can relate to that," Naruto said. "Kaida used to think that her Wood Release puts her above everybody else."

"According to Hanabi-chan, she still does sometimes," Hinata pointed out.

Naruto's face fell. "Damn, I'm not looking forward this mission. Thank goodness there will be some adults as well."

"Who are you going with, besides Hanabi and your siblings' sensei?" Haku asked.

"Itachi is going to lead the mission. There's also Anko's team," Naruto said.

"I didn't know Anko-san had a team," Haku observed.

"And you guys aren't going to believe who they are," Naruto said, as incredulity returned to his voice. "Remember those Otogakure ninjas that we fought during our first C-Rank mission, and then when Orochimaru kidnapped my siblings?"

"A boy that used soundwaves, another boy that shot pressurized air blasts from his palms, and a girl that used both senbon and genjutsu. Are you talking about those?" Haku asked. Naruto was surprised that Haku was able to remember them so well, given that, unlike Hinata and him, the Ice Ninja didn't get to fight them a second time. Sensing Naruto's bafflement, he added. "Zabuza-sama trained me to memorize every ninja I met, as well as their more significant abilities."

"Even the weaker ones?" Hinata asked.

"*Especially* the weaker ones," Haku emphasized. "While a strong ninja is hard to forget, a weak one is. And said weak ninja can train to become stronger. Even if they develop new abilities, at least you have a base of knowledge of what to expect."

"That's... very thorough of Zabuza-san," Hinata praised, sounding genuinely impressed.

Haku smiled in return. "Zabuza-sama didn't become part of the Seven Ninja Swordsmen by being a mediocre ninja, you know. There will be times in which there won't be any chance to check a bingo book, or you won't have one with you."

"Heh, now I wish Zabuza didn't decide to stay in Kiri. We could use his help against Akatsuki," Naruto said. "He saved both you, Tenten and Karin-nee-chan from that Oto ninja with the bone bloodlimit."

"Fortunately, we have other strong ninjas in Konoha we can rely on," Hinata said, as her eyes drifted towards Naruto, and smiled. "You, for example."

"If I was that strong-" Naruto began.

"No," Hinata firmly cut him, raising a hand. "Don't finish that sentence, you hear me? You're a strong ninja, and I don't want to hear you saying otherwise," Hinata insisted, her stare becoming harder. "You need to be strong if you want this mission to succeed and to bring everybody home safe."

"I... yeah, you're right," Naruto replied, forcing himself to smile, something Hinata echoed. "I can't just mope and pity myself. I have to give my best. There's no more room for failure."

"That's the spirit, Naruto-kun!" Hinata cheered.

"Okay, my Shadow Clones had finished packing my stuff," Naruto said, as the new information entered his mind. "I better get going."

"Understood. Good luck, Naruto-kun," Hinata said.

"I'll hope for your safe return," Haku added.

"Thank you guys. I'll make sure to carry your part of the weight while you're absent," Naruto replied, as he leaped away from the park. Then, he whispered: "I'll make you guys proud."

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Akatsuki Hideout, Undisclosed Location, the Next Day

Eight spectral shadows were standing in a circle, their eyes being the only part of their bodies that weren't blurred. Unlike other times, nobody was physically there.

"I'm glad that you could answer my call so quickly," Obito began. "This is an urgent matter. My spies from Konoha has told me that the jinchuriki of the Four Tails, Roshi, has been found."

The rest of the Akatsuki began to grumble among themselves.

"If Konoha is your source, I assume that a team has already been dispatched to secure the jinchuriki," Pain interceded. "Am I right?"

"Indeed. They're crossing the Land of Fire as we speak," it was Zetsu, the black half, who answered the question.

"Of course. That means that we need to dispatch somebody else to deal with the jinchuriki as well," Pain continued. "Konoha already has two jinchuriki behind their walls. Letting them have more would be problematic in the long run."

"The question would be then, who should we send to deal with this new development?" Konan asked.

Obito cleared his throat. "If I may make a suggestion, I already have two candidates in mind."

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Several Days Later

The group spend the next days traveling through the Land of Fire, leaping from one tree branch to the other, stopping occasionally to rest. They decided to cross the frontier with the Land of Earth by going through the Land of Waterfalls, given that such border used to be less guarded. Without much difficulty, they managed to reach the border and cross it without trouble.

The change of scenery couldn't be more evident. The thick forest of the Lands of Fire and Waterfall were replaced by a range of mountains and other rocky terrain. While there was still some green, it was obscured by all the rocks and stones. It was as if nature itself warned the newcomers that they had entered another world.

"Alright then," Itachi said, coming to a halt. The other nine ninja stopped behind him. "We just arrived at the Land of Earth. With some luck, neither Iwa nor Akatsuki know that we're here, and we'll leave without them none the wiser. Still, stay alert."

"Fear not, Itachi-san. Hagane's sensory skills and Hanabi's Tenseigan will track any enemy before they can get too close," Tenzo told te Uchiha.

Itachi nodded. "Even then, I want everybody to keep your eyes open, and stay alert. Now, according to our reports, Roshi was last seen in the area to the northeast, so we'll look there first."

"Should we split in order to cover more ground?" Naruto asked.

Itachi shook his head. "While in other circumstances that would be a valid strategy, I'm afraid it won't do now. I want this group to remain close at all times."

"Itachi-taicho, if I'm allowed to speak," Dosu spoke up. Itachi nodded in return. "Given that we have two ninjas with tracking skills, we could split up, but try to keep a minimum distance. Hagane-san and Hanabi-san can tell if a group or an individual wander too far away."

Itachi seemed to consider the bandaged ninja's suggestion, before nodding.

"Very well. Let's form two groups: Naruto, Hagane, Anko and Kin, with me. Dosu, Zaku, Kaida and Hanabi, go with Tenzo," Itachi instructed. "Hagane, Hanabi, make sure both groups won't stray from each other."

"Sure thing!" Hanabi cheerfully said.

"You can count on me," Hagane replied.

Both groups split, as they began their search of the Four Tailed Jinchuriki.

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Itachi's group went to the northwest, towards a mountain range, while Tenzo's headed towards the west, heading to a series of rocky

paths that lead to Iwagakure. However, soon Itachi commanded his half of the group to stop.

"Huh?" Naruto asked, a bit confused.

Itachi didn't say anything, bit his thumb before making a series of five hand seals, and slammed his palm into the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Itachi's jutsu produced a small burst of smoke. After a couple seconds, the smoke dispelled, revealing a small murder of crows at the Uchiha's feet. Itachi dug into his ninja tool pouch, until he found what he was looking for: a small picture of Roshi.

"My group and I are looking for this man," Itachi said as he knelt down, while making sure the crows could see the man in the picture. "Could you help us track him down? He may be around this area."

One of the crows cawed affirmatively, before the whole murder flew away in different directions.

"Uh, neat," Kin praised, before he looked at Anko. "Anko-sensei, why didn't you think in summoning snakes to help us search?"

"Hey, good idea, girl," Anko replied, as she summoned a few small sized snakes. "Alright, we're searching for an old man. Iwa ninja, red hair, red beard. Probably exudes a powerful chakra since he's a jinchuriki. Are you up to the task?"

The snakes wordlessly spread around, quickly slithering until they were no longer visible. Anko decided to take that answer as a "yes".

"Alright then, while the crows and snakes search, let's keep looking for Roshi on our own," Itachi commanded. "Stay close, and keep your eyes open for a potential ambush, either from Akatsuki or Iwa ninjas."

Everybody nodded, and followed Itachi's lead.

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Tenzo's group moved to the west, with the adult heading the group, followed by Dosu and Haku, and Hagane at the rear, while Hanabi was flying a couple meters above them, her Tenseigan constantly scanning the area. As they ran, Zaku and Dosu started to talk among themselves.

"You know, that man who can use Wood Release," Dosu began. "I think I know who he is."

"Huh?" Zaku replied.

"Back when he was a Konoha ninja, Orochimaru-sam-Orochimaru," Dosu corrected himself, despite the fact that Anko wasn't nearby.

"Orochimaru made several experiments to see if he could replicate Wood Release in somebody else. Apparently, that man was the only success."

"Huh. If Orochimaru could do that, why didn't we have an army of Wood Release users when we attacked Konoha?" Zaku asked.

Dosu merely shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe he ran out of the First Hokage's DNA. Or that guy was just a fluke."

"Guess that would explain why he wanted to kidnap those brats to begin with, if one of them had Wood Release," Zaku guessed. "Kind of ironic that we're working alongside them."

"Yes, Orochimaru started as a ninja of Konoha, before creating Otogakure," Dosu began. "While we started as Oto ninjas, but now we're working with Konoha. Fate has a twisted sense of humor."

"You know, my cousin used to speak that way," Hanabi suddenly said, as she suddenly appeared between the two. She grinned at them. "My sister told me about you two, and that girl you hang out with. She beat all three of you on her own."

"That's in the past, girl! Now we're much stronger than before!" Zaku angrily retorted.

"I find that doubtful," Hanabi said, as she fixed her eyes on Zaku. "She has the power of a Kage now. And when I'm able to control my power, so will I."

"Girl, shouldn't you be keeping an eye on the surroundings, in case the jinchuriki or potential enemies appear?" Dosu pointed out. "You might be powerful, but by forsaking your duty to trade barbs with us, you're showing how poor of a ninja you are."

"Hmpf!" Hanabi grumbled, but apparently listened to Dosu's words, and flew back into the sky.

"Good one, Dosu. You showed that girl," Zaku said with a grin of satisfaction.

"And you shouldn't let a young girl bait you like that," Dosu chastised his teammate. "Keep your mind on the mission."

Zaku's smirk disappeared, and turned his eyes forward. "Hmpf. Whatever. No need to be such a stick in the mud."

"Our subpar performance was what led to our capture," Dosu replied. "Even if we now have to throw our lot with Konoha, I'll make sure the past won't repeat itself again."

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As the Uchiha took the group near the edge of the mountain, he gestured Naruto to come closer. The blond did so.

"What's up, Itachi? Saw something?" Naruto asked.

The Uchiha merely shook his head. "Not yet. Listen, I wanted to talk with you about something else. Hokage-sama told me that Akatsuki knows about your Sage Mode, and how they can counter it before you even get to activate it."

"Yeah. I used to send two clones to gather nature energy, but Akatsuki will be expecting that and prepare for that," Naruto explained, a bit downtrodden.

"Can't you use more clones to gather nature energy?" Itachi asked.

Naruto shook his head. "Large chakra reserves are a must for Sage Mode, and if I create many clones, their individual chakra pools become too small for that. I can't create more than four clones if I want to enter Sage Mode."

"I see," was what Itachi said. The Uchiha remained silent for a few seconds, until he spoke again. "Okay, if a fight happens, this what we'll do."

Itachi told Naruto his idea. The blond's eyes opened wide in shock.

"But... but that's extremely risky! I can't just do that!" Naruto protested.

"Trust me, it will work. I used this tactic with enemies in the past, and it has never failed me," Itachi assured.

"If you say so..." Naruto said, still sounding unconvinced.

"And don't worry about the risks. If it doesn't work, I'll make sure that you're not in danger," Itachi added.

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As night fell, Roshi decided to set camp in a small clearing he had found in the forest at the top of a small hill, close to a larger mountain range. He was gathering firewood, while his Tailed Beast remained silent, contemplating his options.

" **Stubborn human,**" the Four Tails grumbled. "**The two of us will end dead -or worse- if we don't do something.**" He sighed, and started to wonder how could approach the topic in a way that Roshi could be convinced.

That's it, until his meditation was interrupted. He sensed a foreign presence, one that he hadn't sense in pretty much decades.

" ***It can't be,***" the giant ape thought. ***"Not, it couldn't be-"***

" ***Hey, you idiotic primate!***" a voice resounded inside his head.

It could be.

" ***Kurama,***" the Four Tails indentified the voice. ***"Fancy meeting you here."***

" ***Shut up and listen, you dumb shit flinger,***" Kurama harshily snapped.

The Four Tails let out a long sigh. ***"Son Goku. I'm Son Goku. Would it kill you to call me by my name, Kurama? It's bad enough when the humans do it, but to hear it from a brother-"***

" ***I told you to shut up!***" the Nine Tails ordered. ***"And don't even dare to say my name aloud! Only those worthy are allowed to say it!"***

Son Goku decided it was for the better not to argue with his nine tailed sibling. ***"Very well then, You seem troubled. What's the matter?"***

" ***There's not much time, so I'll try to summarize it as best as I can,***" the Nine Tails began. ***"There's this organization of extremely powerful missing ninja called Akatsuki. Their goal is to gather all of us and seal us inside the Demonic Statue in order to revive the Ten Tails."***

If Son Goku actually had blood, it would have drained from his face. ***"B-But... that's insane! Inconceivable! If the Ten Tails returns, then this world will be done for! Why any human would want to do that!?"***

" Beats me, but if I had to guess, they want to harness the Ten Tails' power for themselves," the Fox guessed. "Foolish humans and their lust for power."

Son Goku would have agreed with that, but now other concerns occupied the giant ape's mind.

" Wait a minute, for somebody to summon the Demonic Statue they would need to possess a Rinnegan, and no such human has been born since our father died," Son Goku reasoned.

" And that's where you're wrong, brother. Another Rinnegan wielder exists. Not to the same level of Father, but fairly powerful as well," the Nine Tails revealed. **"Listen, how such human came to be or what the Akatsuki want to do with the Ten Tails is irrelevant. We need to focus on making sure whoever are left among us remain free. Relatively speaking. Now, my jinchuriki and other Konoha ninjas are scouring the are looking for yours. You must convince your human to come to us, before you also fall prey to the Akatsuki."**

" So that's what happened to the others," Son Goku reasoned. **"I guess that, besides you and me, the only ones left are Chomei and Gyuki, right?"**

" I think so, but there's no point in dwelling on that. Do what I said!" The Fox ordered.

" I would gladly try, but I doubt Roshi will listen to me. I've been trying to tell him to seek shelter for the past few months, as I started to sense how our siblings started to vanish one by one," Son Goku replied, sounding a little frustrated. **"Even with this new information, I don't see him listening to me."**

Son Goku could hear his nine tailed sibling loudly groaning for several seconds.

" Okay, new plan. Can you at least make sure the idiotic human stays in the same place?" the Fox asked.

" He's currently setting camp to pass the night, so that won't be a problem," Son Goku asked.

" Very well. I'm going to focus on your position and direct the jinchuriki and the rest of his group towards you. After that, the humans will take care of the situation," the Fox explained.

" It's possible that Roshi might not want to go with them," Son Goku told him, worried by the possibility. **"They may end up fighting."**

" If that happens, then don't do anything," the Nine Tails ordered. **"And don't assist your jinchuriki. I find unlikely that he alone will be able to defeat the entire group my jinchuriki is part of."**

" Very well, brother. I shall be waiting for you," Son Goku said, as he felt his stubborn sibling's presence slowly vanish. **"It might not be too late for us after all..."**

...

Shortly after this happened, not far away from there, Naruto felt a tugging sensation coming from within. Knowing what it was, he allowed himself to be pulled, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, the Nine Tails was in front of him.

"What do you want? I'm kind of busy now," Naruto asked, not in the mood to deal with the grumpy fox.

" Yeah, I know, looking for my foolish brother," the Nine Tails said. **"Which, by the way, I already found. You're welcome for doing your job, by the way."**

Naruto grew excited, and ignoring the sarcasm, he asked. "Really? Where is he?"

" In a forest at the top of a small hill, surrounded by bigger mountains. Follow my indications and you'll be able to reach his position," the Nine Tails instructed.

Naruto beamed in response. "Thank you, Fox, you're a lifesaver!"

The Nine Tails grumbled a profanity. **"I don't do it to help you or your race, but to make sure the Ten Tails is not revived. Now move your ass already!"**

Naruto found himself once again in the real world after being abruptly ejected from the Nine Tails' pocket dimension. Itachi was looking at him with mild concern.

"Are you okay, Naruto?" the Uchiha asked. "You zoned there for a moment."

Naruto smiled, and nodded. "I've been talking with the Nine Tails. He said he has located the Four Tails' position. Come on, follow me!"

...

As Roshi heated a piece of meat in front of the campfire, a feeling of uneasiness washed over him. It started when he swore he was feeling his tenant talking to somebody else, almost in a whisper. But that couldn't be, right? Roshi was the only one that monkey was able to talk to, for a rather obvious reason. What could that ape be scheming?

Not helped by a different sense of uneasiness: It was calm. Way too calm and silent. His experienced battle sense was screaming at him that this was the calm preceding a fight, and that enemies were incoming and he was in danger. And he didn't survive for so long by ignoring his often accurate gut feeling.

Pulling out a kunai, Roshi yelled to no one in particular: "Come on, I know you're there. Come outside and let's get this over with!"

As he had guessed, there was somebody there. Nearby bushes started to rustle, and from them a young blond boy emerged, his hands raised above his head, almost as if he was surrendering. The boy was wearing an orange and black attire, plus a Konoha forehead protector.

"A Konoha ninja," Roshi hissed, narrowing his eyes at Naruto. "And you look awfully familiar to the Yellow Flash, kid."

"Yeah, he was my dad," Naruto awkwardly said. He wasn't sure if he should have said that, given how much Iwa ninjas might hate Minato Namikaze. Still, the best course of action was to make his intentions known as soon as possible. "Listen, I swear I didn't come here to fight. Like you, I'm a jinchuriki."

Roshi raised an eyebrow. "A jinchuriki, you said?"

"He's right, old man. He's the jinchuriki of the Nine Tailed Fox," Son Goku's voice said from within. **"I've been talking with my sibling, and drew him here."**

"You sneaky ape! I know your kind couldn't be trusted!" Roshi mentally snarled.

"Sorry, but you left me no other options. This is important, Roshi, so please stop being so stubborn and listen to what the brat has to say," Son Goku asked, sounding almost like a plea. **"Both our lives depend on this."**

After pondering his options for several seconds, Roshi decided to at least hear his fellow jinchuriki out. If his intentions were hostile, they would have ambushed him from the get go, instead of coming out in the open.

"Alright kid, I'm listening," Roshi stated.

Naruto's lips curved into a hopeful smile. "Really? Great! Now, there's not much time, so I'll try to be-

"But first," Roshi interrupted him. "Tell your friends to come out as well."

"My friends?" Naruto stammered, being taken aback by such statement.

"Yes. I know you didn't come alone. So if you want my trust, you better not have anybody hidden waiting to strike my back at your order," Roshi told him.

Naruto sighed softly, before saying: "Guys, come out!"

More rustling, followed by more Konoha ninjas emerging from behind the darkness and the vegetation. A rather diverse group: men, women, some adults, several young teens, the latter with some eye catching appearances, like the boy covered in bandages, the white haired twins, and a girl that looked like a Hyuga, but her eyes were something Roshi had never seen in his life.

However, most of them were footnotes compared to the presence of Itachi Uchiha, one of Konoha's most powerful ninjas.

"You know, I'm having a hard time believing that you bring a group this large just to talk," a skeptical Roshi said.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Roshi-san," it was Itachi who answered. "We're going to make you a proposition. If you refuse, we will capture you by force."

"But we aren't you enemies!" Naruto chimed in, trying to downplay the inherent threat of Itachi's words. "When you hear what we have to say, you'll agree to come with us. Or return to Iwa, whatever you prefer."

This made Roshi to raise an eyebrow. These Konoha ninja could get their hands on a lone jinchuriki, yet they were okay with letting him return to his old home? There was something fishy about this issue.

And as a good ninja does, information gathering is always a must before taking any course of action.

"Now if you listen to me, you'll understand everything, and why I had to bring such a large group with me," Naruto nervously said, before grinning sheepishly. "Mind if we take a seat around the fire and have something to eat while we're at it? Searching for you left us quite exhausted."

Roshi rolled his eyes and sighed, but motioned them to do so.

"Now, kid, you have my attention," Roshi told Naruto. "But please don't test my patience."

"Very well then," Naruto nodded, as he began his explanation. "You see, there's this group of missing-nin called Akatsuki. Their goal is to gather all the Tailed Beasts in order to..."

Roshi listened to Naruto's story, at first with skepticism, but his willingness to believe him increased with each word. It seemed like the story had no holes; even the most ludicrous parts, like the Rinnegan or the Sage of the Six Paths had their explanation behind it -not to mention that girl with the weird glowing eyes, the Tenseigan, who was a living proof of what Naruto was saying-. Despite being such an outlandish story, he had to admit everything made perfect sense.

"... and after our failure to save Utakata, only four of us remain," Naruto finished with a weary sigh. "That's why we're trying as hard as we can to secure the remaining jinchuriki. Listen, we aren't going to ask you to come to a village that was your home's deadsworn enemy, but at least you should go back to Iwa. They can keep you safe."

"I don't think I'm ready to return yet," the redheaded man began, shaking his head. "But I'm guessing you aren't giving me any options, right?"

"I'm afraid not," it was Tenzo who answered. "Please understand the situation is too delicate, and we can't risk anything to chance. So far you have two options: you let us escort you back to Iwa, or you come back with us to Konoha."

"And if I refuse either option?" Roshi tentatively asked, albeit he could figure out the answer.

Even if for the untrained eye nothing happened. Roshi could feel how all the Konoha ninjas around him tensed up, ready to fight.

"Then we will incapacitate you and take you to Konoha by force," Itachi stated, his voice firm but devoid of aggression.

"I see," Roshi replied, looking around at the ninjas around him, measuring their potential abilities, and wondering if he could be able to fight all of them at once. Itachi alone would be a huge problem, and so was the jinchuriki if he had a degree of control over the Fox. Then there were the other eight ninjas, who didn't look all that threatening, but one could never let appearances deceive you.

"If you're thinking in fighting us, I'd seriously reconsider," Itachi warned him. "This group has ninjas specifically handpicked for this task due their abilities. Many of us could defeat you alone."

"But please don't take it as a threat," Naruto insisted, trying to sound reassuring. "If we were hostile, we wouldn't be here talking with you, nor would offer you the option to return to Iwa. Please understand the situation is desperate."

"It sounds desperate indeed," Roshi agreed. "It's been a while since I've been involved with the matter of ninjas and villages, so I might not be up to date. But before I tell you my answer, tell me this: what about the other two jinchuriki besides us, kid?"

"From what I know, the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails has been hidden somewhere in the Land of Lightning by his brother, the Raikage,"

Naruto replied. "While the jinchuriki of the Seven Tails is safe behind Konoha's walls."

"So, if I decide to accompany you to Konoha, I'll at least be with other two of my own kind, right?" Roshi asked. Naruto nodded. "Alright then. Given the alternatives, I think I'll go to Konoha."

"Really!?" Naruto beamed, jumping to his feet.

"Are you sure you don't want to return to Iwa instead?" Anko suggested. "It's your home village after all..."

"Yes, I was born and raised in Iwa," Roshi replied. "But that place never felt like home. People feared and avoided me, afraid that the Tailed Beast within me would escape or take control of my body and harm them. And to be honest I was afraid of that too, that's why I set on a journey in order to learn how to control this power without endangering innocents. However, after some time... I grew to appreciate, and even enjoy the solitude."

"Yeah, I can relate to that," Naruto uneasily said, as he rubbed his arm.

"So Konoha isn't any different from Iwa then," Roshi stated.

"I don't know about Iwa," Naruto began. "But Konoha is awesome."

"But you just say-"

"Yes, people were afraid of me. At first," Naruto stated. "But I had awesome people raising me that helped me deal with my condition as jinchuriki, as well as all the friends who don't mind that I have a giant homicidal fox sealed within my being. And eventually, even those who were afraid of me learned not to."

Roshi's expression softened a little. "That sounds really nice."

"It is," Naruto chuckled.

"The way you earned those people's trust, you make it sound so easy..."

"It wasn't easy, that's for sure," Naruto said. "But it was worth it."

Roshi's mind was then assaulted by a wave of doubts. He wondered if instead of running away, he should have stayed in Iwa and tried to create some bonds, build some friendships. The idea of somebody, other than another jinchuriki befriending him always seemed like an unreachable dream. And this boy came and proved him wrong.

" *Things are sometimes much easier than you think, Roshi,*"
Son Goku's voice said from within him. **"*You'd realize of this more often if you weren't so stubborn.*"**

"So, you're coming with us then?" Itachi asked.

Roshi nodded. "Yes. When are we leaving?"

"I'd like to go now, but traveling by night is dangerous, especially with such a large group like this one," Itachi said. "We'll wait for dawn to break, and we'll head to the Land of Fire."

"Understood," Roshi nodded. "Let's continue eating and have a nice rest then. A long journey will be waiting for us when the sun rises."

...

The Next Day

The group of now eleven ninjas were undoing the journey those from Konoha had done the days before. Fortunately, no Akatsuki nor Rock Ninjas had decided to ambush them at night, and all of them were pretty rested. Combined with the fact that it took pretty little time to convince Roshi to go with them, moral was overall high.

"At this pace, we will be able to reach the border with the Land of Waterfalls in less than a day," Itachi announced. "We will avoid

nearby towns in order to keep a low profile. If everything goes well, I estimate that we will be back in Konoha in less than a week."

Everybody nodded, with Naruto smiling as well. He did it. He was finally going to save another jinchuriki after the string of failures following Fu's near capture.

"So, Naruto," Roshi began. "How it's Konoha?"

"Oh, it's awesome!" the blond beamed. "It's really pretty, surrounded by forests and some mountains. People are pretty nice, and ninjas are strong. Oh, did you know that my dad is the Hokage?"

"The Yellow Flash, yes," Roshi nodded.

"No, that's my biological dad," Naruto said. "But guess you have a point. I mean the current Hokage is my adoptive dad. His name is Jiraiya."

Roshi raised an eyebrow. "Jiraiya of the Sannin? Kid, you have some powerful family members. Whose your adoptive mother, Tsunade?"

"Yes! How did you know?" Naruto said.

"I... didn't," Roshi stammered, before clearing his throat. "I didn't know those two were married."

"They've been married for more than a decade now," Naruto told him. "Man, were you living under a rock all these years or something? Because really, you don't seem to be aware of all the stuff going on around the world."

"Well, you could say that I was," Roshi admitted. "During my journeys, I did my best to distance myself from civilization."

"I see. Thankfully, it's not too late to fix that," Naruto optimistically said. "Oh, when we arrive Konoha, you have to eat a bowl of

Icharaku's Ramen! There's no better ramen than that! Once you taste it, you'll never want to eat anything else."

Roshi chuckled a little. "Heh, that sounds nice. It's been a while since the last time I ate something that I didn't hunt or gathered myself."

Shortly after the group passed a certain spot, a white humaoid being emerged from the ground. It was a White Zetsu. The humanoid creature smirked.

"So, the jinchuriki are already on the run," the White Zetsu said. "Better tell them that their prey is in the open."

And with that, the humanoid aberration sank into the ground again.

Author's Note: So yeah, here they are! After being introduced towards the end of Part I, Team Anko makes its debut! And alongside them, even if they have been recurring characters, Team Tenzo makes it first onscreen official mission! Again, I'm sorry I took so long to feature these two teams, but juggling so many characters and trying to give them enough screentime is insane. I was planning and writing this arc when people were asking about them. And as of this writing, some readers are complaining about how long has it been since the last time Team Gai did anything important. Be patient, guys, this stuff takes time!

And in order to give these characters some screentime, I was unable to bring any Iwa characters other than Roshi into the arc (unlike the Yugito or Uakata arcs, that featured Kumo and Kiri characters, respectively). If you want to see Iwa characters, I'm afraid you'll have to wait until I adapt the Kage Summit Arc.

Also, I decided to leave a mystery what Akatsuki members will be tasked with capturing Roshi. Have fun guessing which ones will do it (the only hint is that they won't be Pain nor Konan).

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

I believe that's all. Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really happy!

Fire and Earth, Wood and Music

Author's Note: I've made a change to the previous chapter. Many reviews pointed out that snakes are very good trackers in real life, so I changed the scene in which Anko turns down using snakes to track Roshi into her actually using them alongside Itachi's crows.

Also, check out Shinobi420's story "The Two Twisted Timelines", which is actually set in the Son of the Sannin universe.

Now with that out of the way, enjoy the new chapter:

Chapter 74:

Fire and Earth, Wood and Music

or

Monekys, Foxes, Snakes and Puppets

For several days, the group of ten Konoha ninjas and the single Iwa ninja had been traveling through the forests of the Land of Waterfalls almost nonstop. However, they felt their swiftness rewarded when Itachi opened his mouth to announce something.

"We just crossed the border with the Land of Fire," Itachi stated. He could almost feel the relief washing over the rest of his temporary teammates. The fact that they had returned to their home country in one piece gave them high hopes of completing their mission without incidents.

"Yes! Konoha, here we come!" Naruto cheered.

"I believe we're still a couple days away from the village," Tenzo interjected. "But I think the worst have come to pass."

"Yeah. We weren't attacked by Iwa ninja," Anko added. "And the chances of being ambushed by Akatsuki were higher in the Land of Waterfalls."

"Still, I don't want any of you to lower your guard, understood?" Itachi asked. All of them tensed up again. "I believe we could take a small break. Hanabi, see if you can locate a proper spot to rest."

Hanabi nodded, and expanded her sight, though she focused mostly in the terrain in front of her. She scanned the immense forest before her, and after a few seconds, she found a nice place.

"I think I found something," Hanabi began. "If we deviate a little to the west, there's a clearing with a small lake and a waterfall in about three kilometers."

"That will do. Lead the way, Hanabi," Itachi asked.

...

A few minutes later, they arrived at the waterfall lake. The lake was big enough to both drink and even have a bath if one wanted, and they could even use the waterfall to take a shower. Plus there was enough room for all of them to sit and relax in the grass, and maybe have some food if they felt hungry -which Naruto was-.

"Alright, I believe we can afford to spare an hour resting," Itachi stated. "But if you plan to take a bath, eat, or whatever, do it now. Once the hour is up, we will resume our trip back to Konoha, and whoever is behind, will be left behind."

Itachi's tone was cold and left no room for discussion, but none of them questioned his orders. They all knew that bringing Roshi to Konoha was of vital importance.

...

Not far away from there, two figures wearing black cloaks with red clouds were perched on a high tree branch. One of them had their eyes fixed on the Konoha ninjas.

"They finally stopped. Should we attack now?" the first figure asked.

The second one shook his head. "Not us. Let's send our minions first to soften them a little and measure their capabilities. They're a large group after all."

"That might tip them off of our presence and sneak past us with the jinchuriki," the first figure argued. "We're powerful enough to crush all of them. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing my dear partner, but let's say that I'm not somebody keen in using brute force to approach a problem," the second figure calmly replied. "Besides, this is your first mission. You shouldn't be so overconfident. Remember what happened to Hidan and Kakuzu."

"Don't compare me with those fools," the other Akatsuki fire back. "Very well then, we'll do it your way."

"Good. Send your troops first. They'll be excellent cannon fodder."

...

As everybody relaxed, Roshi was sitting under a tree. In his hand there was a book, though rather than reading it, he was actually writing on it. He would write something, stop, look around, ponder about something, and write again.

"Hey there, Roshi!" Naruto's voice said. Roshi took his eyes from his book, and noticed Naruto walking towards him, followed by those two white haired children. "We were going to eat now. Are you hungry?"

"Thanks, but I'm not. I'll eat sometime later," Roshi said.

"I made some tea as well," the white haired boy chimed in. "Do you want some?"

"I don't think I'm going to turn that down," Roshi with a smile, as he took the cup of tea the boy gave him. "Thank you, kid. I don't think we've been introduced."

"My name's Hagane. This is my sister Kaida," Hagane said, waving his arm at Kaida, who made a curtsy nod. "And you already know our older sibling, Naruto."

"You're siblings?" Roshi asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Adopted siblings," Naruto punctualized, realizing that Roshi noticed their lack of physical resemblances between naruto and the twins. "Well, technically, I'm the one who's adopted, but you get the gist."

"Yes. Those two kids look a lot like Jiraiya and Tsunade, especially the former," Roshi observed. "And you say they adopted you?"

"Yeah. Jiraiya was my godfather, and Tsunade was my last living relative, even if we're only distantly related," Naruto explained.

"I never imagined that there would be people kind enough to adopt a jinchuriki," Roshi noted. "We were created to be living weapons, you know. And people don't want weapons to be close to them or their loved ones."

"Not everybody is like that," Naruto argued, crossing his arms. "And sometimes they're just being ignorant. People who used to fear me because of the Kyubi are no longer afraid of me after they got to know me better, and realize that the Tailed Beast within me can't harm them."

Roshi's reply came in the form of a somewhat sad chuckle. "Then you were born luckier than most, Naruto. From my experiences, almost no jinchuriki has your life. Tell me, do you know how they select a jinchuriki?"

Naruto knew why he was chosen to bear such burden, but he guessed it would be different with the other Tailed Beasts, since no other jinchuriki were Uzumaki.

"First of all, jinchuriki are chosen at a young age," Roshi began, not waiting for Naruto's answer. "So they can carry the Tailed Beast for the longest time possible, and their minds can be more easily molded."

"Guess that makes sense," Naruto mentioned. All the jinchuriki he had met were either teens or young adults. The oldest jinchuriki he had met before Roshi was Killer B, and he appeared to be in his mid thirties.

"Second, jinchuriki almost always tend to be orphans," Roshi continued.

"Because no family would want their child to be subjected to such a fate, right?" Hagane guessed.

"You've a bright mind, boy," Roshi nodded. "But that's not the only part. If a child has no family, they won't have any kind of bond or personal allegiance. And thus, there's a void the village leaders can fill."

"Which brings me to my last point: all jinchuriki tend to be related to the Kages in some way," Roshi said. "To ensure their loyalty to the village."

Naruto was the most obvious case. Both his biological and adoptive father were Hokages. Gaara was also the son of the current Kazekage. There was also Killer B, who was the Raikage's brother. And Yagura, who cut the middleman and was Mizukage himself. However, it didn't appear that Utakata was related to any Kage, and Fu hailed from a village that didn't have a Kage to begin with, though she was pretty close to the village leader, Shibuki.

"What about you?" Hagane asked. "Are you related to the Tsuchikage?"

"In a way, yes. Do you know the Second Tsuchikage, Mu the Null Man?" Roshi asked, but upon seeing the youths' look of confusion, shook his head. "Of course you don't, he already perished at the hands of that despicable Gengetsu. Anyway, I was distantly related to him. My father was his second cousin. After both my parents died in the First Ninja War, I was taken under his wing. Shortly after that, I was made the Jinchuriki of the Four Tails."

Roshi could feel the monkey's anger at being referred once again by such moniker, but decided to ignore him as usual.

"Naruto, if I may ask something," Roshi began. Naruto gave him a nod. "How old you were when you were made a jinchuriki?"

"Uh... about an hour or so," Naruto replied. Roshi raised an eyebrow. "Let's say that the circumstances of my birth were kind of chaotic."

"Were you born the same day the Nine Tails attacked Konoha or what?" Roshi asked. Upon seeing Naruto nodding, the redhead's eyes widened. "Boy, I take back what I said before. Your luck is extraordinarily bad for such a catastrophe to happen the day of your birth."

"Luck had nothing to do with what happened that day. It was part of a deliberate plan," Naruto replied. "I'll tell you the details once we're safe in Konoha, because it's kind of a long story. And not even we have the full version."

"I'll be eager to listen to such tale, it will be an interesting addition to my book," Roshi began.

"You're writing a book?" Kaida chimed in. "About what? Does it have romance? Can I read it?"

"It's not the kind of book you'll enjoy, girl," Roshi replied, chuckling a little. "It's mostly a record of my journeys and experiences across the elemental nations. Towns I visited, people I met, ninjas I fought, and the like."

"So, you're going to write about us then!?" an excited Kaida asked.

"Yes. It was exactly what I was doing before you arrived," Roshi said. "Don't worry, I won't write anything bad about you. As long as you don't give me any reason to."

"Then be sure to include that you met somebody who could use Wood Release!" Kaida said.

"Girl, as much as I'd have loved to meet him, I'm afraid that I was nothing but a young teen when the First Hokage died," Roshi said, laughing a little while shaking his head. "Do I look *that* old to you?"

"I wasn't talking about great grandpa, but me! Look!" Kaida made a hand seal with both hands, and suddenly vines started to emerge all around them. "Awesome, right?"

Roshi watched with his eyes open wide in fascination as a Bloodlimit he considered a legend manifested before him. "Amazing indeed, girl. You too were born with extraordinaire luck to inherit such a power."

"My little brother also has a Bloodlimit, even if it's not as cool as mine," Kaida boasted. "As does our teammate, Hanabi."

"You have quite the collection of Bloodlimits for such a relatively small group," Roshi noticed. "Not to mention another jinchuriki. You made no expenses in case I wasn't this cooperative, didn't you?"

"Eh, while I'm not going to deny it..." Naruto began, as he chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. "All this manpower wasn't just because of you, but because of Akatsuki. You know, the guys who

want to capture us. They have some crazy strong people among their ranks. Plus I'm not here just to fight."

"We believe that the chances of jinchuriki listening to us will be higher if it's another jinchuriki the one to do the talking," Hagane explained.

"Yeah, and our brother is taking a huge risk leaving the village like that, so show some appreciation!" Kaida added, tapping her foot.

"But I did, right? I'm coming with you peacefully," Roshi replied, holding his hands in defense. "Not that I had much of a choice."

"You could have returned to Iwa," Hagane pointed out.

"Besides, this is just temporary," Naruto reassured. "Once the Akatsuki threat is done with, you'll be free to roam the world again."

"Glad to hear it," Roshi nodded, as he went back to his writing.

His reaction, however, caught Naruto a little by surprise. "Wait, you believe me?"

"Why I shouldn't?" Roshi asked. "You're in no need to promise me such a thing. So if given my predicament you tell me that, it must be true."

"Boy, you're surely a trusting person," Kaida pointed out.

Roshi raised his eyes from his book, and gave the white haired girl a somewhat condescending smile. "Girl, I didn't get to live this old by being trusting. But over time, you learn to know which people you can trust and which you can't."

"In either case, I'm glad we fall into the latter category, hehe," Naruto said, grinning a little. He felt like a change of topic was in order, and now was the chance. "So, how many books did you write so far with your experiences?"

"Quite a lot," Roshi stated. "Would you want to read one?"

"Hell yeah I would!" Naruto happily replied. "I admit I'm not much of a reader myself, but reading about the experiences of another jinchuriki has to be something else."

"I like your enthusiasm, kid," Roshi chuckled a little. "I'll give you a signed copy once we reach your village."

"You know, our father is also a writer too," Kaida chimed in.

"Jiraiya writes books? That's new to me," the redheaded man laughed. "I can't picture him as a writer. Well, except maybe porn writer, since his pervertedness is as legendary as his skill as a ninja."

Hagane sighed. "Sadly, that's exactly what he writes."

"Not that we can tell if they're good or not, since mom banned us from reading them," Kaida said, shaking her head a little. "Poor mom thinks we'll never grow up."

"Listen to your mom, child. I'm sure she knows what she's talking about," Roshi said, chuckling a little, as he continued his writing.

Kaida leaned towards him, tried to get a look at what he was writing, and gave him his best smile. "So... are you writing about me now?"

Roshi just sighed. "I won't be able to write much if you keep talking to me."

As Hagane and Kaida bothered Roshi alongside Naruto, their last member of their team, Hanabi, took the pause to relax and meditate. Meditation has been an constant exercise in her endeavor of mastering her Six Paths chakra, since the usually energetic Hyuga needed a calm mind to use her new power. It was something that made her advance at a slower pace than her calmer older sister.

However, as she meditated, she felt a presence. Very faint, almost like a distant star. And Hanabi wouldn't have given this a thought if it

wasn't for the fact that, when she decided to focus on this presence, she noticed something unsettling.

The presence had a very similar chakra to her. And other than her older sister, there was only one person with this kind of chakra.

Opening her eyes, Hanabi expanded her eyesight, scanning the area in the direction of the presence. The young Hyuga gasped.

"Hanabi?" Tenzo asked, noticing his student's reaction. "Something's wrong?"

"A large group of ninjas is heading towards us!" Hanabi warned.

Naturally, this drew everybody's attention, as they stopped what they were doing, and quickly gathered around the brown haired girl, with Itachi getting the closest.

"How many of them? From what village? How long until they arrive?" the Uchiha asked.

Hanabi focused her eyesight on the potential group of enemies as she tried to find the answers her captain demanded her. "About eighteen. At their current pace, they will be here in less than five minutes. As for the village..." Hanabi began, as he focused on their forehead protectors. "I don't recognize that symbol!"

Suddenly, Naruto had a very bad feeling about this. "Hanabi, is the symbol a crescent moon overlapped with a sun?"

"Yes, it looks like that!" Hanabi nodded. "Wait, how did you know that?"

"Because Naruto had already fought against such ninjas, isn't that right?" Itachi asked the blond.

"Yeah, they aren't actually ninjas, but very advanced puppets. If those puppets are here, then Toneri Otsutsuki can't be too far," Naruto warned the others.

" Toneri Otsutsuki... so that's the presence I felt..." Hanabi realized. "Well, if he's here expecting my sister, he's in for a disappointment. Though I hope he doesn't decides to take me as his bride instead. EWWW!"

"Even if the last time Toneri attacked us he was aiming for Hinata, we have a reason to believe that he's working for Akatsuki as well," Naruto told the others. "So even if he came here mistaking Hanabi for Hinata, Roshi is still in danger."

"Very well then. Roshi, Naruto, stay close to me. Anko, Tenzo, have your teams cover our flanks," Itachi ordered.

"Very well then," Tenzo nodded.

"You got it!" Anko replied.

"Finally some action!" Zaku said with an excited grin. "I was starting to get bored of all this inactivity."

"Don't underestimate Akatsuki, brat," Anko told Zaku. "Or else you'll end up dead."

"That habit of yours is going to be the death of us, Zaku," Dosu chastised his teammate, shaking his head.

"You can discuss that later! Here they come!" Kin pointed out, as she heard the trees surrounding them rustling.

And true to her words, a trio of Moon Puppets leaped from the trees above them, their hands cupped. A golden chakra ball formed between them, before thrusting their hands forwards, firing the yellow projectile.

"Leave that to me!" Zaku said, taking a couple steps forward, while raising his arms at the incoming projectiles. "Decapitating Airwaves!"

Zaku released two powerful cones of pressurized air and sound that sucessfully repelled the incoming projectiles, and lacked enough

power to reach the ninjas, who just touched ground and rushed towards them.

Anko made five hand seals, before biting her thumb, and slamming her palm into the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

After the initial burst of smoke, a large, green snake appeared around both Anko and her students, coiled around them in a protective manner.

"Did you call, Anko-san?" the snake asked, in an oddly soft and feminine voice.

"Indeed, Tagitsuhime. We could use your help against these enemies," Anko replied. "Try to make sure none of them catches us off guard!"

"You can count on me," the snake said, as she slammed with her tail an incoming puppet with such force, it was snapped in two.

"Alright then! Dosu, Kin, if these guys are puppets, then your usual fighting style won't be of much use here! Switch to taijutsu and conventional ninjutsu!" Anko told her other two students.

"Yes, sensei!" the two of them replied in unison.

Meanwhile, Tenzo prepared his team for another group of puppets that were coming from their direction.

"Kaida, with me! Let's create a wood barricade!" Tenzo ordered, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Hanabi, Hagane, cover us!"

"Yes sir!" the three Chunin chorused in unison, as Kaida's hands also formed hand seals.

"Wood Release: World of Trees Wall!"

Tenzo and Kaida slammed their hands into the ground, and in front of them dozens of wooden roots grew from the ground, interlocking among themselves, catching some of them puppets that were heading towards them. The puppets struggled to get free, but the roots' hold became harder with every second, to the point they were unable to move.

Upon seeing this, some of the puppets generated golden swords made of chakra that they used to cut through the wall of wood -but trying to help the trapped puppets didn't cross their possibly nonexistent mind- and charged forward.

However, Hanabi and Hagane were already expecting them, both of them forming hand seals of their own.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Spear!"

Hagane raised his right arm, which started to crackle with electricity, before firing a lightning bolt at the incoming enemies, hitting one of the puppets square in the chest.

"Fire Release: Burning Palm!"

Flames coated Hanabi's palms as she rushed to meet the attackers head on, and started trade blows with three of them, one using a golden sword, the other two resorting to unarmed combat. Despite being puppets, the young Hyuga found them far more skilled than she imagined. Their movements were fast and precise, blocking her strikes with acute expertise.

"It's as if these guys know about the Gentle Fist..." Hanabi wondered aloud, before a revelation hit her. "... because they do! We Hyugas descend from Otsutsuki!"

Her revelation proved to be correct when the trio of puppets pushed her into the defensive in a frighteningly effective display of Gentle Fist. Unfortunately for them, Gentle Fist wasn't the only thing Hanabi

could rely on. The Hyuga jumped backwards, with the puppets following suit. Just as she expected.

"Very well then, how about this?"

Hanabi spread her arms wide with the palms forward, releasing a powerful kinetic wave that hurled the puppets backwards. Then, with another hand movement, she broke the momentum of one of them and pulled it back to her. The moment it was in range, Hanabi slammed her burning palm into the puppet's chest, blowing a hole into its body. The puppet fell down, and didn't get up.

The other two puppets weren't deterred by seeing their "partner" dead, and dashed towards Hanabi. The Hyuga smirked confidently, as she adopted a defensive fighting stance.

"Come on, I'm not afraid of-"

Suddenly, something fell from the sky, slamming the two puppets into the ground. Said something turned out to be Hagane, who used one leg to stop each puppet, stopping them and there in their tracks.

"Oh come on, those were mine!" Hanabi whined.

"This isn't a competition," Hagane chastised, as his eyes scanned the area for more enemies. "Just focus on the mission, we're Chunin, for crying out loud!"

"Ugh, he always has to rub how mature he pretends to be," Hanabi grumbled, shaking her head in annoyance.

Naruto, Roshi and Itachi were fighting against a much larger number of puppets than the other two squads did, either because they were the strongest ninjas of the group, because it had not one but two jinchuriki, or maybe both. Probably both.

"Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Itachi's katana was coated in flames just in time to parry the blow from one of the puppets wielding a golden chakra sword. The swordfighting puppet delivered a series of vicious but precise blows that forced Itachi onto the defensive. His Sharingan flaring to life, Itachi had tried to put these beings under a genjutsu, but unsurprisingly they were immune, given their lack of a brain. His Sharingan also failed to predict their movements, since they didn't have muscles.

"Naruto, you fought against these creatures," Itachi began, as he pushed back the puppet's sword after parrying a blow. "Any idea on how they can be beaten? Weak points, anything like that?"

"Not really! These guys are strong, fast, and don't feel pain! The last time we fought we just overwhelmed them with brute force!" Naruto said, as he was fighting other two puppets, Wind Blade in hand.

"Watch out!" Roshi warned, pointing upwards.

Laping above them, there were two other puppets, holding a large sphere of golden chakra between their hands, which they threw at the two jinchuriki and the Uchiha. Roshi, however, was already preparing a counterattack.

"Lava Release: Scorching Rocks Jutsu!"

Roshi expelled multiple bursts of lava from his mouth, that quickly solidified into projectiles of molten rock. The lava missiles crashed against the golden chakra spheres, resulting in a large explosion. As this happened, Itachi's hands also ran through hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Itachi breathed a massive fireball into the cloud of dirt and smoke produced by the previous clash of attacks, much to Naruto and Roshi's confusion. But the jinchuriki's confusion didn't last long when they saw the two puppets leaping out the cloud of ash and smoke,

heading directly into the fireball. They realized of their mistake too late, and they were burn to ashes by the Uchiha's hot flames.

"Just because my Sharingan can't predict their movements, it doesn't mean that I don't have other ways to anticipate their actions," Itachi stated in his usual stoic tone, though Naruto could detect some hints of pride in there.

"Everybody, watch out!" Hanabi shouted. "More enemies incoming!"

"More puppets?" Naruto asked.

"No, these ones are alive!" Hanabi replied. "They're Oto Ninjas!"

"Oto ninjas. Then that means that Orochimaru must be close then," Anko deduced.

Her three students immediately paled. Well, Zaku and Kin did, Dosu was better at hiding his reaction, in no small part thanks to the bandages covering his face.

"O-Orochimaru is here!?" Zaku almost screaming. "Of course, it's not like things can go our way just once!"

"No no no no no NO! He can't be here! He can't see us!" Kin shouted, taking her hands to her head. "If Orochimaru knows that we defected to Konoha..."

"Snap out of it, brats! Orochimaru won't lay a hand on you as long as I'm here to keep you safe!" Anko energetically replied. "And even if I can't do it alone, we have more people to cover our backs!"

Kaida, who overheard the conversation, decided to chime in. "Yeah! We Konoha ninjas take care of our own! So as long as we stick together, there's nothing to fear!"

"Besides, if Orochimaru was close, I'd sense him," Anko told them, as her hand instinctively touched the spot on her neck where the cursed seal was. "This thing burns like crazy when he's close."

"Naruto, watch out! An Oto ninja is heading towards you!" Hanabi warned. "His chakra levels are downright ridiculous!"

Itachi and Roshi tensed up, while Naruto made a hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A dozen of clones popped into existence, and formed a circle around the original, Roshi and Itachi, eagerly awaiting for the ninja to show up. Itachi's eyes widened when his Sharingan caught something.

"Naruto, Roshi, move!" Itachi shouted, as he pushed Roshi to the side.

"Ten Finger Drilling Bullets!"

Tiny white projectiles flew at them at an imperceptible speed, dispelling several of the clones, which, along the original, scrambled in an attempt to avoid such an attack. That moment, a white haired ninja Naruto hadn't seen in a long time landed in front of them.

"YOU!"

"Yes, me," Kimimaro replied, his face as stoic as usual. "I remember you, kid. Naruto Uzumaki. I was expecting to see you here."

"What are you doing here? Are you working with Akatsuki? Or did you come here for my siblings!?" Naruto angrily asked, as he and his clones gathered again in front of him, as if forming a barrier to stop him from continuing forward.

"While my failure of such mission will haunt me forever, that's not why I'm here," Kimimaro replied. "We have orders to capture the jinchuriki of the Four Tails for Orochimaru-sama. And you as well, but you aren't the priority right now."

"Well, get this that on that bonehead of yours! You failed back then, and you'll fail again! Just like we rescued our siblings, neither you nor your boss will get your dirty hands on anymore jinchuriki!"

"Kimimaro Kaguya, last member of the Kaguya Clan. Last time I heard of you, Zabuza claimed to have defeated you," Itachi said, narrowing his eyes at him. "Naruto, do you know this man?"

"Yeah. He was part of the group that kidnapped my siblings three years ago," Naruto replied, not taking his eyes from the white haired ninja. "Before you say anything, yes, I know he's dangerous."

"In that case, you won't complain if I say that you should let me handle him," Itachi told him. "Make sure Roshi stays safe."

Kimimaro started to make hand seals. "You think you can handle me, Uchiha? Your Sharingan doesn't impress me. Besides, I'm way stronger than the last time the Uzumaki fought against me. Dance of the Orchid!"

Kimimaro slammed his hands into the grass, and the ground started to shake. Suddenly, an skeletal serpentine dragon emerged from below Naruto and Roshi were standing, who barely jumped in time to avoid it.

"Whoa, that's new!" Naruto pointed out.

"Didn't you hear what I just say?" Kimimaro replied.

The earth continued to shake, and more bone serpents emerged, the three bone constructs focusing on one ninja each. That's when Kimimaro took advantage of the situation and dived for Roshi, while he activated the first stage of his cursed seal.

"Itachi, I'll distract these things!" Naruto said as he made a hand seal. "Protect Roshi! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Itachi nodded as he went to intercept Kimimaro. A hundred of Naruto clones popped unto existence, and they began to charge at the skeletal serpents. While they failed to inflict any significant damage, they did keep the bone constructs distracted enough.

Meanwhile, Anko's team continued to fend off the horde of autonomous puppets. As she saw a couple of puppets coming at her, Kin made several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Needles!"

Kin grabbed a handful of senbon as her hands started to crackle with electricity, and tossed the electrified needles at the incoming enemies. One of them raised its hand forward, casting a golden chakra blast at the needles, producing an explosion. However, when they crossed the ensuing cloud of smoke, Dosu was already waiting for them.

"Resonating Echo Burst!"

Given their momentum, the puppets were unable to stop in time nor dodge Dosu's invisible attack, which violently hurled them backwards.

"Good one!" Kin cheered.

"No time to celebrate! More coming from the east!" Dosu warned, as the bandaged ninja sensed their steps resonating through the ground.

"Leave those to us!" Anko said, as she and Zaku rejoined them.
"Zaku, time to use our combo!"

A smirk appeared on the black haired teen. "Hell yes! I thought we'd never do it!"

"Just wait for the right moment!" Anko told him, as she started making hand seals.

As a trio of puppets rushed towards them, they jumped into the air while cupping their hands, producing a golden chakra sphere between them. Anko tensed up.

"Now!"

Zaku raised his palms upward. "Decapitating Airwaves!"

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Zaku released wide cones of pressurized air through the holes of his palms, while Anko exhaled a stream of fire from her mouth. Both attacks merged into a massive wall of fire that engulfed both the incoming chakra blasts, as well as burned the puppets to ashes.

"Yeah, how do you like that one, huh!?" Zaku boasted.

"Hey, do you hear that?" Dosu asked.

"Hear what? I can't hear anything with all this ruckus," Zaku complained.

"Yeah, what are you talking about, Dosu?" Anko asked.

"It sounds like a flute. Don't you hear it?" Dosu insisted.

Upon hearing that, Kin went pale. "Wait, a flute you say? Oh man, I wasn't expecting her to be here!"

"Who-"

"Tayuya!" Kin interrupted Anko. "She's a member of the Sound Five! And uses the melody of her flute to put everybody who hears it under a powerful genjutsu!"

"I see. And we can't allow that, can we?" Anko said, nodding. "Dosu, you're the one with the best sound ninjutsu. And Kin, you're the genjutsu specialist, so you two take care of her."

"W-Wait! You can ask us to deal with one of Orochimaru's elite guards! We're not that strong!" Kin whimpered.

"Yes you are!" Anko snapped, getting in her face. "And you know why? Because I trained you myself all these years! Under Orochimaru, you were disposable tools, but under me, you're fucking

ninjas! So now go there, beat her into the ground, don't dare to fucking die, and make me proud!"

"Yes, sensei. We won't disappoint you," Dosu said, bowing his head. "Come on Kin."

Reluctantly, Kin nodded and followed his teammate into the thickness of the forest that surrounded the lake.

It didn't took long for Dosu to find Tayuya. The redheaded kunoichi barely made an effort to hide herself. The marks around her skin showed that she was using the first stage of her cursed seal from the get go.

"Let's make sure she doesn't play that flute anymore!" Dosu suggested, as he jumped from one tree branch to the next heading towards Tayuya. "Resonating Echo Soundwave!"

Dosu slammed both melody gauntlets together, producing a sound blast that expanded forward. Tayuya jumped in time before the branch she was standing upon was shattered into splinters. However, she didn't stop playing her music.

"Now's my chance!" Kin said, making a hand seal.

As Tayuya was about to land on another branch, she lost her balance for a second. But that second was enough to made her trip, and fall to the grass below.

"What the fuck!?" the redhead cursed, as she incidentally dropped the flute.

"Good one, Kin!" Dosu praised, as she dashed towards the falling redhead. "Time to finish her!"

However, Kin's genjutsu only lasted a couple seconds, and while she was in mid air, Tayuya was able to regan her balance and land on

her feet. She then sprung towards Dosu, and interrupted his attack with a vicious punch to the face.

"Finish this, you shithead mummy!" Tayuya shouted. "You're going to need way more bandages than those once I'm done with you!"

"Kin! The flute! Make sure she doesn't get it back!" Dosu warned, raising his voice.

Kin nodded, and rushed towards the flute, laying on the ground. Tayuya, being so focused on Dosu, didn't notice that until it was late.

"Fuck no! Don't you dare!"

"Mine!" Kin said as she was about to grab the flute.

"KIN, WATCH OUT!"

But before she could do that, a new cloaked figure appeared from behind a tree, and punched Kin in the face with such force, the black haired kunoichi was sent flying against a nearby tree. The figure then grabbed the flute, and tossed it to Tayuya.

"Be more careful next time," the cloaked figure said. Tayuya grunted something unintelligible in return. "And a 'thank you' would be nice."

"I didn't ask for your help, so go fuck yourself!" Tayuya angrily snapped.

"Very well then. I'll go help Kimimaro instead," the figure said, as he rushed towards the battlefield behind them.

"Of course, you can't stand being separated from your boyfriend that much, can you?" Tayuya mocked, before turning her attention back to the Konoha ninjas. Dosu was helping Kin back on her feet.

"Alright, you fuckers have no idea how mad you made me with that little stunt of yours, so prepare to get the worst beating of your life!"

And Tayuya's cursed seal started to spread even further, as it advanced to its second stage.

"This doesn't look good for us..." Dosu lamented, but he wasn't sure what was more scary: Tayuya as she mutated into a human shaped monster, or Anko if she was pissed. Though deep down, the answer was easy. "Facing Tayuya it is, then."

Back to the fight, Tenzo's team was also fighting the last of the remaining puppets. Several of them had surrounded the Senju twins, and were ready to fire their signature golden chakra blasts.

"Sister, you're on!" Hagane called.

The white haired girl nodded, as she made several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Earth Dome Jutsu!"

Kaida slammed her hands into the ground, and a dome of dense rock quickly formed around the Senju siblings, just in time when the puppets fired their blasts. The golden projectiles easily shattered the barrier. But much to their surprise, the twins were nowhere to be seen all what remained were several pieces of charred rock.

There was also a hole, but they saw it way too late. Hagane and Kaida then burst from underground behind them, the latter making more hand seals.

"Water Release: All Devouring Maelstrom!"

Water from the nearby lake started to form and gather around the puppets, and quickly spun around them, until it formed a water tornado. The puppets tried to break free from the powerful attack, but it was in vain.

"Good one, sis! Now it's my turn!" Hagane said, as he fell from above, his hands holding a massive spinning sphere of blue chakra. "Sage Art: Big Ball Rasengan!"

Upon smashing the sphere of destruction unto the tornado of water, it exploded in a massive blast that not only shattered the puppets, but the land below as well. The water from the lake moved to fill the new empty space.

"Guys, watch out!" Hanabi's voice said from above, as the Hyuga floated down towards them. "More enemies are incoming! These ones are actual ninjas! And their chakra... no, that can't be right!"

"What can't be right?" Kaida wanted to know.

But before Hanabi could reply, the answer presented itself.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

Thick green roots emerged from both the land below and the nearby water. Hanabi flew back into the air, while the Senju twins jumped away in order to avoid the sudden attack. A storm of shuriken laced with electricity appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Hagane, however, managed to see it in time.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

The ensuing cone of wind managed to either suck or push away the incoming rain of steel stars.

At that moment, two ninjas wearing Otogakure uniforms, including face concealing balaclavas, landed on top of one of the newly generated trees.

"Another Wood Release user?" Kaida asked in shock.

"That's what I tried to tell you!" Hanabi shouted from above. "These ninjas have an almost identical chakra to you two! In fact, they even *look* like you two, only older!"

"I see. At first I was surprised, but now I know who they are," Hagane said, as his surprise started to subside. "You're the clones

Naruto-niisan told us about, right? Remove those masks, you aren't fooling anybody."

The two ninjas did as Hagane asked, revealing their appearances. Kaida's shock grew even more, as so did Hagane, but he was better at masking it.

"Who are you calling a clone, brat?" Hagane's lookalike angrily asked. "Orochimaru-sama may have used your DNA as a template to create us, but we're way more than simple clones!"

"Don't bother arguing with them, Hebimaru. Words matter little here," the woman told her brother. "Now stand down and let us take the jinchuriki. If you make our jobs easier, we will spare your lives."

"Hanabi, I need fire. Lots and lots of fire," the male Senju asked.

"You got it," Hanabi nodded, as she started to make hand seals.

"Guess you were right, Hebiko. Time to fight then!" Hebimaru said, as he unsheathed the broadsword he was carrying on his back.

"Fire Release: Crimson Phoenix Flare!"

Hanabi breathed a massive stream of fire that quickly took the shape of a bird, which flew towards the duo of Oto ninjas, burning everything in its wake. As this happened, Hagane also prepared his next attack.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Hagane blew a powerful gust of wind towards the phoenix, and just like Anko and Zaku's attacks a moment ago, both jutsu merged into a massive inferno, which carbonized everything that it touched as it advanced.

"Poor kids, you're so out of your league," Hebimaru said, shaking his head. "Come on sister!"

"I'm ahead of you!" Hebiko said, as her hands flew through hand seals. "Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Using the water from the ever expanding lake as a source, Habiko raised a wave that crashed against the incoming inferno, but it did little to stop it.

"Even if you use water, that's not enough to stop our combination!" Hanabi boasted.

"We haven't played all our cards, girl," Hebimaru said, as he made several hand seals of his own. "Wind Release: Breath of God!"

An hurricane formed among the water that was trying to stop the incoming fire. The hurricane then shapped the water into a tornado, while also sucking more and more water from the lake, increasing the size of the jutsu. Eventually, the water tornado was large enough to stop Hanabi and Hagane's attack.

"Like we said, you're nothing but kids, while we are-"

However, Hebimaru's taunt was interrupted when he felt a presence around him. They've been there for quite some time, but he was so focused on stopping the fire jutsu that he didn't notice it until now. And soon, the Oto ninja were ambushed by Kaida, who sprung from behind.

"You're mine!" she yelled, as she descended towards them, with a kunai on each hand.

Unfortunately for her, Hebiko did notice her in time, and managed to stop Kaida by grabbing her by the neck, making the younger girl drop her weapons.

"You lowered your guard, brother," Hebiko said, shaking her head. "You almost let this little girl shank you."

"Sister!" Hagane cried, upon seeing her predicament.

"Let her go or else... !" Hanabi threatened, as her eyes flared with a blue and white light.

"Or else what?" Hebiko said, and laughed. "Your little friends' recklessness costed you dearly. Now surrender, or she won't enjoy what I'll do next."

"I'm... I'm like... your sister..." Kaida managed to say, as she tried to pry the older woman's hand from her neck. "Doesn't that...?"

"Sister? Please, don't make me laugh!" Hebiko replied. "We may have a similar DNA, but that does not make us family. Hebimaru and Orochimaru-sama is the only family I have."

"Too bad... then..." Kaida said, before losing consciousness, and going limp.

"Huh?" Hebiko mumbled. "I swear I wasn't putting that much force onto that hold..."

Then, much to her confusion, Kaida quickly started to lose all color, her skin, hair and clothes becoming light brown, almost looking like wood.

"A clone! Sister, this girl just fooled-"

But Hebimaru's scolding was interrupted when lots of presences manifested at once, followed by an horde of more Wood Clones emerging from all around then.

"Now, attack!" the Kaida clones said in unison, as they unleashed a barrage of shuriken and kunai unto the Oto siblings.

"Sister, get close to me!" Hebimaru called, as his hands ran through hand seals as fast as they could. "Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

A tornado engulfed both Hebiko and Hebimaru, sucessfully repelling most of the incoming barrage of weapos, though some managed to get by.

"Hanabi, now!" one of the Kaida clones called.

The Hyuga nodded, and flew towards the two white haired Oto ninjas, while making several hand seals. Hebiko's face lost all color when she realized what was going to happen.

"Brother, stop, they're-"

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Hebiko saw how Hanabi breathed a stream of fire at them. If that fire hit the tornado, the two of them would be trapped inside a flaming vortex that would burn them to ashes.

" Even if Hebimaru cancels the jutsu, he can't move until it ceases completely," Hebiko said,, as she started to form hand seals of her own. *"I need to use a water jutsu before-"*

Her thoughts were interrupted when something kicked her out of the wind barrier. She saw that, even if Hebimaru couldn't quite move completely, he was still able to move her leg in order to kick her away.

"No!" she screamed.

Hanabi's fire jutsu hit the tornado, and just as everybody expected, the make Oto ninja was engulfed in a twister of flames. Suddenly, Hebimaru, covered in flames jumped out of the fiery twister. He tried to land on a branch, but the fire burning his body and the ensuing pain made it difficult for him to properly land, tripped, anf fell. Though much to his luck, there was water below which instantly put out the flames.

"Brother!" Hebiko shouted, as she dashed towards him, jumping into the water. She managed to bring him to the surface before he could sink. "Come on!"

Hebiko jumped onto a nearby tree branch, and left her brother resting against the tree. There were plenty of burns across his body, While the water had out out the flames, the sudden change of temperature had worsened his wounds.

"It's okay... I'm okay..." Hebimaru groaned, as he coughed. "I need... some time to recuperate..."

"Very well then. I'll buy you that time," Hebiko told him, before a scowl developed on her face. "Don't dare to die, you hear me? Orochimaru-sama is counting on you, and so do I!"

Before Hebimaru could reply, the Chunin of Team Tenzo landed on a nearby branch -though in Hanabi's case, she just floated above it.

"Alright, time to take them out!" Kaida said, as she got ready to attack the now weakened duo.

Meanwhile. Dosu and Kin were still fighting Tayuya, who, brewing with anger- not that it was that hard to get her like that- decided to go into the second stage of her cursed seal.

"Alright you shitheads, if you aren't going to let me play my music, then I'll rip your fucking limbs from your bodies!" the redhead growled as she dashed towards them.

Dosu protectively stood between her and the still injured Kin, arms raised in a defensive stance. He saw Tayuya's left punch coming, and moved his arm to block it. The impact was so great it pushed the former Oto ninja backwards, leaving his arm sore, but he still smirked under his bandages.

"Resonating Echo Burst!"

All the power Tayuya had put into that punch was converted into soundwaves by the Melody Gauntlet, and released them the form of a sound blast that knocked the mutated kunoichi backwards. Taking

advantage of the situation, Dosu decided not to let her any room to breathe and dashed forward, ready to attack.

However, much to Dosu's surprise, Tayuya quickly crouched and delivered a low kick, hitting his forelegs, and made him trip and fall on his back. Tayuya then pulled a kunai and tried to stab it on Dosu's chest.

"Now die already!"

Dosu managed to grab Tayuya's wrist and stop her in time, but the Oto kunoichi's strength was much greater while in her current form, and the kunai slowly came closer to his chest.

"Damn... I can't use my sound jutsu if I can't move my arms..."
Dosu thought as she struggled against his redheaded opponent.

Suddenly, Tayuya got off Dosu and jumped back as she used her kunai to deflect a pair of senbon. Turning around, Dosu saw Kin back on her feet, pelting Tayuya with her throwing weapon of choice.

"You think you can beat me by throwing fucking toothpicks at me!?"
Tayuya angrily growled. "Oh, that's it!"

Tayuya then made several hand seals, and took her flute to her lips.

"She's going to use her genjutsu again! Dosu, stop her!" Kin panicklingly warned.

"On it!" the bandaged ninja replied, as he prepared to blast Tayuya with another sound wave.

However, there was something odd with the way Tayuya was holding the flute. Rather than holding it sideways, she was holding it facing front, as if it was a blowpipe.

And when Dosu felt the pain of a projectile piercing his shoulder, that's exactly what she was doing.

"Dosu!" Kin screamed, as she rushed towards him.

Tayuya keep firing projectiles at Dosu, but this time, the Oto ninja was able to dodge them, if badly. Kin helped him to stand, as the two of them tried to dodge Tayuya's incoming barrage of projectiles, which impacted with such force, they pierced the nearby trees.

"Just what the hell is she shooting at us?" Kin shouted.

"Bullets of concentrated soundwaves!" Dosu replied. "Really clever, she will never run out of ammo, and they can only be avoided, not blocked."

"That may be clever of her, but we're pretty much screwed!" Kin cried.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Suddenly, a blaze of fire came from above, creating a wall of flames between the two former Oto ninjas and Tayuya. A couple seconds later, Anko and Zaku landed besides Dosu and Kin.

"Sounds like you guys are having trouble," Zaku chuckled, before smirking at them.

"Zaku, do you have a first aids kit?" Anko asked, not taking her eyes from Tayuya. Zaku grunted in affirmation. "It seems that that girl was too much for you guys in the end. Okay, stay behind and take care of Dosu. This bitch's mine."

"Who are you calling bitch, you bitch?" Tayuya snapped back at her.

"You hurt one of my students," Anko hissed. "And as his sensei, it's my duty to return that pain multiplied by one thousand! Get ready for the beating of your life"

While Anko and her students fought against Tayuya, Itachi, Naruto and Roshi continued their fight against the leader of the Sound Five. The last member of the Kaguya Clan was proving to be far more

resilient than what Itachi had expected, as he was able to keep the three ninja at bay, keeping a solid defense while harrasing with powerful attacks.

"Dance of the Orchid!"

Twp more gigantic bone dragons emerged from below, joining the existing three.

"Godammit!" Naruto cursed, as he was trying to fend off a single one. "These things won't go down!"

"Maybe we can slow them a bit," Roshi mentioned, as he started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!"

Roshi slammed his hands down, and the ground around them started to turn into a muddy swamp. The heavy bone constructs started to slowly sink. They trashed violently, but other than splashing mud everywhere, they were unable to do anything.

"Nice one, Roshi!" Naruto praised.

"Watch out!" Itachi warned.

Neither Naruto nor Roshi noticed Kimimaro dashing at them at an insane speed, using the sinking bone serpents as stepping stones. Two bone blades appeared on Kimimaro's hands, as he readied to sink them into the redheaded man's chest. However, a black blur got between the Oto ninja and his prey, and the bone broke with a loud clang.

"Itachi!" Naruto shoued as he was about to help the leader of his squad.

However, another figure, completely covered in a dark blue cloak, intercepted Naruto before he could assist the Uchiha. A gigantic brown and inhuman looking fist emerged from one of the sleeves, punching the Uzumaki with incredible force.

"UGH!" Naruto groaned, but he was able to land on his feet.
"Another enemy?"

The newcomer pulled his hood back, revealing to be an orange haired boy a few years older than Naruto. His face, which was fair skinned, but with grayish brown slowly spreading around it, had an expression of stone hard stoicism.

"Who the hell are you?" Naruto asked.

"For the time being, your opponent," the orange haired teen said.
"But if you need a name, you can call me Jugo. I'd recommend you not to interfere with Kimimaro's fight."

Naruto gritted his teeth in anger, as he prepared to face his new enemy, while Kimimaro and Itachi continued their fight.

"Not bad. You deserve your reputation, Uchiha," Kimimaro said, as he jumped backwards, eyeing the Uchiha, who was now surrounded by an spectral yellowish orange ribcage. "So that's your famed Susanoo?"

"Indeed," Itachi nodded, his eyes forming the shape of the Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan. "Consider yourself lucky, few are the enemies I consider strong enough to use them. However, their luck usually don't last much after that."

"We'll see then," Kimimaro said, as more bone blades started to protude from his arms. "You have no idea how much I trained after my defeat at Zabuza's hands. I swore myself I'd never fail Orochimaru-sama again. And nobody, not even the famed Itachi Uchiha, will make me break that oath! Dance of the Dandelion!"

Kimimaro fired several bone spikes at Itachi, which split into smaller spikes, Itachi jumped backwards as he firmly held his katana in one hand, and pulled a kunai with the other. His Sharingan allowed him to analyze which flying spikes were going to hit him, their speed, and

how he could deflect them. For Itachi, it was as if the world ran in slow motion, allowing him more time to think and react.

From an outsider's perspective, however, it would look as if Itachi was wildly moving his arms as if he was trying to swat away a bee, even if each move was calculated. After deflecting every bone projectile, Itachi stared intently at Kimimaro, panting.

"Out of breath already?" Kimimaro asked. "If that's what it takes to deplete your stamina, then you aren't going to last long around me. Or it is a trick to make me lower my guard? I admit I can be quite arrogant at times, and such attitude costed me dearly in the past."

"Why don't you come and find out?" Itachi said in a taunting manner.

Kimimaro then pulled his own spinal chord out of his back, and wielded it as if it was a sword.

"Oh, I plan to."

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, two figures were observing the fight. Well, technically only one had enough visual prowess to appreciate every detail. His face, however, remained impassible for the duration of the battle.

"How is it going, Toneri?" the first figure asked.

"Inconceivable. That little girl also has a Tenseigan. How is that possible?" Toneri asked, seemingly ignoring his partner's question. With his own Tenseigan, he could zoom into the battle and see it with minute detail. "Only Hinata and I should have one."

"I'm sure you are going to put an end to such unforgivable transgression," the other man said, rolling his eyes. "The jinchuriki?"

"He seems unharmed, and still with plenty of energy," Toneri replied. "Should we attack now, Orochimaru?"

A sadistic grin formed on the Sannin's face. "Why, of course we should. We can't let out minions to have all the fun, can we? Besides, I'm sure they already did a good job wearing them down."

And thus, Orochimaru and Toneri decided to join the battle for Roshi's fate.

Author's Notes: Yep, there you have it. Those who guessed that Orochimaru and Toneri were the ones tasked with Roshi's capture were right. I think it was their time, given that neither of them have assisted in any jinchuriki capture yet. Though before they join the fray, the good guys will have to deal with their minions, mostly the new incarnation of the Sound Five.

In a related note, I hope you guys enjoyed seeing Teams Tenzo and Anko in action. Sorry I took this long to showcase them, but like I said many teams, please be patient with me. For the most part I tend to be a long-term planner, and it may seem that I forgot about a character or plot element that I introduced at a certain point, but I can assure you that most of the time it won't be the case (there is the chance that I may forget about something, I'm still human after all).

But guess this is what happens when you juggle as many characters as I do. We love to criticize Kishimoto for wasting so many good characters (and with reason), but balancing such a large cast is no easy feat. Hell, unlike the Yugito and Uzakata arcs, I was unable to include any ninjas from Roshi's home village, since as you can see, this arc is getting pretty crowded.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next time, this arc comes to an end. Will Akatsuki claim Roshi and the Four Tails, or will Naruto and the Konoha ninjas succeed this time? In the meantime, leave your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Light of their Eyes

Author's Note: And today, we reached another milestone with the posting of the 75th chapter. Let's see how much this story has grown since then:

1070775 views

2678 favorites

3070 alerts

32 communities

and 2632 reviews!

Thanks a lot to all the people who made this story grow so much! I've never ever dreamt that any of my fanfics could get such high number of, well, pretty much everything! You guys rock!

Chapter 75:

The Light of their Eyes

or

Tense Family Relationships

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Anko breathed another stream of fire at the mutated Oto kunoichi, who jumped to another branch before the flames could claim her. Tayuya then took the flute to her lips, and played a quick melody, no more than a dozen notes.

Suddenly, Anko felt as if somebody smashed a hammer into her head from the inside, and instinctively fell to one knee, as the world around her became blurrier.

"Guh...?" she gurgled, as she tried to understand what was going on. While she knew that Tayuya was a genjutsu specialist, she also knew that the Oto kunoichi had to continuously play her flute in order to keep the genjutsu active. Same went in order to control her three summoned creatures.

Tayuya dashed forward, her flute in one hand with a kunai in another. Warned by killing intent, Anko tried to fight the dizziness, and jumped away just in time the angry redhead delivered an horizontal slash, leaving a cut in her left arm. The sharp pain, however, shook her out of the genjutsu.

"How did you-"

Anko's question was interrupted by another quick melody, and she was assaulted again by the same sensation of dizziness. This time, Tayuya decided to deliver a brutal flying kick at Anko's face, which send the Snake Mistress tumbling into the ground.

"Anko-sensei!" Kin screamed, witnessing in horror her sensei getting pummeled.

"This is the end, you bitch!" Tayuya shouted, as she leaped towards her. "This is what happens to those who betray Orochimaru-sama!"

Tayuya landed on top of Anko as she sank her kunai on the purplette's chest. She didn't really know if she had pierced Anko's heart as she wanted, but she was sure a stab like that had to be lethal. Blood trickled from Anko's throat. And much to Tayuya's confusion, she smirked.

"Why are you so happy, you dumb bitch? Did you want to-"

This time, it was Tayuya who was interrupted when "Anko" burst into a mass of snakes that wasted no time and lunged towards her. Tayuya tried to evade them by jumping back, but two of them managed to tightly wrap themselves around her body.

"First of all, it was Orochimaru who betrayed me, not the other way around," the real Anko said, as she landed behind Tayuya. She pulled out a kunai of her own. "Second, not only did Orochimaru betray me, his student, but also betrayed his village, as well as countless others. And third... in case it wasn't clear, you made me angry as fuck, so you have the wonderful fortune of being the target of my venting."

"I'd like to see you try, you bitch!" Tayuya shouted, before disappearing in a puff of smoke, leaving a log behind.

"Sensei! She's between the trees southwest of your position!" Dosu managed to shout.

"Good hearing, kid," Anko replied, as she headed towards the position.

As she dashed towards Tayuya, she heard the sound of a flute. Like before, it was very quick, only a few notes.

"Oh no, you aren't going to catch me with that dirty trick again!" Anko said, as she made a hand seal, while sending a burst of chakra through her body. "Release!"

Anko's world became blurry for a fraction of a second, before it returned back to normal. Anko smirked at Tayuya's bright hair flashed before her eyes.

"Many Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Snakes shot from under Anko's sleeve, and wrapped around Tayuya's neck. The Oto kunoichi barely had any time to gasp before the snakes pulled her towards Anko with incredible force. Anko then

hurled her into the air, before slamming her back into the ground. Tayuya bounced against the grassy ground as if she was a rubber ball, before falling back with a thud.

"I see you improved your genjutsu," Anko stated, as she walked towards the downed kunoichi. "From what I heard, you had to play your flute continuously for it to have effect. It was a valid strategy when you were with your teammates and were about to ambush your enemies, but against an enemy who knows about it, not so much, right?"

"That's why you developed this version. A genjutsu in short bursts. Only disables your enemies for a moment, but that moment is enough for you to strike. However, that also has a glaring flaw, and is that if an opponent knows what is coming, they can preemptively dispel the genjutsu before it takes effect."

"You think you're... so fucking clever..." Tayuya groaned, as she struggled to get back on her feet.

"Oh, I know I am," Anko said, with a wide smile. "Now let's-
AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

Anko screamed as she fell on her knees, her hand instinctively going to the source of the pain, the spot where the Cursed Seal of Heaven was placed. It felt as if she was being branded with a searing iron.

"Sensei!" her three students said at once, as they landed besides her.

"Are you okay?" Dosu asked.

"Orochimaru... he's here..." Anko hissed, as pain coursed through her body. "You have to... warn the others!"

...

As Anko fought Tayuya, Itachi, Naruto and Roshi continued fighting Kimimaro and Jugo. If Kimimaro was proving to be extraordinarily resilient before, he was a force to be reckoned with now that he had backup. Naruto, however, decided that it was time for them to get some backup as well. He bit his thumb, before making several hand seals.

"Itachi, Roshi, get close to me!" Naruto called them, before slamming his hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

After a masisve burst of smoke, an equally massive toad appeared before the two Otogakure ninjas, with Naruto, Itachi and Roshi standing at the top of it. The Toad was smoking from a pipe, and had one of his hands resting over the pommel of a short sword -relatively speaking.

"A Boss Summon?" Roshi asked, sounding impressed, as he looked down at the creature he was standing onto. "You're one interesting kid. I have the feeling this battle will make quite an addition to my journals."

"While I admire your optimism, Roshi-san, this battle is far from over," Itachi told the older man.

"Hey, Naruto," Gamabunta said, as he eyed Kimimaro and Jugo below. "Please tell me you didn't summon me to deal with those little things."

"Don't judge them by their size, boss," Naruto replied. "They've been giving us quite some trouble."

"Hmm... if you say so," Gamabunta finally conceded, as he unsheathed his short sword. "Very well then! I'll take care of them for you! But I'm expecting some compensation after this, you hear me?"

"Don't worry boss, I won't forget it," Naruto replied.

"Let's take advantage of your summon to attack them. They'll be wide open once they try to dodge it," Itachi suggested. The other two nodded.

Gamabunta brought down his short, yet also massive sword at Kimimaro at Jugo. And while the orange haired teen jumped away, Kimimaro didn't move, much to everybody's surprise. The impact created a large fissure in the ground, the resulting shockwave blowing a powerful gust of wind and dust in every direction.

"Ha! Overconfident idiot..." Gamabunta said, shaking his head, as he pulled the sword back. Only that, much to his shock, he was unable to. "What the...?"

When the dust dispelled, the giant toad could see that there was a giant claw made of bones kept the sword pinned to the ground. The Toad Boss tried to pull it, to no avail.

"What the hell!?"

"Watch out!" Itachi called.

Naruto and Roshi saw how a black blur clashed against a mostly white one multiple times in a row, each time a metallic CLANG echoing through the area. Eventually, the two figures landed on a tree branch below Gamabunta.

"You're fast, Uchiha, those eyes are hard to fool," Kimimaro praised. "But reading my movements alone won't do you any good. So far, you didn't make a single attempt to attack me."

"Maybe. But what matters in a fight is not how many times you attack, but how many blows do you need in order to take down the opponent," Itachi countered, as he gripped his katana tighter.

"In my case, you'll need plenty of them. My bones can't be broken," Kimimaro boasted, as bone spikes grew all around his body.

"Actually, I only need one hit," Itachi replied. "And before you answer, yes, the hit has already landed. You just don't know it yet."

Suddenly, the world around them started to melt, and was replaced by a red and black hellish landscape. Itachi and Kimimaro lost all color, becoming shadowy beings. Kimimaro looked around in confusion, before realizing what was going on.

"Ah, yes, the Uchiha and their famed genjutsu," Kimimaro replied. "You think I have no means to counter this? Orochimaru-sama has the same eyes you have, and has trained me to withstand their illusionary powers just in case I ran into one of you. Breaking this genjutsu will be easy."

Kimimaro made a hand seal, and send a burst of chakra through his body. But nothing changed.

"What? Release!" he repeated the process, but the result was the same. "What kind of Genjutsu is this?"

"As you're about to learn, Orochimaru doesn't have the same eyes as mine," Itachi corrected, as he started to walk towards him. Barbed wire apperared out of nowhere, and wrapped itself around Kimimaro. The last of the Kaguya was lifted into the air, with two additional wires pulling his arms in opposite directions, leaving him in a crucified pose. "The name of the jutsu is Tsukuyomi," Itachi said, as multiple Itachi clones appeared around him. "Let's see if your mind is as strong as your bones in order to survive seventy two hours of uninterrupted torture."

The seventy two hours in Kimimaro's mind were merely three seconds in the real world. After such intense torture, the last Kaguya Clan member fell to the ground, his mind completely turned into shreds.

Itachi, however, fell to one knee, as he felt how the jutsu had drained his chakra.

"I was hoping that I wouldn't have to use this jutsu so soon," Itachi groaned, heaving a little. "Okay, now that that's out of the way, let's dispose of this guy as well..."

However, before Itachi could do anything, a gigantic snake appeared out of nowhere. The Uchiha's reflexes were good enough to dodge it in time. He was about to prepare a fire jutsu, when his Sharingan caught sight of another snake.

However, this snake didn't attack him. Instead, it slithered towards the unconscious Kimimaro, and swallowed his body whole before leaving.

"These snakes... Orochimaru must be here..." Itachi concluded.

...

Meanwhile, Team Tenzo was still fighting against the Senju Clones. Though a better way to phrase it would be that Hebiko was trying to shield the injured Hebimaru from the relentless attacks from the three Konoha Chunin.

"Water Release: Water Wave!"

Once again, the water of the lake around them rose in the form of a massive wave. Hebimaru took a step forward, as he made several hand seals. His body glowed with a white aura.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

The male ninja exhaled a massive gust of wind, powered by nature energy, that managed to stop the incoming wall of water. However, the effort made his injuries to punish his body even more, and fell to his knees, groaning and clutching his side.

"Brother! I told you to take it easy!" Hebiko chastised him.

"You need me... to deal with these devils..." Hebimaru said with a cough.

"They just got the jump on us. I know I can-"

"Enough," a third voice said, softly but firmly.

Between the two Oto ninja and the Konoha Chunin was another Akatsuki, one with white hair, pale skin, and Tenseigan eyes.

"Toneri..." Hebimaru whispered.

"Orochimaru wants you to help him capture the jinchuriki," Toneri told the adult twins. "I'll take care of these ones."

Wordlessly, Hebiko helped her brother to his feet, and the two of them went to help their master. Toneri then turned around, and locked eyes with Hanabi.

"So, you're Toneri," Hanabi said, placing her hands on her hips. "The creep who wants to marry my sister."

"Sister?" the Otsutsuki replied. "I was going to ask you how you got a Tenseigan, and your relation to Hinata... that might explain part of it. Though there are still some things that I'm not aware of."

"Yeah, and one of them is when somebody tells you 'no'," Hanabi deadpanned, before punching her palm. "So, ready to get your ass kicked?"

"Your overconfidence is charming, kid," Toneri replied, chuckling in a condescending manner. "I know about you three. You might possess powers beyond most humans, but you lack the experience and proper training to handle them. Fighting me means death. I might spare you as not to upset Hinata, and for... other reasons," he then looked at Hagane and Kaida. "But I have no reason to let you live."

The three Chunin quickly slipped into fighting stances, as Toneri raised his hand to cast an attack. However, before he could do anything, multiple brown wooden roots emerged from below and the sides, wrapping themselves around the Akatsuki, immobilizing him.

"I hope you weren't planning to fight this man on your own, were you?" Tenzo's voice said, as he landed besides them. "You might be Chunin, but this enemy is beyond your capabilities."

"Of course not. I knew that you were around. I was stalling for time so you could join us," Hanabi replied.

"While I'm doubtful of the truth of that statement, let's leave that for later," Tenzo said, as he jumped towards the immobilized Toneri. "Now, let's put you to-"

Suddenly, a shockwave exploded from Toneri's body, shattering his wooden bindings -as well as nearby tree branches- into hundreds of splinters, while Tenzo was violently hurled backwards, his body falling with a splash into the water.

"SENSEI!" the three Chunin screamed in unison.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking that just because you caught me off guard before, you can compete with me," Toneri dangerously hissed. "You might have Wood Release, but your execution is so rudimentary, it's barely a threat."

"Let's see how'd you like MY execution then!" Kaida angrily shouted, as she started to make hand seals. "Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Kaida summoned a serpentine dragon made of wood that lunged at the Akatsuki. Toneri merely made a few hand seals.

"Tenseigan Chakra Cloak!"

Toneri's eyes flashed, and the Otsutsuki started to glow with a teal aura. He raised his hand, generating a green glowing orb of chakra. The glow flew towards the Wood Dragon, which exploded upon contact, shattering the dragon to splinters.

"Is the best you-"

The Otsutsuki was interrupted when his Tenseigan caught three more dragons emerging from under him, advancing towards him while leaving enough distance to each other to make sure they couldn't be destroyed all at once. Seeing no way but up, Toneri flew into the air. However, his flight was interrupted when a white blur shot at him like a missile.

"Heavenly Kick of Pain!"

Before he could realize what was going on, Toneri's face was hit by Hagane's foot, the kid managing to put much more power into his kick than his small size would let one guess. As he bounced backwards, Hagane took a sealing scroll, and unsealed a giant Fuma Shuriken. The shuriken started to crackle with electricity.

"Enjoy this!" Hagane said, before tossing the giant electric shuriken. "Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

Toneri saw how a mass of crackling shuriken flew at him, the loud whirring noise they were making piercing his ears. The Otsutsuki, however, wasn't fazed, and made another set of hand seals.

"Truth Seeking Balls!"

With a flash of green light, Toneri summoned a pair of Truth Seeking Balls. The balls merged into a shapeless mass, which quickly took the form of a shield, covering the Otsutsuki. The shuriken all shattered as if they were made of rotten wood the moment they crashed against the improvised barrier.

"He can use Truth Seeking Balls too?" Hagane asked, as he landed on a branch. "This is bad. As far as I can tell, they can nullify ninjutsu and are an unbreakable defense against physical attacks. But just like a diamond can cut another one, maybe the balls can resist their own power? Hanabi!"

"I know!" Hanabi said, having just summoned other two black orbs as well.

"Your mastery of the Tenseigan is encomiable, girl," Toneri praised.
"But you still have a long way to go until you can reach my level."

...

"Kimimaro!" Jugo shouted, seeing what had happened to his friend. He forgot about Naruto and Roshi and went to his aid.

"Sorry, but no, you arent leaving," Naruto said, as he made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

An horde of Naruto clones appeared from thin air, already dashing towards Jugo.

"Get out of my way!" Jugo shouted, his voice becoming deeper, as his other arm also mutated, becoming larger and more monstrous looking.

Even if all Jugo did was swing his arms wildly, his swings carried so much power they destroyed a good chunk of the clones coming at him. Jugo let out screams of rage the more clones he destroyed.

"That young man seems to have turned into a wild animal all of sudden," Roshi observed. "We should proceed with caution."

"Whatever is his power, he has little control over it," Naruto added. "Let's take advantage of that."

"I'll kill you! I'LL KILL YOU ALL!" Jugo bellowed, as he jumped towards the two jinchuriki atop the giant toad. Jugo's cloak was ripped apart as flesh growths emerged from his back, taking multiple shapes, such as claws, wings, and even an additional pair of arms. "NOW DI-"

However, before Jugo could reach his targets, he swatted away by a giant webbed hand. He was so focused on Naruto, he completely forgot that the giant Toad he was standing on wasn't going to just stay there and watch.

"Good one, boss!" Naruto cheered. "We're almost done here, now let's-"

Suddenly, the earth started to shake, and from under Gamabunta's feet, a giant jet black snake emerged, bursting from underground, and wrapping itself around Gamabunta at imperceptible speed.

"ACK!" the Toad croaked, as he tried to break free from the snake's hold.

"Hello there. My name's Kurokiba, and I shall be your executioner," the giant snake hissed. "To think that I'll be the one to put an end to the infamous Gamabunta... Orochimaru-sama is truly a gracious ally."

"Orochimaru!?" Naruto paled upon hearing that name. "Is that him who-"

"The answer should be obvious, Naruto-kun," a soft but chilling voice said. Naruto turned around, and saw the Snake Sannin standing before him. Both him and Roshi quickly slipped into a defensive stance, with Naruto pulling out his Wind Blade. "It has been so long since we last met, isn't it? From your little incursion in the Land of Sound, if I remember correctly. Back then you were a rookie Genin, yet from what I've been told, you raised to Jonin. Times surely flies, doesn't it?"

"Orochimaru of the Sannin..." Roshi mentioned. "This day surely gets more interesting with each passing second."

"Oh, you heard of me? I'm flattered," Orochimaru said, giving the two jinchuriki a chilling grin. His yellow eyes turned red as he activated his Sharingan, while his hands started to fly through hand seals. "This is something you'll find mostly interesting as well. Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Orochimaru opened the fight with the Uchiha's signature jutsu, breathing a massive fireball at the two jinchuriki. Rather than being

intimidated by an attack of such scale of an element strong against his affinity, Naruto merely smirked and made several hand seals as well.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Vortex!"

Naruto cast his arms forward, creating a spiraling vortex of wind, which quickly started to absorb the fireball, storing and compressing the fire inside an invisible orb of wind. Both Orochimaru and Roshi looked at the display in awe.

"A wind jutsu that can counter fire attacks?" Roshi repeated. "Kid, you're indeed sure something."

Naruto smirked at Roshi. "And that's not even the whole thing!"

Waving both arms in a circle before thrusting them forward, Naruto released all the fire he had absorbed in the form of a powerful stream. The Snake Sannin was forced to jump away into the trees below to avoid being incinerated.

"Heh, this is one of the jutsu I developed with Asuma-sensei's help!" Naruto proudly thought, while directing his improvised flamethrower. *"Fire won't be a trouble anymore!"*

"We should go after him," Roshi suggested. "I know Orochimaru is powerful, but I don't think I know the extent of his abilities. I mean, I would remember if he had a Sharingan!"

"Agreed. The less room we leave him to breathe, the better!" Naruto said, before making some clones. "I'll leave some clones here to help the boss."

Both jinchuriki leaped after the Sannin, while Gamabunta continued to struggle against Kurokiba, and the clones prepared to attack the giant snake. They landed on a large tree branch, and saw that Orochimaru was perched onto another one. And just that moment, Itachi landed besides him.

"My my, three versus one, isn't that a bit unfair?" Orochimaru said with a chuckle. As if on cue, Hebimaru and Habiko landed on another branch above Naruto and Roshi. "Now that's much better."

"What are your orders, Orochimaru-sama?" Hebimaru asked.

"Keep the two jinchuriki busy, but try not to harm them much," Orochimaru stated. His glinted with anticipation as they fixed on Itachi. "Itachi Uchiha here is the biggest threat. We'll have to deal with him first if we want our mission to succeed."

"Understood!" the adult twins said in unison as they leaped towards the two jinchuriki, with Hebimaru unsheathing his broadsword.

"Finally, some payback for what you did last time!"

Naruto didn't say anything, just shot the twins a look of pity, before he and Roshi prepared to fight them.

"Naruto!" Itachi called, while his eyes were still fixed on the Sannin. "Sage Mode, now!"

"Uh, are you sure?" the blond stammered.

Itachi turned around, looking at the Oto twins, before sending Naruto a determined stare.

"Yes! Now do it!" Itachi ordered.

Naruto nodded, and made his most common hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two clones popped into existence, and jumped away in different directions. Upon seeing this, Orochimaru merely chuckled.

"You know what to do, kids," the Sannin told them.

Hebimaru and Hebiko nodded, and dashed towards the escaping clones.

"Not so fast!" Hebimaru said, as he sliced the clone from the back, dispelling it instantly.

Hebiko, meanwhile, made several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Rock Bullet!"

Hebiko conjured a large rock in front of her, which shot forward towards the other Naruto clone. Upon impacting, the clone was instantly dispelled.

"You tricked me with that the last time we fought," Hebimaru replied, as he and his sister returned to their original positions. "But rest assured that such thing won't happen twice!" the white haired man hotly stated, as he and Hebiko lunged at Naruto and Roshi.

And while they fought, Orochimaru and Itachi got ready for their own one on one fight. The two of them opened the fight by making the same sequence of hand seals, almost in perfect synchrony.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball jutsu!"

Both Itachi and Orochimaru exhaled a massive fireball each at the other. The two fireballs, equal in power, clashed against the other unable to push the other backwards, resulting in a burst of fire that set the trees around them ablaze.

"Those eyes don't belong you, traitor," Itachi coldy told him. "I must thank fate for this chance to right a wrong that has been haunting me for so long."

"It is fate who favors me, Itachi-kun," Orochimaru said in a jovial tone, as his grin widened. "So far, I've been unable to discover the secrets behind the Mangekyo Sharingan. But if I capture you, or at least take your eyes, that will be one problem less I'll have to worry about."

"The Tsukuyomi I used before took a good portion of my chakra reserves, and Kami knows what kind of modifications Orochimaru grafted into his body. No, I can't win this with brute force, I have to pace myself, wait for an opportunity to strike, and end the fight in a swift blow," Itachi thought, as he pulled a handful of shuriken from his ninja tool pouch, and tossed them forward.

Orochimaru merely pulled out a kunai from under his cloak, and with the aid of his Sharingan, expertly deflected the shuriken thrown at him. However, as he did that, Itachi was charging at him, his right hand firmly holding the handle of his katana. As if he wasn't even surprised, Orochimaru merely blocked the strike, but Itachi's momentum pushed him backwards.

"You'll have to do better than that, Itachi-kun," Orochimaru taunted with a grin.

"I plan to," Itachi said, as his other hand dropped something.

Much to his surprise, Orochimaru saw it was a flash grenade, but he realized of that too late. The grenade exploded, filling the area with a bright white light. Even if he closed his eyes in time, there were another pair of eyes that he was using and took the brunt of the attack.

"AAARGH!" Orochimaru yelled, as he took a hand to his head, while keeping the other one up in a defensive stance.

"According to our reports, you have four snakes attached to your back. One of those snakes has a Byakugan, which I presume you were using, right?" Itachi told him. Orochimaru's grin of smugness had turned into a grimace of pain and anger. "Well, not for much longer."

"Very well! I don't need the Byakugan to defeat you, Uchiha!" Orochimaru said, before a snake emerged from his mouth. Said snake opened its own mouth, vomiting a sword, which Orochimaru took no time to grab. "Do you know what's this?"

"The Sword of Kusanagi, if I must guess," Itachi said, readying his own katana as well. "Don't worry, I'm prepared for that."

"I find that doubtful," Orochimaru said.

Suddenly, several snakes burst from underground, and wrapped around Itachi, pinning his arms against his body, just as Orochimaru lunged at him, stabbing the Sword of Kusanagi into his chest. Itachi then turned into a black mass, before bursting into a murder of crows, which started to fly in circles around Orochimaru.

"Of course, it would never be this easy," Orochimaru mentioned in mild resignation. *"And why didn't the protective seals carved in my skull work? Is his genjutsu level so good he can bypass them?"* The Sannin thought in mild frustration.

While Orochimaru's skull seals offered him some protection against genjutsu, they were mostly designed to keep people like Yamanaka to use mind probing or mind controlling jutsu on him. They couldn't just stop the brain from being fed wrong information. Not to mention that against a genjutsu user of Itachi's caliber, those seals were of little use.

"It's amazing that, despite having the same eyes as yours, you still manage to trap me into one of your genjutsu," Orochimaru said.

"Your eyes are not the same as mine," Itachi answered, his voice coming from every direction at once.

Orochimaru made a hand seal, releasing a burst of chakra through his body, undoing the genjutsu. He watched in satisfaction how the crows started to dissolve into nothingness, but much to his confusion, only half of them disappeared.

"What?"

Among a cacophony of screeching caws, the crows all dived at Orochimaru, more precisely his face, and tried to peck his eyes out.

"I see. He mixed some real crows with illusionary ones. Crafty, really crafty, Uchiha," Orochimaru said, making several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Flash Burst!"

Orochimaru's body crackled with electricity as lightning coursed through his skin, shocking the crows away before disappearing in a puff of smoke. Sensing danger, the Sannin spun on his feet and raised his Sword of Kusanagi in order to parry the blow from a large sword made of golden flames. Said sword was being held by Itachi's Susanoo, which was just a ribcage with a skeletal arm attached to it.

"It seems I'm not the only one with a legendary blade in their possession," Orochimaru commented. "The Sword of Totsuka. Given that you were in Konoha when I unleashed my reanimated Kages... that's how you defeated them, right?"

"Yes. I defeated Tobirama Senju with this blade," Itachi answered. "Now, you will share his fate when I seal you as well."

Itachi's Susanoo grew another arm and a head, before muscles and skin covered its body. It raised its arm, and tried to slam Orochimaru with it. The Sannin, however, easily avoided the blow by jumping it backwards, and the sword only ended up cutting some -admittedly large- tree branches.

"Susanoo already? I'm really flattered," Orochimaru said, grinning mischeviously.

"While I'm not keen on using my Mangekyo Sharingan, I can't afford to hold back against an opponent of your caliber," Itachi declared. "Akatsuki can't be allowed to capture any more Tailed Beasts."

"And you think you can stop us?" Orochimaru taunted, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Lightning Release: Snake Thunder!"

Orochimaru raised his arm at Itachi, which was crackling with electricity. A snake made of lightning shot forward, quickly wrapping itself against the Susanoo, before biting its neck. The whole snake

blew up, as if a lightning bolt fell from the sky onto Itachi. However, when the light and dust disappeared, Itachi and his Susanoo were still there, even if they were now standing on a crater.

"Your defense is impressive, I'll give you that," Orochimaru complimented. "Or did you put me under another genjutsu while I was casting the jutsu? Are you going to attack me from behind while I'm busy striking down an illusion?"

Itachi smiled a little. "That's the beauty of fighting a genjutsu user. Eventually, you start to doubt reality itself. But to answer your question, why don't you attack and find it?"

"I intend to," Orochimaru said.

But rather than Orochimaru, it was one of the giant snakes that he had summoned before who lunged at Itachi. The Uchiha, however, reacted in time and slashed it with the blade of Totsuka, unsummoning it instantly. It was then when Itachi felt something biting his neck.

"Ow! What the...?" Itachi's hand flew to his neck, and grabbed a little snake, who wriggled within his grasp.

"You were so preoccupied with me and my giant snakes, you failed to notice the little ones," Orochimaru cackled. "And while its size is rather puny, I can assure you that the poison that it injected in your system is quite potent."

"When did you...?" Itachi slurred, the poison already taking effect. The world started to look blurry, and Orochimaru's words sounded distorted.

"Right when we first clashed. I'm aware of the power of the Sharingan, but your eyes can be fooled if I can focus them on something else. I wanted to see if I could defeat you myself, but I admit that the power of the Mangekyo Sharingan is too much for

me," Orochimaru replied. He twirled the Kusanagi in his hand. "Now ready to die, Itachi? I can't wait to make your power my own."

Not waiting for the Uchiha's reply, Orochimaru dived into the grass, digging underground. The next instant, a giant snake emerged from under Itachi, catapulting the Uchiha into the air. The giant snake opened its mouth, revealing the Sannin between its jaws, ready to skewer his opponent.

"DIE!"

"Amaterasu!"

Both Orochimaru and his giant snake were engulfed by a mass of black flames, breaking their momentum. Curiously, the giant snake broke into a multitude of smaller snakes, while Orochimaru fell to the ground, screaming. Itachi, however managed to regain his balance, and landed on his feet.

"I need to find Anko. Only she can heal me from this poison," Itachi said to no one in particular, and went to look for the snake mistress, hoping she wouldn't be too busy.

As Itachi left, Orochimaru, as he was being consumed by the black flames, opened his mouth, and regurgitated a new body, shortly before the old one was burned to ashes.

"That was a close one," Orochimaru said, pnating heaveily. Even if he was able to escape the attack, so much damage and pain wasn't easy to brush off, not to mention the huge amount of chakra his Shed Skin Replacement consumed. "But at least I got rid of the Uchiha for some time. With him out of the picture, I can finish the mission."

...

Not far away from there, Gamabunta was still struggling against Kurokiba, the giant snake proving himself to be extraordinarily

strong.

"Stop resisting, toad. Let death claim you, and your suffering will end," Kurokiba hissed.

"I don't know about my suffering, but yours is about to BEGIN!" the giant toad said, as his dewlap swelled. He then shot a stream of oil, not at the snake, but upwards. The oil naturally rained down, splashing both toad and snake.

"Just... what are you doing?" the giant snake asked, as he felt his grip on Gamabunta slipping.

"Oil is awfully slippery, isn't it?" Gamabunta said, as he pushed the snake away from him. "Let's see how can you deal with an enemy you can't wrap around!"

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, the two jinchuriki were fighting against the two white haired Oto ninjas, who were proving to be formidable opponents.

"Wind Release: Breath of God!"

Hebimaru blew a massive tornado at the two jinchuriki. As Naruto and Roshi held onto the nearby trees in order to not be sucked away, Hebiko made several hand seals.

"Wood Release: Ironwood Armor!"

Several vines quickly wrapped around her, piling onto each other until they formed something akin to a chrysalis or a cocoon, which instantly disappeared in a poof of smoke, revealing the Oto kunoichi now wearing an armor made of wood, which only left her eyes visible.

"I'm going in!" Hebiko said.

The white haired woman jumped into the tornado. Vines shot from the armor, and wrapped themselves around nearby trees or rocks in the ground, acting as anchors. When she was near the two targets, several vines shot at them.

"You're mine!" she yelled.

"Fire Release: Fiery Cataclysm!"

Roshi breathed a massive stream of fire, which was quickly amplified by the giant tornado, engulfing Hebiko completely. Roshi then smirked.

"You youngsters think you're so strong, don't you?" Roshi taunted. "But youth and power means little if you keep making such mistakes! Don't you know what happens when wind clashes against fire?"

However, much to his and Naruto's surprise, Hebiko emerged from the flames. Half of her armor was burned, but it quickly rebuilt itself, almost looking as wounds rapidly closing.

"And you old men think you know everything because you lived for long," Hebiko angrily seethed, as she wounded her arm back. A large, curved blade of extremely sharp wood formed from her bracers. "All Cutting Forest Blade!"

Roshi jumped backwards just as Naruto got between the two of them, his Wind Sword activated. The sharpened wood blade clashed against the sword of wind, neither of them being able to cut each other, as they struggled to push the other back.

"Naruto, duck!" Roshi said from behind.

Naruto disengaged Hebiko and did as Roshi told. The white haired woman saw how the redheaded man lunged at her, his fist wounded back and coated in small rocks, forming a compact gauntlet of stone.

"Earth Release: Fist Rock Jutsu!"

Hebiko instinctively reared back, but she wasn't fast enough to avoid the incoming punch. While the wooden faceplate softened the blow, it carried so much power it send her flying backwards, drops of blood falling from her mouth.

"Sister!" Hebimaru cried, as he rushed to assist her.

"Now's my time to strike!" Naruto said, leaping from the tree branch while making several hand seals. "Wind Release: Bounce!"

When Naruto touched the ground, a burst of wind from beneath his feet catapulted him upwards, almost as if he had bounced off, heading towards Hebimaru. The white haired man, however, saw Naruto coming, and with a powerful roundhouse kick, the blond was send crashing against a tree.

"Not so though without your Sage Mode, are you?" Hebimaru said in a taunting manner.

However, much to his surprise, rather than slam against it, Naruto once again bounced against the tree's surface, flying towards the Oto ninja. Hebimaru had no time to protect himself from the incoming attack, and soon he found his face at the wrong end of Naruto's fist. Like his sister before, done by a powerful punch to his lower jaw.

Naruto landed on the grassy ground beneath him -no bouncing this time-, with Roshi soon joining him.

"Nice jutsu you got there," Roshi complimented. "I don't think I've ever seen something like that before."

"Thanks! I spent the last few weeks trying to come up with more creative wind jutsu," Naruto explained. "I had an idea for a jutsu that would allow me to fly. Wind Release: Bounce is based upon that idea."

"You certainly caught that hothead by surprise," Roshi said, pointing at Hebimaru, sprawled on the ground.

"It's not that hard. They may be strong and possess rare Bloodline Limits, but I think their own power blind them," Naruto said, shaking his head.

"Those kids are indeed powerful, but their tactics and teamwork could use a lot of improving," the red haired man commented. "The way they fight remind me of some Genin out of the Academy. Whoever trained them did an overall poor job."

"These kids are actually clones grown in a lab, whose age was accelerated by unknown means," Naruto explained the older man. "They are as powerful as my siblings, maybe even more. But they don't have not even a tenth of their experience."

"Let's finish them off," Roshi said, taking a step forward, but he was stopped by Naruto.

"Wait!" the blond said, as he grabbed Roshi by the shoulder. "Could we... avoid killing them? They're kind of important to me and my family."

Roshi looked at Naruto in the eyes, shooting him a pleading look. While sparing your enemy in the heat of the battle would be considered a foolhardy decision, he could see that Naruto's request wasn't a foolish or selfish one.

"Very well then. Let's knock them out," Roshi suggested. "Then I can use an Earth Release jutsu to immobilize them."

Naruto nodded. "Thank you."

The two of them walked towards the downed white haired twins, trying to get back on their feet as badly as they could. However, before they could get any closer, a massive snake tail slammed down, forcing the two jinchuriki to jump backwards. Orochimaru landed between them and the two Oto ninjas.

"Just when I got rid of Itachi, my children fall before you two," Orochimaru said, sounding disappointed. "Guess luck won't favor me without taking something else in return."

"You got rid of Itachi? What did you do to him?" Naruto asked, between panicked and angry. If Orochimaru had grown strong enough to defeat Itachi, then they were in serious problems.

"You should worry more about what's going to happen to you and your jinchuriki friend, Naruto-kun," Orochimaru said, as his long tongue licked his lips, while his eyes glinted with a red light. A large brown snake slithered its way around Orochimaru, while at the same time acting as a barrier for the twin Oto ninjas.

"If anything, this is proving to be an interesting day. You don't get to fight a Sannin on a regular basis," Roshi commented. "My next journals are going to be quite the read."

"I'm afraid the only thing anybody will write about you in the near future will be your epitaph," Orochimaru hissed, before lunging at them "Now fall to your knees!"

...

"Fire Release: Crimson Snake Fang!"

Anko breathed a large stream of fire, which split into smaller ones as it moved forward. The smaller streams then took the shape of snakes, and wrapped themselves around its target, the last of Tayuya's Doki demons. All the snakes bit the giant creature, while detonating at the same time. When the ash and dust dispelled, the creature was sprawled on the ground, defeated, before it disappeared leaving a poof of smoke behind.

"Is that the best you have?" Anko said in a taunting manner.

"Not in the slightest, you fucking hag!" Tayuya angrily snarled. "Now prepare to-"

Tayuya was interrupted when she saw Itachi Uchiha landing behind Anko. The redhead's eyes grew wide, and color started to vanish from her face.

"Oh shit! No, just no!" Tayuya said, taking several steps backward. "Orochimaru-sama didn't say anything about fighting fucking Itachi Uchiha!"

And the redhead turned around, and leaped into the trees, disappearing behind them.

Anko turned around, and smirked at Itachi. "Hey, good job scaring her away. That's one less problem to be worried about. I take you took care of Orochimaru?"

Itachi shook his head. "Not in the slightest," his hand darted towards a spot in his neck. "He managed to slip a small snake into my body. It bit me. I can't even..."

"Say no more," Anko said, as she started to look for something in the hidden pockets inside her coat, until she pulled out a small vial. "Yeah, I know those snakes. They're called Marble Needles. Real pain in the butt. Here, take a shot of this, and after a few minutes of rest you should be good to keep fighting."

"Thank you," Itachi said, as he did what Anko instructed.

"But be careful, I don't have many more antidotes on me," the purplette warned him.

"Don't worry. Orochimaru won't trick me again," Itachi assured her. "Unfortunately, I left both Naruto and Roshi alone against him. You should go and help them."

Anko's mouth formed a wide grin. "You don't have to tell me twice."

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Toneri continued their fight against Team Tenzo. As the Otsutsuki floated above them, Tenzo's hands flew through hand seals.

"Wood Release: Great Forest Jutsu!"

Brown wooden roots grew from below, lunging at Toneri. The Otsutsuki merely smirked, and made a hand motion. His two Truth Seeking Balls shot at the incoming attack, and the moment they touched the wood, it instantly rotted and turned into ash.

"Nothing. That defense is impenetrable..." Tenzo said in frustration.

"And you just realized of that now?" Toneri mocked. "And the best part, it can be also used as offense."

With another hand motion, the black orbs stretched and expanded, as they took the shape of large nail-like spears, before shooting themselves at Tenzo. Fortunately for the Wood Release user, two other black orbs appeared in front of him, merged, and took the shape of a dome. The spears bounced against the dome, quickly recovering their original form.

"Thank you, Hanabi," Tenzo earnestly said. "That was a close one."

"This man is powerful, but I noticed that his number of jutsu is pretty limited. If all he can do is using telekinetic blasts and Truth Seeking Balls, we might be able to build a tactic around that," Hagane suggested.

"Still, don't underestimatye him, Hagane. A ninja of ancient times once said 'Don't fear the man who practiced ten thousand jutsu once, but the man who practiced a single jutsu ten thousand times'," Tenzo quoted. "His number of abilities might be low, but if he's skilled, that's all what he needs."

"Not to mention that he can nullify all our ninjutsu," Hanabi added.

"Come on, those balls must have a weak point," Hagane insisted.
"No jutsu is perfect! All of them have vulnerabilities!"

"Not this one, I can assure you of it," Toneri said, with a mocking smirk. "Also, do you want to see something new from me? I wasn't going to use this, given that you're just children, but if you insist..."

"Way to go, Hagane," Kaida deadpanned.

Toneri cast his hand at Tenzo and his students, and the two Truth Seeking Balls started to spin in a circle in front of it while they glowed with a golden light.

"Quickly, behind me!" Hanabi said, as she put herself between Toneri and the rest of her teammates, as she molded her own black orbs into another protective dome.

"Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The two golden balls merged into a sphere of pure energy, energy which was released in the form of a golden beam of chakra, carving a path towards Team Tenzo hidden behind the shield. After a second of delay, the area the golden beam touched was engulfed in a massive linear explosion, digging a large trench in the ground. Hanabi undid the shield, and everybody looked around at the destruction caused by such a jutsu.

"Incredible... if it wasn't for Hanabi..." Kaida stuttered, still processing the power the last Otsuttsuki possessed.

"You'd be dead were you stand," Toneri finished the sentence. His eyes then drifted towards her brother. "So, what do you think, young man? Do you still think you can stand against this power?"

However, Hagane's answer was something Toneri didn't expect in the slightest.

"Come on, attack now! All at once! Before he can summon the black orbs again!" Hagane shouted.

"Well observed, Hagane!" Tenzo praised. "Kaida, you and me will cover your brother's flanks! Hanabi, cover us from above!"

"Yes sir!" the three Chunin chorused back.

Toneri was taken aback. Hagane's words made him realize that no, he no longer had Truth Seeking Balls to protect himself with, and found that he was unable to create more, at least for the time being.

" *This kid... how did he...?*" Toneri was unable to gather his thoughts as he saw how the members of Team Tenzo went after him, Hanabi through the air while the others jumping from one tree branch to another, while all of them started to make hand seals. Kaida and Tenzo were the first ones to attack.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Kaida expelled a stream of water at Toneri, while several rocks were conjured out of thin air above him, falling down after coming into existence.

"I don't need Truth Seeking Balls in order to avoid these infantile attacks," Toneri said, as he raised each of his arms against the incoming elemental blasts, and repelling them with a kinetic blast. "Whatever you do, I can counter!"

"Counter this then!" Hagane replied, as he furiously weaved hand seals. "Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

Hagane's body started to glow with a white light, as lightning sparks crackled around it. His teammates and sensei quickly covered their eyes. Unfortunately for Toneri, he found what the jutsu did too late,

when his Tensiegan was overwhelmed by a searing white light, threatening to burn his retinas.

"MY EYES!" Toneri screamed, as he instinctively covered his eyes with his hands, in a vain attempt to nurse the pain. "MY EYES! HOW DARE-"

"Hanabi, now!" Tenzo shouted.

In an instant, Hanabi appeared in front of the now blinded Otsutsuki, her palms covered in fire.

"Fire Release: Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Burning Palms!" Hanabi started to deliver a flurry of palm strikes at Toneri. However, much to her shock, while she got some few good hits, the Otsutsuki managed to stop her by grabbing her wrists.

"I've been blind most of my life," Toneri seethed, his eyes still closed. "You think a little trick like that is enough to beat me?"

Displaying a deceptive amount of force, Toneri hurled Hanabi against the ground. Tenzo quickly moved to catch her, but due the sheer force she was launched, both of them ended up slamming against a tree. As this happened, However, Hagane had leaped towards Toneri, and prepared for the kill.

"*Okay, I managed to gather as much nature energy as I could for this attack. It should be enough to end him,*" the white haired boy thought. "Sage Art: Big Ball Rasengan!"

However, just as the large chakra sphere was about to hit the seemingly unsuspecting Otsutsuki, two new Truth Seeking Balls formed out of nowhere, merged and formed a protective barrier around him.

"NO!" Hagane cried, as his jutsu hit against the improvised shield.

"Look at that, I recovered my Truth Seeking Balls just in time," Toneri said, sporting a confident smirk. "Now, let's put you in your-"

Crack!

"What... what was that?" the Otsutsuki asked, not liking the sound of that.

More cracking sounds were heard, as cracks started to form around the black barrier, much to both Toneri and Hagane's amazement.

"What? No! How could you-" Toneri said in shock and frustration, before the Rasengan exploded and overpowered the barrier, shattering it in a million pieces. Even if Toneri didn't took the brunt of the attack, the resuling shockwave was enough to submit him to the same thing he had done to Hanabi just a few seconds ago, only ten times stronger. In less than a second, Toneri was hurled into the ground with such force into the forest, it blasted several trees away, and created a large crater.

"Wow..." Kaida said in awe. "You... you nailed him!"

"I.. I think I did..." Hagane said, panting.

"HOW!?" his sister inquired. "Truth Seeking Balls are supposed to nullify ninjutsu! All of it!"

"I'm still trying to figure it out," Hagane said, as he started to think. *"Could it be... the nature energy of the attack?"*

"We can worry about that later," Tenzo said, as he hobbled towards them, with a limp Hanabi on his arms. "I know you must be exhausted, but I need you to heal Hanabi. She sustained some serious injuries from that last impact."

"Sure thing," Hagane nodded. Tenzo gently placed Hanabi on the ground, and the white haired kid started to heal his injuries, starting from the most grievous, to the less ones.

Meanwhile, Toneri laid on his back against the crater his body had formed upon impact. His eyes still hurt. His whole body hurt. He was having trouble understanding what was going on. How could he be beaten by mere children? Even if one of them had the same eyes he had, she shouldn't even be able to touch him.

But what puzzled him the most was how the Truth Seeking Balls had failed to protect him. How could that be possible? The Truth Seeking Balls were the ultimate elemental combination. Their Yin-Yang release should nullify any ninjutsu, no matter how big or powerful.

"My Byakugan Princess.." Toneri softly cried, an image of Hinata shooting him a pitiful look appeared before him. "How can I pretend to be worthy of you, if I allow a bunch of children to..."

Suddenly, besides Hinata, an image of Naruto appeared. The blond was looking at him with a mocking expression, almost stifling a laugh.

That vision filled Toneri with rage. How dare that blond hick, mock him on top of stealing what was rightfully his? He would make him pay. Both him, and everybody who submitted him to such humiliation.

Something insider Toneri broke, and the body of the Otsutsuki was overflowed with power. He could feel his head throbbing in pain, but he didn't care. The aura of the Tensiegan Chakra Cloak returned, only this time it shone brighter, almost forming flames around him. His body elevated into the air, the new power coursing through his veins restoring his energy and slightly healing his wounds. Four Truth Seeking Balls appeared around him.

"So much power..." Toneri said in awe, as he looked at his own hands. "Did my emotions awake this power? I knew other stages existed, but experiencing them myself... I don't feel like I'm going to lose."

Naturally, Toneri's comeback wasn't unnoticed by Team Tenzo, who were still covering Hagane as he healed Hanabi.

"The hell? How is that guy back again?" Kaida whined. "I thought you nailed him for good!"

"I thought so as well!" Hagane said, panic seeping through his voice.

"What do we do?" Kaida asked.

Toneri aimed his hand at the group, the four black orbs orbiting around it as they started to glow with a golden light. Everybody paled. They knew what was coming, except this time they didn't have Hanabi to protect them. Without letting Hagane finish, Tenzo scooped the youngest Hyuga between his arms, and ran away.

"Everybody, flee!" Tenzo ordered. "Run in different directions, he won't be able to hit all of us at once!"

Regardless of Tenzo's tactic, Toneri had already decided on his target. The boy who had bypassed his defenses and humiliated him.

"Perish, you accursed child," Toneri hissed, as he moved his hand towards him. "Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Toneri fired another golden beam, this one being thicker, and glowing with a brighter light. As it progressed, the beam carved a thin line towards its target, and after a second delay, it produced a line of massive explosions.

"BROTHER!" Kaida screamed, upon seeing her twin being engulfed by the chains of explosions.

"Now let's see if-ARGH!" Toneri gargled, as the pain coursing through his body increased tenfold, forcing him to land. "Dammit! My body was too injured to withstand the backlash from such a heavy jutsu. Sorry, Orochimaru, but I can't provide you anymore assistance..."

And Toneri quietly flew away from the battle.

...

While Toneri was fighting Team Tenzo, Orochimaru was facing the two jinchuriki, who were now assisted by Anko.

"Multiple Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

A multitude of snakes emerged from under Anko's sleeve, all of them lunged at Orochimaru while hissing furiously. Orochimaru merely smirked, and brandishing the Sword of Kusanagi, beheaded all of them with a series of quick and expert swings.

"Really, Anko-chan? Do you expect to defeat me by using my own tools?" Orochimaru mocked, as he grinned at her.

"I expect to defeat you using every tool I can get my hands on," Anko replied, as she started to make hand seals. "Blondie, support me here with some wind jutsu! Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Naruto nodded, and weaved the signs of one of his most used wind jutsu.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Anko expelled a stream of fire at Orochimaru, which was magnified by Naruto's wind attack, resulting in a massive tornado of flames, dangerously advancing towards Orochimaru, burning to ash everything they touched. Orochimaru, however, wasn't fazed. Two white snakes emerged from the cloak's neck, while Orochimaru made several hand seals.

"For a regular ninja, that combination might be impressive. But for me, not so much," Orochimaru confidently said. "Wind Release: Great Breakthrough! Water Release: Tearing Torrent! Typhoon Water Vortex Jutsu!"

Orochimaru's snakes expelled two streams of water that coiled around each other, while Orochimaru blew a powerful gust of wind from his mouth, creating a massive, raging torrent that clashed against Anko and Naruto's combination attack. The Sannin waited expectantly for his attack to overpower theirs, but such thing didn't happen. His smirk slowly disappeared as the wall of flames devoured the torrent, while continuing its advance towards him.

"What!? How can this be?" the shocked Orochimaru said, as he jumped to the ground. There was no time to ponder what was going on, and no place to hide but down. "Earth Release. Hiding like a Mole Jutsu!"

Orochimaru dug deep underground, and the firestorm safely passed him, leaving a field of scorched earth before. Of course, he wouldn't be safe for too long.

"He's underground!" Naruto said. "Let's dig him out before he can ambush us!"

"Leave that to me, boy!" Roshi replied, as he started to make hand seals, before slamming his hand into the ground. "Earth Release: Opening Earth Rising Excavation!"

The earth started to shake, as multiple earth pillars shot from the ground, one of them launching the surprised Orochimaru into the air. As the Sannin pondered what could have happened, a loud, whirring sound filled the air.

"That sound... no, it can't be!" Orochimaru said in horror. But it was

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Orochimaru's Sharingan saw how Naruto, in Sage Mode, tossed his most powerful jutsu at the Sannin. Even with his modified body, there was no way he could survive the attack. There was only one thing he could do, and he didn't have much time before the attack struck. The Sannin opened his mouth wide, regurgitating a white snake, which

tried to move as far from the Rasenshuriken as possible. Seconds later, the attack struck, exploding into a sphere of razord winds which teared the Sannin's body to shreds.

"He's trying to use his Shed Skin Replacement Jutsu to avoid your attack!" Anko pointed out. "Target that snake before he can generate a new body!"

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

A huge wall of stone rose between the Konoha and Iwa ninjas, and the spot where the snake landed. Hebiko landed on top of the wall, while Hebimaru landed behind Naruto, Anko and Roshi. Once Orochimaru climbed out of the snake's mouth in his new body, he joined his surrogate daughter.

"You entered Sage Mode," Orochimaru observed, after noticing Naruto's golden eyes. "How?"

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" Naruto taunted in return, giving the Sannin a foxy grin. "You often boast how much of a genius you are, why don't you figure it out yourself?"

"I can tell that bothersome Uchiha and his genjutsu had something to do with it," a displeased Orochimaru said.

While Naruto wasn't going to confirm it, the Sannin was right. Turn out Naruto hadn't created two clones, but four. Itachi had used a genjutsu to cloak them from others, making sure to keep Orochimaru's attention on him. The clones went to hide in a safe place, and began storing nature energy. Once they had enough, one of them dispelled.

"I have to admit, it was careless of me not to count that you guys would figure out a way around my Sage Mode," Naruto said, causally placing both arms behind his head. "But you guys should have counted that I'd figure out a way around your way!"

"This changes nothing. You aren't the only one among those present that is able to use Senjutsu," Orochimaru countered.

"I already beat Hagane's clone once, and I can do it again," Naruto replied.

"Yes, but can you do it while you fight against me?" Orochimaru asked, and fast as lightning, lunged at Naruto, followed by Hebiko and Hebimaru.

"We're going to need some high ground!" Naruto said, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Earth Release: Moving Core!"

The blond slammed his hand into the ground, raising a large stone pillar, almost looking like a hill or a small mountain. As this happened, Roshi's mind came with a way to use this to his advantage. His hands quickly went through a chain of seals.

"Lava Release: Volcanic Bloom!"

Lava started to erupt from around the two jinchuriki and Konoha kunoichi, flowing down in every direction, forcing the Sannin and his twin minions to back down.

"Very well, Roshi!" Anko praised, patting him on the back, before turning around. "Meanwhile, I'm going to make sure that other fucker doesn't blindside us."

"Hebiko, we need to neutralize that lava! Attack with me!" Orochimaru ordered, as she and the white haired young woman went through the same chain of seals.

"Water Release: Water Wave!"

Both Orochimaru and Hebiko expelled a stream of water from their mouths at the incoming lava, generating a cloud of steam. They intensified both the pressure and cold temperature of the burst of water, until the lava was starting to solidify.

"Lava Release Chakra Mode!"

The curtain of steam split in two, revealing the jinchuriki of the Four Tails enveloped in an armor made of molten lava, dashing at Orochimaru. The Sannin's Sharingan glinted with a crimson spark, and expertly dodged backwards while pulling the Blade of Kusanagi, and quickly stabbing it into the jinchuriki's shoulder.

"AGH!" Roshi cried, as Orochimaru pushed further, making the old man to fall on his back against the ground.

"You underestimate me, Roshi-san," Orochimaru told his prey.

Roshi, however, grinned. "It's you who overestimate yourself!" Roshi said, before it transformed into Naruto, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The earth started to shake, and from below, Roshi, wearing his lava armor, emerged, dropping embers and chunks of molten rock everywhere. Said chunks of molten rock started to gather around Roshi's reared fist, forming a gauntlet of lava around it. Orochimaru parried it with the Kusanagi, but that was what Roshi was expecting. Grinning, the older man gripped the blade of the sword, while holding Orochimaru's arms with his other hand.

"I got him!" Roshi stated. "Naruto, this is your chance!"

"You can count on me!" Naruto said, as he created several clones. One of them helped the original to create a Rasenshuriken, while the others went to make sure Hebiko didn't interfere.

Victory was close.

"Huh?" Naruto said, his sensorial abilities picking up a massive spike of chakra. "What is this-"

The place was shaken by a chain of explosions. But most distressing, was that he had sensed Hagane's chakra massively

dropping.

"Hagane!? What the-"

Naruto's distraction also extended to his clones. And unfortunately, it was all Hebiko needed. The white haired woman quickly weaved a chain of sings.

"Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Hebiko's cheeks puffed up, expelling another stream of water, this one taking the shape of a masisve dragon. The dragon opened its jaws, swallowing the Naruto clones -which were instantly poofed- Orochimaru and Roshi. And in the latter's case, the water had the unfortunate effect of turning his lava armor into brittle rock.

Seeing his opportunity, Orochimaru grinned, showing his sharp fangs. His neck stretched in an unnatural manner, and the Sannin sunk his fangs into the jinchuriki's neck, piercing the layer of thin rock that covered him.

"What the...?" was all that Roshi said before he lost consciousness, and fell into Orochimaru's arms.

"Roshi, NO!" Naruto yelled, as he dashed to save his fellow jinchuriki.

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Or he would have, if Hebiko didn't create several wooden dragons to keep him at bay.

"Excellent! It would have been better if we could capture Naruto-kun as well, but for the time being we'll settle for just one," Orochimaru said, nodding. "Everybody, we're done here! Fall back!"

As if on cue, Kurokiba emerged from underground, and opened his jaws. Carrying Roshi above his shoulder, Orochimaru jumped inside his mouth, followed by Hebiko.

"Alright, let's leave," Orochimaru said.

"Wait a minute! Where is brother?" Hebiko asked, sounding distressed, as she scanned around the area, until she found him.

Wrapped in snakes, with Anko holding a kunai to his neck.

"Listen, Orochimaru, I know that you don't give a shit about your subordinates," Anko yelled. "But I know that this one is special to you! So how about an exchange? Let the jinchuriki go, and you can have him back."

Hebiko looked at Orochimaru with apprehensively. "Master? What are we going to do?"

But Orochimaru didn't acknowledge Hebiko's question. "Kurokiba, get us out of here."

"WHAT!?" Hebiko asked in shock.

The giant, jet black snake snapped his jaws shut, and dug underground.

"ROSHI! ROSHI! NO!" Naruto yelled, as he futilely rushed towards the escaping snake.

And inside the snake's mouth, before darkness claimed him to never be released again, Roshi had one last thought.

" I'm sorry Naruto... I guess I won't be able to write about this day..."

Author's Note:... yep, Roshi has been captured. I know that this is not what most readers wanted to see, and I'm sorry for that, but he had to be captured for the sake of the plot.

I know maybe I've been giving the bad guys too many victories, but it was either this, or have the jinchuriki be captured offscreen. I originally planned to do the latter as I told you in

chapters past, until a certain somebody asked for Naruto authors to give jinchuriki more presence in their stories. That way, I was able to flesh them out a little more beyond being walking McGuffins, plus I could use their arcs to showcase other characters and give them character development (like how I brought Suigetsu and Miyako in the Uzakata arc, or how I finally gave teams Tenzo and Anko some much needed time to shine this arc).

I don't regret doing this arcs, even if they made the story far longer than I initially thought, for the reasons above, and because I grew to like the jinchuriki a lot while I was writing them, which made me all the sadder that I couldn't save them (I especially liked Roshi). But yeah, I know that despite all of this, the reception hasn't been that good, not just because of what the reviews said, but because said number of reviews have been steadily decreasing.

And on top of that, Hagane was left in a coma. I originally planned for him to die there, but I felt it would make this arc way too dark, so he was just grievously wounded instead. Plus, I liked him and, unlike Roshi, his death wasn't needed to advance the plot, so I decided to save him. Though, on a brighter side, at least this time Naruto doesn't return home empty handed, and have captured one of the clone twins. I don't think I need to tell you this capture will become important later on.

But hey, you can breathe in relief knowing that it's finally over. From now onwards, the chances of the good guys scoring some victories are all the greater (doesn't mean that they will win all the time, mind you).

Thanks to Ookami88 for beta'ing this chapter.

In two weeks, we begin the Root Arc! It's another original arc I've been planning since the beginning of this story, and I'm very excited that the story finally reached that part! In the

**meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really,
really, really happy!**

Recovery

Author's Note: Okay, while the Root Arc DOES come next, this chapter doesn't delve into it already. It was the next chapter when such arc will begin. Sorry for playing with your expectations, and hope you enjoy the chapter nevertheless:

Chapter 76:

Recovery

or

Old and New Arrivals

Akatsuki Lair, Undisclosed Location

Roshi's still living body laid unconscious on the hard stone floor of an underground cave. Eight figures watched him, six of which were mere shadowy projections.

"The jinchuriki of the Four Tails has fallen to Akatsuki," Pain declared. "Good job on your first successful capture."

"You honor me with such kind words, Pain-sama," Toneri replied, bowing a little. "I already assured you that I would be an excellent asset for Akatsuki."

"Yes, you proved to be useful," Konan added, though her tone revealed some unpleasantness. "Come on, we need to seal the beast immediately."

"If I may," Obito interjected. "Before we begin, however, there's something you need to know: Zetsu here has finally located the hideout of the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails."

"Yes. The jinchuriki has been moved to a place called Valley of Clouds and Lightning," the white half of Zetsu stated. "It's a place deep within the Land of Lightning, and its multiple mountains make it hard to traverse."

"Of course, no natural formation is obstacle for our abilities," the black half boasted.

"The jinchuriki has minimal escort, probably in an effort not to draw unwanted attention, so snatching him shouldn't be that hard," the white half helpfully added.

"Very well then. In that case, he needs to be captured immediately," Pain said with a nod. "Deidara, I believe that due your flight capabilities, you're the best suited to traverse such strenuous terrain. Take Kisame with you."

"Understood, sir. That man won't stand a chance against my art, hn!" Deidara shouted.

"While I'm not one who turns down a chance for some action, shouldn't we help you to seal this one first?" Kisame questioned. "With just six doing the sealing it will take quite some time."

Pain shook his head. "Capturing the jinchuriki is the hardest part of our mission, that's why we need to collect them as soon as possible," Pain explained. "Once they're in our grasp, the sealing won't be a problem, since no Village has found out any of our hidden lairs."

"Besides, I'm sure we will be done with the sealing already once you two return with the Eight Tails," Konan added.

"Alright then," Kisame said with a nod, before he and Deidara's projections disappeared.

"Now that that's out of the way, let's begin," Pain declared. "Summoning Jutsu: Demonic Statue of the Outer Path!"

...

Konoha Hospital, a few days later after Roshi's abduction

"So, how is he?" a male voice asked. "Any progress?"

"He's still stable, Hokage-sama," the medic-nin told Jiraiya. "Though even if your son is out of danger for the time being, I can't tell when is he going to wake up."

"Thank you, doctor," Tsunade said.

"I'll leave you alone," the medic-nin said, leaving the unconscious white haired kid with his family.

"Our poor son," Jiraiya said, as he ran a finger through Hagane's bandaged face. "I swear that I will make whoever did this to you pay tenfold."

Hagane's survival was a miracle. From what Tenzo could tell, the boy had been gathering as much as nature energy as he could while he ran away from Toneri using his Bloodline Limit, and jumped away the moment he sensed Toneri was about to fire. However, even if he was able to avoid the initial blast, he was caught by the ensuing chain of explosions. If it wasn't for all that nature energy strengthening his body, Hagane would have died then and there.

Naruto managed to keep the boy alive with his rudimentary knowledge of medical ninjutsu, as well as giving him regular chakra transfusions. The only silver lining was that the Akatsuki ambush had happened in the Land of Fire, not far away from Konoha, and they were able to get back home in just a couple days.

Naturally, Naruto had taken this as good as anybody would expect. Losing yet another jinchuriki to Akatsuki had been a huge blow to his morale, and Hagane's status didn't make it any better. During the first two days, all the blond did was sit besides the kid's bed, completely silent, never answering all those who wanted to talk to

him, either being his parents, Kaida, Shizune, or even Hinata. If he was deliberately ignoring them, or his depression sunk him into some sort of trance, nobody could tell.

It was during the third day that Naruto broke his silence.

"Hagane's like this because of me," Naruto whispered.

Which was a big mistake, given that among those present in the room was Tsunade. She immediately turned around, and shot Naruto a stare full of anger.

"Oh no, you won't!" Tsunade said as she stomped towards the blond. "You aren't going to take the blame for this, you hear me!? Whatever happened to your brother was tragic, but it's not your fault!"

"In fact, I'd say it was thanks to you that brother is still alive," the other person present in the room, Kaida, added.

Tsunade then groaned, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Naruto, we already went through this with the Uta-kata fiasco. Why do you always feel the need to think that anything that goes wrong during a mission is your fault? I'm not saying that you shouldn't feel bad for what happened, but don't think for a second that it's your fault! You weren't even the squad leader!"

"I'm his older brother. I had to protect him," Naruto said.

"No, Naruto, Hagane doesn't need you to watch over him," Tsunade had stated. "Young as he is, he's a Chunin, who got -earned- the rank when you earned yours.."

"But-"

"No buts!" Tsunade interrupted him. She then grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him towards the door.

"Hey, what the hell? Mom!" Naruto protested as he tried to push back.

"You've been here for too long! Do you think Hagane will wake up faster just because you're here? Get some fresh air already! Go visit your girlfriend!" Tsunade said, as she finally pushed him out of the room. "And we're in a goddamned hospital, so cut down the yelling!" Tsunade yelled, before slamming the door shut.

Naruto sighed, lacking the energy to fight her. Not eating anything in two days and not barely moving from a chair won't do anything good to your body. However, another part of him told him that his mother was right.

He remembered when Hinata visited Hagane, and tried to talk to him. But Naruto was so depressed, he barely registered her presence there. Reflecting on that, that wasn't something a good boyfriend should do.

"I better apologize to her," Naruto said, as he started walking. "Maybe I should buy her some cinnamon rolls just in case..."

...

"How are you feeling today?" a male voice asked.

"Better," another male voice replied. "Today I could finally eat without wanting to throw up immediately afterward."

"Just try to take it easy, Itachi," a woman advised. "That poison was a really nasty thing. You're lucky to be alive."

Turns out, Hagane wasn't the only one who had to be hospitalized upon arriving to Konoha. The leader of the operation himself, Itachi Uchiha, also needed urgent medical intervention. While the antidote provided by Anko had proved to work at first, the poison's symptoms started to show the day after the battle's conclusion.

Apparently, the Marble Needle snakes had improved their poison since Anko got that antidote, which now only served to slow down the damage caused to the body. Once again, it was thanks to

Naruto's knowledge on medical ninjutsu that managed to keep the Uchiha alive until an actual medic could heal him.

And even if the poison was now out of his body, the effects would take some time to disappear, meaning that, for the next couple weeks at the very least, Itachi would have to spend his time locked inside a hospital room.

"Don't worry, brother," Sasuke began. "I swear that Orochimaru will pay for doing this. All of the Akatsuki will pay. It's because of them that most of our clan is dead."

"Sasuke-kun..." Shizune softly chided.

"Sasuke, no," Itachi said, shaking his head. "While Akatsuki needs to go down, you can't let feelings of revenge to guide your actions."

"You almost died, Itachi," Sasuke pointed out, a scowl developing on his face. "Aren't you angry? No, wait, let me rephrase that. Had Akatsuki threatened to kill me, wouldn't that make you angry?"

"Indeed it would have," Itachi admitted. "But I would have at least tried to keep my anger in check. Remember, Sasuke, our clan met its downfall because they act upon their feelings and cast reason aside."

"Tch, wahetever," Sasuke scoffed, looking aside. "If you're in the mood for lecturing me, your health must be getting better. I'm going to train. Sooner or later, Akatsuki will come here to get their hands on Naruto and Fu."

And with that, Sasuke left.

"Little brother..." Itachi said after Sasuke had left.

"While not as bad as Naruto-kun, this Akatsuki debacle is taking a toll on Sasuke-kun as well," Shizune said, shaking her head.

"Keeping that anger of his under control is such an exhausting task..."

"I understand you. And I deeply appreciate all what you've been doing for him," Itachi reassured the medic-nin. "Akatsuki is like a wound that never fully healed. Worse, every time Akatsuki wins, it's like rubbing salt into the wound. And I'm afraid of what Sasuke might end up doing if he ends up losing a loved one at their hands."

"Sasuke-kun knows the possibility. We're ninjas, after all. Death always follows us wherever we go," Shizune said in a mildly admonishing tone.

"Sasuke knows that way too well. He was surrounded by death long before he even became a ninja," Itachi reminded Shizune.

There was a moment of silence between the two of them. Shizune walked towards the window, and gazed at the village, or at least the past that could be seen from there.

"Sasuke did bring a good point," Itachi said, changing the topic. "Akatsuki now has, at the very least, six Tailed Beast in their possession. Only three remain. One of them is hidden in the Land of Lightning, while the other two are here. While it's not their modus operandi, Akatsuki already invaded a village before in order to capture a jinchuriki, not to mention how many times Obito and Orochimaru had attacked Konoha. Whatever they plan to do to capture Naruto and Fu... we won't like it."

After a few seconds of staring through the window, Shizune turned around. A determined look appeared on her face.

"Well, they'll like our welcoming party even less!" the black haired woman said. "Akatsuki isn't invincible, we have defeated them in the past. They might have won the last few battles, but the war isn't over."

Itachi couldn't help but chuckle at Shizune's enthusiasm. "Glad to see that you're not intimidated by such prospect," the Uchiha said.

"Of course not! As Jiraiya-sama said, a ninja is one who endures," Shizune stated. "And we Konoha ninjas have endured more than most. Whatever Akatsuki plans, we'll be ready for it, especially now that we know about all its members."

"If our ninjas had half the determination and resolution you have, I'm sure of it," Itachi said, smiling gently at Shizune. "Shizune, take care of Sasuke, since I won't be able to do it for the time being."

Shizune nodded. "You don't even need to ask."

...

Torture and Interrogation Department

Despite the failure to stop Akatsuki and the number of injured, Itachi's squad hadn't returned home empty handed. Anko was able to subdue and capture Hebimaru, and thanks to her snakes' paralytic poison, she was able to bring him to Konoha in order to be interrogated.

Right now, the purplette was watching through a one way mirror how a Yamanaka ninja scanned his mind. A broad shouldered man wearing a dark trenchcoat with his face marred by two huge scars walked towards her.

"Any progress?" the man asked.

Anko shook her head. "Very little for the time being, Ibiki," the Snake Mistress replied. "It seems that his skull was carved with seals that act as barriers against mind scanning or mind manipulation. If we get any cooperation at all, we will have to beat it out of him."

"Understandable," the scarred man said. "Orochimaru had no trouble leaving him behind. If he possessed information that we could use

against that bastard, at the very least he would have tried to kill his underling."

"As much as pains me to talk positively about my former sensei, he's a very methodical man who rarely leaves loose ends," Anko hissed.

"Even then, Orochimaru is still a man, and every man makes mistakes," Ibiki stated. "This might have been one of them."

"Yes, there might be the case," Anko stated. "While this man doesn't appear to take Orochimaru's betrayal as such, I saw the way his twin sister reacted. Even if we can't get any useful information out of him, we might be able to use him to turn the girl against her master."

"That would be nice. We never had any kind of leverage against him. This might be the first truly important minion of Orochimaru we got our hands onto," Ibiki stated. "Speaking of which, how are your brats? I heard they returned from the mission in a pretty bad shape."

"You heard right," Anko said. "However, they weren't as bad as others. They didn't even need to be a whole day in the hospital before being discharged. While they got some pretty bad wounds, there was nothing that would leave any kind of permanent effect. "

Ibiki couldn't repress a smile. "Is that relief I hear in your voice, Anko? It almost look like you care about those brats."

Anko turned at Ibiki, and frowned. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Just because I'm kind of a sadist, doesn't mean I don't care about a lot of people, you know!"

"Kind of?" Ibiki laughed. "And I wasn't talking about that. Those brats used to work for Orochimaru. I thought you hated everybody related to that traitor."

"I thought that too," Anko admitted. "But the more I got to know those kids, the more I realized they really didn't know what they were getting themselves into. Thankfully, seeing Orochimaru abandon one

of his minions made them realize that joining Konoha was the smart thing to do. They were almost like..." Anko left the sentence unfinished.

"Come on, say it," Ibiki prodded.

"They remind me of how I used to be, and how I used to see Orochimaru," Anko finally said. "And I swore I'd never let them end the same way I did."

"Give yourself some credit. I think you turned out pretty well," Ibiki complimented. "Though don't get yourself too attached to those brats. We don't want any softie working here."

"Who the hell are you calling a softie, Ibiki!?" an outraged Anko angrily asked, as she stomped towards the interrogation room Hebimaru was in. "Alright, get that Yamanaka out of there! Once I'm done with that fucker, he'll beg me to kill him!"

...

Hyuga Estate

After buying a bag of the best cinnamon rolls he could find in Konoha, Naruto headed towards his girlfriend's house. He was hoping that Hinata wouldn't be too mad at him, and that the sweet treats would do the trick. Then again, he never remembered Hinata being truly mad at him, ever. Even if they sometimes had arguments just like any other couple, they usually solved them in a civilized manner.

"Even then, bringing this won't hurt," Naruto told to himself, as he finally reached the door.

There were a couple of guards guarding the entrance to the compound as usual. What wasn't usual, however, was that these men belonged to the Main House, given that their exposed foreheads lacked the much hated Caged Bird Seal.

" *Guess this is the result of Hinata's equality policies,*" Naruto thought, as he mentally shrugged.

"Hello there, Naruto-san," one of the Hyuga guards brightly greeted him, confusing Naruto even more. Why a Main House member would be so happy if he was doing a job that used to be part of the Branch House's duties? "Are you here to see Hinata-sama?"

"Yeah," Naruto replied with a nod. "Uh... do you know if she's too angry with me? Last time she talked to me, I was kind of a jerk to her."

"Ah, yes, we heard about that," the other guard said, albeit he didn't sound disapproving. "However, Hinata-sama was aware of the circumstances surrounding your mood back then, and doesn't blame you for your reaction. She decided that giving you space was the best course of action, and that you'd come back to her once the moment was right. And given that you're here now, guess that she made the right choice."

"Hinata-sama is in the outdoor training ground, sparring with Hanabi-sama," the first guard told Naruto.

"Alright, thanks a lot!" Naruto said.

The blond was a bit relieved to hear that. There was the chance that those guards would be playing a prank of him and Hinata was actually beyond furious, but he pushed the idea aside. Naruto has always been welcome among the Hyuga, and they treated him with nothing but politeness and respect.

"Oh look, Naruto-san is here!"

"Welcome, Naruto-san!"

"Came to see Hinata-sama? She will be happy to see you!"

As he walked across the compound, he was warmly greeted by more Hyugas, all of them Main House, if their naked foreheads were of any indication, and all of them in an exceptionally good mood.

"Weird. Just what happened to make these guys so happy?" Naruto inwardly wondered. *"And now that I think about it... I only saw Main House members. What happened to the Branch House?"*

"Hello, Naruto, are you here to see Hinata-sama?" a familiar voice said, one that sounded far more stoic than the average Hyuga. "She will be happy to see you. She has been quite worried about you these past days."

"Oh, hey, Neji!" Naruto happily greeted Hinata's cousin. "Say, can you tell me what's going on? Why is everybody so happy?"

In an incredibly rare display, Neji smiled at Naruto. While the smile was genuine and warm, it was also a bit mischevious.

"Are you saying you can't tell?" the Hyuga prodigy stated, almost chuckling. "Come on, look a bit closer."

It didn't take too long for Naruto to notice what Neji was talking about. He realized that, unlike the other times he saw Neji, the Hyuga wasn't wearing his forehead protector, leaving his forehead bare. However, the Caged Bird Seal was nowhere to be seen.

"Whoa! The seal! It's gone!" Naruto shouted, pointing at Neji's forehead with a shaky finger.

"Indeed it is," Neji confirmed with a nod. "And good riddance. This marks a new era for the Hyuga Clan."

"Wait, all those happy Hyugas I saw on my way here... they were Branch House members?" Naruto asked.

Neji nodded once again. "Former Branch House members," Neji punctualized. "The clan division is no more. All of us are equals

nows, thanks to Hinata-sama."

"Hinata... did this?" Naruto asked, his shock only growing. "How?"

"Why don't you ask her?" Neji replied. "She's sparring with her sister in the backyard training ground."

And indeed, true to Neji's words, Hinata was sparring with Hanabi in the outdoor dojo, under the watch of some Hyuga and a couple of Moon Acolytes. Naturally, Hinata's Tenseigan registered Naruto's presence the moment the blond entered her field of vision.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata happily chirped, before a Gentle Fist to the abdomen nearly made her fall. "OUCH! Hanabi-chan, what are you doing?"

"Hey, just because your boyfriend is here doesn't mean that the spar is over," Hanabi said, showing a cheeky smile. "You can't afford those kind of distractions in a real battle!"

Hinata merely rolled her eyes.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Hanabi replied, before she turned around. "Everybody, move! I bet Hinata-neechan wants some alone time with her boyfriend!"

A pink blush developed on Hinata's cheeks. "Do you have to word it that way? You make it sound as if Naruto-kun and I are going to do it here."

"You aren't?" Hanabi asked, feigning innocence. "Kidding, kidding! We're leaving."

After a couple minutes, the outdoor dojo was completely vacant save for the two members of Kurenai's Assault Squad. They decided to sit in one of the benches surrounding the training area.

"I'm glad to see you, Naruto-kun," Hinata said, as she moved her face closer to Naruto's in order to kiss him, a kiss Naruto happily

welcomed. "And... are those cinnamon rolls I see?"

"Heh, there's no way to keep a surprise for you with those eyes," Naruto chuckled, as he handed the bag with the baked goods to Hinata, who was practically drooling. "Consider them my apology gift."

"Apology?" Hinata asked, before shaking her head. "There's nothing to apologize for, Naruto-kun. Hanabi-chan told me how the mission turned out, and your resulting mood was understandable. Though I admit, I'm glad you feel better now."

"It took mom to literally kick me out of the hospital, but yeah, I'm a bit better now. It helps that Hagane is going to be okay, even if we don't know when is he going to wake up," Naruto told her. "So, how about you? Are you any better? I see you're no longer using a crutch."

Hinata smiled brightly. "Both Haku-kun and I recovered fully shortly before your return to Konoha. The next mission, we will be there for you."

"That's great to hear. Let's hope Kurenai-sensei gives birth soon so the whole squad can be reunited again," Naruto said, smiling back. "By the way, I wanted to ask, what happened to the cursed seals of the Branch House members? Neji told me you found a way to undo them."

Hinata's smile grew even wider. "Yes. It took some time, effort and a lot of trial and error, but I found a way around it."

Before Naruto could ask how, Hinata waved her hand, creating a single Truth Seeking Ball.

"Truth Seeking Balls contain Yin-Yang release, which nullify ninjutsu. That got me thinking if it could nullify fuinjutsu as well. After some testing, I managed to successfully turn an explosive tag into a mere piece of paper without destroying it. Then, I made my first test on Neji-niisan, who volunteered to be the first human test, when he

heard what I was trying to do. It worked perfectly, and after a few days, I managed to remove every single Caged Bird Seal. There's nothing now that makes any Hyuga better or superior to another. The clan is finally unified."

"That's awesome. I knew that one day you'll change your clan for the better," Naruto replied, smiling earnestly.

Hinata smiled and giggled in return, before her expression turned a little more serious.

"Well... I can't help but feel that all of this is possible because of the Tenseigan," Hinata reflected. "I mean, I was able to enforce this new policies thanks to my new power, and removed the Caged Bird Seal with the Truth Seeking Balls that came with it. What if I didn't have any of those?"

Naruto chuckled. "You know, mom always gets mad when I bring up possible fatalist scenarios. Now I understand why," the blond said with a chuckle. "Obviously, you wouldn't have been able to do all of these. But think about this: you were given a great power, and rather than using it to your own benefit, you used it to make the lives of your clansmen better. Not to mention that you also shared part of that power with your little sister."

Hinata rubbed her arm, her cheeks turned a shade of pink at the receiving praise. "Well... that's what I always wanted to do..."

"That's what I mean," Naruto replied. "You should focus on how much you're helping with your power, not how you'd be able to help if you didn't have it."

Hinata nodded. "I guess you are right."

"Heh, talking with you made me understand a little how the others feel when I get all mokey," Naruto replied.

"Nobody said that you have no right to feel sad when bad things happen, Naruto-kun," Hinata gently reminded.

"But excessively pondering over potential scenarios isn't healthy either," Naruto replied. "Anyway, how have you been doing since I was out?"

Hinata stood up, and did a little spin around her feet.

"As you can see, I'm completely recovered," Hinata said. "And now I'm resuming my training. Hanabi and I are trying to reach the second level of the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak."

Naruto nodded. While he didn't see it personally, Kaida and Hanabi told the others how Toneri had gotten back from the brink with a stronger Tenseigan Cloak, which not only made his jutsu more powerful, but allowed him to summon up to four Truth Seeking Balls. It was natural that Hinata and Hanabi wanted to catch up, not just for their sakes, but for everybody else's.

"I just remembered something," Naruto said. "When Hagane apparently defeated Toneri, he had managed to somehow bypass the Truth Seeking Balls' ability to nullify ninjutsu with his Rasengan."

"Yes, Hanabi told me that already," Hinata replied. "Turns out the Truth Seeking Ball isn't all that infallible as we thought."

"Hagane thought that every jutsu had a weakness, and it seems that he was right," Naruto continued. "And given that both you and your sister can produce Truth Seeking Balls, maybe we could try to figure out what he did? Since we can't ask Hagane, and I don't want a Yamanaka to scan his mind just for that."

"Of course," Hinata said with a nod. "We can start now if you-"

"HELLOOOOOOOOOOO!" a cheerful but extremely loud voice boomed from above. A white, tan and green blur crashed into the

dojo like a meteor, producing a loud thud, and leaving some cracks in the landing zone. "Fu is here! Ready for your flight lessons?"

"Oh..." Hinata said, a little dejected. "I forgot that I already had appointments."

"Hey, don't worry, we can do that any other time," Naruto said. "Hey, Fu."

"Naruto! Good to see you back on your feet!" the bubbly girl said as he rushed to the blond and gave him a bone crushing bear hug. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Ack..." the blond croaked in pain, before Fu released his loving embrace of pain. "Y-Yeah, I was in a kind of a funk, but I'm better now."

"Good to hear it! Though, I'm very sorry for what happened to your brother," Fu said, gently patting Naruto in the shoulder. "But from what I heard, he's going to be okay, right?"

"He's out of danger, yes," Naruto replied. "We're hoping he can fully recover soon."

"Great," Fu said, before turning at Hinata. "Your sister isn't coming?"

"Oh, yes! She must not have seen you," Hinata deduced, before leaving the two jinchuriki alone in the dojo. "I'll go fetch her."

While Hinata went to look for her sister, Naruto continued to engage Fu in a small talk. It's been quite some time since he and the fellow jinchuriki spend some time together.

"So, are you getting used to Konoha?" Naruto asked. "I know it'd took me a while to adapt living in another village."

"I won't deny I do miss Taki," the tall girl said, her mouth curved into a melancholic smile. "But Konoha is pretty cool. Though I'm still getting used how big Konoha is. I could fly from one end of Taki to

another in less than five minutes, while it takes me almost four times as much to do the same with Konoha."

"Hey, we're a great village for a reason, hehe," Naruto said, grinning as he placed his hands behind his head. "Where are you living, by the way?"

"Shino was kind enough to offer me stay in his Clan's compound," Fu said. "It's pretty big and have plenty of room to spare. His clansmen are rather quiet and stoic, but very kind people when you get to know them."

"You and Shino are already living together?" Naruto asked. "Wow, you're surely taking things fast!"

Fu put her hands on her hips as she narrowed her eyes at Naruto. "Hey! It's not that we're sleeping together or anything!" the green haired girl protested. "We simply want to enjoy an opportunity to spend quality time before I return home. Long distance relationships are kind of hard. Not all of us are lucky enough to find love in the same village."

"Hey, don't worry, I was just making an observation," Naruto said, raising his hands in a defensive manner. "Even if you were sleeping together, I wouldn't judge you."

"Though now that you mention it... I wonder if Shino will be ready to take our relationship to the next level," Fu started to wonder, as she rested her chin on her hand.

"We're back!" Hinata announced, as she and Hanabi returned to the dojo.

"Come on, let's begin!" Hanabi impatiently said.

"Sure thing," Fu said. "Anyway, we'll have to catch up later, Naruto. Being a sensei keeps me quite occupied, hehe."

"Again, sorry that I wasn't able to spend more time with you, Naruto-kun," Hinata apologized, bowing slightly.

"Hey, it's okay. There will be more time to hang out, especially now that you're back in shape," Naruto reassured.

The three girls took off into the sky, while Naruto left the dojo by feet.

"By the way, what were you and Naruto-kun talking about?" Hinata asked. "I feel that I interrupted something."

"Oh, there's nothing you should worry about," Fu replied in a nonchalant tone. "Say, Hinata, did you and Naruto have sex already?"

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Akatsuki Lair, Undisclosed Location, a Week Later

Inside yet another underground cave, the Akatsuki were gathered to seal the Four Tails into the Demonic Statue. Without Kisame and Deidara the process had took them the best part of a week, but much to the relief of the two present members and four astral projections, the sealing was reaching its end.

The last few bits of Tailed Beast chakra left Roshi's mouth as they were absorbed into the statue. The chakra field that kept the former jinchuriki suspended in mid air disappeared, and Roshi's body fell to the ground below with a thud. His long life had finally come to a tragic end. Right after that, one of the statue's closed eyes opened, while its mouth snapped shut.

"It is done," Pain declared. "The sealing of the Four Tails is complete."

"Heh, six beasts out of nine. We're doing pretty good if I may give my opinion," the white half of Zetsu said, smiling happily.

"It may be the case, but we shouldn't let our streak of victories drop our guard," Konan said in an almost chiding tone. "Konoha is growing desperate, and it shows. Rather than their usual four man squads, they sent a team of ten people to stop Orochimaru and Toneri. Not to mention that among that group was Itachi Uchiha, two Wood Release users and a Tenseigan wielder. Next time, they might send an even more powerful force."

"Your concern is understandable, Konan, but there won't be a 'next time'," Obito interceded. "Zetsu here told me that Konoha is unaware of the Eight Tails' location, nor that we dispatched a team to retrieve it. Once the Eight Tails is in our possession, all what's left will be the capture of the Seven and Nine Tails, both of them in Konoha."

"Speaking of which," Pain spoke up. "Do we have any news on Kisame and Deidara's progress? I was expecting that they should be here with the Eight Tails by the time we were done sealing the Four Tails."

"Apparently, there has been some logistic problems that delayed their progress," White Zetsu said.

"The two of them were too far apart from each other, and thus they took a few days just to gather," Black Zetsu continued. "The last time we heard of them, they had successfully infiltrated the Land of Lightning. I believe they will capture the Eight Tails' jinchuriki within the next three days at the latest."

"If I may speak," Toneri interceded. "It's to my knowledge that we have half the Nine Tails. Shouldn't we seal it as well?"

"For the time being, let's not," Pain replied with a head shake. "Not only is the Nine Tails an useful asset that helped us catch a jinchuriki, but we should seal it once we have both halves under our control."

"Besides, the Nine Tails should be sealed last," Obito continued. "It's the most powerful of the nine, and it could destabilize the other

beasts within the statue without the other eight first."

"I see," Toneri replied. "In that case, I have nothing else to say."

"Very well then. We can use this time to rest and prepare for what comes next," Pain declared. He made a hand seal, and the statue slowly sank into the ground, until it disappeared completely. "Meeting dismissed."

And with that, the four astral images of the Akatsuki not present vanished, leaving Orochimaru and Toneri alone with the other. Orochimaru cracked his neck, and stretched his limbs.

"If I knew it would take this long, I would have voted against sending Kisame and Deidara to catch another jinchuriki before sealing the one we captured first," Orochimaru complained.

"It's a mostly unpleasant experience, yes," Toneri agreed. He then noticed Orochimaru walking towards Roshi's corpse. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"I'm taking it with me," Orochimaru said, as he sealed the body inside a storage scroll. "Why? Did you want it yourself?"

"Why would I want the corpse of an old man?" Toneri asked in disgust. "Why would YOU want the corpse of an old man?"

"A ninja's corpse contains plenty of secrets, and this one is no exception," Orochimaru said. "This old man was able to use the Lava Release Bloodline Limit. If I study his body, I might be able to replicate it in somebody else."

"Did anybody tell you that you're a grim, creepy man, Orochimaru?" Toneri asked the Sannin.

Orochimaru nonchalantly shrugged, and grinned. "I've been called worse. If there's nothing left to discuss, I'll be taking my leave. See you during our next meeting, Toneri-kun."

Both the Sannin and the Otsutsuki left the underground cave, going their separate ways until Pain would recall them again for new missions.

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It didn't take long for Naruto to return to the hospital. Unfortunately, it wasn't because his little brother had finally woke up from his coma. While stable, Hagane was still unconscious, and the medics still weren't able to tell when he would wake up. However, the reason for his visit to the hospital was one of joy: Kurenai had finally given birth.

She was watching her husband train his students -and Sai, who tagged along more and more often, usually at Ino's request-, when her water broke. It was a good thing Asuma and his team were there, since they were able to bring her to the hospital with utmost celerity, and Ino's medic-nin training came in handy to help Kurenai until the red eyed woman was in the hands of better doctors.

After nearly a whole day of labor, Kurenai had given birth to a healthy baby girl. And after Shikamaru, Ino and Choji had spent quite some time watching over the newest member of the Sarutobi Clan, the Genjutsu Mistress had requested for her students to be present as well.

"Prior marrying you, they're the closest thing I have to a family," the raven haired woman had said.

And now, it was the Assault Squad's turn to see and admire their sensei's daughter.

"Aw, she's really cute," Hinata cooed. "She looks like Kurenai-sensei."

"Eh, all newborns look the same to me," Haku admitted. "Seiichi-kun looked the same when he was born as well."

"What's her name?" Naruto asked.

Both Asuma and Kurenai looked at each other and smiled, remembering how much importance Naruto had placed on a meaningful name.

"We decided to name her Mirai," Kurenai revealed.

"Mirai..." Naruto repeated, as if tasting the name, before grinning and giving his sensei a thumbs up. "Sounds cool! I like it!"

"Good to see that our chosen name passed your test, Naruto," Asuma admitted with a chuckle.

"I know it may be a bit early to ask..." Haku began, sounding somewhat bashful. "But you think you'll be able to return to duty soon? Yugao-san returned to active duty only a couple days after giving birth."

"Of course," Kurenai told Haku. She could see how both Naruto and Hinata beamed as well. "Trust me, apart from finally being able to hold my daughter in my arms, I also couldn't wait to give birth already so I could get back to action. I know you guys have been going through a rough time."

"Heh, that's putting it lightly," Naruto said, sounding a little sour.

"So, does that mean that you won't continue training under me then?" Asuma asked.

"Of course not!" Naruto replied. "We've been doing quite a lot of breakthroughs when it comes to Wind Jutsu. It would be stupid to stop now."

"I also want to do missions with you again, sensei," Hinata told her. "Without you it hasn't been the same."

"Well, we're going to need babysitters to take care of her when both of us are busy so... how about a D-Rank?" Asuma asked. Upon seeing three forwns headed towards his direction, he raised his arms

in defense. "Kidding, kidding! Nobody in their right mind would make you do a D-Rank!"

Kurenai laughed at her husband's attempt at a joke, and the rest of them spent the next hour both talking to each other and watching little Mirai.

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Orochimaru's Hideout, Undisclosed Location

A few days after he and Toneri went their separate ways, Orochimaru had finally arrived at his main hideout. He was really hoping that Kisame and Deidara would take their sweet time with the Eight Tails, since between the battle against Konoha, the sealing of the Four Tails and the subsequent trip, the Snake Sannin felt truly tired.

"Huh. It seems that even with all the improvements I made to this body, I'm still close to my limit," the pale man reflected. "It will be something that I'll need to tackle soon. I can't afford to have a body so unreliable."

Once within the safety of his lair, Orochimaru was greeted by his number one lackey, the bespectacled medic-nin known as Kabuto.

"Welcome back, Orochimaru-sama," the silver haired man said. "I presume your mission was a success?"

"You presume well, Kabuto," Orochimaru confirmed with a nod. "How have been things here while I've been absent? I trust nothing happened."

At this, the medic-nin grew a little uneasy. "For the most part, yes. Though there has been a certain individual who has been a major source of troubles lately."

It didn't take a genius to know who was the bespectacled man talking about.

"Let me guess, Hebiko?" Orochimaru asked.

"Yes. The rather... unfortunate loss of her brother has been a major source of distress to her," Kabuto began. "She has tried many times to gather several of our ninjas and head to Konoha to rescue her brother. In the end, I had to lock her up in a cell."

"I should have foreseen this would happen," the Sannin said, shaking his head. "I knew their attachment to each other would become troublesome for this very reason.."

"I believe the wisest course of action is to talk to her," Kabuto suggested.

Orochimaru nodded. "Indeed. I'll visit her immediately. Hopefully my words will be able to soothe her concerns."

"What if you fail?" Kabuto asked.

"If she becomes a nuisance rather than an asset, I guess we'd have no other option but to terminate her," Orochimaru replied, thought sounding a little saddened at the possibility. "Even if neither she nor her brother are indispensable to me anymore, they were strong minions, and it would be a pity if I had to get rid of them."

Hebiko and Hebimaru helped the Snake Sannin to make plenty of breakthroughs in his investigation on the Wood Release and Senjutsu. However, he had managed to cultivate enough of their cells as not to need them anymore. That's why he had no qualms abandoning Hebimaru the moment the white haired ninja had become a liability. Still, Hebiko could have some uses yet.

It didn't take long for the Sannin to reach the cells. One of them was actively guarded by two of his balaclava-wearing Oto ninjas, Chunin, if their uniform was any indication. The fools wouldn't stand a chance

against Hebiko if the girl decided to break free. Upon seeing their master, the two of them stood to attention.

"Open the cell, then leave," Orochimaru commanded.

"Yes, Orochimaru-sama!" the two of them obediently chorused before carrying out their orders.

Inside the cell, Hebiko was sitting on a bench, both arms and legs crossed, an expression of unamusement plastered on her face. Orochimaru had the impression she knew that he would come to talk to her.

"Ah, my dear," Orochimaru began, trying to sound friendly. "I was told-"

"You abandoned him," Hebiko spat, interrupting the Sannin.

Orochimaru was taken aback. While he could sense the unbridled anger boiling beneath her, her calmness was off putting. He was expecting her to yell, to shout, to throw a tantrum. But this... it showed how much Hebimaru's loss had affected her.

"Yes, I did," Orochimaru admitted, his tone turning colder.

"Why?" was all she asked. "Was the mission more important than his life?"

"Yes, the mission was important," Orochimaru said. Hebiko was going to say something, but Orochimaru silenced her by raising his hand. "But I didn't abandon your brother to die."

"Somehow, I find that hard to believe," Hebiko scoffed.

"It's true. Had it been another enemy, I would have tried to rescue Hebimaru, even if that meant putting the mission at risk," Orochimaru said in a reassuring tone.

"But not with Konoha," the white haired woman concluded.

"With Konoha, abandoning him is something I could have afforded," Orochimaru began. "Your brother will be fine. I know their ninjas, and I know their Kage. Due the fact that the genetic template I used to create you being those of his own children, Jiraiya foolishly thinks of you as his children as well. And that sentimental idiot would never try something that would end in Hebimaru permanently damaged.

"But if you need additional consolation, Akatsuki will attack Konoha soon in order to capture the last two jinchuriki. We can take advantage of that and free your brother when we're at it."

There was a very tense moment of silence while Hebiko absorbed Orochimaru's words and pondered on them. After what appeared to be an eternity, she gave him his answer.

"You promise?" Hebiko asked.

"You know how important you two are to me. I'd never abandon you for real," Orochimaru told the young woman. "Now come on. There's still much work to do."

Author's Note: After the admittedly bleak ending of the previous arcs, it was nice to read something far more lighthearted. Sure, there were still scenes with Orochimaru and the Akatsuki, but this chapter mostly focused on the stuff with Konoha, Naruto and his teammates.

Yeah, after their absence, the entire Assault Squad is back in business! With Hinata and Haku recovering already, and Kurenai finally giving birth. Guess this fic has been missing some Naruhina goodness for quite some time. And as you can see, Hinata hasn't been wasting her time while she was off duty. While I teased it a few chapters back, thanks to her new powers, Hinata was finally able to completely remove the Caged Bird Seal, unifying the Hyuga Clan once for all.

And Fu. Man, I missed writing for her so badly. Even if her scene wasn't that long, I always like when she's present.

Thanks a lot to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Now, for real, the Root Arc does begin next chapter. I promise you guys will like it much better than the past jinchuriki arcs. In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Enemy from Within

Author's Note: Okay, now THIS chapter is the beginning of the Root Arc. I hope you find it both revealing and enjoyable:

Chapter 77:

The Enemy From Within

or

The Root of the Problem

"Please let it be good news," Jiraiya said to no one in an almost pleading tone, as he opened the sealed envelope. Upon reading the document inside, the Sannin's face soured, crumpled the paper into a ball, and tossed it to a nearby papercan.

As with the last three reports he got from his ninjas gathering information on the last remaining jinchuriki, it was negative.

This was an unknown that needed to be solved as soon as possible. As far as Jiraiya knew, the remaining jinchuriki (other than Naruto and Fu) were either Han of the Steam Armor, or Killer B. Jiraiya was completely sure that it was the latter -had Killer B been captured by the Akatsuki, Kumo would have retaliated in some way, not just because he was their last remaining jinchuriki, but mostly because he was the Raikage's brother, and Jiraiya knew how emotional A could be.

However, he couldn't just discard the possibility of Han being the last survivor, at least not until they had the confirmation that Killer B was alive. While he knew it would be impossible to take Killer B out of the Land of Lightning, at the very least he could form an alliance with Kumo in order to protect him -and Naruto and Fu- better. Sadly, he

couldn't just send the Raikage a message asking if Killer B was still alive, and if that was the case, to reveal his current location.

Because Jiraiya knew that, once Akatsuki had seven Tailed Beasts in their power, they'd turn their attention towards the one village that houses the other two. Konoha.

Jiraiya was snapped from his thoughts when somebody knocked the door of his office.

"Yes?" the Sannin asked.

The door opened, and a bird-masked ANBU peered in.

"Hokage-sama, Danzo of the Council of Elders is here," the ANBU announced. "He wants to talk with you about an important matter."

"Fuck, just what I needed, a meeting with Danzo," Jiraiya grumbled under his breath, as he rolled his eyes. "Tell him to come in."

"Yes, Hokage-sama," the ANBU replied.

A few seconds after the ANBU left, the door opened again, revealing the leader of Root.

"Danzo," Jiraiya said. "What do I owe this visit? Please try to be quick. I'm a very busy man."

"You know exactly why I'm here, Hokage-sama," Danzo said, as he took a seat without Jiraiya telling him to do so. "Our recent failures in curbing the Akatsuki threat has put us in a very... delicate situation."

"I'm aware of that," Jiraiya dryly replied. "Any other obvious things that you want to share with me?"

"It would do you plenty of good if you cast away that façade of sarcasm and nonchalance, and employed some sobriety just for once," Danzo chastised, almost as if Jiraiya was a kid -and Jiraiya had the feeling that that was how Danzo saw him-. "Your method of

dealing with the Akatsuki threat has resulted in failure so far. Obviously a new strategy is needed."

"Not a complete failure. We managed to secure the jinchuriki of the Seven Tails," Jiraiya tried to defend.

"And for that, you'll have my appreciation," Danzo replied. "Or you would, if I didn't know you have the foolish idea of letting her go back to Taki once this crisis is over, instead of trying to make her stay in Konoha permanently. From what I could learn, she started a romantic relationship with the heir of one of our most important clans. Even a kid with no experience in politics should know how to use that to convince her to stay."

"Regardless if she chooses to stay or not, it will be a better option than within Akatsuki's grasp," Jiraiya stated, bringing the topic back on course. Danzo, however, had no option but to agree with that.

"Even then, Akatsuki is in control of six and a half Tailed Beasts," Danzo recapped. "A threat of such magnitude requires a response of appropriated scale."

"I'm afraid to ask what are you suggesting," Jiraiya deadpanned.

"Your informants revealed that the leader of the Akatsuki has strong ties to Amegakure. In fact, the whole village appears to be under Akatsuki's control," Danzo began. "The answer should be obvious: we should invade Amegakure and capture the leader of the Akatsuki. With the leader in our power, not only dealing with the rest of the organization will be much easier, but we will be able to obtain all the Tailed Beasts they captured."

Jiraiya let out a sigh, and repressed an urge to groan.

"Danzo, starting a war is no small business," Jiraya said, now being the one to use a scolding tone. "Much less a war with a village that's still officially allied with us, on evidence that it's shaky at best. It

would make our other allies worry that we might also turn on them on a whim."

"Suna and Kiri also lost jinchuriki at the hands of Akatsuki. They should join us in the invasion," Danzo countered. "Plus we aren't attacking Amegakure without reason, so it wouldn't be 'on a whim'."

"This is why you were always passed for the title of Hokage," Jiraiya remarked. "War is your solution to everything."

"It will be a solution this time around. Besides, war is unavoidable at this stage," Danzo rebutted. "We have two of the three remaining jinchuriki. You know that Akatsuki will attack us sooner or later in order to claim them. The wisest course of action would be to attack them first and catch them off guard. You can hide behind Hiruzen's pacifistic nonsense all you want, it won't change reality, not the fact that I am right."

There was a moment of silence as Jiraiya pondered Danzo's words. He wanted so badly to dismiss them, but he had to admit the war hawk had a point. And given the current situation, it wouldn't be hard for him to foster fear of the Akatsuki among the population, and gain support for a war. And thus, Jiraiya did the only thing he knew he could in this situation.

"Thanks for letting me know your concerns, Danzo," Jiraiya replied, now sounding more polite. "I'll meditate on them before reaching a solution."

"No meditation is needed to do such a thing," Danzo said, as he stood up and walked towards the door. "But sure, take all the time you need if that's what it takes to quell your conscience."

Danzo left the office, leaving Jiraiya struggling with his thoughts.

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Training Ground Eight

"Ice Release: Thousand Needles of Death!"

Several ice spikes formed above Hinata and Kurenai, the former taking a step forward, and slipping into a fighting stance.

"Okay, I can deflect them!" Hinata said, as she started to move her palms forward in a pushing manner. "Protection of the Eight Trigrams: Sixty Four Palms!"

The ice spikes showered over the two women, but Hinata's defensive jutsu blocked all of them efficiently. As the ice bolts were shattered, the air started to fill with little ice crystals that sparkled with the sunlight. This gave Kurenai an idea.

"Hinata, prepare to attack after this," the Genjutsu Mistress said as her hands flew through hand seals. "Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

The raven haired woman blew a gust of wind towards her and Hinata's opponents, the male half of the Assault Squad. The wind also pushed the sparkling ice crystals towards the duo, momentarily blinding them.

"Not bad, sensei. You aren't as rusty as you made us believe," Haku commented, as a smirk appeared on his face, as he jumped backwards and made a hand seal. "Take this then! Ice Release: Multiple Piercing Icicle Shots!"

This time, Haku conjured several frozen spears, which flew towards the two women making whistling sounds.

"You're right, Haku, I'm not," Kurenai replied, and returned the smirk as she made a hand seal. "Demonic Illusion: Mirror of Heaven and Earth Change!"

Suddenly, the icicles turned around, flying towards Haku instead. The Ice Ninja tried to move, but found several roots growing around

his legs, pinning him in place. Fortunately, both the roots and the icicles dissolved into nothingness before any damage could befall.

"Are you okay?"

Haku looked around, and saw Naruto grabbing his shoulder.

"Yeah. Thanks for the save," Haku said with a nod. "I guess I underestimated Kurenai-sensei."

"My body might be out of shape, but I had plenty of time to hone my skills in genjutsu," Kurenai said in almost chiding tone. "You still have a long way to go until you can beat me with the very art I taught you. And you've seen only a little of what I learned these past months."

"Let me show you something I learned then!" Naruto boasted, as he made a hand seal, before clapping his hands together. "Wind Release: Riding the Hurricane!"

A tornado started to form around Naruto. Or better said, around Naruto's legs. As the tornado started to grow in both size and intensity, the blond's feet stopped touching the ground, as he elevated into the air. Hinata's eyes were wide open in surprise.

"I finally did it! A jutsu that allows me to fly! Well, more or less," Naruto say. "You can thank your husband for this!"

"He's so sleeping on the couch tonight," Kurenai joked, letting out a chuckle. "Okay, I'll try not to rely on genjutsu so much, this spar is to help me get back into shape after all."

"Understood. I'll hold back so you'll do most of the work, sensei," Hinata offered. Kurenai nodded in return.

The Genjutsu Mistress ran to meet Naruto mid charge, while making several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Multiple Rising Pillars!"

Like the name of the jutsu suggested, rock pillars grew from the ground in front of Kurenai, each one being a little taller than the one before. The raven haired woman jumped from one pillar to another as if they were stepping stones, until she was at the same height as Naruto. She pulled out several shuriken from her ninja tool pouch, and tossed them at Naruto.

The orange clad Jonin, on the other hand, pulled out his Wind Blade, and after activating it, he used it to deflect the incoming steel stars with expert swings. He was about to dash towards Kurenai, but what happened next surprised the blond.

"Huh?"

Naruto saw Kurenai leaping at him, holding Asuma's trench knives on each hand, glowing with a blue aura as chakra coursed through them, and delivered a double swing in opposite directions, forming an X. Naruto barely had time to parry the surprise attack, and pushed Kurenai back onto one of the stone pillars.

"Since when are you able to use those knives?" Naruto asked in shock.

"Genjutsu isn't the nonly thing I've been working on," Kurenai replied. "While I admit that I'm not as good as them as my husband, they aren't that different from normal kunai."

Kurenai was mostly a long range fighter that relied mostly on genjutsu and ninjutsu, and thus strong close combat fighters were a problem id they were able to close the gap. That's why she decided to learn to use a melee weapon as well.

"Very well then, how about this!" Naruto said, as his hands quickly made more hand seals. "Wind Release: Cyclone Shockwave!"

The tornado supporting Naruto expanded and grew until it doubled in size. Rather than at the top, Naruto was floating in the middle.

"Riding the Hurricane is not just for flying, I can combine it with other wind jutsu and use it to attack!" Naruto said, as he waved his hand forward. "Onwards we go!"

"That's an impressive jutsu indeed," Kurenai said, as she jumped off the pillar, landing on the ground. "Though it has a glaring weakness."

"And that would be?" Naruto asked, almost in a taunting manner.

"I'll show you now," Kurenai said, while her hands formed more hand seals. "Earth Release: Hiding Mole Jutsu!"

Kurenai quickly dug underground, leaving a patch of removed dirt as the only evidence that she was even there. Naruto's tornado passed over it without having any effect.

"Dammit!" Naruto cursed, as he dispelled the tornado, landing on the ground, as he started to frantically look around. "Where did she go? Haku, do you see her?"

"No, but stay on guard. She might plan to ambush us from below, so let's focus on the ground beneath our feet," Haku told Naruto, who nodded. "Let's fight back to back."

The male half of the Assault Squad covered their backs with each other, as they prepared for Kurenai's next move. It didn't take long until they noticed the ground vibrating beneath them.

"There she comes!" Naruto warned, as he prepared to attack.

But rather than Kurenai, multiple wooden roots emerged from below, wrapping themselves around Naruto and Haku, until the two ninjas were trapped inside a tree.

"What the...?" Naruto asked, as he tried to futilely struggle against his bindings. "When did she put us under a genjutsu?"

"You've been under one for quite some time," Kurenai said, as she appeared from behind the tree. "And to answer your question, it was

just after you used that giant wind jutsu."

"Then you didn't go underground!" Naruto said in realization.

"No, I didn't," Kurenai said, before making a hand seal. The tree disappeared, releasing Naruto and Haku. "I made you think that so you'd focus your attention elsewhere and wouldn't think that the attack could come from somewhere else."

"Misdirection," Haku said in realization.

"Misdirection is a powerful tool that, if applied correctly, can allow a ninja to defeat a superior opponent," Kurenai explained. "One that genjutsu specialists just like myself work to master above everything else."

"You did an splendid job, Kurenai-sensei," Hinata praised, as she walked towards the others. "Nobody would say that you've been off duty for so long."

"Thank you, Hinata," Kurenai smiled at her,, before she started to huff. "But truth be told, I'm almost out of breath. That little spar left me torn. Then again, my victory is also due Naruto and Haku's poor performance. Seriously boys, how did you let me fool you like that?"

"Guess I'm a bit rusty as well, since I've been recovering from an injury these past weeks," Haku said a little embarrassed, deep down knowing that there was no excuse for failing like that. He could feel Zabuza's disappointing glare weighing on his neck.

"What about you, Naruto?" Kurenai asked the blond. "I don't remember the last time since you've been this distracted."

"I something on your mind, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked her boyfriend.

"You could say that," the blond replied. "I've been thinking in Akatsuki, and all the jinchuriki we failed to save..."

"Naruto-kun..." Hinata said, almost in a worried tone.

"It's not what you think. I'm done playing the blame game," Naruto reassured his girlfriend. "I've been thinking in those fights, and realized of something: the Akatsuki always managed to capture the jinchuriki just after we located them."

"Now that you mention it..." Haku said, as he also recalled the missions involving them. "You're right."

"Do you think that Akatsuki is following us?" Hinata asked.

"That, or there's a spy in Konoha that feeds them information," Naruto concluded.

"No, that can't be right," Kurenai replied, shaking her head. "If there was a spy leaking intel, I'm sure Jiraiya-sama would have already routed him or her out."

"Maybe, but it's the only possibility I can think of," Naruto said.

"Also, what about Gaara? Or Yugito?" Kurenai asked.

"Gaara and Yugito worked for their respective villages, so tracking them would be easy," Haku countered. "It would be a matter to wait until they're far from the village, or trick them into leaving it."

"But Utakata-san and Roshi-san were vagrants," Hinata continued, as she came to same realization as her teammates. "And Akatsuki found them almost immediately after we did. I'm with Naruto-kun, this can't be a coincidence."

"If what you say is true, and there's an Akatsuki spy in Konoha..." Kurenai began, as she looked at Naruto with worried eyes. "Then both you and Fu are in grave danger."

"Fu and I have been in danger since the moment we became jinchuriki," Naruto replied. Realized the way he sounded he added. "Thanks for your concern, Kurenai-sensei, but this is nothing new to us."

"Anyway, enough of this gloom talk," Hinata said, standing up. "If there's an spy, we must trust Jiraiya-sama will be able to find and deal with them. All this training worked up my appetite a little. Say, how about if we go to Icharaku's, the four of us? It's been a while since we did that. Plus I think that will take your mind off of negative thoughts."

Naruto smiled at her girlfriend's suggestion. "I think I can agree on that."

...

Root Main Hideout, somewhere under Konoha

Careful nobody could see him -Danzo was sure Jiraiya had ANBU monitoring his every move, but the old War Hawk knew how to evade them- the leader of root entered his underground base. There, his two most trusted agents and bodyguards, Fuu Yamanaka and Torune Aburame were waiting for him.

"Welcome back, Danzo-sama," Torune greeted his leader. "We hope your meeting with Hokage-sama went well."

"It went better than most other meetings, that's for sure," Danzo replied, as he started to walk, his two minions closely following from behind. "He insists that this crisis can be avoided without declaring war on Ame. However, soon he'll be forced to face the facts. Time runs against him."

"Indeed. We need to take the war to the Akatsuki before they attack," Fuu agreed. "Those who take the initiative are the ones with greater chances to win a battle."

"Now is time to check how the progress on my other pet project is going," the leader of Root said. "Please go and fetch Sai. Tell him I want to speak with him."

"Immediately, Danzo-sama," Torune said, as he and his partner vanished.

About an hour later, Fuu and Torune returned with Sai. The three of them were kneeling in front of Danzo.

"Here is Sai, as you commanded," Torune said.

"Very well, leave us alone," Danzo ordered.

The two older Root agents stood up and left instantly. Some people would have called Danzo negligent for not having more people present, you never know who can be a spy among those who work for you.

Of course, Danzo knew. He knew very well. And the answer to that question was none. He had made sure to break all the ninjas working for him, before rebuilding them in his image. That method guaranteed a one hundred percent rate of loyalty towards both him and Konoha. Danzo could tell his subordinates to die for no reason, and they would do so without even asking why. How many people could boast about that? Not even a Kage could.

That's why Danzo was so sure of his agents' loyalty. Naturally, Danzo wasn't foolish enough as to trust them completely. He hadn't reached such an advanced age by being a trusting person.

"Report," was all what Danzo said.

"As expected, the Hokage suspects that somebody within Konoha is leaking intelligence regarding jinchuriki to the Akatsuki," his agent said. "So far, he has been very secretive about this issue, but has been working to root out the potential spy."

"Of course," Danzo nodded. "Like his sensei, Jiraiya may be an idealistic fool, but one should never make the mistake of underestimating either of them. Continue, Sai."

"As we suspected, he did task Ino Yamanaka with this mission. So far, nobody knows about it. Not even Jiraiya-sama's wife or elder son, or Ino's sensei and teammates," the pale boy continued.

"Does Jiraiya suspect it was us?" Danzo asked. The leader of Root did feel a bit uneasy, worried even, but years of brutal self-imposed mental conditioning didn't allow his stoic façade to falter.

"Fortunately not, Danzo-sama," Sai replied. "He seems to be convinced that the spy is somebody under a genjutsu placed by Obito Uchiha using Shisui Uchiha's stolen eye. Even if the eye was recovered, the genjutsu will continue to work as intended. So far, Ino doesn't seem to question this line of thinking either."

"Those are good news indeed," Danzo said, but once again, if he was happy, he didn't look like it. "What about the Yamanaka? I hope you didn't give that girl a chance to scry your mind."

"She did use some of her mind jutsu on me as part of our training sessions alongside her team," Sai began. "Fortunately, Fuu-san's training prepared me to resist such jutsu, and realize when she was reading my mind."

"And you trust she never did?" Danzo questioned.

"I do. After all, Fuu-san is a more experienced and skilled in the arts of the Yamanaka jutsu than her. If I can resist his jutsu, then so I can hers," Sai replied. "Not that I ever let my guard down with her during any moment."

"As it should be," Danzo replied with a firm nod. "You know, it was a fortunate chance that the Yamanaka heiress showed interest in you, Sai. Being close to her might provide us with more Yamanakas to our organization."

"So I take that you want me to continue my relationship with her?" Sai asked.

"For the time being, yes," Danzo said. "Though I hope that you aren't growing fond of her, Sai."

"I believe I'm not," Sai replied.

Danzo's only visible eye narrowed. "You *believe* ?"

"Ino has been trying to undo the mental training I received at Root," Sai explained. "So far, I've made her believe she's making progress. However, even with my best efforts, it's logical to think that spending so much time with one person might end up influencing you to some extent."

"A logical assumption, yes. For regular people, not Root ninja," Danzo harshly reprimanded. "Emotions are a weakness no good ninja should be prey of. It was thanks to the girl's emotions and dare I say, hormones, that we were able to place an agent following her every step without her being none the wiser. However, we can't allow your mind to be poisoned by such nonsense. If the Yamanaka heiress is giving you this much trouble, I might have to remove you from this mission."

"That wouldn't be advisable, Danzo-sama," Sai countered. Despite the words, Danzo didn't detect any sort of defiance in his voice, but more of a warning.

"And why not?"

"Ino-san has grown accustomed to my company, and might ask why I suddenly disappeared on her without reason," Sai explained. "And if we place another agent to fulfill my role, she might grow suspicious."

Danzo looked at Sai, his façade of impassiveness unwavering, as he processed the pale boy's words. Root agents were trained to think logically and to use foresight, and so far, Sai was showing a marvelous display of both attributes. Danzo couldn't find any fault in his reasoning.

"Yes, I believe you're right. This operation is at a too far advanced stage in order to change the agent carrying your role," Danzo admitted. "However, I think that supplemental training will be in order if we want to counter the influence the girl is having on you."

"Of course, Danzo-sama," Sai obediently agreed.

"You're dismissed," Danzo finally said.

Without saying anymore words, Sai swiftly disappeared from the chamber, as if he was never there, leaving Danzo alone with his thoughts.

So far, the plan was going good. Akatsuki would soon gather the other seven Tailed Beasts in one place, making their capture by Konoha all the easier. Then, it will only be a matter of fueling a sentiment of fear towards Amegakure that would result in a war. Akatsuki would be crushed, and Konoha in possession of all nine Tailed Beasts, as it should have been.

And then, Danzo's dream of Konoha ruling supreme over the Elemental Nations would finally become a reality. Yes, the long years of planning were finally bearing fruit. Soon, everything would come to an end.

...

Valley of Clouds and Lightning, Land of Lightning

Surrounded by steep mountains lied one of the Land of Lightning's most visually impressive hallmarks. Its unforgiving terrain made an almost impossible task to build anything there, either be a military outpost or a village for civilians to live. So naturally, most people who go to the valley are mere trekkers wanting to enjoy a beautiful sight.

Of course, Kumogakure took advantage of such terrain, and decided to build a small underground shelter beneath it. Not too big, with only capacity for ten, maybe fifteen people, which wouldn't make it fit as a

place to go for an evacuated village. However, it was the perfect place to hide somebody.

Such as the jinhcuruki of the Eight Tails.

Or it would be if Akatsuki didn't had such good spies in their payroll (albeit the best one worked for free).

The Valley had changed a lot in the past hour or so, mostly due the battle of titanic proportions that just took place between its sole human inhabitant and a pair of cloaked interlopers. The battle had deviated the course of a nearby river, shattered some of the nearby hills, fill the ground with craters, and oddly enough, gigantic severed tentacles were scattered around.

The two interlopers, Deidara and Kisame, walked towards their downed prey.

"Goddamit... the fucker took so long to go down," Deidara said, panting. "If I knew this guy was a Lightning Release user..."

"This has to be the strongest jinchuriki we ever faced," Kisame stated, who, unlike his annoyed partner, sounded rather pleased. "Too bad. Now every enemy I will fight after this one will feel unsatisfying."

"I can't believe you enjoyed this," Deidara said, as he put some of his clay into one of the mouths in his hand, and started to chew. "We've been this close to die! I still don't know how that last attack brought him down!"

"You can say that to me, fighting is an art, and the stronger the opponent, the better. I mean, seven swords at once? These Kumo guys might have a point when they boast about being the better swordsmen. Though in the end, guess that quality trumps quantity," he replied, shooting the blond a bloodthirsty grin. He then crouched down and placed two fingers on Killer B's neck. "Good. He's still alive. I was afraid that my last attack would have ended him for

good. You can't afford to hold back against an opponent of this caliber. But thankfully, jinchuriki tend to be tougher than average."

"Yeah, whatever, I want to get the hell out of this place," Deidara said, as his mouth released a small bird made of clay, that in a burst of smoke increased his size to a point where it could comfortably carry both Akatsuki and the jinchuriki.

Deidara and Kisame hopped onto the bird, who caught Killer B with its talons, before it flew away.

And as this happened, two Kumo ninja stationed nearby arrived to see the result of the ensuing fight.

"What the... what happened here?" the first ninja asked. "A fight? Is Killer B-sama okay?"

"Hey, what's that?" the second ninja asked, pointing at the retreating flying figure.

Wordlessly, the first ninja pulled a spyglass and took a look. What he saw filled him with horror. "It's the Akatsuki! And they have Killer B-sama!"

"No!" the other one said. "Come on, we have to stop them!"

"We can't," the first one said, shaking his head in resignation. "We have no way to catch an airborne enemy. All we can do is inform Raikage-sama of this."

"Raikage-sama isn't going to take kindly to these news..." the second ninja fearfully said, as he loudly gulped. "Even then, I better try to follow them, so I can find any leads."

"Understood. Good luck. I'm going to report this to Raikage-sama," the first ninja said, as he and his partner took different paths.

And if both Akatsuki and Kumo ninja had stayed a little longer, they would have noticed how one of the many severed tentacles

scattered around the devastated battlefield started to wiggle, as if something alive tried to get out from inside it...

...

Downtown Konoha

Walking through the moderately crowded streets of the village, the four members of the Assault Squad made their way to Icharaku Ramen, per Hinata's suggestion.

"I tend to eat there pretty often, but man, it felt like ages since the last time I was there!" Naruto said with a grin of anticipation, both hands behind his back.

"Things have been pretty hectic during the past weeks," Haku pointed out, then looked at Naruto. "Especially for you."

"Not having you guys with me has been weird, that's for sure," Naruto admitted. "But now that the whole squad is reunited, things will get back on track in no time! Akatsuki won't lay a finger on any more jinchuriki, and we will rescue the Tailed Beasts they had in their power!"

"You're certainly in a good mood, Naruto," Kurenai observed, before smiling at the blond. "Did my return had such an impact to you? If that's the case, I'm really flattered."

"Hey, the three of us are pretty awesome. But none of them would be were we are if it wasn't for you, sensei," Naruto earnestly said. "A ninja might have potential, but it's a good sensei's job to bring it to the surface."

"I think you give me too much credit," Kurenai replied, even blushing a little. She was aware all her students had surpassed her already, yet they still looked up to her and considered her an important part of the team. "You downplay too much the importance of-"

Kurenai stopped mid sentence when something caught her eye. She could have sworn she saw a certain person she hasn't seen in quite some time.

"Kurenai-sensei?" Hinata asked, tilting her head. "Are you alright?"

But the genjutsu mistress didn't reply. Upon seeing that person turning to another street, the raven haired woman immediately rushed after her.

"Wait!" Kurenai cried as she followed this person.

"Kurenai-sensei? Where are you going?" an alarmed Naruto asked.

But Kurenai didn't reply. Entering the same street as the stranger, she frantically looked around, having lost her out of her sight, until she was able to see her again, about to enter to another street. Rushing along, she followed suit, entering a less crowded zone. But much to her shock and disappointment, she was nowhere to be seen.

"I swear it was her..." Kurenai mumbled to herself, before sighing in defeat. "How I wish I had a Byakugan, or were a sensor at the very least..."

"Kurenai-sensei!" Naruto yelled, as he and his teammates ran towards their sensei. "What's going on?"

Shaking her head, Kurenai turned around, and forcing herself to smile. "Don't worry. I thought it was somebody I met some time ago. But I guess that my mind was playing with me. Come on, let's go to Icharaku already."

For the time being, her students didn't pry for anymore questions, but she knew that it wouldn't last. And indeed, once they were at Icharaku's and placed their orders, Naruto's overwhelming curiosity got the best of him, and asked.

"Uh, Kurenai-sensei," the blond began. "Who is this person you thought you saw?"

Everybody could see how Kurenai's expression turned somber, and the blond immediately regretted asking that question. Still, Kurenai wasn't mad at him, not after that little display from before.

"I think I told you about how before I got to be your sensei, I was assigned as the teacher of a girl from a dying clan that was very gifted with genjutsu," Kurenai began.

"Yes. Yakumo Kurama, right?" Hinata asked.

A bit surprised that Hinata remembered that, Kurenai nodded. "And you know what happened to her."

This time, nobody said anything, but they knew that she had died in a fire alongside her parents, putting an end to her clan forever.

"I think I saw her among the crowd," Kurenai said. "And foolish me, I thought she was alive. That she somehow had survived the fire and went to live on a secret life. What a stupid thing to think."

"Don't say that, Kurenai-sensei," Hinata told her. "I sometimes mistake some of my clan members with my father. It's possible that you just saw a girl who happen to look like her."

"Yes, that appears to be the most logical explanation," Kurenai admitted. "But the thing is... this is something that never happened to me before. It's not that I haven't lost people I cared for during my life."

"Eh, there's a first time for everything," Naruto said, shrugging a little. "Don't dwell too much on it."

That moment, Icharaku walked towards them, placing the bowls of ramen in front of the four Jonin.

"Alright, your orders are ready!" the ramen chef said. "Hope you enjoy them!"

"Thanks, old man!" Naruto cheerfully said, as he split his chopsticks and dugged in as if there was no tomorrow.

"Well, when you think about it, people coming back from the dead isn't that impossible," Haku observed. "Take a look at Kakashi-sensei's teammates, Obito and Rin. Both of them were thought to be dead, and the two of them turned out to be alive and well. More or less."

"While nothing would make me happier than to learn that my former apprentice survived, I would hate to see Yakumo turned into another Obito," Kurenai replied, as she slowly eat. "It's kind of a grim thought, but there are some times were death is the better alternative."

Hinata sighed heavily. "And here I thought that bringing you guys here would distract you from such kind of thoughts..."

"Sorry, Hinata," Kurenai said, as she tried to put on a smile. "It's just that... well, seeing that stranger reminded me of Yakumo. But don't worry, from now onwards, any sort of topic that it's remotely gloomy or grim shall be banned!"

"I can agree with that!" Naruto cheerfully said. "Old man, another bowl!"

Kurenai's eyes shot open, staring at Naruto's empty clean bowl, before looking back at her barely started one. She closed her eyes, and shook her head. "Ah, I definitely missed this."

As they eat, their conversation started to shift to more casual and lighthearted topics, just as Hinata had hoped. While Kurenai and Haku were full after just one bowl, Naruto and Hinata ordered several, with Hinata surprisingly eating more than Naruto, who apparently took Hinata's large apetitie as some sort of challenge.

They had such a good time as Icharaku that nobody, not even Hinata, noticed that somebody had been watching them the whole time. It was the person that Kurenai had mistook for her deceased student.

She decided to leave before they could notice her presence.

...

Turns out, the Assault Squad wasn't the only team whose members were eating together after a hard training session. Coincidentally, Kurenai's husband Asuma was also eating with her students, albeit they were having lunch at Yakiniku-Q, their usual -and Choji's favorite- eating spot.

"Today's training has been a good one," Asuma commented. "You're getting visibly stronger with each day. You guys make me proud."

"Aw, you don't have to say that," Ino said in fake modesty. "But I enjoy being praised a lot, so keep the compliments coming!"

Asuma laughed at the blonde's reply. "Well, this compliment may make your day then. Guys, have you ever thought in applying for a promotion to either Jonin or Special Jonin?"

Naturally, such question drew the full attention of his three students, who looked at him with eyes wide open. Even Choji had stopped chewing on his slice of steak when he heard Asuma saying that.

"Do you.." Choji began, before gulping the piece of meat in his mouth without even chewing it whole. "Do you mean it, Asuma-sensei? Do you think we're ready?"

"Of course I do! If it wasn't the case, I wouldn't had say it," the bearded Jonin stated. "Honestly, I think that you've pretty much outgrown the rank of Chunin for some time. It's about time you guys move forward."

"While the prospective of a higher rank is indeed great, I can't help but notice that there's something more to this recommendation," Shikamaru interjected, narrowing his eyes at Asuma as his lips curved into a smirk. "I suppose that the fact that you have a child now had nothing to do with it. And that if we had a higher rank, you would be allowed to spend less time with us and more with your family?"

Asuma was taken aback by Shikamaru's conclusion. No matter how much time he spend with the Nara heir, he would never stop being caught of guard by Shikamaru's keen mind. Fortunately for Asuma, he didn't have to answer as Shikamaru continued talking.

"Not that I blame you for thinking that," Shikamaru added. "I just want to make sure we're ready for it."

"Er... I'd lie if I didn't admit spending more time with Mirai was part of the reasoning," Asuma bashfully replied. "Don't think I want to get rid of you, guys. You're the best students a teacher could have."

"We'd never think something like that," Shikamaru said. "Besides, Temari has been needling me with that topic as well. Since she became Jonin less than a year after becoming Chunin, she also wants me to get the rank as well."

"A lot of people of our age group are either Jonin or Special Jonin," Ino commended, as her hand rested under her chin. "I mean, Kurenai and Gai's teams have no Chunin among them." Suddenly, Ino's face lit with realization. "That's it! You're afraid Kurenai-sensei will make you feel inadequate and want match her team, aren't you?"

"Ino..." Asuma groaned as she shot the blonde an annoyed stare.

"Kidding! Kidding!" Ino laughed, holding her hands up in defense. "I know you don't have such a fragile ego, Asuma-sensei."

"Say, what would we have to do in order to get the promotion to Jonin?" Choji asked, hoping to bring the topic back on track.

"For starters, you'll need to improve your record a little. Jonin usually do nothing but A and S rank missions, so you'd need to do some more missions like that in order to show them that you're ready," Asuma began. "You'll also need a certain degree of expertise on two different elemental ninjutsu. I think we should focus most of our training on that."

"I'm all for it," Ino replied. "Hinata and Tenten are already Special Jonin, and if I let forehead girl to get the rank before I do, then I'd-" Ino began, before she suddenly shut up. Her mouth was agape, and her eyes shot open. It looked as if Ino had just seen a ghost.

"Uh, Ino? Are you okay?" Shikamaru asked, while Choji waved a hand in front of her.

This seemed to snap the blonde out of her stupor. "Uh, yes! Yes! I'm fine!" Ino insisted, sounding oddly nervous and agitated. "Uh, I remembered something! I need to help my mom with some stuff on the flower shop!" Ino pulled out her coin purse and left a couple bills in the table. "This should be enough for my meal. You guys can keep the change. Sorry for leaving so sudden! I will make up for this, I swear!"

And Ino left the restaurant as if it was on fire, leaving her three male teammates rather confused.

"Do you know what happened?" Asuma asked, deeply confused. "I hope it wasn't something I said."

Choji just shrugged, but Shikamaru looked pensive. It was quite obvious that the blonde was hiding something from them.

...

Ino felt really bad for leaving her teammates like that. It was painfully obvious that her excuse to leave was a very transparent lie, but she had no other options. She couldn't tell them, at least not now. Her mission was too important, and secrecy was key.

She walked at a steady pace, but not quite as fast as to make her look she was in a rush. Fortunately, Yakiniku-Q wasn't that far away from her destination: the Hokage Tower. Wasting no time, she climbed the stairs until she reached the last floor, and walked towards the Hokage's secretary.

"Excuse me," Ino began, making herself known. "My name is Ino Yamanaka. I need to see the Hokage right now. I hope he isn't busy."

"You're lucky, Hokage-sama doesn't have a meeting until half an hour," the secretary began, as she pressed a button in the intercom. "Hokage-sama, a kunoichi of the name Ino Yamanaka wants to see you."

"Sure! Tell her to come in!" Jiraiya's voice replied.

"Tell the Hokage that I bring some inspiration for his new book," Ino added.

The middle aged woman raised an eyebrow, as she shot the blonde a dubious look, but decided to comply.

"Uh, Hokage-sama," the secretary continued. "The girl says she brings something that will inspire you for your next book."

There was a moment of tense silence, until Jiraiya's voice could be heard again.

"I want you to cancel all my scheduled appointments for today. I'm going to be very busy," Jiraiya's voice said. His voice had lost all its usual warmth, replaced by steel cold determination.

"But sir-"

"Do as I say!" Jiraiya insisted, silencing the secretary. "And tell Ino to meet me immediately."

"Okay," the woman looked at Ino. "You heard him, girl. Better not make him wait."

Ino nodded, and walked into the Hokage's office. Jiraiya was there as expected, and stood up the moment the Yamanaka heiress made her presence known.

"I already made all the ANBU leave," Jiraiya began. "You know what to do."

Ino nodded, as she and Jiraiya made a hand seal, producing a single Shadow Clone each. Jiraiya had made Ino to learn the Shadow Clone jutsu. It took some time for the blonde, but in the end she managed to expand her chakra pool enough to produce a single clone. It was necessary for their meetings.

As the clones took seats at a side of the desk each, Jiraiya walked to Ino, grabbed her wrist, and made a different hand seal. The next second, they weren't inside the office anymore, but inside the stomach of a giant toad. Jiraiya remembered the first time she had brought Ino there. The poor blonde had emptied her stomach upon realizing where did he took her. However, it was the only place they could talk one hundred percent sure nobody would listen to them.

"So, what is it?" Jiraiya asked, already dreading the answer.

"It is as we feared, Hokage-sama," Ino began. "It is Danzo who has been leaking information to the Akatsuki."

Author's Note: Dun dun duuuun! And now you finally knew why Ino was having all those meetings alone and in secret with the Hokage. She was carrying a mission only her would be able to do. My beta said he was a bit confused as how Ino learn about Root's treachery, and if you share his confusion, rest assured that it will be explained during the next chapters. I don't plan to leave any loose end.

So yeah, if you like Ino, she's going to shine quite a lot during this arc. I know she's far from the most popular character (or even most popular girl) but I think she's a pretty awesome and

underrated character, and I hope I can make people like her more with this story.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, NOW finally the Root Arc begins! Hope you guys are as excited as I am, because I've been planning this arc even before I posted this story. Tell me your thoughts about both the chapter and the upcoming arc in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Enemy Without

Author's Note: And after an episode of building up, here comes the action! Though, don't think everything's going to go smoothly. Danzo isn't going down without a fight.

Enjoy:

Chapter 78:

The Enemy Without

or

Uprooting the bad weeds

Hokage Monument, early in the morning

"Boy, I wasn't expecting so many people here," Naruto said, as he looked the crowd around him.

"Whatever happened, it must be big for Hokage-sama to gather this many people," Haku observed.

Kurenai's Assault Squad started their morning routine as usual, with some training before seeing any mission that could suit them. After half an hour or so, an ANBU had appeared, requesting the three of them to meet with the Hokage at the Hokage Monument. It was an odd choice of place, given that Jiraiya often briefed every team he tasked a mission with in his office.

"No wonder Jiraiya-sama told us to meet him here," Hinata added. "His office is pretty big, but I doubt it could fit this many people."

"There are a lot of known faces," Naruto said, as he scanned the crowd. "There's Shizune-neechan and her team, Team Bushy-Brow

Sensei, Team Kakashi..."

"Team Asuma as well," Hinata continued. "But... oddly enough, Ino-san isn't with them."

"Maybe she's indisposed?" Naruto guessed, sounding unsure.

"Maybe she ate a lot and now is bedridden with indigestion."

"That doesn't sound like Ino-san at all," Hinata replied, shaking her head, before smiling at him in a teasing way. "That sound more like you, Naruto-kun."

"I can also see some ANBU, as well as several Military Police members," Kurenai said, speaking for the first time. "Whatever happened, it must be big if Hokage-sama needs so many people."

"Do you think it has to do with the last jinchuriki?" Naruto asked, sounding rather agitated. "Given our string of failures, I wouldn't put past dad to send an army to secure him."

"It's a possibility, yes," Kurenai conceded, a hand resting under her chin. "Though sending this many people to a single mission has a lot of drawbacks, such as-"

"It seems we're about to find out, sensei," Hinata interrupted the raven haired woman, as she nodded towards Jiraiya, who was walking towards them.

"Wait, isn't that Ino walking behind him?" Naruto asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Seems to be the case," Kurenai said, looking as puzzled as her students. "Anyway, now let's be quiet. I'm sure Hokage-sama will explain what's going on."

All the ninjas present there immediately stopped chattering with each other and stood to attention once the supreme commander of Konoha got closer to them. He scanned the crowd, and smiled while

nodding, confirming that all the people and teams he had summoned were indeed there.

"Greeting. I know what you're thinking. Yes, this is highly unorthodox, even for my standards," the Hokage acknowledged. "However, time is of essence, and I couldn't afford to debrief every team and ninja present here one by one. The reason as for why I gathered you here is because we're going to carry out an operation against an enemy of Konoha which has been hiding within the village itself. Said enemy is the Black Ops organization known as Root, headed by Danzo. I'm sure that name rings a lot of bells."

Naturally, this revelation caused a lot of people to murmur among themselves worriedly, with some even asking what was going on. It was known that Jiraiya and Danzo didn't get along, but this was going too far.

"What did Danzo do to merit this?" an ANBU asked.

"Rest assured that everything has an explanation," Jiraiya continued, hoping to soothe their concerns. "I had the feeling that there were spies within the village that leaked our intelligence to our enemies. More specifically, regarding those related to our operations of search and rescue of jinchuriki. Now I know that it was Danzo's group the one behind these leaks. What they expected to gain by helping our enemies, I don't know."

"Do you have any evidence on this?" another ninja asked.

Ino then took a step forward. "I've been tasking Ino Yamanaka here with a counterespionage mission. Sadly, it took us quite some time, but we finally have the proof needed."

Without being told, Ino started to speak. "I've been following one of Danzo's agents, whose name is Sai. Thanks to my clan's psychic jutsu, I was able to collect information that incriminates Danzo and Root. Said information has already been shown to the people in the T & I department, as well as the Council of Elders."

"I knew that guy was trouble the moment I laid my eyes upon him," Sasuke said within the crowd.

"Well, it's a relief to see that Ino wasn't being manipulated by that asshole," Sakura added, and had to raise an eyebrow when she realized of the implications. "Actually... it was the other way around. Huh, didn't know Ino had it in her."

"I remember telling you that you should give Ino a little more credit," Sasuke reminded his girlfriend. "She's a kunoichi after all."

Near them, another Uchiha was also talking to his romantic partner. Even if said Uchiha was usually really nice and friendly, today he was shaking with anticipation. Shisui never forgot the confrontation with Danzo eight years ago. It's hard to forget when somebody gouges your eye out. And even harder if said someone gets away scott free.

"If it wasn't for Danzo," Shisui thought. "The Uchiha Insurrecion and all the pointless bloodshed it caused could have been averted. Today, you will pay for your crimes!"

The Uchiha was snapped out of his thoughts when a hand grabbed his. A hand he knew too well.

"Shisui? You okay?" Shizune whispered her husband.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Shisui replied, grinning at his wife. "Let's say that I've been waiting this day for a long time."

"I can imagine," the medic-nin replied. "Though try not to get to carried away, okay? This is an important mission for Konoha as a whole."

"Don't worry, I'll behave," Shisui reassured, as his smile widened. Though Shizune could tell it wasn't entirely genuine.

Jiraiya, meanwhile, continued talking.

"Root has several installations that they use to carry their missions. Of course, none of them is their general HQ," Jiraiya stated. "Danzo believes that the location of his true HQ is unknown to us, but he forgot that I used to be the one in charge of the village's intelligence network, so finding it wasn't that hard for me."

"I'm sure that word of this attack will reach Danzo's ears before we can storm his base, so expect heavy resistance, as well as an escape attempt," Jiraiya said. "That's why we will split into two forces: the Vanguard Unit, and the Hunter Unit. The Vanguard Unit will be the ones to invade his base, and capture, disable or kill every member of Root you come into contact with. The Hunter Unit will spread around, and will capture any Root agent trying to flee. I expect Danzo will sacrifice several of his own agents to create a path to escape. Remember, Danzo is the main objective of this mission. If we can take him down, Root will go down with him."

"That's all. I myself will lead the Vanguard Unit in the raid. Everybody knows your roles. Now let's go!"

Jiraiya jumped off the cliff, using the carved faces as footholds, until he reached the village, and headed towards the main Root HQ, with the ninjas of the Vanguard Unit closely trailing behind him. Meanwhile, the many squads that composed the Hunter Unit moved into their positions.

As this happened, three people were observing the display. These three persons were Koharu Uatane, Homura Mitokado, and Hiruzen Sarutobi. The retired Hokage looked at the rushing ninjas with melancholic eyes.

"To think that it would end like this..." Hiruzen began. "Danzo, just what did you do?"

"Guess it's a good thing we didn't offer the hat to Danzo when he asked for it after the Uchiha Insurrection," Koharu said, shaking her head.

"I believe Danzo had the skills to be a competent Hokage," Homura replied, earning a glare from the other councilor. "Though, his war-like tendencies made him a unsuitable candidate. Not to mention that further militarization of the village isn't what people wanted after the horrors of the Uchiha Insurrection."

"Danzo was also too stubborn. He always believed that his ways to solve problems were the only correct ones," Koharu continued. "But to leak information to the Akatsuki..."

"Danzo and I used to be friends," Hiruzen solemnly said, before straightening himself. "And I used to believe that, despite our differences, he loved this village as much as I do. But sadly... this treason cannot go unanswered."

"I'm sorry, old friend. I deeply lament this had to end like this."

Of all the times Hiruzen was glad that he was rid of the burden of being Hokage, this moment was the one he appreciated it the most. Just like what happened to Orochimaru, he was afraid that he would let Danzo go if he confronted his old friend. Fortunately, Jiraiya didn't have any kind of emotional connection with the War Hawk, and would do what's needed to do.

Shaking his head, he turned around and walked towards the village.

"Let's go," Hiruzen told his former teammates. "There's nothing left to see here. All we can do is wait for the news of Jiraiya's victory to arrive."

...

Root Underground Base, at that same moment

Just like Jiraiya had expected, Danzo got wind of the operation against Root. Its leader wasted no time, and gathered all the available agents he had in Konoha around him. Time was of

essence, and there were many things to do. Though he had hope his men and women could deliver the results he was aiming for.

"My ninjas, what we feared has come to happen," Danzo started. "It seems that Jiraiya has evidence of our dealings with Akatsuki. Naturally, he didn't even bother to contact me and let me explain why I did this and how Konoha can benefit from it. As we speak, a battalion of ninjas loyal to him rush to this very base, ready to either kill or capture every single one of us."

As expected, none of his ninjas said anything. They remained quiet, still bowing to him, merely awaiting orders.

"Fortunately, I already had a contingency measure in case something like this came to happen," Danzo continued. "For the time being, given how outnumbered we are, the best course of action will be to flee the village. In order to do so, several of you will need to stay behind and fight Jiraiya's forces so you can buy the rest of us time to escape."

Again, none of his agents ever protested. If Danzo told them to die, they would die. Since they believed that that was for the best of the village. The thought of questioning such orders wouldn't even cross their minds.

"On top of covering our escape, we need to take several crucial assets for our organization to continue," Danzo finally said, as his single eye rested on a particular group of ninjas. "It's time to carry out Operation: Rising Phoenix."

...

A few minutes later, the Vanguard Unit, lead by Jiraiya, arrived at the entrance of Danzo's main base. It was an old, wrecked textile factory that had been severely damaged by the Nine Tails when it first attacked Konoha sixteen years ago. Since then, a new textile factory was opened, and this one was left unused. That's it, until Danzo decided it would make a great hideout.

"Is this the place?" Jiraiya asked the kunoichi besides him, who happened to be Hinata.

Hinata's Tenseigan flared for a second, and nodded. "Yes. There are several tunnels that lead to a large underground base. There are several ninjas placed inside the factory, as well as many others in the base."

"As expected, they know we're coming," Jiraiya confirmed with a nod. "What else? Do you see where Danzo is?"

Hinata's eyes scanned the underground base, until she finally found the man in question.

"Found him," Hinata said. "He's in the deepest part of the base. He seems to be issuing orders to his ninjas. Some of them are gathering around him while others are coming up. I believe he's planning to send half his forces to stop us while he escapes with the other half."

"Just as I expected," Jiraiya said, smirking a little. "Even if Danzo escapes our grasp -and I think it's a possibility- the Hunter Unit is going to give him a really nasty surprise. Now, if he plans to ambush us, it would be best to send somebody who's utterly and completely expendable. Naruto!"

"HEY!" the blond protested. "Who are you calling expendable?"

Jiraiya sweatdropped. "... I was talking about your clones."

Naruto's anger dissipated, replaced by a feeling of embarrassment. "Oh... yeah, that makes sense. Though you could have worded it differently."

"Naruto-kun, we have no time for this. For each second we stall, is one more second we give Danzo to escape," Haku reminded him.

"Oh, yeah, sorry!" Naruto replied, making his favorite hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

A hundred Naruto clones popped into existence. Without waiting for the original to issue a command, the orange and black clad army poured into the abandoned factory like predators breaking to their prey's lair. And just like they had expected, the Root ANBU ambushed them. Two Root agents leaped from their hideouts, weaving the same set of hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

The two Root ninjas expelled a stream of water through the hole in their masks, quickly flooding the floor of the factory. As this happened, other two Root ninjas appeared, weaving a different set of hand seals from the first two.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Their hands started to crackle with electricity, before they shot lightning bolts from their fingertips at the ground below. The water conducted the electricity, instantly dispelling most of the Naruto clones.

"Good job guys, you just wasted that carefully prepared trap on a bunch of clones!" one of the surviving clones boasted. "Everybody, come inside!"

"Everybody, watch out!" Hinata warned the ninjas breaking into the factory. "More Root agents remain hidden in the shadows! Expect another ambush!"

Just as Hinata had said, more masked Root ANBU jumped out of their hiding spots, and tossed kunai with paper tags attached to them. It didn't take a genius to realize what they were.

"Explosive tags! Take cover!" Asuma warned.

"Those aren't explosive tags!" Hinata shouted.

And indeed, upon closer inspection, they could see they had both a different color (dark blue rather than the usual faint yellow) and sealing patterns. The mysterious paper tags started to glow with a pink light, and suddenly an array of seals quickly started to spread all around the ground. Once the array was complete, they started to glow with a blue light, and the effect was immediate.

"Aw, what the hell?" Ino protested, as she was frozen in place. "I can't move!"

"Me neither!" Sakura replied.

"These seals seems to form an energy field that paralyzes whoever gets close," Sasuke deduced. "If we destroy the paper tags, it will be undone!"

"And you think we're going to let you?" a voice said from above, as more Root ninjas emerged from their hiding spot. All of them were carrying large sealing scrolls. "DIE!"

The ninjas above them unfurled the scrolls, whose contents were quickly unsealed, and the paralyzed ninjas found themselves about to be showered by a rain of multiple swords, kunai, shuriken, and other weapons and very sharp objects.

"Hinata-hime, your turn!" Naruto said.

Hinata, who had remained behind, floated into the factory, before flying upwards, completely immune to the effect of the paralyzing seals.

"Since I'm not touching the ground, I'm safe from that trap," Hinata thought, as she made several hand seals. "Tenseigan Chakra Cloak!" Hinata started to glow with a lavender aura. "Truth Seeking Balls!" The Hyuga Clan head created two dark orbs out of thin air. "Silver Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The two Truth Seeking Balls merged into a single energy orb, which exploded into a silvery tornado that began moving upwards, blowing the rain of weapons away, until it destroyed the roof of the factory. The tornado not only pushed the storm of steel away, but several of the Root ninja were caught inside it as well.

Most people present watched in awe at the sheer destructive display of the Hyuga Clan head.

"Well done, Hinata!" Jiraiya praised, snapping the others out of their astonishment, before using a fire jutsu on a section of the ground. The section now revealed a tunnel that led underground.

"Hinata-hime and I will take care of this and secure the building!" Naruto volunteered, as he proceeded to produce more clones. "The rest of us, go downwards!"

"Very well then, son!" the Hokage agreed, before turning to the rest of his troops. "Everybody, go inside! Beware of any traps!"

The entrance tunnel to the underground base was very narrow and only allowed them to move in rows of one. Even if the tunnel itself was devoid of traps, such bottleneck was perfect for an ambush at the other end.

"Hokage-sama, there are a multitude of ninjas waiting for us to come out at the other side of the tunnel," one of the Hyuga ANBU accompanying them warned.

"As I imagined," Jiraiya said, as he bit his thumb. "Don't worry, whatever they're planning, I'm sure they're not accounting for what comes next."

...

At the other side of the tunnel, a large group of Root ninja waited patiently for their enemies to appear. The sensors had already warned them of their presence, and now they could hear them

talking, even if they couldn't discern their words. Several agents were surrounding the tunnels' exit, ready to strike at whatever came out of that gate. And it seemed it would be Jiraiya, the Hokage. Danzo had told them that he would lead the attack, and to make him a priority target.

Yes, getting rid of that weak Hokage would be a huge service to Konoha.

However, those who underestimate Jiraiya would pay for it dearly, and the Toad Sage was about to show why he was a living legend.

"SUMMONING JUTSU!"

There was a burst of smoke, followed by a large, six meter tall toad, breaking through the tunnel, tearing it apart completely. The toad was blue skinned with a yellow belly, holding a kanabo in one hand and a rectangular metal shield in the other. While the Root agents didn't expect something like that to happen, they didn't hesitate and unleashed a barrage of elemental ninjutsu on the toad.

"Yikes!" the toad cried, as he hid behind his metal shield.

"Sorry, Ryoko, but you were the best one to use for this situation!" Jiraiya hastily apologized as he leaped above the toad. *"This place is too small to summon the larger toads, and Ryoko's shield makes him the perfect candidate for a meat wall. Though I better not say that out loud."* Jiraiya thought

Aside from that, Ryoko also blew a huge hole in the wall connecting the tunnel, destroying the bottleneck and thus allowing the Konoha ninjas to pour into the base in large groups, while also using the giant toad as a meat shield.

"Goddamit, why is that when I'm summoned, is to be used as an improvised shield?" Ryoko complained. "It's because I carry a shield myself?"

"Again, sorry, Ryoko! I promise I'll make up to you!" Jiraiya told him, as he engaged in combat with a Root ANBU that carried two swords.

"You better!" Ryoko complained, before he noticed what was going on. "Hey, wait a minute, all these guys are Konoha ninja, what gives?"

"Let's say we managed to find that they weren't as loyal to the village as we thought," Jiraiya replied, as he traded blows with the dual wielding ninja.

"Er... this is going to be rather complicated..." the toad grumbled as he looked at the battlefield around him. "You guys are wearing the same clothes and all that..."

"It's okay! Just stay there and cover our ninjas as they enter this place!" Jiraiya told the giant toad.

A few seconds into the fight, circular sealing patterns started to appear all around the ground. While some of them didn't know what they mean -other than a potential trap-, many others, especially those who took part in the Kirigakure Civil War, remembered very well what was going to happen. Still, every ninja, Root or otherwise jumped backwards to give the seals space.

"You have to be kidding me..." Sasuke groaned.

The seals started to glow, until produced a burst of smoke each. And from the smoke, a humanoid mechanical construct emerged.

"Chakra Golems," Jiraiya hissed, narrowing his eyes. "Did Danzo steal the blueprints as well?"

These golems resembled greatly those used by the Blood Mist, except that they were black with red highlights instead of red, and had Konoha's crest on them instead of Kiri's. Jiraiya could also see that they had more sealing patterns written all over their steel plating

than those Naruto and the others brought from Kiri. The fight had become much more difficult.

"What... what are those things?" a Konoha ANBU asked.

The Chakra Golems started to hum as the fuinjutsu patterns across their chassis started to glow with a blue light, signaling that they had been activated. Recognizing the Konoha ninjas not affiliated to Root as enemies, the mechanical creatures stomped towards them.

"They're Chakra Golems. Mechanical constructs animated by Uzumaki fuinjutsu and powered by chakra," Karin quickly explained. Some Konoha ninjas started to form hand seals, but the redhead interrupted them in time. "They can absorb ninjutsu, so only those who are good hand to hand combat should fight them!"

"Too bad we didn't brought Tenten-chan's team," Haku lamented. "Gai-sensei and Lee-san would make short work of these machines."

"Thank goodness I'm here to trash these pieces of scrap," Sakura eagerly said, as she took a step forward while punching the palm of her hand. "Come on!"

The pinkette lunged towards an incoming golem, delivering a brutal chakra-enhanced punch to its chest, blowing a large hole on it. The force of the attack was such that the golem was hurled backwards, before slamming against a wall.

"Were those golems this fragile, or it's me who became stronger?" Sakura wondered aloud, enjoying the situation. "Who cares. The faster I can get rid of them. Guys, cover me while I trash these overgrown toys!"

Sakura dashed towards another Golem. Two Root ninjas, a large man carrying a massive sword, and another, smaller man wielding bladed tonfas. However, the two of them were unable to reach the pinkette, as their weapons clashed against a katana and a shoto.

Sasuke Uchiha was the one holding the blades parrying their weapons.

"If you want to touch her, you'll have to go through me first," Sasuke coolly said, as he spun around his feet, turning himself into a brief bladed whirlwind, pushing the root ninjas aside.

"Thank you, Sasuke-kun!" Sakura said, as she was about to reach the second golem. "Now let's turn you into scrap metal!"

However, before Sakura could reach, one of the seals in the golem's chestplate started to glow. Then, a circular sealing pattern spread from the golem's feet, covering an area of two meters in radius. And the moment Sakura entered the sealed area, she was paralyzed on the spot, much to her shock and confusion.

"What the...?" Sakura asked, as she struggled to break free. "What's going on? Why can't I move? This is like being trapped by Shikamaru's jutsu!"

The golem stomped forward, and raised one of its massive fists in order to crush the pinkette. Sakura let out a scream.

"Sakura!" Sasuke shouted, as he tried to help her, but the large man with the broadsword got in the way.

"You're not going anywhere, Uchiha!" the man shouted, as he brought his sword down, forcing Sasuke to parry.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!" Sasuke hollered, while delivering powerful and swift blows with his katana.

"Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

Just when the golem's fist was going to hit the defenseless Sakura, a wall of ice developed between the two of them. The mechanical warrior hit the frozen barrier, but only succeeded in cracking it a little.

The cracks quickly disappeared as if the ice had a healing factor. As this happened, Karin rushed forward, making a hand seal.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Several chains wrapped around the golem, pulling it back, and thus releasing Sakura from the fuinjutsu paralysis trap. Wasting no time, the pinkette climbed the wall of ice, and used it as a springboard before jumping into the air.

"Heavenly Foot of Pain!"

Sakura landed feet-first into the downed golem, the impact shattering it into tiny pieces of metal. She looked at Haku and Karin, and smiled in gratitude.

"Thank you, guys. A second later and I would have been a goner," Sakura told them.

"It seems that this golems know more tricks than those we fought in Kiri," Haku observed. "Better advance with caution."

"Though we shouldn't spend too much time fighting these mooks," Shisui called, as he traded blows with another tanto-wielding masked ninja. The Root ninja slashed at Shisui, but his weapon phased through him as if he was an illusion, before slowly vanishing. The real Shisui appeared from behind, and plunged his own tanto into the man's back, killing him instantly. "Danzo is probably preparing his escape as we speak."

"I sense more ninjas in the lower levels, but they're still," Karin relayed, as she directed her Mind Eye of Kagura down below. "I think they're planning a series of ambushes when we get down."

"Thus confirming that this is mere a delay," Jiraiya stated. "Half of you stay here and fight these Root agents! Everybody else, with me! Let's go downwards!"

"Don't let them advance any further!" a female Root agent cried.

"Shizune-chan, let's cover them! Time for our combo!" Shisui called.

Shizune nodded, and made a hand seal while taking her head back.

"Posion Mist!"

Her cheeks puffed before expelling a stream of purple, poisonous gas. The Root ninja immediately jumped back, careful not to let the gas even touch them. It was too late when they noticed Shisui weaving hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Shisui breahted a fireball at the growing toxic cloud. Not too big, since he didn't need it to be large for what he was planning to do. The moment the fireball touched the purple cloud, it instantly ignited, producing a chain of explosions, making the whole underground base to shake.

"That's out chance! Now go! Go! Go!" the Hokage urged, as he dashed towards the staris that led to the lower levels, followed by several of his ninjas.

And, as expected, the moment they reached the next sublevel, they were welcomed by yet another ambush, with several Root ninjas unleashing a barrage of elemental attacks, kunai and shuriken on them, followed by several Chakra Golems charging forward. However, there was a new element that wasn't present in the previous fights: large animals made of ink.

"Sai is here!" Shikamaru pointed out. "Can you guys see him?"

"He's not fighting us directly," Ino said, as he made hand seal, in an attempt to sense him. An attempt that resulted in a success. "He's hiding in a nearby storage room. He's probably drawing and animating creatures before sending them to fight us."

"That way, he can fight and help his friends without exposing himself," Asuma deduced. "Cheeky bastard."

"I'll take care of him," Ino decided, as she started running towards the room Sai was hiding in.

"Ino, wait for us!" Choji said, as he and Shikamaru rushed after her.

"No!" the blonde replied, much to her teammates' confusion. "I want to do this alone. There's something I need to tell Sai. Plus I may be able to end this in a nonviolent way."

"Ino," Asuma said in a somewhat forewarning tone. "I know you care about Sai. But he's with the enemy, and has always been. Don't let your feelings get in the way of what has to be done."

Ino scowled, and averted her gaze, looking as if she was wrestling with conflicting feelings. Eventually, she returned her sensei's gaze.

"Don't worry, Asuma-sensei. I'm a kunoichi. I know what to do."

And Ino went to face Sai alone.

...

"Super Beast Imitation Drawing!"

As expected, Sai was sitting alone on a half empty crate inside one of the building's many storage rooms, calmly drawing pictures of various animals before bringing them to life and sending them to support his fellow Root agents.

"Sai." a voice called.

The pale boy looked up, and saw Ino glaring at him, a kunai in hand. Her eyes were glinting with anger, but she was doing an admirable job at suppressing it.

"Oh, Ino, hello," Sai said, giving her a smile. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"What did I told you about faking a smile, Sai? You aren't fooling anybody, much less me," the Yamanaka heiress hissed.

"This smile isn't fake. I'm smiling because I like seeing you," Sai truthfully replied, as he furled his scroll, and stood on his feet. "I enjoy and appreciate your company."

"Why, Sai? Why did you help Danzo? Why did you guys leaked intel to the Akatsuki of all people?" Ino angrily asked.

"I don't know. It's not my place to question Danzo-sama's orders," Sai replied, and Ino once again could tell he was being honest. "But if he says that it will be for Konoha's benefit in the long run, I believe him. However, I must ask: how do you know Danzo-sama was responsible for the leaks? Root's security is tight when it comes to keep our operations a secret."

"If you don't remember, Sai, I'm not just a Yamanaka, but the Clan Heiress," Ino replied. "While I wasn't as suspicious of you as others were, it took me no time to find that you were a spy. And with the Mind Fragmentation Jutsu, I was able to see and hear through your eyes and ears as if they were my own."

"That can't be true," Sai said, looking a bit confused. "A Yamanaka Root agent that's stronger than you scanned my mind after all our meetings just in case you tried something like that. He never found anything."

"Quite pretentious to assume that guy to be stronger than me, don't you think?" an annoyed Ino said, as she placed one hand on her hip. "I did tell you that it's a jutsu I created, meaning that no other Yamanaka knows about it. And I refined it so I could create a shard of my mind so small, it could go unnoticed for anybody who would try to scan your mind, unless they knew what they were looking for."

Sai smiled again. This time, it was a smile of admiration. "So, you knew that I was spying on you. And used the opportunity to turn the tables on me. Truly outstanding. I had to admit that I underestimated you, Ino."

"Why are you smiling!?" Ino screeched, her face turning red. "I pretended to be your friend, but I was just using you! Why aren't you angry at me!?"

"Why should I be? You were doing your job, nothing less, nothing more," Sai said with a shrug. "The only thing I should feel is regret for letting me fall to your tricks. But I will suppress that feeling too. After all, emotions are the enemy of the ninja."

Ino took a step backwards, his face no longer contorted with anger, but reflecting a look that was a bit of shock and pity.

"Just what they've done to you!?" Ino asked, her voice cracking with horror.

"I am a tool of Danzo-sama that he will use to shape the world into a better place," Sai replied, his cheerful demeanor, fake or otherwise, disappearing, as it was replaced by stoic determination. "And tools aren't allowed to feel emotions."

"You lie. Even if it was a farce, I refuse to believe that all the time we spent together didn't influence you in any way," Ino replied, before narrowing his eyes. "I can feel your inner turmoil. How you struggle to suppress your emotions. It has been increasingly difficult the more you got to know me, right?"

"That's not true. My emotions are in check. My mind is clear," Sai declared.

Ino shook her head, unconvinced. "Chakra doesn't lie. I'm a sensor, remember? And your chakra fluctuates in a very irregular way. Your chakra isn't that of a calm person."

"Why do you care about how I feel?" Sai asked. "I'm your enemy. A ninja doesn't show compassion to an enemy. It's illogical, and goes against common sense."

"Maybe because I'm lying to myself. Maybe because I'm a lovestruck fool. Maybe because I'm still an idiotic little girl pretending to be a kunoichi," Ino replied, shrugging. "And humans are rarely driven by logic."

"And you still plan to fight me? In that condition, you will barely be able to stand against me," Sai replied.

"Why? You may think that emotions are a ninja's enemy. But I was taught that my emotions can also be a source of strenght. When you fight to protect something you love..." Ino began, as her body slipped into a fighting stance, while her face reflected nothing but determination. "... is when a ninja's at their most powerful!"

"Very well then. I believe no more words are necessary. Now, we fight. Show me this power of yours, Ino," Sai challenged.

Ino's lips curved into a smirk. "It will be a pleasure."

True to his words, Sai didn't say anything. Instead, he pulled a smaller scroll, unfurled it, and started to draw something on it at a lightning speed pace.

"Super Beast Imitation Drawing!"

Several inky black snakes jumped out of the scroll, and quickly slithered their way towards Ino, hissing loudly as they came closer. The blonde kept calm, slowly walked back, and carefully eyed the drawn reptiles as they prepared to attack.

The moment the snakes lunged at her, Ino pulled out several shuriken from her ninja tool pouch, and tossed them. The close distance made aiming much easier, and the momentum the snakes

carried made them impossible to dodge, and thus they were turned again into small puddles of ink once the shuriken hit them.

Ino then rushed forward, and her hands started weaving hand seals, just like Sai was busy drawing more pictures in his scroll. Ino finished her jutsu faster.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Ino's cheeks puffed, before shooting several water bullets at Sai.

"Super Beast Imitation Drawing!"

Several large dogs emerged from his scroll. However, before the dogs could leave the scroll completely, the incoming water bullets destroyed them. One of the water bullets even hit Sai in the shoulder, dropping the Root agent to one knee, while instinctively clutching the damaged spot to soothe the pain.

"You'd do well not underestimating me, Sai," Ino hissed, glowering at Sai.

The pale skinned boy stood back on his feet, and nodded. He stopped clutching his shoulder, and pulled another scroll, this one being larger.

"Of course. That was careless of my part," Sai said, as he quickly started drawing once again, his hand moving so fast it was almost a blur. "I promise I will throw at you everything I have."

Multiple ink bats emerged from the scroll, and flew at Ino in a circular formation, so the blonde wouldn't be able to destroy all of them at once. Not that Ino wasn't going to try anyway.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Once again, Ino started to shoot small but deadly watery projectiles at the bats, each creature hit being turned into a small puddle of ink. And the bats were small enough that the bullets kept most of their

momentum after destroying once. Unfortunately, there were many of them, and spread too wide to destroy individually.

A shadow alerted Ino that the bats might be a mere distraction. Looking up for a split second, the Yamanaka Heiress saw that Sai was riding a giant bird made of ink, and the pale Root agent was still drawing more creatures to throw at her.

"Super Beast Imitation Drawing!"

Four tigers jumped from the scroll, and pounced at Ino, letting out loud roars.

" *This is bad. I can't defeat him in direct combat,*" Ino forced herself to admit. Her hand drifted towards her ninja tool pouch, and grabbed something. "Time for a different approach then!"

Ino tossed something to the ground, which exploded on contact, followed by a burst of smoke, and a grey cloud covering the area, and most importantly, hiding her from Sai's eyes. Sai commanded his bird to vigorously flap its wings, producing a constant gust of wind. The wind quickly dispelled the cloud of smoke.

But when the smoke cleared out, Ino was nowhere to be seen, just Sai's ink tigers, confusedly looking around for their prey. The Root agent was also confused as to where Ino could have gone. That's it, until Sai, perceptive as he was, noticed what was finally wrong with the current situation. There were five ink tigers, and he had only drawn four.

"I admit, that wasn't a bad tactic, Ino," Sai said, as he began to pull five kunai. "But it ends here."

Sai tossed the five kunai at once at his ink tigers, all of them hitting the target with flawless accuracy. Four of the tigers dissolved into a puddle of ink, while the fifth one burst into smoke, revealing Ino, who was clutching the knife now stabbed into her gut, as she fell to the ground.

"Don't worry, Ino, I won't kill you," Sai softly said, as his bird descended. "But you need to surrender, otherwise I can't give you the medical help you need."

Ino, still panting and heaving, shot Sai a murderous glare, before it turned into a smirk, much to the black haired boy's confusion.

"Oh, it's YOU who'se going to be in need of medical attention!"

And Ino poofed away, leaving nothing but a burst of smoke.

"A Shadow Clone? Since when did she-?" Sai asked aloud, before realizing that something was above him. Much to his surprise, that something was Ino, who was using chakra control to stick herself to the ceiling.

Before Sai could react, Ino dropped from above. Sai was unable to move in time, and the Yamanaka heiress landed on his bird, but did so with such force, that the fabricated animal burst into multiple blots of ink, making the two ninjas fall to the ground.

Ino ignored the pain, got on her feet as fast as she could, and hobbled her way towards Sai, this was her only chance to do it.

"Mental Scourge Jutsu!"

At such close range, the jutsu didn't miss, and the pale skinned boy felt pretty to a short but intense headache. And he had seen that jutsu in action more times to know that the migraine could be the first of many if he wasn't careful.

"Alright then, let's see how well do you fight," Ino began, still panting and hurt, while she grabbed a couple kunai. "Now that you can't rely on those little scribbles of yours."

"Danzo-sama trains all his agents to be more than just one trick ponies," Sai stated, as he unsheathed his tanto. "I can still fight even if ninjutsu is no longer an option."

Ino frowned a little. Not because she knew he was speaking the truth, but because she also knew that not only was he better than her in close combat, but he made no signs of boasting. He wasn't underestimating her. Say what you want about Danzo, but the man knew how to train a ninja in order to be good at their job.

Sai dashed forward, his tanto in hand. His steps were fast and precise. Ino had to take a step back and raise a kunai to preemptively parry an incoming slash. However, before she could counterattack, Sai quickly attacked again, this time with a stab that Ino was barely able to deflect. Sai, however, managed to quickly strike Ino's wrists, knocking one of the kunai out of her hands.

"Shit!" Ino cursed, as she jumped backwards, in a vain attempt to put some distance from Sai.

"It seems that now you're realizing the mistake of engaging me in hand to hand combat," Sai calmly said, as he dashed forward once again.

As panic started to seep in, Ino's hand went to her ninja tool pouch, and grabbed another smoke bomb. She noticed it was the last one.

" *I definitely need to carry more,*" Ino thought, as she tossed the small orb into her feet, producing a burst of smoke, followed by a cloud of blackness.

Just as expected, Sai broke his dash, and slipped into a defensive position. While the smokescreen was up, Sai would be blind while Ino could track him through her sensor abilities. A whirring sound warned him of an incoming attack, and raising his tanto, he expertly parried the four shuriken aimed at him.

" *The shuriken came from there!*" he thought, as he dashed towards the spot he thought Ino was. But much to his disappointment, Ino was no longer there. He could hear the faint sound of quick footsteps, but he couldn't pinpoint where they came from, other than telling him that Ino had changed her spot.

More shuriken, coming from a different spot this time. Once again, Sai prepared to block. But before he was about to do it, another whirring sound coming from behind alerted him of an attack coming from that direction. Sai quickly dropped into the floor and rolled, narrowly avoiding the steel stars.

"Two different directions, she must be using a clone," Sai deduced.

That moment, the smoke started to dispel, and the Root agent could see the shape of Ino. He didn't know if she was the real one or a clone, but he didn't care. Even if she was the clone, destroying it would make the fight easier. So wasting no time, Sai charged towards her, tanto in hand. He could see Ino grabbing more stuff from her ninja tool pouch -just how many weapons it could carry?-. He rolled into the ground just as Ino tossed him a handful of kunai, before striking her.

Sai's tanto slashed Ino's bare abdomen, resulting in a spray of blood, which confirmed that she had struck the real one instead of the clone. And indeed, he heard said clone poofing behind him. Ino stumbled backwards, and quickly started to heal her wound.

"Man, I'm going to be so pissed if this leaves a scar..." Ino grumbled, as she tried to heal her bleeding wound.

"Your attitude is rather casual for somebody who just lost a fight," Sai said, as he prepared to strike again.

"Oh, I didn't lose," Ino said, sounding incredibly sure of herself. "In fact, I just won, you just haven't seen it yet."

"You haven't lost that much blood to become delirious," Sai stated matter-of-factly. The smoke was now almost gone.

"You think so? In that case, take a look at where you're stepping," Ino said, as her eyes moved to Sai's feet.

Even if it was most likely a ruse to distract him, Sai allowed himself to take a quick look down. Ino, however, didn't attack. She didn't need to. Because much to the pale teen's horror, he was stepping onto several explosive tags in the ground. In fact, the entire floor was littered with explosive tags.

"Move one step, and you'll blow up," Ino told him while she continued healing herself. "And now you're going to tell me you have a way to counter this tactic, do you?"

That's what Sai wanted to say. But no matter what he thought, he couldn't find any solution to his problem. If he couldn't move, he couldn't defend from Ino's attacks. And given that the blonde removed his ability to use ninjutsu as well...

"So, while I was focused on finding you and blocking your ranged attacks, you were covering the floor in explosive tags," Sai guessed. "A very clever strategy."

"I may not be the strongest ninja out there. My taijutsu is so-so, and my ninjutsu is mostly suited for support rather than direct offense. However, if there's something I'm proud of being, that's being observant as hell," Ino told him. "When I use smoke bombs, I always notice that the opponent will either try to find me, or get ready for an ambush. But almost nobody takes into account that I might use the cover of the smoke to set up a trap. Now tell me, how do you plan to get out of this situation?"

"I'm afraid I have nothing," Sai admitted, dropping his tanto, and holding his hand in the air as a sign of defeat. "Rooted in a single place, I have no means to continue fighting."

"Rooted?" Ino repeated, as a small laugh escaped her mouth. "Was that a pun?"

"I found it fitting for my situation," Sai replied.

"You may not be as hopeless as I thought..." Ino said, her smile softening.

"What are you going to do with me?" Sai asked.

"I'm going to capture you. Then, I'll hand you to Hokage-sama, who will decide your fate," Ino stated, before a realization dawned upon her. "Wait, are you going to let me capture you? I thought you Root guys were ready to die before letting the enemy win."

"In the past, I would have moved and let the explosion kill me," Sai stated in a jarringly neutral tone. "But now... I don't want to. I don't want to die. Not because I'm afraid of dying but... but because I don't want to die this way. Not like this. Maybe Danzo-sama was right. I let you influence me in a much greater way than I had expected. In the end, I couldn't help but underestimate you from the very beginning. And now I pay the price."

"Don't give to despair, Sai. Life has many surprises in store for us. Some of them are good," Ino said, as she walked towards the brunet, and placed a hand on his forehead. "Sleep."

Sai dropped down instantly, with Ino quickly catching him before he could hit the floor, and carefully placed him down.

"Okay Sai, let's see what your mind hides. With some luck, Danzo might have said in your presence where did he plan to flee," Ino wondered aloud, as he placed both hands over Sai's head, and started to scry his mind. And as she had hoped, Sai's memories proved to be a treasure trove of information regarding Root and Danzo. She kept digging further and further, until she reached a certain point where she was forced to stop.

All color disappeared from her face upon hearing Danzo talk about the Operation: Rising Phoenix, and all what it entailed.

"No... no!" Ino said in horror, as she quickly got up. "This... this is bad! I have to tell Hokage-sama!"

Fortunately for her, her telepathy would allow her to contact Jiraiya immediately, and warn him about what was going on. She simply prayed it wasn't too late.

Author's Note: When I was planning this story, one of the things I wanted to do is not only stick to the six canonical couples we got at the end of the manga, but also trying to improve them and making them more believable. Sai and Ino proved to be by far the most difficult to approach. Even when I finished Part 1, I still wasn't sure what I could do with them. Fortunately, thanks to a suggestion from fellow Naruhina writer The Flare Blade (go to read his story "Because I love You: Chasing After You" if you want a good read), I was able to come up with an arc that's both relevant to the story as a whole, and impactful to their characters.

While Sai's development in canon was okay, it always bugged me that it was tied to Naruto. Naruto did become a very important person to Sai, but Sai was basically an afterthought to Naruto. I always thought that it would be much better if Sai's development was tied to that of his future wife. Plus, not everything has to revolve around Naruto, you know?

So yeah. This battle was meant to represent the crux of both their character arcs. Also, another opportunity to showcase how badass Ino can be, and that not every battle has to be won by the ninja with the most destructive jutsu.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Like I said above, Danzo isn't going down without a fight. What is "Operation: Rising Phoenix", and how will it affect the heroes? Will Ino's warning reach them in time to stop it? Find out next chapter! In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Operation: Rising Phoenix

Author's Note: It's been a while since I did this, but I'd like to recomend a Naruto fanfic: "Why a Civilian Council is Inappropriate", by DigiXBot. I think the title is pretty self explanatory.

Many of you made guesses as of what Operation Rising Phoenix Would be. Many of you managed to get some things right and others wrong. Read the chapter and see what you managed to correctly guess. Enjoy:

Chapter 79:

Operation: Rising Phoenix

or

Cool Names to Disguise Uncool Actions

Even if Root put up a formidable resitsance, they were still unable to beat the assault led by the Hokage himself. The Root agents were strong opponents, and the Chakra Golems didn't make things any easier. But due the Konoha ninjas having both numbers and power on their side, they soon plowed through their ranks, and arrived at the lowest part of the level, where Danzo was gathering most of his troops.

"I can sense Danzo. He's at the other side of that door," Karin said, focusing her senses into the next door.

"I find it odd that he hadn't fled yet," Jiraiya pondered.

"In that case, it's obvious that he's preparing a trap, Hokage-sama," Shizune warned. "He probably knows that you're leading this attack

by now, and maybe he wants to kill you and as many ninjas with you in one swift move."

"How much he's underestimating me is insulting. Still, better not let the guard down," Jiraiya said, as he nodded towards Karin. "How many people does he have with him?"

"Still quite a lot. I'm counting thirty eight, plus some golems," Karin replied, before frowning and crossing her arms. "Just how many people does he have working for him? With the amount of ninjas we fought against, you wouldn't think he'd still have this many."

"Danzo's days to run unchecked will come to an end before the day is over," Jiraiya stated. "His actions not only put one of my sons in constant danger, but he's the reason my other son is in a coma. Everybody, stand back! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Jiraiya created a single clone, before forming a Rasengan with one hand. The clone started to infuse the blue sphere with fire chakra, which started to expand and turn reddish yellow, almost if the Toad Sage was holding a little sun in his hand.

"Fire Release: Rasengan!"

Jiraiya slammed his fire attack into the door. The attack quickly expanded forward and exploded into a fiery inferno, which not only obliterated the door completely, but opened up a massive hole in the wall as well. Many Root ninjas who were near the wall were blown away.

As Karin had said, the room was filled with Root ninjas, a few Chakra Golems, and lastly, Danzo himself. Oddly enough, they didn't appear that they were doing anything, much less trying to escape. Jiraiya was about to order everybody to attack when Ino's voice echoed in his head.

" *Everybody, stop! It's a trap!*" Jiraiya heard Ino shouting inside his mind. Not only Jiraiya could hear her, but pretty much every ninja

with him, as well as those who remained in the upper levels fighting Root ninja and ensuring that no reinforcements reached Danzo.

"Ino? What's going on?" Jiraiya asked.

...

Shisui and Shizune's apartment

Given that both Shisui and Shizune were taking part in the raid of Root's facilities, they had hired a team of Genin in order to watch over their kids. The mission was given to a Genin team that had graduated from the academy that very year. Given that it was such a simple task, their Jonin-sensei decided to let them on their own, and do more productive things with his time than watching over babies.

It would be a decision that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Thankfully, both Shiro and Shizuka weren't making any ruckus. The two of them were playing with their toys in their playpen, while the Genin boredly watched TV. The monotony, however, came to an end when somebody knocked the door.

"I'll go," one of the Genin, a girl with brown hair and glasses, said as she got up and walked towards the door. "Who's-"

However, she didn't finish those words, as the door was kicked open, hurling her backwards. Two Root ninja broke into the house, the first one tossing several kunai at the brown haired girl, killing her almost instantly.

"Hey, what's going on-"

The only male of the group, a boy with brown hair, a red headband and a band-aid on his nose, was also silenced mid-sentence when a tanto slashed his throat.

"AAAAAAHHHH!" the remaining Genin, a girl with black hair tied in a ponytail, screamed loudly as she, overwhelmed by terror, jumped out of the window.

One of the Root agents was going to chase her, but he was stopped by his partner.

"Forget about her, there's no time. Let's grab the target," the Root ninja said.

His partner nodded, and the two men, after a quick search, took the two Uchiha babies, and ran away from there.

...

Rin's Apartment

Unlike most of her friends, Rin hadn't been among those called to form the large group that would raid Danzo's facilities. Jiraiya knew that Danzo had people shadowing her for obvious reasons, so he decided it was for the best to leave her out. Not only she wasn't part of the group, she wasn't even aware that such operation was taking place right now.

Again, that would be a decision Jiraiya would come to regret.

Rin had decided to use her spare time in order to do some laundry. Then, she'll head downtown and do some shopping. Not just groceries, but she also felt like indulging on a whim.

"It's been a while since the last time I had strawberry cake," Rin wondered aloud, as she folded a clean bedsheet. "I think I could make some, and bring it to Kakashi's team so we can eat it together."

When Rin turned around to grab another sheet, she found herself staring at a masked ninja. Before the girl could react, the masked

ninja quickly waved his hand at her, spraying her with some sort of greenish powder.

"What... the...?" Rin slurred, as she quickly lost consciousness.

The Root ninja caught her before she could hit the ground, carried her over his shoulder, and left the scene the same way he had entered it, through an already open door.

...

Downtown Konoha

Given that team trainings were suspended until Hagane recovered, Hanabi Hyuga found herself with more spare time than usual. She often trained on her own with the Moon Acolytes in the use of the Tenseigan, but her progress had been slow at the very best.

She decided to use some of her spare time in paying a visit to her comatose teammate. On the way to the hospital, she was thinking how empty and... sterile his room looked, and thought that maybe a vase of flowers could make the place a little more livelier. Plus Hagane would appreciate the gesture once he woke up.

"Thank you, be sure to come again," the clerk, a middle aged woman with brown hair, told Hanabi. "And I sincerely hope your teammate wakes up soon."

"We all do so, Mrs. Yamanaka," Hanabi said as she exited the door. "We all do."

However, the moment the young Hyuga set a foot on the street, a dart hit her in the neck. Dropping the flowers, she immediately plucked it out of her neck, and after her battle instincts kicked in, activated her Tenseigan for potential enemies.

However, the poison the dart was coated with was fact acting, and the young Hyuga suddenly felt to the ground, motionless.

"Hanabi?" Mrs. Yamanaka, asked, as she left the counter and headed out of the shop. "Hanabi!?"

Suddenly, two masked ninja came out of nowhere, pushed Mrs. Yamanaka away, took Hanabi's unconscious body, and ran away, leaping from one roof to another.

"Those men! Somebody stop them!" Mrs. Yamanaka screamed.
"They kidnapped a girl!"

...

Konoha Hospital

Hagane's room looked as if a bomb had blown inside. Not just because an entire wall -the one that faced the street- was missing. The rest of the walls and floor were covered in dirt, crack and debris, the bed and the rest of the furniture were completely wrecked, and most importantly, the corpses of two Root ninjas laid there.

For these two ninjas, tasked with the kidnapping of Hagane, had the misfortune of running into Tsunade as they carried on with their mission. However, the fact that they decided to attack her was pure idiocy on their part, element of surprise or not. Needless to say, it had been a very short fight.

"What happened here?" A nurse asked, as she entered the room. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw its state. "Tsunade-sama!"

"It's okay," Tsunade said, turning around. She was holding Hagane's unconscious body in her arms. "I'm fine, and so is him. Those Root agents, not so much."

"What... what happened here?" the nurse asked.

"Apparently Danzo wanted to take my son as a souvenir from Konoha before leaving for good," Tsunade said. "And if I didnt' have

to take care of my son, I'd give that one-eyed bastard a piece of my mind. With my fists. Guess that Jiraiya will have to do it for both."

...

Ino explained everybody what the Operation: Rising Phoenix entailed. While Danzo and his cronies escaped, half of his forces would remain in the lair in order to keep the raid division busy, while small commandos kidnapped certain individuals that would be necessary for a New Konoha: individuals with great power and potential, but young enough to be manipulated.

" Those targeted are Shiro and Shizuka Uchiha, Rin Nohara, Hanabi Hyuga, and Hagane Senju," Ino finished.

"NO!" Shisui shouted.

"Hokage-sama! We need to-" Shizune was going to say, but Jiraiya already knew what she wanted to tell him.

"Go! I'll send you reinforcements whenever I can!" Jiraiya told.

Shisui and Shizune nodded, and the two black haired ninjas quickly left the lair, undoing the path they walked to reach there.

"Wait a minute, if Danzo isn't here, who is this guy?" Shikamaru asked, drawing the attention to such fact. "An imposter? Somebody under a Transformation?"

" According to Sai's mind, it's a genjutsu," they heard Ino's voice say.

"Sharingan!" Sasuke's Bloodline Limit flared to life, but all it did was to feed his confusion. "My Sharingan doesn't notice anything!"

"I don't sense anything either! What's going on?" Karin asked.

"There's no genjutsu that can fool both the Sharingan and a sensor of my skill!"

"Actually, there is," Kurenai solemnly said, as she took a step forward, looking at the alleged Danzo in the eye. "There is a Bloodline Limit that makes genjutsu so real that your mind is unable to tell it apart from reality. Even if you're a sensor or possess a doujutsu. The bloodline of the Kurama Clan."

Suddenly, Danzo, his ninjas and chakra golems all vanished, being replaced by a single individual: somebody wearing dark brown robes, and their face obscured by an ANBU mask.

"Bravo, Kurenai-sensei. Took you long enough," the robbed figure, a woman, said in a cold but mocking tone.

"Yakumo? Is that you?" Kurenai asked. "Why are you working for Danzo?"

But the figure didn't say anything. Just raised a hand and made a hand seal, before vanishing as well as if she was never there. Several explosions rocked the place.

"Danzo was planning to bury us alive!" Jiraiya said in realization. "Everybody, out! Go, go, go!"

As the Konoha ninja present there fled the scene before the underground lair collapsed under their heads, they all realized how dangerous a foe Danzo was, and how far was he willing to go to see his goals completed.

...

The moment Hinata had heard what Ino said about Hanabi's kidnapping, she instantly shot into the sky, using the hole in the ceiling her previous attack had caused. She didn't even say anything to Naruto - though if he heard the same thing as she did, not only would he understand, but bolt to the hospital as well to check on Hagane.

Hinata frantically scanned the whole village from above, in a desperate attempt to find her little sister's chakra, but after a few minutes, she had to give up. Six Paths Chakra was incredibly potent, and through the Byakugan -or Tenseigan in her case- it shone with such intensity it was impossible to miss. Meaning that they had already taken her out of the village.

Hinata expanded her area of vision as much as she could, trying to catch a glimpse of Hanabi's chakra, but to no avail. However, even if she didn't see Hanabi, her sight caught something that merited her attention: masked ninjas moving towards the north. Not all of them walked the same routes, but it seems they had the same destination in mind.

"I don't have any other leads," Hinata said in resignation, as she focused her eyesight to the north. A feeling of hope swelled in her heart once she caught a glimpse of Hanabi's chakra. It was very weak -they had probably put chakra-dampening seals on her to prevent her escape-, but it was no mistake, that was Hanabi. "Hang on, Hanabi-chan!"

Her entire being filled with determination, Hinata shot forward, flying faster than any bird, faster than any previous time she had flown, pushing her chakra to its very limits. Such effort, however, paid off when Hinata caught the kidnappers -a group of four ninja-, one of them carrying Hanabi on his back, and the other three acting as escorts. The moment they saw Hinata zooming in, they instantly placed themselves in a defensive formation, with the man carrying Hanabi in the middle.

Hinata floated above them, her Tenseigan glinting with a dangerous light.

"I'll say this once," Hinata began, her tone cold as ice. "Leave my sister this instance, and I won't even try to capture you."

The reply to her demand came in the form of several kunai with explosive tags attached being tossed in her general direction. With a

telekinetic blast, she repelled the kunai, which were flown away in different directions, before exploding a couple seconds later.

"I see you made your choice," Hinata's voice was unflinching. Her hand reached back, and pulled her collapsible chakra bow. "I'll make mine then. Lightning Release: Thunder Arrow!"

Hinata shot several arrows made of pure lightning in quick succession. The Root agents, however, were fast enough to jump in time and dodge the attack.

"Quickly, go to the meeting point!" a Root agent said, as he unsheathed two swords, and charged at Hinata. "We'll buy you some time!"

"Negative. If the hostage stays here, she'll be forced to hold back in order not to harm her," the Root agent carrying Hanabi replied. "We can use her as a human shield if needed."

"You bastards!" Hinata shouted. Her face turning red with anger.

"Very well then," another Root agent, this one wielding a kusarigama, agreed. "Though be careful. Danzo-sama won't appreciate if the girl is hurt."

"We also have an opportunity to catch another Tenseigan wielder, so let's make the most of this!" the third root agent said, as his hands flew through hand seals, before clapping his hands together. "Fire Release: Fox Fire!"

Several fireballs appeared around the Root agent in a circle. The masked ninja started to make several quick hand motions, launching the fireballs with each one. Hinata expertly dodged the incoming fiery missiles -the fact that he was floating made it even easier- but she realized of two things thanks to her Tenseigan: the first one was that the caster could control the fireballs, and those she dodged turned around and flew back at her. The second was the ninja wielding the

two swords took advantage of her predicament in order to land a hit when she was wide open,.

Fortunately, the Hyuga Clan Head had a solution for both problems.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Still mid air, Hinata started to rotate, turning into a spinning sphere of chakra, which both successfully repelled the incoming fireballs, and blasted the attacking Root ninja away, his swords falling from his hands. Once she stopped spinning, she made a couple hand seals, and dived at the ninja who had used the fire jutsu.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Hinata was ready to strike her electricity-imbued palm into her enemy, but she was forced to abruptly stop when the man carrying Hanabi placed himself between the two of them, and hastily floated back.

"See? Told you this would give us an edge!" the man carrying Hanabi said.

As Hinata floated back, the ninja with the kusarigama tossed the iron weight of his weapon at her, which wrapped itself around her legs. Hinata was caught off guard when a sudden force pulled her down.

"I have her! Prepare the chakra suppression seals!" the Root ninja said, as he pulled Hinata down.

"That wasn't very intelligent on your part," Hinata hissed, making a single hand seal. Hinata's body started to crackle with electricity, electricity the chain transmitted, instantly shocking the ninja into unconsciousness.

"Two down, two more to go," Hinata said, as she imbued her hands with electricity again, and dived at the fire specialist.

Like it happened before, the man carrying Hanabi quickly jumped between the two of them, but this time Hinata was expecting it. Carefully measuring her movements, she dispelled the electricity of her hands as she wrapped one arm around Hanabi's waist, while pointing her other arm forward, releasing a powerful kinetic blast that both hurled the two Root ninja back, while propelling Hanabi and herself in the opposite direction.

"Good, I don't have to worry about you getting hurt anymore," Hinata said, as she gently placed Hanabi on the ground. She then turned at the two remaining Root ninja, who were getting back on her feet. Too bad for them, the fight was already over. She made several hand seals, in order to deliver the finishing blow. "Tenseigan Chakra Cloak! Truth Seeking Balls! Silver Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Like she did not long ago, Hinata merged her two black orbs into a single energy sphere, which exploded into a silvery tornado that blew the two Root ninja away. Checking her surroundings to make sure there were no enemies around, Hinata quickly turned back to Hanabi, kneeled before her, and started to remove all the chakra dampening seals around her body and her eyes.

"Good, she doesn't appear to be hurt," Hinata said, as she checked her body. She noticed a small puncture in her neck. "Guess that's how they took her down. There's no way they could have defeated her in a straight combat. Anyway, I better take her back to Konoha. Sorry, Jiraiya-sama, I will rejoin the mission once my sister is safe and sound."

Hinata picked Hanabi bridal style, and flew back to the village.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, another group of four Root Ninjas were carrying the unconscious Rin towards their intended meeting point. Little did they know that a certain somebody was spying them. And while Danzo trained all his agents to learn to know

when somebody was following or spying them, there was no way Danzo could have trained them to avoid this kind of enemy.

Because the spy was flying above them, but letting them some head start so they wouldn't see her if they looked up. She was looking at the marching group through binoculars she was holding on one hand. She used her other hand to tap an earpiece.

"Guys, target located," Fu said, her eyes fixed on the foursome. "Around three hundred meters from my position to the north."

"Good job, Fu-san," Gai's voice said from the other day. His voice sounded far more professional, and was devoid of the usual enthusiasm, but was just as energetic. "Kids, time to show these unyouthful jerks what we do with kidnappers."

"Yes sir!" other three voices choruses in unison.

"Do you guys want me to join you?" Fu asked.

"For the time being, no," Neji's voice replied, making Fu pout a little. "You're more useful watching from above. But feel free to lend us a hand if it appears that the enemy has the upper hand, or if we can't rescue Rin-san."

"Understood then. You guys want all the fun part to yourselves," Fu replied, as she went back to her binoculars. "I'll stick with the boring job."

Even if Fu hoped that the fight would be a tough one and the Close Combat Squad would be forced to call for help, it wouldn't be the case.

"Double Konoha Whirlwind!"

Gai and Lee, shining with the a faint green aura provided by the first Celestial Gate, appeared from behind the lush trees, delivering a flying roundhouse kick to a Root ninja each.

"Run!" the Root ninja carrying Rin urged. His partner nodded, and continued forward.

Unfortunately for them, Gai's team had already a plan for that.

"Manipulated Tools: Rain of Steel!"

Swords, spears and morning stars rained from above, abruptly cutting their escape, before Tenten landed in front of them, carrying two large battleaxes on both hands.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, as she took a battle stance.

The man carrying Rin took a step backwards, while the other one unsheathed a katana in order to fight Tenten. And as this happened, Neji landed besides the kidnapper, took Rin from his arms while pushing him away.

"Rin is safe! Finish them off!" Neji said, as he retreated with the still unconscious Rin in his arms.

"Very well then!" Tenten said, as she started to glow with the same aura as Gai and Lee. "Gate of Opening: Open! Raging Bladestorm!"

The two Root agents were unable to do anything to block, dodge or counter Tenten's devastating technique.

...

Not far away from there, Shisui and Shizune were leaping from one tree branch to another, in hopes of finding the ninjas who had kidnapped their children. Thankfully, Ino had already alerted the Hunter Division of the kidnappings, and decided that rescue the hostages was of higher priority than capturing Danzo and his cronies. Even then, the Uchiha couple just couldn't leave the rescue of their children to a third party.

"Danzo is so dead after this," Shisui seethed. "I don't care if Hokage-sama or anybody else thinks it's wrong or whatever. That man will

die by my hand."

"Shisui," Shizune called him. "Right now, I hate Danzo as much as you do, but we should focus on getting our children first and foremost."

"They will be bringing them to him right now," Shisui reasoned. "So if we track Danzo, we'll track our children."

"Okay, makes sense..." Shizune admitted. "But do we know where is Danzo? Where are we going, by the way?"

"From what I heard the other Hunter Teams say," Shisui said, tapping his earpiece. "All the Root ninjas were heading north. So far, the only country in that direction is the Land of Sound, the former Land of the Rice Fields."

"I don't think I'm following. There's nothing of interest in that country, at least not after Orochimaru abandoned it!" Shizune replied.

After Orochimaru and his forces vacated his lair, it was deemed safe for the inhabitants of the Land of the Rice Fields to go back to their previous homes. To make sure such thing wouldn't happen again, Konoha would send teams every couple of weeks or so to check that everything was fine and the small country wasn't invaded again.

The fact that all the returning teams didn't report anything out of the ordinary meant that Orochimaru didn't return .

"Yes, but think about it. The first time we found Orochimaru's base was because his actions drew our attention. It's possible that he recovered his old base, but this time he decided to be more discreet about it," Shisui explained. "We do know Danzo and Orochimaru were close in the past, to the point that Danzo nominated Orochimaru to be the Fourth Hokage. And Orochimaru is part of the Akatsuki. It's obvious that he was the one Danzo has been selling the information to on the other jinchuriki.

"I don't think he made it his main base again. No, that one has to be somewhere else. But I'm sure he's still using it as an outpost and maybe meeting point."

Suddenly, both of their earpieces started to crack with some noise, before a voice spoke.

"Shizune? Shisui? Do any of you copy me?" a calm voice asked.

"Kakashi!" Shizune replied, recognizing his voice. "This is Shizune. Shisui is here with me as well. Any news?"

"Yeah. We've just intercepted a group of Root ninjas. After a quick fight, we defeated them. They were the ones carrying your children. Don't worry, we checked them, and they don't appear to be harmed."

Both Shisui and Shizune let out a huge sigh of relief.

"You have no idea how happy we are to hear those news, Kakashi," Shisui said, his voice recovering his usual warmth. "Remind me to buy you a drink when this is over."

"I'll be sure to check on that," Kakashi replied. "Anyway, Tamaki is going to shoot a fire jutsu into the sky. That's our position. Come here to pick your kids."

As soon as Kakashi said that, the two Uchiha saw a fireball shooting into the sky, before exploding in a shower of orange and yellow sparks. Wasting no time, the Uchiha couple headed to the direction of the improvised flare.

...

Konoha Hospital

When Naruto saw the massive hole in the hospital's front, just when Hagane's room was supposed to be, his heart sank. But upon entering the hospital and asked, he was very relieved to see that Tsunade had stopped the potential kidnapping of his adoptive

brother. The blond wasted no time, and rushed to the room Tsunade had moved Hagane.

"It's a good thing that the two of you are safe," Naruto told Tsunade after greeting her.

"Yes. It's such luck I work here. It allows me to visit Hagane as much as I want. And the attack happened just when I was about to pay him a visit," Tsunade said. "Do you know something about Kaida? Was she kidnapped as well?"

Naruto shook his head. "I send a few clones to check on her. They found her in a clothing store, shopping. It seems that Danzo didn't target her for some reason."

Tsunade let out a sigh of relief. "It's good to hear that."

"Maybe because he ordered to kidnap Rin as well, who does have the Wood Release, and couldn't afford to spare people to kidnap the two of them," Naruto reasoned. "Though, speaking of Rin, I really hope that both she and the others can be rescued before they lose their tracks."

...

Forests to the North of Konoha

Danzo and eight of his ninja were resting in a small clearing they found in the forest. Well, to be fair, only Danzo was resting, sitting against a tree, while the rest of his men were watching for potential pursuers. Not that they minded, they literally lived for Danzo.

"Danzo-sama?" one of the ninjas, a woman wearing a wolf ANBU mask, walked to him. "I'm afraid I have bad news. The extraction teams failed their missions, and all the targets had been retrieved by enemy forces."

Danzo, as usual, didn't react. Or didn't make his reaction known. Either way, his body language didn't change.

"It's unfortunate, indeed, but even then, they fulfilled their purpose," Danzo cryptically said.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," the Root agent asked.

"Getting my hands on at least one of those Bloodlines would have been a major boon for my plans. However, that's not the only reason I ordered the extractions," Danzo began. "I knew that, if several high-profile Bloodline Limit carriers were kidnapped, Jiraiya would focus all his forces to their retrieval, freeing the rest of our men. Such as the ones carrying all our archives, scrolls containing secret jutsu, and the blueprints of the Uzumaki Chakra Golems."

"I see. Truly a genius strategy, sir," the female agent complimented him.

"Danzo-sama!" another of his agents shouted, jumping down from a nearby branch, landing in front of him. "We saw a flare not even a kilometer south of our position. Our pursuers are way closer than we had expected."

"In that case," Danzo said, as he picked his cane, and used it to help himself back to his feet. "They won't take long to resume the chase. We need to reach the Land of Sound before Jiraiya's forces close the gap."

"Yes, sir!"

And with that, Danzo and his men resumed their exodus.

...

To the south, Shisui and Shizune had finally met with Kakashi's team. On top of Kakashi and his students, there were more ninja present, such as Kiba's mother and sister, Tsume and Hana Inuzuka,

Neji's father Hizashi Hyuga, and some other ninja they didn't recognize, though they could see all of them were suited for tracking.

"My babies!" Shizune said, as she rushed towards Hana and Tamaki, who were holding a baby each. Shizune scooped the two of them on one arm each. "Oh, I'm so glad you're okay!"

"Once again, thank you guys," Shisui softly said, as he joined his wife.

"Anyway, now that that's out of hair, shall we chase that one eyed bastard?" Tsume asked. "After pulling such a shitty stunt, I want to hack him to pieces and feed him to the clan's dogs."

"Mom!" Hana protested.

"You know I'm joking, Hana-chan," Tsume said with a dismissive hand wave. "We'd never feed our dogs something so disgusting. But yeah, harming children is a big no-no for our clan. If I get my hands on him, he won't come back in one piece."

"I agree with that sentiment. However." Shisui interjected. "I must ask you another favor, and make sure to take care of Shiro and Shizuka until this is over."

"Shisui-san? What do you mean...?" Hana asked.

"It isn't obvious? I'm going after Danzo," Shisui said, as his hands clenched into fists. "That bastard had caused enough harm to the Uchiha Clan, and this was the last straw. That man will die by my hand."

"I understand," Tsume said with a nod. "Had Danzo harm any of my kids, I would have felt the same. Don't worry, Uchiha, your pups will be fine under our care."

Shisui nodded back. "Thanks again, Tsume-san. I'll make sure to repay you for this," Shisui then turned at his wife. "You coming?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Shizune replied, as she returned her kids to Tsume and Hana. Even if it was rather odd seeing the rather mild and tame medic-nin so thirsty for blood, given the circumstances, it was understandable.

"Let the rest of us accompany you," Kakashi offered. "Chances are Danzo won't be alone. Plus you'll need us to follow his tracks."

"Very well then. Come on everybody, move!"

...

Almost a kilometer to the north, Danzo's group continued their journey towards the Land of Sound. They were mostly unperturbed, until Fuu, the Yamanaka redhead and the squad's sensor, perked up. Worried, he dashed closer to Danzo.

"Danzo-sama, a large group of ninja is coming close," the Yamanaka stated. Despite the urgency of the situation and the message, his voice was still clam. "I'm sensing some rather powerful chakra signatures among them."

Danzo took a couple seconds to process the information, and come up with a course of action.

"I see. Since all the targets had been recovered, they're focusing all their efforts in capturing me, while ignoring my other fleeing agents," the one eyed man deduced. "A sound strategy indeed."

"What should we do, Danzo-sama?" Fuu asked again.

"Diving our forces would be folly, since they'll chase whoever group I'm part of. It's very likely that they have a sensor in their group, or some specialized tracker," Danzo replied. "No, I'm afraid that the only possible solution is to delay them as much as we can in order to widen the gap. Listen everybody!"

The rest of the ninjas escorting Danzo immediately turned their attention to him.

"We're being chased by a large group of hunter-nin. It's more than likely that they'll catch on us before we can reach a safe haven. In order to do so, somebody needs to stay and delay them. Everybody except Fuu and Torune, stay here and prepare an ambush. Fuu, Torune, you shall continue with me."

"Yes, Danzo-sama!" all his ninjas chorused in unison.

...

To the south, the group of pursuers lead by Shisui and Shizune continued their chase of Danzo and their men. But mostly Danzo.

"Danzo left most of his men behind," Hizashi warned the others, his Byakugan active. "They're setting up several traps. They're planning to ambush us."

"A diversion to make sure we are unable to reach them," Kakashi quickly deduced.

"What should we do, sensei?" Tamaki asked. "Try to go around them?"

"That would make us waste time, and Danzo would gain a lead," Kakashi said, shaking his head.

"Then the other possible solution is to plow through the ambush, right?" Kiba asked. "But that's also going to delay us a lot."

"Not if we copy their strategy," Kakashi rebutted. "Danzo decided to leave some of his forces behind, so we'll do the same. Most of us will stay and take the ambush head on so the rest can continue the chase unimpeded."

Needless to say, it was obvious that those who would continue the chase would be Shisui and Shizune. The two of them quietly moved

to the back of the group.

"Here they come! Get ready!" Hizashi warned. "Watch out for wires and explosive tags!"

And just like the former Branch House Hyuga warned, the hunting group was soon bombarded by a barrage of elemental jutsu, as well as a shower of kunai, shuriken, and other weapons. But they were prepared.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Pouring as much chakra as he could into the jutsu, Kakashi blew a powerful wind current from his mouth in order to push the incoming barrage back. Even if his attack alone was insufficient, he wasn't the only one to jump forward to take the brunt of the attack, as Hizashi and Tamaki soon followed.

"Heavenly Spin!"

"Death Steel Ring!"

The two ninja, leaving a reasonable distance from each other, started to quickly spin until they were turned into living tornadoes, deflecting most of the incoming attacks.

Following this, Shino extended his arms, and two swarm of angry beetles poured from under his sleeves, flying at the attacking Root ninja, while trying to push them to the sides.

"Shisui-san, Shizune-sensei, I created an opening. Better take it as long as I can keep it," Shino warned the couple.

"Very well then, thank you Shino-kun!" Shizune said, as she dashed past him.

"Stay safe until we return!" Shisui added.

"Shisui! Danzo may be old and retired from active duty, but he isn't a pushover!" Kakashi warned the Uchiha. "Remember that he's strong enough to be considered for the position of Hokage!"

"Don't worry, I know that!" Shisui shouted back, before he set his eyes forward. "I underestimated Danzo once. I won't make that mistake again."

...

North of Shisui's position, Danzo and his remaining two escorts continued their escape. Fuu was monitoring through his sensing abilities how the ambush was going. And while it worked as intended, it didn't throw all the pursuers off of their backs.

"Danzo-sama, the ambush has stopped most of the pursuers, but I'm afraid that two people are still chasing us," Fuu told his leader. "They're getting closer and closer with each passing moment. I doubt we'll reach the Land of Sound before they catch us."

"Just two?" Danzo asked. At the very least, they no longer had the advantage. "While fighting them might be tempting, we better not take any risks."

"Wait a minute, this chakra..." Fuu said, his eyes opening wide. "One of the two people chasing us is Shisui Uchiha!"

"Shisui Uchiha?" Danzo repeated. This changed everything. "Torune, how far are we from the Land of Sound?"

"Not much. The Valley of the End is just ahead," the masked Aburame replied.

"Very well then. That shall be our battlefield," Danzo decided.

"Danzo-sama? Are you planning to fight Shisui Uchiha?" Torune asked. While he was going to question his master's orders, he felt it was too risky to stop and fight when they were so close to their goal.

"Eight years ago, I had one of Shisui's eyes under my power, until we regretablely lost it to Akatsuki," Danzo began. "Shisui's eyes have the power to cast a genjutsu so powerful, it can control the mind of others. It's so powerful is impossible to resist, and the only known way to break it is to bring the victim to a state of near death. Now, another chance presents before us. It is imperative that we collect at least one of his Sharingan. With that power, rebuilding Root and setting Konoha straight would be a child's play."

"Very well then, Danzo-sama. What is the plan?" Fuu asked.

"We will meet them in the Valley of the End. Meanwhile, you two will keep them busy while I unseal my arm," Danzo instructed.

The two Root agents nodded.

"We won't fail you, Danzo-sama."

...

Shisui and Shizune arrived at the Valley of the End shortly after Danzo did. Oddly enough, the leader of Root and his two cronies weren't fleeing anymore. Instead, Danzo had removed his allegedly injured arm out of the cloth he used as a cast, while the other two watched. However, the moment the Uchiha couple arrived, the two underlings immediately went to face them.

"It seems that you guys finally stopped running," Shisui said, as he unsheathed his tanto. "Good, it would be kind of annoying if we had to chase you all the time."

"You will pay for you did, you monsters!" Shizune shouted.

Shisui then noticed something. "Uh... what is Danzo doing?"

And indeed, Danzo's right arm was covered in three larged golden bracers, secured with thick locks. Danzo was calmly undoing the first lock.

"I see... the bastard was hiding some sort of trump card, am I right?" Shisui asked. "And you're supposed to buy him time while he removes all those things."

"Danzo-sama won't have to sully his hands fighting the two of you if we're able to get your eyes ourselves," Torune stated.

"My eyes... so that's why you stopped. Makes sense. Oh well, you know what they say," Shisui said, as he adopted a fighting stance. "Never stop an enemy when they're making a mistake!"

And with that, the Uchiha vanished, reappearing behind Fuu, his tanto ready to strike his back.

"You're a Yamanaka, right? I don't want you messing with our minds! You go down first!" Shisui said as he attacked.

However, his tanto clashed against another one, as Torune had parried Shisui's strike just in the nick of time, allowing Fuu to move away from him. As Shisui vanished again, Shizune leaped at them, her hands forming a seal, and her cheeks puffed.

"Poison Mist!"

Shizune exhaled a massive cloud of purple gas, forcing the Root operatives, and even the nearby Danzo, to jump away from the incoming hazard. That moment, Shisui reappeared behind the fleeing Root agents, his hands weaving seals at an imperceptible speed.

"There's no way you can escape from this!" Shisui said, as he finished the seal sequence. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Shisui exhaled a massive fireball at the Root agents, sandwiching them between the flaming attack and his wife's poison mist. The two attacks soon collided, resulting in a massive explosion. The Uchiha then reappeared alongside Shizune.

"We had a good combo there," Shizune pointed out. "Do you think it was enough?"

When the smoke and steam raised by the explosion dispelled, a pair of charred logs were floating in the water.

"I'm afraid it isn't," Shisui said, as he tensed up.

"Fuu, Torune!" Danzo called, as he started to undo the second lock. "Stop fooling around. As long as you don't damage his eyes, everything is fine. Use your best jutsu. Especially you, Torune."

"As you order, Danzo-sama!" the two of them replied at the same time.

Emerging from underwater, the two Root ninjas charged at the Uchiha couple, with Torune oddly enough undressing as he ran. Fuu pulled out several kunai with explosive tags attached on them, jumped and tossed them at the Uchiha couple. Shizune's answered this by making a chain of hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

The water beneath their feet started to shake, as a barrier of water emerged in front of the two, blocking the kunai, followed by a chain of explosions, which created yet another cloud of steam. And from said cloud of steam, Fuu appeared, tanto readied to skewer the Uchiha. Shisui's Sharingan started to spin, and as if everything moved in slow motion, expertly dodged the thrust, before slashing Fuu's own throat. However, rather than blood, water started to pour from the wound, before the alleged Fuu burst into water.

"A decoy!" Shisui realized too late.

A splash from the back alerted them from the ambush, and saw Torune, not wearing any clothes from the waist up, charging at them, whose entire skin had turned purple for no reason, both arms extended as if trying to grab them, rather than punching them. Acting

purely on instinct, Shisui grabbed Shizune's hand, made a hand seal with the other, and Body Flickered several meters away to put some distance.

Which is what Fuu was expecting.

"Mental Scourge Jutsu!"

Shisui felt a short but very painful and throbbing migraine assaulting his brain. A feeling of uneasiness washed upon him.

"What... what the hell was that?" Shisui asked, feeling a bit dizzy.

"Damn, I know that jutsu. The Mental Scourge is a Yamanaka Clan jutsu that prevents the target from using ninjutsu," Shizune explained. "It doesn't last forever, but usually last long enough for the caster to finish the battle by then."

"And if I try to use ninjutsu..." Shisui began.

"You'll feel like your head will explode," Shizune finished.

"Fine. I see, no ninjutsu then. I'll have to get creative," Shisui stated.

"Then get those creative juices flowing, because they're coming!" Shizune warned, as Fuu and Torune were once again charging at them.

"Very well then. Given that ninjutsu is not an option, I'll take them head on, and try to create an opening for you to exploit," Shisui told the medic-nin.

"Got it!" Shizune nodded.

"Also, make sure the masked guy doesn't touch you," Shisui warned. "His skin is covered in million upon millions of diminute beetles. I don't know what they do, but better not to take any risks."

"The Sharingan is sure something, to see the secret of my trump card with a mere glance," Torune said. "Not that it will help you in the long run!"

Shisui dashed forwards towards the incoming ninjas. His tanto clashed against Fuu's, and while they were locked, Torune took advantage of the moment in order to punch Shisui. Shizune, however, intervened just in time by delivering a double kick into Torune's face, hurling him backwards.

"SHIZUNE, TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES, NOW!" Shisui yelled. "But try not to touch them!"

Not wasting any time to ask why, Shizune quickly kicked her shoes out of her feet, making sure not to touch them with any other part of her body.

" I thought we'd be safe if our skin remained untouched, but it seems they can propagate through inorganic matter as well," Shisui thought, as his Sharingan stared at the sinking sandals. If it wasn't for his Bloodline Limit, his wife would pretty much be dead now.

Fuu snapped him out of his brief thoughts when he attacked again

" They seem to be entirely focused on Shisui. Better for me then!" Shizune thought, as she pulled three senbon, and tossed them at Fuu, who was forced to disengage Shisui in order to deflect the attack. Shizune decided not to give them a moment to breathe, and his hands started to form hand seals. "Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

The water around them started to gather and formed a massive serpentine dragon. Letting out a distorted roar, the dragon lunged at the two Root ninjas, who once again where forced to jump back.

"With all these water around, somebody with a water affinity has the advantage," Torune mentioned. "We won't be able to touch Shisui as long as his wife is defending him."

"In hindsight, this was a poor choice for a battlefield," Fuu observed. "What shall we do? Should we try to take her out first?"

"No, even without ninjutsu, Shisui is still the more dangerous of the two. We should neutralize him before your jutsu wears off," Torune replied. "Then, there shouldn't be any problem taking care of Shizune."

"Shisui it is, then. But we'll have to make sure Shizune doesn't jump on us like she's been doing so far," Fuu replied.

"Leave that to me," Torune said, as he clapped his hands together. Upon separating then, a dark purple gaseous mass started to form, growing bigger by each second. "Make sure you don't touch this: Poison Cloud Jutsu!"

Torune blew the cloud forward, creating a smokescreen that quickly advanced towards the Uchiha couple, which were forced to take a few steps backwards.

"Shizune, I have a plan to take them out," Shisui said. "It's kind of risky, and we need to split up for it to work."

"Don't worry, whatever you have thought, I trust you," Shizune replied. "You're thinking in running around the cloud, right?"

"Jackpot. You go to the right, and I'll go to the left. Make sure to strike when the opportunity arrives," Shisui instructed.

"Understood."

The Uchiha couple took different directions, surrounding the expanding swarm of microscopic beetles from opposite sides. Even if they couldn't be seen, Fuu was able to sense their positions and from where they were coming.

"Torune, here they come!" Fuu warned.

The first one to appear was Shisui, holding several shuriken in both hands, which he tossed at Torune. The Aburame jumped backwards, as he skillfully deflected all the steel stars with several swipes of his tanto.

"And here's Shizune," Fuu said, just as the black haired medic-nin made her presence known.

Shizune rolled up her sleeve, revealing her wrist mounted senbon launcher, which fired multiple needles at the Yamanaka Root agent, who, like his partner before, also deflected with his tanto while jumping backwards. Both Fuu and Torune noticed that Shisui and Shizune were pushing them against each other, and thus made sure to keep their distance.

"So, this is your plan? Getting me to accidentally infect Fuu with my rinkaichu?" Torune asked. "Not bad, but it's not going to work. Our teamwork has been honed over years of training and doing missions together. I know how to fight without endangering him."

"Yeah, that was our plan," Shisui admitted. "And even if you caught up, it was too late."

Shisui then motioned both hands in opposite directions, much to Torune's confusion, upon he saw a faint light flicker around them.

"This is..." Torune said in realization. "Fuu, watch out!"

But like Shisui said, it was too late. The shuriken Shisui had tossed a moment ago had ninja wire attached to them. With that quick motion, Shisui maneuvered the shuriken to move around Fuu, tying the ninja wire against him.

"Damn!" Fuu cursed, as the ninja wire immobilized him.

"Shizune, now!" Shisui shouted.

The medic-nin already charged at the immobilized Yamanaka, and delivering a flying kick to the chest that sent him into the air, helped by Shisui pulling him as well. Torune was unable to move in time, and the orange haired man crashed into him. Even if they only touched for less than a second, it was already enough. Multiple purple spots appeared around Fuu, which started to grow as the beetles devoured his flesh and chakra, and used them to breed at an alarming rate.

"AAAAAAAARRGH!" Fuu screamed, as he futilely tried to wipe the tiny insects away from his body. With each passing second, the pain was becoming more and more unbearable.

"Fuu, hold on!" Torune said, as she rushed towards his fallen teammate.

However, before he could help him, Shizune landed in front of him, making a splash when her feet touched the water. Two kunai appeared in each of her hands, and started to deliver quick swipes at the Root agent, trying to keep him away from the agonizing Yamanaka.

"Get out of the way!" Torune desperately shouted, as he countered Shizune's attacks with blows of his own. Unfortunately, in his urge to help his partner, he had taken his eyes from Shisui, and that moment of distraction is all what the Uchiha needed to dash and plunge his tanto into the Aburame's back, piercing his heart. "Urk..."

Unlike Fuu, Torune's death was quick and painless. Wordlessly, Shisui walked towards the still agonizing Fuu, and quickly stabbed his tanto into the Yamanaka's chest, putting an end to his misery.

"Okay, done," Shizune said, panting a little. "Well done."

"Thanks. They thought they could beat me if they cut me off of my jutsu. But this is what happens when you underestimate the Uchiha clan," Shisui replied, as he turned his head towards the last remaining enemy. "Now, time to end Root forever."

Fortunately for Danzo, his minions had bought him enough time to undo all the locks protecting his right arm. Not to mention that they had wore Shisui and Shizune down a little, making the upcoming fight easier.

"Fuu and Torune were two of my best agents," Danzo replied, as the last bracer fell down, revealing a bandaged arm. "Finding suitable replacements is going to take quite some time and effort."

"Guess that you don't care about the lives that had been lost here, do you?" Shisui spat. "You only see them as tools you can replace."

"Ninjas are nothing but tools, Shisui. All of us," Danzo said, as he started to unwrap the bandages of his arm. "However, if I can take your eyes, their deaths won't be in vain."

Both Shisui and Shizune's eyes grew wide open after most of the bandages were removed, revealing Danzo's right arm. It was much paler than the rest of his skin, but the most horrifying part was the multiple Sharingan eyes on it. Danzo also removed the bandages covering his right eye, revealing yet another Sharingan.

"Now, let's begin."

Author's Notes: We're reaching the climax of the Root Arc, and boy, I'm really excited. Next chapter, Shisui & Shizune versus Danzo! Will the Uchiha pay Danzo back for stealing his eye shortly before the Uchiha Insurrection? Or will Danzo succeed where he failed a few years ago? Let's say that this is a fight I've been planning to write pretty much since the beginning of the story, and I'm so glad that we're so close to that part.

Now you had it. Operation: Rising Phoenix involved kidnapping several young individuals with powerful Bloodline Limits. While Danzo also used them as a distraction, he was hoping to get his hands on at least one of those kids. That's why, even if it might look dumb, Danzo decided to stay and fight Shisui when he

heard he was only accompanied by Shizune. The man refuses to go away with his hands empty.

You know, I was originally planning to end the last chapter with the montage of the kids being kidnapped, but I decided against it since most readers would get mad at me making it appear as if the bad guys were going to get another win on Konoha *again* . By the way, the trio of Genin that were taking care of Shiro and Shizune are a reference to other anime, in both their appearance and the way they die. Let's see if you guys can guess which one ;)

Like many of you guessed (not that it wasn't obvious) Yakumo Kurama wasn't dead. Danzo's agents abducted her, and he turned her into one of his puppet agents. Thanks to reviewer AzureTemplar who suggested this idea after my first attempt at introducing Yakumo in the story failed.

Thanks to Ookamii88 for betareading the chapter.

Next chapter, Shisui and Shizune versus Danzo! Are you excited for this fight? Because I surely am! In the meantime, leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter and your predictions on the next! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Revenge of the Uchiha

Author's Note: Gotta say, I was surprised how many viewers were claiming for Danzo's blood, mostly I wasn't even trying to make readers hate him (I wasn't trying to make them like him either), I was just trying to write him as faithful to canon as possible. Though guess that "faithful to canon" on this instance means that readers will be claiming for his blood.

Anyway, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 80:

Revenge of the Uchiha

or

Control Zed

Valley of the End

Shisui and Shizune stared wide eyed at Danzo's right arm, its many Sharingan eyes wiggling and moving around, as if trying to scan the surroundings. Not that Danzo could see through them, since those eyes weren't connected to the brain via nerve cords.

"Just... what the...?" Shizune mumbled, as she tried to shake off the shock.

"You just weren't happy with letting me stop the Uchiha Insurrection," Shisui seethed, his hands clenching into fists. "You just had to desecrate their bodies for more power, didn't you?"

"I just let Konoha see the Uchiha for what they truly are, savages who let their emotions run wild and unchecked," Danzo replied, sounding as stoic as ever. "A ninja should never let their emotions

get in the way, they're nothing but a distraction, an obstacle to overcome."

"For your apparent dislike of the Uchiha, you seem to like the Sharingan quite a lot," Shizune pointed out.

"It would be quite illogical to discard it," Danzo flatly replied. "The Sharingan is one of the most powerful Bloodline Limits in existence. If only there was a way to harvest such power without having to deal with the Uchiha and their many flaws... that's why I tried to take your children with me. Those kids are still young and malleable. They could be raised into the perfect ninjas, which would also serve as the foundation of a new and improved Uchiha Clan. A new generation of Sharingan-wielding ninjas that wouldn't be corrupted by emotions and would live and die for Konoha."

"You... you're sick!" Shizune shouted. "How can you talk in such way? Strip children of their humanity in order to turn them into living weapons! Treating ninjas as nothing but tools!"

"Ninjas are nothing but tools," Danzo insisted. "The moment we wear a forehead protector, we become the tools that will protect Konoha and slay its enemies, and sacrifice for Konoha if the need arises. A tool can't have room for emotions or loved ones. And the moment a tool can no longer be used, it must be discarded and replaced by something new. That's the way of the ninja."

"Your way, maybe," Shisui replied.

"One doesn't need to be a genius to see that you two are angry with me to the point of hatred," Danzo stated. "And that's why you're going to lose. You let your emotions guide your actions. You may think that they're a source of power, but the power they can grant is very finite. Nothing compared to what discipline and determination can bring."

"How can you say you protect Konoha, if you don't have loved ones? If you don't allow yourself to love? How can you be motivated to do

what you do, if in the end all you're doing is protecting people that mean nothing to you at all?"

"That's an egotistical point of view," Danzo replied, shaking his head. "So, you only protect Konoha because it benefits a few people who are close to you? I don't need to have bonds to do what is right."

"And what about the information leak to the Akatsuki?" Shizune brought up, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "How can you claim that it was for the good of Konoha?"

"The Akatsuki are merely tools that can be used and manipulated for our sake. By hunting jinchuriki, they deprive the other villages of their power," Danzo explained.

"And how is letting the Akatsuki get their hands on them any better? They have six Tailed Beasts captured, for Kami's sake!" Shisui pointed out, though he left out one half of the Nine Tails. "Do you know how much harm can they do should they decide to unleash them?"

"Akatsuki might have the means to control the beasts, but so do we. Once Akatsuki captures all seven foreign jinchuriki, all we need to do is assault their base in Amegakure," Danzo said. Seeing Shisui and Shizune's confusion and shock, he decided to elaborate. "Jiraya's spies got multiple hints that lead to the leader of Akatsuki being in control of Amegakure, so that's where the captive Tailed Beasts must be held. All we need to do is destroy Ame, take the Tailed Beasts for ourselves... and then Konoha shall reign supreme over the elemental nations."

"You're sick," Shizune hissed. "No wonder you were always passed over for the title of Hokage."

"I will always do what's best for Konoha," Danzo defended. "No matter how other people see me or my ideas, I will always do what is right."

"Nothing you ever did could be considered as 'right' under any sane morality system," Shisui spat. "But trying to kidnap our children... you're not getting out of this alive."

"I see you're talking a lot, but so far, you didn't make any move," Danzo replied. "Or do you hope to take me down with your words alone?"

"No, I was merely stalling for time," Shisui replied. He let out a sigh of relief. As he shot Danzo a bright smile. "And... there. I'm no longer under the effect of that Yamanaka jutsu that stopped me from using my own. Thanks for patiently waiting until the effect wore off."

Danzo emoted for the first time that day, as a scowl developed in his face. "You cheeky bastard. You're a strong ninja, I'll give you that. But unfortunately, your eyes are the only part of you worth salvaging."

"Yes, I believe that time for words have passed," Shisui said, as his smile disappeared, replaced by a look of subdued anger, his Sharingan glinting with a red light. "Now it's time for you to suffer just retribution for all the Uchiha you indirectly killed, as well as kidnapping my children!"

All who met Shisui Uchiha would describe him as an anomaly. While most of the Uchiha clan members -back in the time when the clan boasted more than a hundred ninja- used to grow either prideful, violent or reserved, often believed due the Sharingan's influence. Shisui, however, was neither. He was a ball of sunshine, always smiling, cracking jokes, greeting politely everyone, even strangers, willing to support others when they were at their lowest, always willing to forgive and forget anybody who had wronged him.

People said he was the light that shone in a clan engulfed by darkness. One of the few Uchiha who rejected the hatred that cursed their clan, and embraced the Will of Fire that represented Konoha.

Today, however, Shisui wasn't like that. There wouldn't be any mercy nor forgiveness. Just this time, Shisui would embrace the darkness and the hatred that coursed through the veins of any Uchiha. He wasn't worried, for he trusted his wife would snap him to his senses if he delved too much into the darkness. Still, it would be better to end this as quickly as possible.

Reaching into his ninja tool pouch, Shisui grabbed a pair of smoke bombs and tossed them forward, creating a huge cloud of smoke, while Danzo made three hand seals. His Sharingan impaired, Shisui used the Body Flicker to appear behind him, and sank his tanto into his back, making sure to pierce his heart. Not finished, he pulled the tanto with one hand as he made hand seals with the other.

"Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

The blade of his tanto was covered in a cloak of flames. Spinning over his heels, Shisui delivered an horizontal slash at Danzo's neck, cleanly separating his head from his body, who fell forward with a thud.

"Nobody shall suffer for your machinations anymore, Danzo," Shisui told his enemy's corpse.

Shisui put off the fire of his blade, before sheathing it back, as he walked towards Shizune.

"Man, that was easier than I thought. His minions were a far greater challenge," Shisui said, sounding rather cheerful. "Guess his age wore him down far more than the Third..."

Suddenly, Shizune's expression was one of horror, much to the Uchiha's confusion.

"SHISUI, WATCH OUT!"

The Uchiha instinctively turned around, and his eyes caught sight of Danzo, his head still attached to his body, ready to thrust a kunai into

him. Thankfully, he still had enough time to unsheath his tanto and parry the swipe before it could touch his skin.

Shizune rushed forward, making hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Shizune jumped into the air, her cheeks puffing, before expelling from her mouth multiple water bullets at the leader of Root, who disengaged Shisui and jumped backwards several times in order to dodge the attack. Shisui quickly rejoined his wife.

"Just... what the hell happened?" Shisui asked. "I swore I killed Danzo!"

"Maybe a clone? Or a genjutsu?" Shizune offered, being just as confused as her husband.

Shisui shook his head. "Clones immediately dispel or break down the moment they take fatal damage. And I doubt that Danzo can put me under a genjutsu. Besides, you saw me killing him as well, right?"

"Yes," Shizune replied. "You killed Danzo and then... his body disappeared and reappeared behind you, completely unharmed."

"Save the three of us the bother of a battle, and surrender already," Danzo offered. "Do it, and I promise the woman will live."

"You're far more senile than I thought if you think we're going to surrender!" Shizune shouted.

"Come Shizune-chan. Let's attack together. We need to find out whatever's that jutsu!" Shisui said, as he charged forwards.

"I'm right behind you!" Shizune said, running as well.

Danzo was as nonplussed as ever, though one could see a little of his annoyance. It made Shisui even angrier, the fact that the Root

leader wasn't even taking this fight seriously. However, as they charged, Danzo brought his hands together and started to weave hand seals. Shisui immediately recognized those seals.

"Shizune-chan, scatter!" Shisui warned, as he rushed to the left.

Shizune nodded and headed into the opposite direction, just as Danzo was about to fire his jutsu.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Bullets!"

Danzo spat multiple air bullets in a wide range, trying to hit both Shisui and Shizune, though mostly the former. Thanks to his Sharingan, Shisui was able to pinpoint their trajectory and gracefully dodge all of them, while making several hand seals of his own.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Shisui expelled multiple fireballs at Danzo in return. Danzo, however, also had a Sharingan, which allowed him to easily dodge them. However, he was so focused on Shisui, he didn't notice Shizune getting close to him, preparing a jutsu of her own.

"Posion Mist!"

Once again, Shizune cast her signature jutsu, expelling a purple cloud of toxic gas that quickly engulfed Danzo. However, even if the Root leader held his breath in time, Shisui's fireballs ignited the poisonous cloud, resulting in a massive explosion. Shizune and Shisui quickly jumped back, landing near each other.

"Did that get him? Or did he escape again?" Shizune asked, frantically looking around.

"My Sharingan saw him being incinerated by the explosion," Shisui said, as his eyes wandered around, trying to look for Danzo. "I wouldn't count him out yet."

They both were warned by a loud whirring sound coming towards them. Turning towards the direction of the sound, they saw two shuriken flying at them. The shuriken were engulfed by several blades made of pure wind.

"Shit!" Shisui cursed, as he and Shizune jumped in opposite directions once again.

And once again, the attacks were aimed at Shisui. Unfortunately for the Uchiha, his Sharingan didn't catch them in time, and was unable to dodge it completely. Even if he dodged the shuriken themselves, their wind aura slashed his side, resulting in a stream of blood coming from it.

"ARGH!" Shisui shouted, as he took his hand to his wound.

"SHISUI!" Shizune screamed, rushing towards him.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Blade!"

Danzo, who was a few meters in the direction the shuriken came from, held another two shuriken in his hands. He infused them with wind chakra from his mouth, enveloping them in a razor wind aura, before tossing them again. Shizune's hands weaved seals as fast as her dexterity allowed her.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Using the water of the valley, a thick watery barrier emerged between the shuriken and herself. The wind-enhanced shuriken tried to force their way through the barrier, forcing Shizune to pour more chakra into her jutsu, until Danzo's attack was finally repelled.

"Phew..." Shizune sighed in relief. But her relief was short lived when, through the corner of her eye, saw Danzo rushing towards the now defenseless Shisui. *"Oh shit! This was just a distraction!"*

Danzo reached Shisui, and catching him by the neck in a very strong grip. The Uchiha coughed blood.

"Now, time to recover what should be mine," Danzo calmly said, as his other hand shot at Shisui's eye, his fingers curved as if they were claws.

However, before he could grab Shisui, Shizune appeared besides them, and grabbed Danzo's arm before he could gouge her husband's eye.

"You won't touch him!" Shizune yelled, before slapping an explosive seal on Danzo's back, and sending him flying with a well placed kick to the chest. While he was in the air, Shizune detonated the explosive tag, blowing Danzo's body to bits. With the Root leader out the way, for the time being, Shizune directed all her attention to her husband. "Shisui, are you okay?"

"I've been better," Shisui said, coughing more blood. "Thanks. That's the second time you saved my ass."

Shizune didn't say anything, pulled a kunai, and used it to cut Shisui's shirt, leaving him completely exposed from the waist up.

"Heh... not that I don't love it, but I'm afraid that this isn't the best moment to get intimate..." Shisui replied.

"Shut up, you dummy. I needed the clothes out of the way if I'm to treat your wounds," Shizune said, as she placed her hands on his slash wound, which started to glow with a green light.

Relief washed over Shisui's body as the healing chakra slowly but surely repaired the damage done to his body, as well as replenishing some of his energy and chakra. Then, Danzo reappeared a few meters in front of them as if he was a ghost, once again completely unharmed. He brought his hands together, making a hand seal.

"Release!"

Shisui's Sharingan noticed how Danzo's chakra changed. Did he thought that Shisui had put him under a genjutsu? Well, maybe he should have, given that ninjutsu wasn't giving them any results.

"Shizune-chan, hurry, I don't think he's going to stay there and let you heal me," Shisui urged his wife.

"Just a second!" Shizune told him, as he finished healing the injury.

But much to Shisui's confusion, Danzo did not attack. He just stayed there, slowly breathing in and out, as if trying to regain his energy.

"And... done!" Shizune said, removing her hands from her husband's exposed torso. "Just try to make sure you're not hit on that spot again."

Despite the medic-nin's warning, Shisui had the feeling that Danzo would focus on that area the most. Speaking of Danzo, Shisui noticed something about him. Or better said, his arm. Two of his Sharingan were closed. It was then when a realization dawned upon him with the power of an avalanche.

"Of course! How didn't I realize what he was using," Shisui said in realization. "All those Sharingan... it makes perfect sense now. Tell me Danzo, how do you know about Izanagi?"

"You kid have no idea of all the things I know about. Especially about your clan," Danzo replied. "And if you knew what I know, you'd surrender your eyes to me without further resistance."

"Izanagi?" Shizune asked.

"It's an Uchiha Forbidden Jutsu," Shisui began. "It's a bit hard to explain. Once activated, as long as it lasts, the caster pretty much becomes a genjutsu."

"Uh? How does that work?"

"Another way to explain it is a jutsu that allows the caster to manipulate reality, allowing him to decide what is real and what is not," Shisui explained. "If the user suffers a crippling or fatal injury, he can simply turn that injury into an illusion, negating it."

"Wow..." Shizune was amazed. How a jutsu so powerful could exist? "Please tell me there's a way to counter it. Because if Danzo can use that jutsu indefinitely..."

"Don't worry, he can't," Shisui said, much to Shizune's relief. "The jutsu lasts about a minute, give or take, and once the time runs out, the caster of the jutsu loses a Sharingan permanently."

"I see. That explains why some of Danzo's Sharingan are closed," Shizune observed.

"Yes, but he still has plenty to spare. Though, another of the jutsu's drawback is that consumes a lot of chakra. Danzo must have quite the impressive..." Shisui's words died in his mouth another realization hit him. "Wait, that hand seal... he wasn't trying to undo a genjutsu! He undid the Izanagi in order to conserve his chakra!"

"It also begets the question on how he's able to sustain those many Sharingan without Six Paths chakra," Shizune noted. "Kakashi is in the prime of his life, and just one leaves him pretty winded."

"It doesn't matter!" Shisui said, as he grabbed his tanto, charging forwards. "Quickly, before he reactivates his jutsu again!"

"Too slow," Danzo said, as he started to make hand seals, even if they weren't those of the Izanagi. "As for young Shizune's inquiry... I think this may hint her towards the answer. Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The valley started to rumble, and from the water below around them multiple trees started to emerge, forcing the Uchiha couple to abort their attack.

"The hell? He can use Wood Release too!?" Shisui asked in shock, looking around at the growing trees. "Just how many Bloodline limits did this guy steal and graft into himself?"

"Just those that matter," Danzo calmly replied.

"The Tailed Beasts," Shizune said in realization. "That's why he wants to get their hands on them. With Wood Release, he'll be able to put them under his control, like Hashirama did decades ago. And I believe the Sharingan serve a similar purpose."

"Very clever, Shizune. A mostly astute observation. Not that it changed anything," Danzo replied. "Now please die, both of you."

Danzo made another hand seal, and the trees and roots all shot towards the Uchiha couple. An attack from so many directions would be impossible to dodge. There was only one thing Shisui could do.

"Shizune!" Shisui shouted, pulling his wife towards him, and wrapping his arms around her in a protective manner, before the two of them were buried under an avalanche of green.

Even if Shisui and Shizune had no way of knowing it, this was the first time Danzo used Wood Release in actual combat. He obviously trained it in secret, but never used a jutsu of such magnitude. Orochimaru splicing his genes with those of the First Hokage gave him a physical boost, but was unable to control Wood Release properly.

That changed, however, when Sai brought Rin's severed finger. Analyzing the finger, the Root scientists found out that the way Rin's DNA was combined with that of Hashirama was way superior to anything Orochimaru attempted. And with sample of flesh, blood and bone tissue, his scientists were able to tweak Orochimaru's body modifications in order to made them more stable. This finally allowed Danzo to use and control Wood Release.

Indeed, sending Sai alongisde the group that went to aid the Kirigakure rebels was one of the best decisions he ever made.

"That should be it," Danzo said, allowing himself to breathe in relief. He calmly walked towards the spot where Shisui and Shizune had been. That jutsu had cost him some precious chakra, but thankfully it had been worth it. Plus it was better than sacrificing more Sharingan with Izanagi. Better finish the fight now before more of Shisui's allies could show up. Danzo knew he could beat the Uchiha, even with Tsunade's protégé supporting him, but his odds wouldn't be that good if more people joined the fray. He knew for sure none of his men would walk near the valley. "Hopefully, at least one of the eyes is still intact..."

As Danzo prepared to remove the vines, something burst from underground, much to the elder's surprise. Shisui and Shizune, wrapped around each other's arms and any worse for the wear, were inside what appeared to be a giant ghostly green ribcage. An equally large skeleton formed around the ribcage, before it generated skin and muscles, and finally, armor.

"What the...?" Danzo mumbled, as he was forced to jump backwards.

"You aren't the only one with a hidden surprise, you son of a bitch!" Shisui angrily shouted. A drill-like spear appeared on the construct's right arm, and thrust it at him. "Now die already!"

" *Dammit, no time to reactivate the Izanagi!*" Danzo distressingly thought. *"This is my only chance to survive!"*

Suddenly, a massive tree emerged from Danzo's chest, tearing his white shirt to pieces, and sucessfully stopping the incoming spear attack. Danzo detached himself from the tree, as he landed a few meters behind.

"Don't let him reactivate the jutsu!" Shizune urged him.

Shisui nodded, and made a hand seal. "Susanoo: Tsukumo!"

Shisui's construct fired a barrage of green glowing chakra stakes at Danzo, but sadly, it wasn't fast enough, and the Root leader quickly made the three hand seals in order to reactivate Izanagi. Many of the missiles pierced him, but Danzo simply disappeared, before reappearing completely unharmed.

"I didn't know you could use Susanoo," Danzo commented. "I knew Itachi and Sasuke could use it, but I didn't even cross my mind that you had access to it as well, despite having two Mangekyo Sharingan. Such an oversight almost costed me dearly."

"Yeah well, like I said, don't presume that you know everything about me," Shisui spat. "you're about to- ARGH!"

Shisui fell to one knee, and started to cough blood again. His Susanoo quickly disappeared, as the Uchiha reached for his eyes.

"Shisui!" Shizune shouted, kneeling besides him.

"I'm... I'm okay," Shisui weakly said. "I forgot how much chakra this shit consumes. I don't think I'll be able to do this again."

"I don't understand... Sasuke-kun doesn't have this problem when using his Susanoo..." Shizune pointed out.

"Sasuke has an Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan, which reduces the Susanoo's chakra cost to negligible levels. Plus he has a better hang of this power than I do. I only used it once before, and it was even before we started to date," Shisui explained.

"I see. Anyway, let's not despair," Shizune said, as she applied the Mystical Palm Jutsu to Shisui once again, while also helping him back on his feet. "I have faith that we can win this."

"You're grossly underestimating me, Shizune-san," Danzo replied. "I'm sure you think that, because you were trained by Tsunade, that

alone gives you an edge over me. Her grandmother and Hashirama-sama's wife, Mito Uzumaki, was my Jonin-sensei."

"With all respect to Mito-sama, she did a piss poor job with you then," Shizui angrily spat.

"I'm afraid that yes, I quite never lived up to her expectations in certain areas. But that's irrelevant now," Danzo said, while making more hand seals. "Wood Release: Acid Spore Cannon!"

The water started to shake again, and a single, large green vine emerged from down below. Said vine was crowned by a large flower. The flower opened its petals, and fired a greenish yellow blob at the Uchiha couple.

"Jump!" Shizune shouted.

Both she and Shisui jumped in opposite directions. The missile crashed against the vines they were standing on until then, exploding into a yellow cloud. With a hissing sound, the concentrated corrosive spores quickly consumed them.

The flower continued firing its acid projectiles at Shisui, while ignoring Shizune. While this forced Shisui into the defensive, it gave Shizune a chance to counterattack. She quickly formed several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Severing Wave!"

Shizune expelled from her mouth an extremely thin, extremely pressurized stream of water towards the vine, cleanly cutting it in half.

"Good job, Shizune-chan!"

"You have an awful habit of declaring victory way ahead of time," Danzo commented.

Danzo's statement was followed by three more flowers emerging from underwater, with two of them firing at Shisui, and the third one focusing on Shizune. The two of them dodges the acid projectiles while trying to get close to Danzo, but found it increasingly difficult to do so.

"Shit, this guy caught on, and is preventing Shizune-chan and I from fighting together!" Shisui thought, as he tried his best to dodge the corrosive missiles, which were fired at an increasingly faster pace. *"However, I think I have an idea of what will be Danzo's next move..."*

Shisui tried to shot a glance at the Root leader, but he was nowhere to be found. As he jumped back in order to dodge two acid shots, Danzo reappeared near Shisui, kunai in hand.

"End of the fight. Time to die," Danzo said, as he prepared to attack.

"I knew you'd use those attacks as a distraction!" Shisui triumphantly said, as he jumped back while making hand seals as fast as possible. "Fire Release: Meltdown!"

Shisui exhaled a massive fireball that quickly engulfed Danzo. Rather than shooting forward, the Fireball continued expanding in every direction, until it also engulfed the three acid spitting flowers, quickly reducing them to ashes. Danzo, however, reappeared a few meters from him, once again not worse for the wear. Shizune also took the chance to quickly regroup with her husband.

"Godammit, stop not-dying!" Shisui complained.

"... not-dying?" Shizune repeated, shooting her husband a confused glance.

"How do you call what he's doing?" Shisui replied.

"You're making this infuriatingly difficult," Danzo stated, even if his voice or body language didn't betray any sign of anger.

"Look who's talking," Shisui spat back.

Danzo and Shisui continued to trade glares. The Root leader was studying the young Uchiha, wondering what other nasty surprises he had hidden. He could also see that, despite being much younger, Shisui appeared to be far more exhausted than Danzo was. Then again, Shizune appeared to still have enough stamina to spare.

"It seems that using Susanoo drained quite a lot of his chakra. He might not be used to it. It's unlikely that he'll use it again," Danzo thought, before quickly reprimanding himself and pushing that thought out of his head. *"No, I can't afford to think like that. I already underestimated Shisui once, and nearly costed me the fight. I need to fight thinking that he can unleash that jutsu at me at any moment. In that case..."*

Danzo bit his thumb, and started to make hand seals. Of course, Shizune and Shisui immediately caught what he was going to do, but reacted a bit too late.

"You can feel proud of yourselves. Not many foes push me so much as to rely on this," Danzo replied, before slamming his hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

In a burst of smoke, a large, orange elephant-like being appeared, creating small waves of all the water that it displaced upon appearing. Despite having a trunk and long fangs like an elephant, it also had orange fur, and its legs ended in long, sharp claws.

"What... what the hell is that?" Shisui asked.

"A Baku," Shizune replied, sounding rather worried. "It's a very powerful summon. It's said it can devour dreams and nightmares. We better watch out."

Danzo jumped onto the Baku's head, and without having to tell it anything, the beast charged forward.

"Oh shit, here he comes!" Shizune shouted.

Shisui started to make hand seals. "Don't worry, I'll stop it on its tracks! Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Once again, Shisui breathed a massive fireball at the incoming monster, leaving a trail of steam as it flew. The Uchiha was confident the Baku wouldn't be able to dodge it, given both its size and its current momentum. Of course, Danzo was about to prove why he was a contender for the title of Hokage.

As it rushed, the Baku took a deep breath, before releasing a stream of pressurized air from its trunk. Danzo followed, making the hand seals of another wind jutsu.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Great Sphere!"

Danzo exhaled from his mouth a rather large sphere of concentrated, pressurized air. His jutsu merged with his summon's attack, forming a massive gale that pushed the fireball back at Shisui, much to the Uchiha's distress.

"The hell? How can he use a wind jutsu to counter a fire based one!?" the indignant Uchiha protested.

"If it's more powerful than yours, it can do it! Now shut up and run!" Shizune urged her husband, as the two of them retreated towards the waterfall flanked by the giant statues of Hashirama and Madara.

As he gave chase a top of his beast, Danzo took a moment to check his right arm. He still had five Sharingan opened. While he felt they were enough to finish the fight, he decided it was best not to take any chances and finish the fight as quickly as possible. He could no longer be conservative with the chakra anymore. His hands started to form more hand seals, albeit this time not for a wind jutsu.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

Once again, a multitude of wooden vines and roots emerged all around Shisui and Shizune, swiftly cutting their escape. However, this time Shisui wasn't going to let him trap them like that. He bit his thumb, before making five hand seals, and slammed his palm into the water's surface.

"Summoning jutsu!"

From a burst of smoke, a giant crow emerged, with Shisui and Shizune riding on its back. The crow quickly flapped his wings, raising some wind as it gained altitude. Danzo, however, was unfazed.

"You won't escape me, Uchiha," Danzo said, mostly to himself, before his eyes darted towards his minion. "Baku, stop them."

The orange furred beast opened its jaws, creating a powerful suction force between them, which started to suck all the air around it. Shisui's giant crow was stopped on his tracks, being caught inside a powerful wind current which pulled him towards the Baku. The bird flapped his wings as fast as he could, but to no avail.

"Shisui-san..." the crow managed to say. "I'm afraid... I can't..."

"Don't worry, Kurokaze-sama! I know how to get rid of this guy!" Shisui said, as his hands flew through more hand seals. "Hope you like spicy food! Fire Release-"

Danzo, however, made a single hand seal faster.

"Sealing Art: Self Cursing Seal!"

Suddenly, Shisui felt his whole body go completely rigid just as he was about to use his fire jutsu, as black marks started to spread around his body.

"Shisui?" Shizune asked, worried. Her worry multiplied tenfold as Shisui started to slip away, pulled by the wind. Fortunately, she was

able to grab him in time. "SHISUI! Hold on!"

Shisui tried to break the cursed seal with the force of his chakra, but sadly he found out it wasn't enough.

"Damn, when did Danzo placed a seal...?" Shisui inwardly asked, as he mentally reviewed the battle so far. The answer came when he remembered that Danzo had briefly held him by his neck when he was trying to gouge his eyes out. *"So he placed a seal when he was going to take my eyes just in case... bastard's quite the planner..."*

"You have lost, Shizune. You can't protect your husband and fight me at the same time," Danzo calmly said. "As a show of respect to your teacher, I will spare your life. But only if you surrender now."

Of course, being Tsunade's first apprentice, the black haired medic-nin had also inherited some of her master's stubbornness, and giving up wasn't apt of her vocabulary, especially when the life of a loved one was on the line. "Surrender this! Posion Mist!"

Shizune exhaled a cloud of poisonous gas, which was quickly sucked by the Baku. The effect was immediate, and the beast started to cough and cry in pain the moment he inhaled the toxic fumes. The damage done was so bad, the summoning was undone, and the orange furred animal disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving Danzo alone once again.

Next, Shizune quickly made several hand seals, before placing her hand on Shisui's chest, sending a burst of chakra through her body.

"Sealing Art: Lesser Void Touch!"

The effect was immediate, and the black marks spread around Shisui's body started to vanish, and as they did, the Uchiha started to recover his mobility. Trembling a little at first, he managed to sit up with Shizune's help.

"Thanks," he said, rubbing his sore limbs. "I lost on how many times you saved my ass already."

"Well, you saved me back then with your Susanoo," Shizune replied, smiling earnestly at him.

"I doubt that makes us even," Shisui said, chuckling awkwardly, before his eyes focused on Danzo. "Since when are you this good at fuinjutsu?"

"The perks of living with Jiraiya-sama for the late part of my childhood," Shizune explained. "I might not be as talented as an Uzumaki, but I did pick up quite a few useful things."

"Useful indeed," Shisui agreed, before looking at the ground below. Danzo was still there, looking up at them. "And you got rid of that annoying animal as well. You're the best."

"Now, let's get rid of the summoner. Can you still fight?" Shizune asked.

Shisui looked at Danzo, or better said at his right arm, and saw how one of its Sharingan closed. The Uchiha cracked his neck, and smiled with determination. "You can bet I am. In fact, I think I have an idea of how we can beat him for good. Follow my lead, and attack with as much intensity as you can, okay?"

Shizune wanted to ask how that was going to help against Izanagi, but decided to trust her husband, She energetically nodded. "You got it!"

The Uchiha couple jumped from the giant bird's back, falling towards Danzo. Shizune's hands were enveloped by blue chakra, taking the shape of two large chakra blades, while Shisui made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Shisui rained fireballs upon Danzo, who dodged the attack in spite of Izanagi being active. Shizune landed besides him, creating a huge splash the moment her feet hit the water, and delivered a flurry of rapid-pace swipes with her Chakra Scalpels, which Danzo alternated between dodging and parrying.

A whirring sound alerted danzo of multiple shuriken flying his way. He jumped backwards while crouching, avoiding both of them and Shizune. However, as he did this, he didn't notice Shisui body flickering besides him, and plunging his tanto into his back. Danzo, however, disappeared before reappearing a few meters away from them.

"How much long are you planning to keep this charade up?" Danzo asked in a somewhat bored tone.

"Until you drop dead!" Shisui replied.

Shisu started to Body Flicker constantly around Danzo, generating multiple afterimages around him. Despite his Sharingan, Danzo was unable to follow Shisui's movements, as he futilely tried to see where the Uchiha was moving. A bead of sweat ran through his temple.

"Even the Sharingan has its limits, old man!" Shisui said as he struck.

His tanto, however, was parried by Danzo's kunai.

"It doesn't matter. As long as I can see you, you won't be able to surprise me," Danzo calmly replied.

"Posion Mist!"

Shizune jumped above the two men, and exhaled another cloud of poisonous gas. Shisui was able to disengage Danzo and Body Flicker away in time, but the Root leader was engulfed by the mist. Not that it mattered, as Danzo reappeared a few meters out of the

cloud, none the worse for the wear. As Shisui and Shizune charged at him, he made several hand seals.

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

From the water emerged a serpentine dragon made of wood that lunged at the incoming Uchiha couple. It tried to devour the two of them, which were forced to jump in opposite directions to avoid the bite. Rather than Shisui, the dragon focused on Shizune this time around. However, the medic-nin knew what to do to counter it. Her hands flew through hand seals once more.

"Water Release: Water Severing Wave!"

Shizune expelled a thin stream of pressurized water, aimed at the dragon's neck, easily chopping its head off. However, much to her surprise, three other Wood Dragons emerged after the first one was destroyed, taking his place. Shizune was forced to jump back in order to avoid the incoming attack.

"Haven't you realized the difference in skill and power between you and me yet?" Danzo asked.

"Haven't you realized that you talk too much?" Shisui said, appearing behind Danzo. "Fire Release: Meltdown!"

Danzo was engulfed by a massive fireball, which also burned to ashes the wood dragons chasing Shizune, while also raising several clouds of steam from the nearby water.

"All you're going to accomplish by doing this is to exhaust your chakra pointlessly," Danzo replied, as he reappeared, once again completely unharmed.

"Trust me, our chakra isn't the only one that's getting depleted," Shisui replied. "Did you actually check how many Sharingan have left?"

"I know that I still have enough to..." but Danzo's words died on his mouth when he checked his right arm. Only two Sharingan remained, with one of them already closing off. The Root leader's eyes visibly widened. "What? No, this can't be right. How did this...?"

"I don't know if you're aware of the limitations, but Izanagi's duration isn't a constant," Shisui pointed out. "Its duration is proportional to the chakra you have, with one minute being its maximum time. By using Izanagi constantly, as well as other heavy chakra consuming jutsu like Wood Release, your chakra quickly plummeted, which in turn shortened the duration of the Izanagi.

"How did you know that? Nobody has used the Izanagi for as long as I did before!" Danzo replied.

"Easy. I've been keeping track of how long your eyes take to close. The first three were a minute each, so I thought that its duration was indeed constant. The fourth one, however, took fifty two seconds to close, and the fifth one only forty seven. From that point onwards, every eye took less and less time to close. That's why I realized that, if we pushed you constantly, we could reduce that time even further.

"Plus Shizune-chan and I are young and the prime of our lives, so we can afford going all out from time to time, but you?" Shisui asked. "How old are you, seventy? I mean, your Jonin-sensei was Tsunade-sama's grandma, for crying out loud! Even with Hashirama's cells boosting your power, your stamina can't be that great."

"You... you bastard!" Danzo shouted, showing emotion for the first time.

"There's a reason as for why Izanagi is a Forbidden Jutsu," Shisui said, shaking his head. "You probably thought that you could abuse it with enough Sharingan. But that's what you get when you think you're smarter than the clan who invented that jutsu, and whose eyes you stole and wear as if they were your own."

Shizune landed besides Shisui with a small splash.

"Good one, Shisui!" Shizune praised her husband. "Let's finish him off!"

"So, two eyes left. One in his arm, and the one in his face," Shisui observed. "Though he might not want to sacrifice the latter."

"Correction," Shizune said, smiling smugly. "One eye left."

Danzo saw how the last Sharingan in his arm closed. Not without a considerable amount of resignation, he made a hand seal.

"Cancel."

Shisui's Sharingan could see how Danzo's chakra shifted. It seems that he didn't want to use his remaining Sharingan left to fuel the Izanagi.

"Whose eye is that?" Shisui asked. "In order to be so protective of it."

"Fugaku Uchiha's," was Danzo's laconic answer. "He awakened the Mangekyo Sharingan during the Uchiha Insurrection."

"Yet you didn't use it against us," Shisui said. "Do you plan to use it now as a last resort?"

"I'm afraid I can't. Even with the regeneration provided by Hashirama's cells, my chakra levels are too low to use the Mangekyo Sharingan," Danzo explained.

"So, do you surrender then?" Shisui asked, as he menacingly walked towards Danzo, who made no effort to flee or even move. "Or do you plan to die fighting?"

"While my failure at acquiring your eyes is undeniable, I'm afraid that you won't claim my life today, Shisui Uchiha," Danzo confidently stated. "Or any other day for that matter."

That moment, Shizune noticed something above them, albeit not fast enough to prevent it in time.

"SHISUI, WATCH OUT!" she yelled as she jumped backwards.

Trusting his intuition, he followed his wife's example and jumped away from Danzo. That moment, several kunai with explosive tags attached rained from above, creating a chain of explosions between the Root leader and the Uchiha couple, raising some water and steam as well.

"I was afraid that you didn't get my message," Danzo said.

"What the...?" Shizune mumbled.

When their eyes refocused, they could see that Danzo was surrounded by Otogakure ninja, being led by no other than Kabuto Yakushi.

"Oh, we did. But we thought that, with the head start you had, our aid wouldn't be necessary," Kabuto replied, as he eyed Shisui and Shizune. "May I ask why did you let these two catch you?"

"No, you may not ask," Danzo firmly stated.

"I thought I had the right to know, given that you exposed our partnership to Konoha," Kabuto replied. "Orochimaru-sama won't be pleased with this development."

"Orochimaru still needs me, and you know that," Danzo replied, who was starting to sound impatient. "Now, can we leave already?"

"Very well then," Kabuto said with a shrug, as he took a step forward, looking ready to fight the Uchiha couple.

"So, you plan to keep us busy while your minions take Danzo away, right?" Shisui guessed, as he scowled at Kabuto. "Not going to happen. Shizune!"

"Yes!"

Shizune dashed at Kabuto, who was making hand seals, her chakra scalpels activated, while Shisui Body Flickered towards Danzo's position. However, neither of them were expecting what came next, once Kabuto finished weaving seals.

"Yin Release: Bringer of Darkness!"

The Oto ninjas threw more kunai with explosive tags attached at them, before the entire Valley of the End was engulfed by a cloak of absolute darkness. Choosing between trying to catch Danzo or avoiding the explosions, the Uchiha couple decided that their lives were more important. When the explosions happened, they managed to put enough distance to avoid the shockwave. Then, the aura of darkness vanished, revealing that Danzo, Kabuto and the Oto ninjas were longer there.

Realizing that Danzo had indeed escaped, Shisui stomped his foot in anger. "Dammit! Dammit all! We had him! We had him, and the bastard escaped from our grasp!"

"Shisui...?" Shizune asked. "Should we... go after them? They probably head to Orochimaru's old hideout in the Land of Sound."

Shisui just shook his head. "Forget it. We're in no shape to fight that many ninja. Danzo got away for good."

Shizune walked to her husband and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm... I'm sorry."

Shishui grabbed his wife's hand, and squeezed it a little. Looking into her eyes, he deactivated his Sharingan, and forced himself to smile. "It's okay, it's not your fault. Hell, if anything, I would have died a hundred times if it wasn't for you. Besides... at the very least our children are safe."

"Our children..." Shizune repeated. "Let's go back home. I want to hold them in my arms again."

"Me too," Shisui agreed, as the two of them headed south. "So, Danzo was working with Orochimaru all along. At this point, it's hardly surprising."

"Makes sense. Remember when Orochimaru invaded the village?" Shizune asked. "Danzo probably tipped Orochimaru about how to do it, where to attack, and what time would it be best."

"As if leaking information on the jinchuriki wasn't bad enough," Shisui said, shaking his head. "Hokage-sama is going to be almost as mad as I am when he hears the news."

...

Orochimaru's Land of Sound Lair, a couple hours later

The sun had set a few minutes ago, and the land was covered with the night's mantle of darkness. As Danzo expected, Konoha didn't send any teams to retrieve him. That doesn't mean that he and all the agents that successfully escaped could stay in that lair forever. They had to find a new hideout soon.

While Danzo and his men rested in the lair, guarded by Orochimaru's men, the Snake Sannin himself and his right hand man were discussing how the recent events had unfolded.

"It's a pity that Danzo failed to abduct not even one of all those targets," Orochimaru lamented, as he walked alongside Kabuto. "While there's little more I can learn from Jiraiya's brats, or any Uchiha, that Rin girl would have been something worth studying. I can't believe I had such a valuable specimen in my power for so long, but foolishly let her go. To think that Obito used Hashirama's cells to bring somebody back from the death..."

"Indeed. It seems that Obito can use Hashirama's cells in a way that we can't even imagine," the bespectacled man agreed. "Is there anything they can't do?"

"The fact that Obito could provide me with an almost unlimited amount of Hashirama's cells was one of the key factors that made me join Akatsuki," Orochimaru said. "However, I also knew that Obito had to be working with somebody else."

"Pain?" Kabuto asked.

Orochimaru shook his head. "Obito isn't somebody with a background in biology, medicine, or any kind of science, and neither is Pain. If that was the case, they wouldn't have recruited me for Akatsuki. Plus, I've been investigating him, and I found a gap in his past that I've been unable to fill. What did he do between his apparent death, and the Nine Tails' attack on Konoha?"

"The fact that Obito hides plenty of secrets is something obvious," Kabuto said. "What about Zetsu? Our analysis shows that he also has Hashirama's DNA."

"Yes, Zetsu. At first I thought he would be Obito's benefactor. Yet for some reason, Zetsu acts subservient to Obito, not the other way around," Orochimaru pointed out. "No, their dynamic makes no sense. That is, unless the two of them serve another."

"If that's the case, then who? If it's not Pain, nor that Toneri guy... who's left?" Kabuto asked. "The only one I can think of would be Madara Uchiha, but even if he miraculously survived his fight against Hashirama, there's no way he can still be alive."

"Maybe not, but just like how Obito resurrected his childhood crush, who says that he might not try to do the same with somebody else? Like Madara?" Orochimaru suggested.

"The implications of Madara coming back to life... are chilling, to say the least," Kabuto said, remaining stoic, but showing some fear.

"That's why we must investigate what's Obito planning to do next," Orochimaru said. Then, he raised his left hand, and removed the

Akatsuki Ring from the little finger. "And in order to do so, I can no longer be part of the Akatsuki."

"I see," Kabuto said, then a realization hit him. "Wait, does that mean that we're going with the final phase of our plans?"

"Indeed. Kabuto, make sure to move all our forces to the designated base," Orochimaru instructed. "But make sure to relocate Danzo and his men somewhere else. While the old war hawk still has his uses, he's no longer as relevant as he thinks."

"Understood," Kabuto said with a head nod. Before leaving, another realization hit him. "Orochimaru-sama... does this mean that we aren't going to help Akatsuki with the remaining jinchuriki?"

"Regrettably not," the Sannin replied, shaking his head in disappointment. "What a pity, I would have loved a rematch against sensei that and that idiot Jiraiya... if they only knew the power I possess now..."

"I'm sure you will have another chance in the future," Kabuto reassured him, before both men left.

Little did the Sannin and his lackey knew that his conversation had been heard by a certain somebody, who didn't take Orochimaru's plans very kindly.

"So, that's what you plan do to, you bastard?" the unseen person hissed, speaking to no one in particular. "This betrayal won't remain unanswered, I swear that on my life."

And the mysterious individual disappeared as well.

Author's Note: And sadly, Danzo slipped away. Sorry for those who wanted to see him dead (I also wanted to kill him then and there), but sadly, I need him alive for a future plotline. Don't worry, you won't have to suffer him much. Still, I hope that you

enjoyed the battle. I know some people weren't looking to it due to Izanagi abuse, but I tried my best to make the fight both original and enjoyable. At the very least, I hope that the reviewers who were afraid that either Shisui or Shizune were going to bite the dust can now breathe in relief.

Given that Danzo helped Orochimaru with his invasion of Konoha (which ended up in failure anyway) I thought it would be fitting that Orochimaru would return the favor. And speaking of him, the Snake Sannin will move to the final part of his plans. What plans are those? You'll have to wait and see, but you can see they involve finding out the truth about Obito. Of course, said plans aren't going to go as smoothly as he expects given that somebody got wind of his betrayal of Akatsuki.

Thanks to OOkami88 for betareading the chapter.

And with this chapter, the Root arc comes to an end! Next chapter will show you what's coming next, though you should have a pretty good idea by now. Anyway, make sure to share your thoughts on this chapter, the whole arc, and what's to come in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

A Problem Uprooted

Author's Note: I'm glad to see that the Root Arc was better received (not without reason) than the previous jinchuriki arcs. I was kind of worried that my writing skills were getting dull. Let's hope the next arc, which this chapter will showcase, will be even better received. Enjoy:

Chapter 81:

A Problem Uprooted

or

A Solution for Today, a Problem for Tomorrow

Akatsuki Lair, Unknown Location

After a rather long trip in order to escape from the Land of Lightning, Kisame and Deidara managed to reach their destination. For the most part, their prey, Killer B, had remained unconscious. The two Akatsuki members, however, made sure to check him frequently in order to ascertain that he was still alive.

And now, it was finally time for the organization to claim its seventh Tailed Beasts. On top of Kisame and Deidara, six shadowy astral projections were present in the underground cavern. The one member missing, though, soon became evident.

"Where is Orochimaru?" Deidara asked.

"I was going to ask that as well," Pain interceded. "I've been unable to contact him for the past few hours. Such thing would only be possible if he either died, or took off his ring."

"Toneri," Konan spoke, grabbing the Otsutsuki's attention. "Do you know anything about this?"

The Tensiegan wielder merely shook his head. "After capturing the Four Tails and helping to seal it, Orochimaru and I went our separate ways until the time to be recalled came. I'm afraid I have no idea of his whereabouts."

"Orochimaru wouldn't dare betray us!" the Black half of Zetsu shouted, sounding beyond enraged.

"I wouldn't put past that snake to do so," Obito replied, sounding only mildly disappointed. "He was a formidable asset, one that served us well, but keeping him under control was becoming increasingly difficult."

"So, what are we going to do? Hunt him down?" Kisame asked, sounding almost eager to volunteer for the job.

"For the time being, our mission comes first," Pain declared. "Once we seal this Tailed Beast, only the ones from Konoha remain. We can't allow Orochimaru to distract us from our goal when it's so close to completion."

"Yes. Orochimaru shall be punished as he deserves once we are done with the Tailed Beasts," Konan agreed.

"Now, let's not waste anymore time," Pain continued, as he made several hand seals, before slamming his hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu: Demonic Statue of the Outer Path!"

As usual, the gigantic statue slowly emerged from underground, its head and hands sticking above the ground, with the rest of its body still hidden. All Akatsuki took their place at the top of each finger.

"Without Orochimaru, the extraction process is going to be even longer," Zetsu's white half complained.

"All the more reasons to work harder than usual. Now let's begin."

...

Kumogakure, Raikage's Citadel

"WHAT?" the Raikage roared, upon hearing the news. "Killer B has been kidnapped!? Who!? How!? It was Akatsuki again!?"

K, the kumo Jonin delivering the news, was kneeling in front of the Raikage, his whole body trembling with fear, which became bigger as the Raikage's rage grew.

"Y-Yes, Raikage-sama," K confirmed. "We identified them as Deidara, from Iwagakure, and Kisame, from Kirigakure. My partner, J, stayed behind in order to follow them to their lair."

The third person present in the office, a dark skinned woman with pale blond hair, wearing a formal green kimono, while holding a few folders, spoke up.

"Kisame and Deidara... our spies told us those two were also behind the abduction of the Fourth Mizukage," the woman said.

"Who cares who did it, Mabui!" the Raikage roared, as he split his desk table in a single chop, sending several stack of papers flying, making K flinch, but the woman remained unfazed. "I want to know HOW THE HELL did they find Killer B's hiding place! That's after we rescue him! Mabui, gather a rescue team immediately! Put the best ninjas we have! Every other mission is secondary!"

Mabui merely sighed, and started to pick up all the papers her boss had scattered around the room.

"I shall do so as soon as we have word of J-san from Akatsuki's location," Mabui agreed with a nod, before turning at the quivering ninja. "K-san, is that all you have to report?"

"Yes, Mabui-san, Raikage-sama," the Jonin replied.

"In that case, you're dismissed," Mabui said, much to the Jonin's relief, who wasted no time and left the office as fast as he could. She then turned around, and saw her boss looking through the window at the village before him. His burst of rage appeared to have subsided. "Appeared" being the key word. "Raikage-sama... at the risk of sounding defeatist, there's a high chance that, by the time we track Killer B-san's location, it may be too late."

She could hear the Raikage sighing heavily. "I'm aware of that, Mabui. But I have to do everything in my hand to bring him home safe. Besides, it's not impossible. We know the Kazekage's brat was rescued from their grasp."

"Yes, but they did so at the cost of the Tailed Beast inside him," Mabui countered. "How the host managed to survive the extraction process is beyond me."

"I don't care about the Eight Tails in the slightest," the Raikage stated, as his hands clenched into fists. "I'm also going to make sure those bastards paid for what they did. For both B and Yugito!"

"Does that mean...?"

The Raikage turned around, and nodded. "Once you're done forming B's rescue team, summon other four teams and send them to each of the other four Great Villages. I'm going to summon a Kage Summit."

...

Konoha, Hokage's Office.

"Hey there."

The door of Jiraiya's office opened as somebody entered. Normally, nobody would be able to enter the office without Jiraiya's explicit approval. The Sannin only had to give the order, and the ANBU hidden around him would spring to action and either kick out the

intruder, or if the situation demand it, swiftly remove their head from the rest of their body.

Naturally, all the people named Tsunade were exempt from such thing.

"Hey there," Jiraya echoed, though his greeting carried far less energy. The Hokage was now swamped in paperwork, due the chaos that Danzo's stunt had created in the village.

Tsunade pulled out a bottle of sake and a couple of small cups from under her haori.

"You look stressed," Tsunade observed, as she placed the bottle and cups in the desk, before moving a couple of stack of papers in order to make some room. "Do you want to take a break over a drink?"

"Yes. Yes please," Jiraiya sounded almost desperate.

Tsunade chuckled, as she poured some sake into the cups. "That bad?" the Slug Sannin asked.

"Even worse," Jiraiya said, groaning. "We managed to capture a lot of Danzo's cronies, but just as many escaped. We managed to follow his trail to Orochimaru's old lair in the Land of Sound just as Shisui said, but they had moved from there by the time the combat teams arrived. Danzo still has a moderate force under his command, and his alliance with Orochimaru and the Akatsuki exposed, he now presents a huge threat to the village."

"Boy, no wonder you're so stressed," Tsunade said, as she was about to pick her cup, but Jiraiya was faster and picked it first alongside his, before downing both of them in two big gulps. "Whoa, there! One was for me, you know!" Tsunade protested, as she went to refill the cups.

"Sorry, but like I said before, this is a goddamn nightmare," Jiraiya replied. "I know that guy was shady, but to think that his

manipulations reached so far..."

"Why did you keep him running the black ops, then?" Tsunade asked. "Because, as far as I remember, not even sensei trusted him much."

"The main reason? Because after the Uchiha Insurrection, he was pretty much untouchable," Jiraiya told her. "He was the most vocal and distrustful of the Uchiha, so when they rebelled, they proved him right. If it wasn't for our fame, as well as sensei's former teammates not supporting him, he had a good shot at becoming Hokage."

"But then again, I should have kept him under a shorter leash. I was so focused on keeping Naruto safe and dealing with the Akatsuki that the thought that Danzo might have been overstepping his boundaries never crossed my mind," Jiraiya admitted, before he poured himself another cup of sake.

"You know, drinking on the job is not very Hokage-like."

"Yeah, as if you wouldn't do the same should you got the hat instead," Jiraiya said, as he downed the second cup. This time, however, he drank it slowly.

"I have to admit you got a point," Tsunade agreed with a shrug, as she drank from her cup as well. "Though I admit Shizune would have confiscated any alcohol I hid here."

Jiraiya shot his wife a knowing smirk. "Why do you think I decided to make her a Jonin-sensei? I don't think I'd be able to write my novels with her around all the time. Even if I do use clones to work faster on the paperwork."

"You cheeky bastard," Tsunade laughed.

"But yeah, thanks for this. These past couple of days have been a nightmare," Jiraiya said. "By the way, shouldn't you be in the hospital?"

"I should," Tsunade admitted. "But it's kind of a slow day, and I had the feeling that you needed some company."

"Bless your intuition," Jiraiya thanked, before downing another cup of sake. "How is Hagane? Any signs of improvement?"

Tsunade shook her head. "His constants are stable, and doesn't appear to be in any immediate risk. But he's still in a coma. Not even I know when he'll wake up."

Jiraiya sighed in resignation. "I see."

"What are you going to do with his team? Have you thought in placing a substitute?" Tsunade asked.

"For the time being, I put the team on stand-by, just in case Hagane wakes up.," Jiraiya said. "Plus I don't think Kaida and Hanabi would take kindly to a replacement so soon."

"Replacements are rarely welcomed, unless the team in question was unbelievably dysfunctional," Tsunade agreed. "Especially with Hanabi's kidnapping attempt still so recent. Thank goodness neither she nor the others were taken away for good."

"Man, that team is cursed. With Hanabi, now all three of them had been kidnapped at one point or another for their Bloodline Limits," Jiraiya observed.

"Not to mention what they did with their Jonin-sensei," Tsunade added. "Maybe we should have put them on different teams? Because so many powerful Bloodlimits on a single team is inviting for disaster..."

"If we spread them, we would only increase the number of targets on the back of our teams," Jiraiya countered, before changing the topic. "Also, how are the kidnapping victims? Are they okay?" Jiraiya asked.

"Rin and Hanabi are fine, thank goodness, as well as Shizune's kids," Tsunade said, her hand clenching into a fist when the still recent memory of her grandkids being abducted resurfaced.

"It seems Danzo instructed his drones not to harm the victims in any way, and lucky for us, they followed those orders as best as they could," Jiraiya said.

"Still, that makes little to soften their crimes," Tsunade replied, her face turning a little red. "The next time Danzo shows his face, I'm going to beat it so hard, not even the best surgeon will be able to rebuild it."

"I hope you don't mind if I join you, Hime," Jiraiya agreed. "First our kids, now our grandkids... man, given that he's with a Hyuga, I'm afraid to think what's going to happen when Naruto has kids of his own."

"Let's worry about that in the future," Tsunade said with a hand wave. "I'd be more worried if Naruto knocked up Hinata right now."

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Naruto watched as Hinata held the baby in her arms, gently rocking her into a peaceful sleep. It was indeed, a really beautiful image.

"Boy, you're a natural," Naruto praised her.

"Well, given that my mom was busy running the clan, I had to help her a lot with raising Hanabi-chan," Hinata replied. "Though she wasn't this little when I got more involved in her upbringing."

"Still, seeing you like that makes me think you'd make an awesome mother," Naruto praised again.

"M-Mother?" Hinata stuttered, as her cheeks turned pink. "Naruto-kun, it's too soon for-"

"Haha, calm down! I don't mean now!" the blond laughed. "I mean in the far future, once we're done with all this shit."

"Oh. I guess I got carried away. Again," Hinata admitted, his blush receding, but not completely disappearing. "Yes, it would be wonderful if we had kids of our own one day. I think you'd also make for a great father, Naruto-kun."

"You think so? Thanks!" Naruto replied, grinning at her.

"Of course, you made a wonderful job taking care of your little siblings as well. They pretty much kiss the ground you walk on," Hinata said.

That moment, Haku entered the room. The Ice Ninja looked a bit exhausted.

"Okay, it took some time, but I managed to get Shiro-kun to sleep," Haku said, sounding a bit tired. "Did you guys expect to go back to do D-Rank missions after being promoted?"

Because that was exactly what they were doing. Not a personal favor to Naruto's surrogate sister, but an actual remunerated mission sanctioned by the Hokage. Shizune had insisted vehemently for a team of Jonin or Special Jonin to take care of her children from now onwards, and if possible, somebody who had her complete trust, such as Naruto and his friends. Despite the fact that Danzo's goons coming back for a second kidnapping attempt were pretty much minimal, Jiraiya was unable to make her change her mind.

"Let's hope Shizune-nee-chan doesn't get all overprotective of them now," Naruto said, shaking her head.

"Give her some time. It's only natural that she feels apprehensive right now given what happened," Haku replied. "Her and Shisui-san's failure in bringing down Danzo had to exacerbate her fear for her children."

"You know, I'm kind of happy that Shisui and Shizune-nee-chan failed to kill Danzo," Naruto said, much to Hinata and Haku's surprise.

"That way, I'll be able to do that myself. The bastard was leaking information on the jinchuriki to the Akatsuki. Not only Uta-kata and Rōshi could be very much alive right now, but you two almost died fighting against Pain, and Hagane is in a coma because of Toneri. Danzo's hands are stained by not only the blood of the jinchuriki, but of all the people who were wounded or killed by the Akatsuki he helped."

"I can't believe one of Konoha's esteemed elders was a traitor," Hinata murmured. "What does that say about us? About our village? To let such a monumental betrayal to happen?"

"You'd think that, after the Uchiha Insurrection was suppressed, other potential traitors would take the hint," Naruto grumbled. "Apparently, that wasn't enough."

"Given that he escaped, it's obvious that that man will come back to finish the job. Even if he might not try to kidnap Bloodline Limit possessing individuals, that man had a plan, and we better get prepared for when he comes back," Haku interceded, before he looked at Naruto. "Naruto-kun, did Hokage-sama told you anything about that man?"

Naruto shrugged, and slumped his shoulders. "Not much, dad hated his guts and didn't like to talk about him. All I know is that he and the Old Man Hokage used to be rivals, and always opposed any initiative that involved allying with another village, or strengthening the bonds we had with an already allied village. He was of the belief that alliances shouldn't be trusted, and that a friend today can become tomorrow's foe."

"What a jaded outlook on life," Hinata lamented. "Wonder what kind of experiences he went through to develop such a pessimistic view on humanity as a whole."

"Hearing that, it's a miracle that all of our alliances managed to survive like they did," Haku said.

"Hey, I'm remembering something," Hinata said. "Sakura-san and Ino-san talked about a socially awkward pale boy who was in ANBU and came with us to help Mei-san win the Civil War. Said boy turned out to be a Root agent working for Danzo. It is possible that Danzo sent him to sabotage any future relationship between both villages."

"Though it seems he didn't find the opportunity to do so," Haku concluded. "Fortunately for us."

"Wait... you mean that guy that hanged out with Ino all the time?" Naruto asked. "He was a Root agent? Did Ino know about that?"

"It appears that she did. I talked with Ino-san, and the reason they appeared to be so close is because Hokage-sama knew that boy worked for Danzo, and thought he could use Ino as a counter-spy," Hinata recounted. "Though I do believe Ino-san did develop feelings for that boy."

"Boy, now I understand why Ino met with dad on her own so often," Naruto said in realization. "It would have been another thing if it was her whole team, but Ino alone? And dad didn't tell me anything."

"He probably didn't want to risk any leaks," Haku interceded. "The less people know about a mission, the less chances the enemy has to learn about it."

"Guess that makes some sense..." Naruto grumbled in resignation, as he crossed his arms. After the Pain fiasco, he didn't take very kind to his adoptive father keeping secrets for him. Though he had to admit that in this case it was necessary. "I guess he's in jail right now?"

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Torture & Interrogation Department, Underground Cells

Indeed, Sai was now locked inside a cell. While other people might have gone over all sort of emotions upon finding in such predicament, it wasn't Sai's case. He was a Root agent, he had long accepted that his life could end at any moment, and that it was preferable for him to die than let his enemies capture him and be interrogated.

"Yet I let Ino capture me," Sai mumbled aloud. "Why? Why did I do it? Was because I afraid to die? Or it was something else?"

Not that it mattered anymore. A team of Yamanaka, Ino among them, had already scanned every second of his memory in order to look information on Danzo. Not that they found much, since Sai, young as it was, wasn't exactly high in the Root hierarchy.

"Hey!"

Sai was snapped from his thoughts by the harsh voice of a lizard masked ANBU, who was standing in front of his cell door.

"Yes?" Sai asked.

"You have visit, traitor," the ANBU said, much to the pale boy'd surprise, before he opened the cell door, and Ino walked in.

"Whenever you're done, call for us, Yamanaka-san. And if he tries to attempt anything funny, shout and we will be here in an instant."

"That won't be necessary," Ino told the ANBU. "I already proven whose the stronger of the two. Besides, he's wearing chakra-suppressing manacles, right?"

"Even then, being cautious won't hurt," the ANBU said, before locking the door once Ino was inside. "I'll return in half an hour."

"Very well then," Ino said, before turning her eyes towards the prisoner. "Hello, Sai. How are you?"

"Good, I guess," the Root agent replied, sounding as calm as usual. He raised his head, and looked at Ino in the eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk with you," Ino replied, crossed his arms. "I thought you could figure as much?"

"I asked because every corner of my mind had already been scanned by both you and your clansmen working at T&I," Sai explained. "So you aren't going to learn anything new with a further interrogation."

Ino rolled her eyes, and let out a small groan. "I said I came here to *talk*, not to interrogate you."

"You wish to make small talk with me?" Sai asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Not small talk," Ino said, growing exasperated.

"Then what?" Sai asked again.

"I want to understand you better. I want to know how somebody who went through the Root brainwashing thinks," Ino said. "So when the time comes, we will be able to undo it."

"So, you don't plan to execute me, nor any of my fellow Root agents?" Sai asked, genuinely surprised.

"No. We do know that your complicity with Danzo wasn't voluntary, at least for most of you," Ino explained. "Hokage-sama thinks that executing a ninja for the crimes of another is something morally reprehensible to do. And frankly, I agree."

"See? This is why Jiraiya isn't fit to be Hokage," Sai retorted. "Instead of disposing of his enemies, he lets them live, allowing them another chance to strike him down again."

"Or maybe allowing them a chance to see the error of their ways and turn a new leaf," Ino countered, as she crossed her arms.

"Sentimentalism has no room in a ninja village. A Hokage must do what's best for Konoha," Sai retorted.

"So that's it? That's how Danzo justifies acting behind the Hokage's back?" Ino asked.

"Yes. If the Hokage doesn't act in the interest of the village-

"And who decides that? You? Danzo? Does he know better than the Hokage?" Ino asked in rapid fashion. "Because that would be quite rich coming from a man that had always been passed over for the position when it had been vacant. Not to mention his alliances with sworn enemies of the village, like Orochimaru or the Akatsuki."

"Orochimaru and the Akatsuki were merely pawns in Danzo's plan. They would have been disposed once they no longer were of any use," Sai told her.

Ino rolled her eyes once again. "Yeah, Shisui learned as much from your boss. On top of being power-hungry, Danzo is also a fool that underestimates our enemies."

"Why are you here, Ino?" Sai asked, seemingly growing bored of the back and forth. "What are you planning to do? I won't change my mind."

"Yes. Yes you will," Ino replied, sure of herself. "Danzo didn't strip you of your whole humanity. There's still something there, buried between layers of brainwashing and mental conditioning. And I plan to bring it to the surface."

"How are you so sure?" Sai asked.

"Because if you were as much as a drone as Danzo hoped to make you, you wouldn't be alive," Ino replied. "Remember our fight? I

littered the ground with explosive tags. You could have stepped on any of them, and end it. Hell, you could have tried to trigger as many as possible with the hope of taking me down with you."

Sai didn't say anything. He merely lowered his head, averting his gaze.

"You yourself told me that you didn't want to die, even if it's what Danzo would have expected out of you in such situation," Ino continued. "How does that make you feel, Sai? The fact that a man ordered your death against your wishes, simply because you failed your task?"

Sai remained silent. Ino then decided to play her last card.

"I know about Shin," she replied. This appeared to elicit some sort of reaction from Sai, but he quickly masked it.

"Of course you do. You scanned my mind," Sai dryly said.

"I know that you loved him like a brother," Ino continued. "And I know that you didn't take kindly when Danzo ordered the two of you to kill each other. Shin's illness solved the dilemma. But even then, without Danzo, the two of you could have lived. Tsunade-sama could have treated him. You must know that, and there's no way you can't not resent Danzo for it."

Once again, silence was Sai's response. Ino decided that that was enough.

"I see you're no longer in the mood for talking," Ino concluded. "I'll leave now. Though don't think for a second that I'm not coming back."

Ino called the ANBU outside to open the cell door, allowing her out before being closed again, leaving Sai alone with his thoughts.

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Konoha Hospital

Despite the kidnapping attempt, Rin declined the Hokage's offer of a few spare days in order to recover from the experience, and decided to dutifully continue her job at the hospital. While being kidnapped is indeed a distressing experience, it kind of loses impact when you have been literally killed. Though then again, it wasn't even the first time Rin was kidnapped. She felt happy that this time she didn't end with a Tailed Beast sealed inside.

Then again, for Rin her job at the hospital was therapeutic, as the sheer monotony filled her with nothing but calmness, something she desperately craved after coming back to life.

The hours went by as she checked on the patients she had assigned with. She then noticed that the door of the patient she was about to check next was ajar. She knew that room, it was where the Hokage's youngest son was. Opening the door a little, she was relieved that the white haired boy was still there. There was also a brown haired man wearing the standard Konoha uniform sitting in a chair besides the bed.

"Um, hello," Rin said, as she entered.

The man turned around, and smiled a little. "Oh, hello there."

"I came here to check on Hagane-kun," Rin stated.

"Understood," the man said, as he stood up, and walked towards the door. "I'll come back later."

"You don't need to leave, you know," Rin said, as she walked towards the unconscious Hagane. "I'm not going to take that long."

"Oh, I see," the brown haired man said. "I'll make sure not to get in the way of your job."

"Thanks for your consideration," Rin said, as she started checking Hagane.

Just like the medic-nin promised, she didn't take long. Hagane didn't show any change. At the very least, he was stable. Hopefully he would wake up in some time. After that, she changed the intravenous drip bag for a new one, and updated the report on his status.

"Okay, done," Rin said.

"How is he?" the man asked.

"Same as yesterday, and as the past week," Rin replied. The man looked downcast. "At the very least, he isn't getting any worse."

"No. Guess that's something to be grateful about," the man agreed.

"By the way, may I ask you something?" Rin asked. The man nodded. "What are you to this boy? I don't think you're his family."

"You're right. I'm his Jonin-sensei. Name's Tenzo, by the way," the man, Tenzo, introduced himself.

"Rin Nohara," the medic-nin replied, bowing her head a little. "I see. It has to be hard seeing your student in such a state."

"You have no idea," Tenzo sorrowfully replied. "There's no day in which I don't wonder what could have I done to save him. Because you have no idea what this kid went through. How he survived, I'll never understand."

Rin wondered how Minato-sensei felt when he heard about what happened to Obito and later herself. She was there when Kakashi told him the outcome of the mission of Kanabi Bridge. When he heard the news, the man merely smiled, and told them: "Obito's death is indeed tragic, but I'm glad that you two came out alive."

At first, Rin thought that reaction was cold. But then he realized that Minato was merely masking his emotions in order not to upset them any further. Only Kushina knew how he truly reacted: spending the next night crying, and blaming himself for Obito's death.

"You said your name was Rin Nohara?" Tenzo asked. "As in, Kakashi-senpai's teammate?"

"The one who came back from the dead, yes," Rin replied. It seems like that was becoming her most prominent identity trait, regardless how much she liked it. It wasn't until a few seconds that Rin noticed the way the man addressed Kakashi. "You said 'Kakashi-sempai'?"

"Yes, from our days at ANBU," the man replied. "I don't know if Kakashi-sempai told you, but he became an ANBU for a few years after your tragic loss."

"I see," Rin said. "And no, he didn't tell me anything. I think talking about that period of his life causes him pain, and honestly, I can see why."

"Say, this may sound a bit sudden but, do you have a moment to talk with me?" Tenzo asked. "I've been wanting to talk with you about certain topics, but I never had the chance."

"Well, you have me here. Now's your chance," Rin said, smiling.

"I'd prefer if we went to talk somewhere else," Tenzo said. "Say, care to join me for a walk? The park behind the hospital would be a perfect place for a little talk."

"Okay. I think I could use a break," Rin said, as she and Tenzo left the room together.

A few minutes later, they arrived at the park. Given the time of the day, it was mostly deserted. And quiet, very quiet, with only the chirping of the birds filling the air. Maybe that's why Tenzo chose it. Something Rin deeply appreciated. Tenzo then started to walk

towards the grass, and much to her confusion, started to make hand seals.

Then, to her even greater confusion and now shock, a bench of wood emerged from the ground. Tenzo took a seat, and motioned Rin to sit as well.

"As you can see, Rin-san, we have something in common that make us... few of a kind," Tenzo said.

Rin didn't say anything, and merely sat besides him, her eyes still wide open.

"I guess you're probably wonder how I got Wood Release," Tenzo said.

"Y-Yes," Rin replied, stammering a little.

"Do you know Orochimaru of the Sannin?" Tenzo asked.

"Yes, Jiraiya-sama and Tsunade-sama's other teammate," Rin explained. "I know he's a missing-nin now. Did he have something to do with your Wood Release?"

"It was thanks to him that I got this power," Tenzo said. "Orochimaru gathered sixty small children, orphans all of them so nobody would miss them, and tried to splice their genes with the First Hokage's cells. Of the sixty babies, fifty nine died. I'm the only lucky one who not only survived, but developed Wood Release."

Rin brought her hands to her mouth in horror. "That's... terryfing..."

"And that was only the beginning," Tenzo said with a nod. "Shortly before the Third and his forces could dismantle Orochimaru's secret lab, Danzo arrived first, found that I was alive, and took me under his wing, in order to train my power."

"So... you were a member of Root?" Rin asked.

"Yes. It wasn't a part of my life I cherished the most," Tenzo replied.
"Thankfully, Kakashi managed to rescue me from that life."

Tenzo told Rin how his team clashed with Kakashi and other ANBU a few times, and Kakashi found about Tenzo's Bloodline Limit. Kakashi was able to convince Tenzo to abandon Root and join actual ANBU under his guidance.

"I wondered why Danzo never bothered to send any agents to take me back," Tenzo said, as his gaze fixed into the blue sky above. "But then again, given that both your and Kaida's Wood Release is far more refined than mine, I can see why he decided to pass me over. Not that I'm complaining."

"I knew that Danzo had spies following my moves," Rin revealed.
"But I didn't know he'd be bold enough to kidnap me like they did."

Tenzo opened his eyes wide in surprise. "Come again? How did you know that?"

"Ino Yamanaka warned me," Rin replied. "During the wedding, she took me to give a short walk. Using her telepathy, she warned me that Danzo had several agents shadowing me, in hopes to acquire some of my DNA."

"While many people in Konoha wanted to replicate the First's Wood Release, Danzo was especially fixated with the ability," Tenzo mentioned. "And given what Shisui-san and Shizune-san told us, now we know why."

"There's something I don't understand," Rin said, as she grabbed the hem of her skirt. "Why did the Hokages let this happen? Why did they let Danzo do as he pleases? Why did they let him have his own army not loyal to Konoha or the Hokage, but him?"

"Because Root is Konoha's Black Ops division," Tenzo replied. "Root carried missions that were beneficial to the village, but that the Hokage couldn't be seen approving. That's why Root members hide

their identity, and don't wear headbands or any other symbol that may trace them here."

"But why?" Rin repeated.

"Imagine this," Tenzo replied. "The Fire Lord has a new councilor. Said councilor has a very poor view of ninjas, and is trying to convince the Fire Lord to cut our budget. All our attempts at swaying the Lord to our side fail. That's where Root enters. A few agents would infiltrate him, and kill the councilor. However, they would also make it sure the death was an accident, or frame a third party in order to deflect suspicions."

"That's... awful," Rin said, grimacing in disgust. "I can see why our budget is important, but resorting to assassination of a Lord's councilor..."

"It's the dark side of the ninja world, Rin," Tenzo said, sighing a little. "That's why Danzo was called the Darkness of the Ninja. Because he took the duty of carrying all that darkness on his back. That's why the Hokages never bothered him much and let him do his thing as long as he brought results. Danzo's job was something nobody else wanted to do, and it benefitted the village, so the Hokages were eager to turn a blind eye on him."

Rin's opinions of the past Hokage quickly plummeted. Even if his reign was short lived, she even wondered if Minato-sensei was aware of all the shady stuff Danzo did, and if he purposefully ignored it, or worse, approved of it.

"Albeit, in the light of these past events, that was a mistake," Tenzo continued. "I'm sure that Jiraiya-sama will close Konoha's Black Ops branch for sure."

"At least something good is coming out from this debacle," Rin replied. As a realization dawned upon her, she turned her gaze at Tenzo once again. "By the way, you worked under Danzo, right? You

must know about his lust for power and all the stuff he was doing behind the Hokages' back."

"I did," Tenzo admitted. "But who was going to believe me? Danzo was one of Konoha's elders, and a personal friend of the Third. And given his open distrust of the Uchiha, his reputation only grew after the failed insurrection. He used it as a way to criticize the Third's way to rule the village, but thankfully he didn't gather enough support to claim the Hokage's hat. And thank goodness, Jiraiya-sama proved to be a popular and competent Kage."

"Still, given that Danzo is out there, I don't think he's going to give up his ambition of a Konoha under his rule," Rin stated.

Tenzo nodded. "That's for sure. Let's hope Jiraiya-sama makes his priority his capture and execution."

"Let's hope," Rin echoed, before standing up. "Sorry to end out chat here, but I need to go back to work. It was nice to meet you, Tenzo."

"The feeling's mutual, Rin-san," Tenzo said, standing up as well. "If you ever want to talk, I'm always willing to listen."

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Downtown Konoha, Afternoon

After spending the whole day with training with her students, and bidding them goodbye as each other returned to their respective homes, the black haired medic-nin did the same. She couldn't wait to arrive home and spend some quality time with Shisui and their children. The training had left her legs a little sore, and she hoped that Shisui would be eager to give her a massage. Then again, Shisui was always eager to do anything if it involved touching a part of her body.

"Though, if she does a good job, I'll give him a little reward," Shizune said, as she smiled to herself. "Maybe I could be the one handcuffed

to the bed this time around..."

Shizune's kinky thoughts were dispelled when she saw something from the corner of her eye that caught her attention. Looking to the side, she saw her friend Kurenai, sitting alone in a bar, drinking and looking miserable. As the red eyed woman's friend, Shizune's conscience insisted in seeing what was wrong with the Genjutsu Mistress.

"I guess Shisui is home already, so no harm if I arrive a little late," Shizune decided, as she stepped inside the bar, and sat near Kurenai. If Kurenai noticed her presence, the raven haired woman didn't make it evident. "Hey."

"Hey," Kurenai weakly replied, as she emptied her glass.

"So..." Shizune began, as she fidgeted with her fingers, hoping to board the topic with a modicum of tact. "I saw you here all by yourself, and decided that you could use some company."

"Guess I could," Kurenai said, her voice carrying a little slur. "Another-"

Shizune grabbed Kurenai's hand, interrupting her, and shook her head. "Better not. Whatever's the problem you're having, I'm sure drinking won't be the solution."

"I'm not drinking to solve the problem," Kurenai retorted. "Mostly because this problem has no solution at all."

"Come on, I'm sure it's not that bad," Shizune insisted. "A few hours ago, my babies were in the hands of Root ninjas, yet now they're safe at home. So come on, tell me."

"If you insist," the dejected Kurenai replied. "Do you remember that, before Naruto and the others, I used to have another student? A girl with a Bloodline Limit related to genjutsu?"

"Yes. The one who descended from this ancient clan, right?" Shizune said, as she remembered. "She died in a fire some years ago, didn't she?"

"No, she didn't," Kurenai dryly stated.

"Wait, what?"

"She was there, during the raid," Kurenai said. "One of Danzo's goons. It was her. I would recognize that kind of genjutsu anywhere... the one capable of fooling even an Uchiha..."

Shizune brought her hands to her mouth. "Oh my god... I'm... I'm so sorry, Kurenai..."

"Here I thought that since they didn't find her body, Yakumo was okay," Kurenai slurred, sounding depressed. "That she started over somewhere else... because, hey, if Rin came back after having her chest impaled, then anybody can come back from the dead! And now I got my wish. And now I wish she had died during that fire. Because anything's better than being one of Danzo's slave drones."

"Come on, don't say that," Shizune said, placing a hand on Kurenai's shoulder. "I'm sure we can rescue her, and undo whatever brainwashing Danzo put her through."

"You're quite the optimist, aren't you, Shizune-chan?" Kurenai asked, her lips forming a sad smile.

"I have to, if you ever want to survive living with Tsunade-sama," Shizune replied, as she stood up, and forced Kurenai to do the same. "Now come on. First, we'll get you out of here and back home with your family. And tomorrow, we will talk with Hokage-sama about that Yakumo girl, okay?"

...

Senju Residence, Nighttime

"So, how was your day, Naruto?" Tsunade asked.

Tsunade, Jiraiya, Naruto and Kaida were having dinner together. They've been eating in silence for quite some time, until the blonde Sannin decided to start a conversation in order to lighten the mood a little.

"Kind of peaceful, may I said. Back then I used to hate D-Rank missions," Naruto replied. "But taking care of Shizune-neechan's kids was rather relaxing."

"Yes. After putting your life on the line against the Akatsuki so many times, it's only natural that you appreciate something far less nerve-wracking," Jiraiya said. "And speaking of nerves, I need to find a way to calm Shizune down. I don't want her to blow her money hiring Jonin every day she needs a babysitter."

"Jiraiya, somebody tried to kidnap her children. Be a little more understanding," Tsunade chastised her husband. He should know better than anybody how does that feel. "Plus her children are way too little now. It's not like our kids, who can defend themselves now."

"Just give her time, dad," Kaida chimed in. "I'm sure she'll get better over time."

"Guess that's the only thing I can do, until a better idea presents itself," Jiraiya admitted. "Though, I do hope that you don't get used to doing D-Rank missions much. There's still one jinchuriki left besides Fu and yourself that needs to be saved from Akatsuki."

"You can bet I didn't forget about that," Naruto replied. "In fact, the babysitting mission gave me some time to think, and I came up with an idea to strengthen our forces."

"Really? I'm all ears then, son," Jiraiya said, visibly interested. He also got Tsunade's attention as well.

"Given how powerful Sage Mode is, is there a chance to teach it to more people?" Naruto asked. "I'm sure there are quite a few Jonin on Konoha with good chakra control and large chakra pools."

Jiraiya's interest was instantly replaced with mild disappointment. "Naruto, if it was that easy, don't you think I wouldn't have tried to do that already?"

"Senjutsu can only be learned from the summoned animal tribes. Humans are naturally incapable of feeling nature chakra," Tsunade explained. "However, the animals have a way to make humans receptive to nature energy. The toads have their special oil, the slugs have their springs."

"How do you know that, mom?" Naruto asked.

"Because I'm a Sage too," Tsunade replied, much to Naruto's shock. The Sannin frowned upon seeing Naruto's surprised expression. "What? Sure, at first I wasn't very interested in learning it given that senjutsu is not that useful in a hospital, but after your father returned to Mount Myoboku to complete his training... I wasn't going to fall behind him!"

"So you went and learned an incredibly ancient difficult art to master, just to one-up dad?" an incredulous Kaida asked, before she smiled approvingly. "Yeah, I would have done the same."

"But you still don't have a way to make my idea possible, do you?" Naruto asked.

"The hardest part of your idea would be to give the new apprentices a taste of nature energy. That's what the oil or the springs are for," Tsunade replied. "Once done, the human body can sense and gather nature energy without any external help."

"Damn," the blond cursed, as he slumped into his chair, dejected. "Guess that this isn't as easy as when Hinata-hime and I did that..."

Naruto trailed off, as an idea formed inside his mind. His eyes grew wide, and his lips curved into a huge smile. "Of course, that's it!"

"What is it?" Jiraiya asked.

"Quick, dad, summon Pa right here! I know how my idea can work!" an excited Naruto said, almost in a shout.

...

Kumogakure, Raikage's Office, Next Day

As expected, the news of Killer B's capture by the Akatsuki hit every ninja in Kumogakure like a sledgehammer to their hearts, especially so soon after Yugito's own abduction. Still, other than the Raikage himself, nobody took it worse than Karui, Omoi and T, Killer B's students.

"No, it can't be..." Karui cried, her hands flying to her mouth. T quickly went to comfort her.

"This is terrible. Way more terrible than any scenario I can imagine..." Omoi said, also shedding some tears as well.

"W-What are we going to do now, Raikage-sama?" T asked.

"For the time being, the only thing we can. While I have my best Hunter-nin tracking Killer B's whereabouts, I'm going to summon a Kage Summit in order to deal with the threat of Akatsuki," the Raikage stated. He then walked towards Karui and handed her a scroll. "You three shall go to Konoha, and give this to the Hokage personally."

"We won't fail you, Raikage-sama," Karui said with a nod. She wiped her tears, put the scroll inside a pocket on her skirt, and turned towards her two teammates. "Raikage-sama tasked us with a mission of utmost importance. We shall not fail him. To Konoha, now!"

Omoi and T nodded, and followed their now unofficial leader out of the Raikage's office.

...

Akatsuki Lair, Unknown Location

Turns out, even with Orochimaru's absence, the sealing ritual had ended way sooner than any of the Akatsuki had anticipated.

"Hehe, funny," White Zatsu laughed.

Because while they were sealing the Eight Tails, "Killer B" burst into smoke, leaving an octopus tentacle in his place. Zetsu's laugh was followed by a deadly silence, as everybody tried to make sense of what just happened. Pain looked into Kisame and Deidara's general direction.

"What's the meaning of this?" the Akatsuki leader asked. He didn't raise his voice, but they could tell that it was full of anger.

Again, neither the Kiri nor Iwa missing-nin replied, at least not immediately. Kisame appeared to be just as amused as Zetsu, while Deidara seemed to be frozen in place.

"Well, it seems that that cheeky bastard pulled our legs," Kisame replied, letting out a chuckle.

"That... that..." Deidara said, his voice trembling.

"Hm? Did you say something, Deidara-san?" Kisame asked, looking at the blond artist.

"That... THAT SON OF A BITCH!" Deidara's scream echoed through the underground cavern. "How dare that scumbag mock me! How dare he mock my art! When I find him again, I'm going to BLOW HIS ASS TO KINGDOM COME!"

"Unfortunately, Deidara, your revenge will have to wait," Pain interceded.

"What are we going to do now, Pain? Do you have a plan?" Konan asked. "Because the jinchuriki could be pretty much anywhere now."

"Zetsu," Pain said, looking at the plant-man. "Your task will be to track the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails. Everything else is secondary."

"Including finding Orochimaru?" the black half asked, just to be sure.

"Yes. We can afford to ignore Orochimaru for the time being, but we can't do the same with the remaining jinchuriki," Pain explained.

"Alright. The trail might be a bit cold, but I'll do my best to find him," the white half said, as his astral projection vanished.

"What about us?" Toneri asked. "What we should we do until Zetsu-san finds the Eight Tails?"

"I was planning to capture the jinchuriki of the Seven and the Nine Tails once we were done with the Eight Tails, but we can't wait any longer," Pain said. "We must capture them, and seal them as soon as possible."

"Konoha is very protective of their jinchuriki, especially in the eyes of our recent actions," Kisame said. "Who are going to be the lucky ones to infiltrate Konoha?"

"All of us," Pain replied. "And it won't be an infiltration. We will launch an open attack on Konoha, crush anybody who stand in our way, and take the jinchuriki by force."

"Yes. The time of being subtle has passed," Obito agreed, speaking for the first time. "We'll attack Konoha in two days. I'll pick you up when the time for the attack comes. Make sure you're ready by then."

And one by one, all the Akatsuki astral projections vanished, leaving Deidara and Kisame alone with the Eight Tails' tentacle.

Author's Note: Yep, the Pain Invasion comes next! Though it should be named Akatsuki Invasion, given that the entire organization is taking part.

I already knew from quite some time that I couldn't have just Pain storm Konoha alone. Konoha in this fic has three Sages, three Wood Release users, three Mangekyo Sharingan wielders and two Tenseigan wielders. Pain is going to need the entirety of Akatsuki behind his back if he wants to make a dent on this Konoha. And originally, the attack was also going to include Orochimaru as well, though I had to remove him from Akatsuki earlier than intended due plot related reasons.

Not that I complain, since I always wanted to see while maybe not all, at least a good chunk of Akatsuki operating in a large group. And while I can understand why the manga never did such a thing, I never read a fanfic in which something like that happened. And following the very first writiding advice I got, "write a story you'd like to read", I decided to do that myself. It was an herculean task, but I'm quite content with the end result.

Also, despite the fact that, in my opinion, I made it pretty obvious, this chapter does finally confirms that no, Killer B hasn't been captured, and pulled the same stunt he did in canon.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

The entirety of Akatsuki is gunning down for Naruto and Fu. Will they add another victory to their winning streak? Or will Konoha win this time around? Share your thoughts on both this chapter and the arc to come in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Sage Training

Author's Note: So, a more relaxing chapter before hell is unleashed upon Konoha. Still, despite being a breather, this chapter has some important plot developments. Enjoy:

Chapter 82:

Sage Training

or

Becoming a Sage is such a headache

Training Ground Twenty Five

Naruto inspected expectantly the small group of people his father had gathered for his little project. All of them people with very large chakra reserves, as well as minute chakra control. Interestingly, the majority of the group were girls: Shizune, Hinata, Hanabi, Fu, Karin and Rin. The only men present were Asuma and Shisui.

Besides Naruto was Fukasaku, who was also eyeing the group with a critical eye, silently judging if these apprentices had the potential to become Sages. When Jiraiya summoned him, and Naruto told him his plan to teach other people Senjutsu without having to sign the Toad Summoning Contract (or any other contract for that matter) the elder toad was skeptical, but decided to help the blond with his endeavor.

Only time will tell if Naruto was right or not.

"Alright, is everybody here? I think so," Naruto said, as he cracked his knuckles. "Hello, and welcome to 'Learning Senjutsu like a Pro'! I'm Naruto Uzumaki, your sensei!" Naruto said, as he grinned widely, and gave the group a thumbs up.

"Um... Naruto-kun?" Hinata spoke. "I think everybody here knows you."

"Yeah, can we start with the Sage thing already?" Hanabi impatiently asked.

"Agreed. I mean, I was so happy when you said that you could teach us in the end, after telling us first that you couldn't" Fu chimed in.

"What changed your mind?"

"You'll see soon," Naruto said. "Now, everybody sit down, forming an horizontal line!"

Everybody nodded and did so. Once they were all sat on the ground, Naruto started to walk around them.

"You see, Senjutsu consists in gathering the energy of nature. Energy from the air, the earth, the grass, trees, plants, mountains... you get the gist," Naruto started to explain. "And mixing it with your own chakra. To do so, you must feel the nature energy around you, and pull it inside your body. Once you do it, your bodies will be stronger and far more resilient, your jutsu will pack more power, and you'll be able to sense your surroundings as if you were a sensor. Now, let's do a small demonstration."

Naruto sat down and started to gather nature energy. Meanwhile, much to everybody else's confusion, Fukasaku grabbed a rather large sealing scroll, and unsealed its contents: several large toad statues, thrice as tall as a human being, with a weigh of a couple tons each. In a few minutes, Naruto entered Sage Mode, and walked towards one of the statues.

"Now, behold!" Naruto said, as he placed his hands under the statue. With a mighty heave, the blond lifted the massive statue above his head as if it weight nothing. "See? And this is nothing but the tip of the iceberg!" he said, before letting the statue down again.

There was a chorus of "ohhh" and "whoa!", except Fu, who grumbled something that sounded like "I can do that too."

"So, now that you see what Sage Mode can do, let's get to work!" Naruto enthusasitically said. "First, you must learn to sense and gather nature energy!"

Shisui raised his hand. "Naruto-sensei? How do we do that? Because I'm not feeling anything."

"Yeah, me neither, and I'm a sensor!" Karin agreed.

"That's why I was unable to teach you Sage Mode at first. You can only feel nature energy once it has been inside your body," Naruto explained.

"But in order to do so, you must feel it to begin with," Rin concluded. "It's a circular problem."

"In order to solve that problem, we Myoboku Toads use a special oil that, when anointed on the skin, makes the body to draw nature energy on its own. It's used to both give a human a first taste of nature energy, as well as to help the body keep it under control. Unfortunately, said oil can't be taken out of Mount Myoboku, as it instantly evaporates outside of it."

"However, my brilliant mind developed a solution!" Naruto proudly boasted, and clapped twice. Two clones landed besides him. Said clones were in Sage Mode, given the golden eyes and orange pigmentation around them. "Given that I'm an universal chakra donnor, I can gather nature energy, then pass it to anybody."

"That's a pretty clever idea, Naruto-kun!" Hinata praised. Naruto beamed with pride.

"Yeah, why didn't you think about it earlier? We could all be Sages by now!" Hanabi protested. Naruto instantly deflated, his triumphant smile replaced by a grimace of embarrassment.

"However, nature energy, if left uncontrolled, can be extremely dangerous!" Fukasaku said, bringing the topic back in track. "If not properly mixed with your own chakra, you'll suffer horrible mutations!"

"M-Mutations?" Shizune stuttered. "What kind of mutations?"

"You'll turn into a toad," Naruto casually say.

"WHAT!?" everybody yelled in unison.

"And that's not the worst part. Then, you'll turn into a statue," Naruto continued. "Permanently."

Suddenly, everybody's eyes drifted towards the bunch of toad statues that Fikasaku had brought for the training. Everybody thought that they were just to test their newfound strength, but suddenly their presence took a very sinister meaning. Guessing what they were thinking, Naruto and Fukasaku nodded at them, much to their chagrin.

"This isn't worth it!" Karin said, as she stood up, ready to leave. "I'm not going to risk being turned into a statue! Or worse, a toad!"

Naruto quickly cut Karin's escape, placing himself in front of her. "Whoa, there, calm down!" Naruto reassured, holding his hands up defensively. "We do have the means to stop that from happening. Pa?"

The old toad nodded, and produced a large black staff from under his cloak.

"This special staff here can force somebody to release all their gathered nature energy at once," Fukasaku said. "So the moment I see one of you starts to mutate, I'll reverse it before it's too late."

"Now, that's convenient," Asuma observed. "But I'm not going to complain. How does it work?"

"He hits you in the head with it," Naruto said, as he instinctively rubbed his head. Asuma raised an eyebrow. "Really, really hard."

"Now that we've covered the basics, let's begin the training!" Fukasaku stated. "First, Naruto-chan will transfer you some nature energy, so you can experience how it feels firsthand!"

The clones nodded, and they started to do what Fukasaku said, one by one. As the nature energy was transferred, small marks started to appear around their eyes. The amount transferred was enough to let them feel the energy around them, but not that much as to risk turned into a toad.

"Can you feel it now?" Fukasaku asked. "All the energy around you. In the air you breathe, the grass you're sitting on, the ground below it, the trees around us..."

"Yes... YES! Now I can feel it!" Shizune said. "This sensation is amazing!"

"Whoa, this is nothing I've ever felt before!" Karin said. "I can feel my sensorial abilities growing even stronger!"

"Yes, Senjutsu grants its user sensorial abilities by default, so it's normal that it would increase those of sensors," Naruto said, nodded.

"Good! Now that you have a taste of nature energy, try to draw it yourselves!" Fukasaku instructed. "In order to do so, you need to be perfectly still!"

"You can speed the process with Shadow Clones," Naruto helpfully added. "Though for the time being, use just one. Alright, let's see how well you guys mix nature energy with your chakra!"

...

Training Ground Eight

Since Naruto and Hinata were busy doing Senjutsu training, Kurenai and Haku continued their team's usual training routine on their own. Given that they were just the two of them, they decided it was a good opportunity for them to continue Haku's genjutsu training. Right now, sensei and student were engaged in a battle of illusions, creating images inside the other's mind until one of them would give up. Though for an external observer, it would just look like Haku and Kurenai were merely standing in front of each other with their hands forming a seal.

The battle finally came to an end when Haku fell to one knee. Even if their duel only lasted a couple minutes, it felt like hours for them.

"Not bad, Haku," Kurenai praised the Ice Ninja. "You're getting better each day. I think that you're only a few months away from beating me."

"It didn't feel like that," Haku said, heaving a little, before standing up once again.

"Well, I do have more experience than you," Kurenai said. "But trust my word. You're both talented and a fast learner. The time in which I will have nothing left to teach you draws near."

"I'll try to measure up to our expectations then, sensei," Haku said with a nod.

Kurenai walked to a nearby tree, and sat under the shadow of its canopy.

"Come on, let's take a rest here before we continue, okay?" the Genjutsu Mistress said.

Haku just nodded, and sat besides her. They spent a few minutes in comfortable silence, with only the chirps of the birds and the sound of a cool breeze filling the air. Even if Haku hated to interrupt such peaceful calm, he felt the need to ask something to the red eyed woman.

"Say, Kurenai-sensei... I see that you've been pushing yourself a lot lately," Haku observed. "Your genjutsu were far more intense than usual."

"Why, of course," Kurenai replied with a nod, as if Haku had stated something obvious. "Just because I'm a sensei doesn't mean there's no more room for improvement. Especially with what's going to come in the near future."

"Root?" Haku asked. Kurenai merely nodded with a soft grunt. "Is this also because of... Yakumo Kurama?"

Even if Haku couldn't see it, the light from Kurenai's eyes dimmed a little. The raven haired woman closed her eyes and nodded sadly. After the raid had ended, Kurenai had told Naruto, Hinata and Haku that the masked genjutsu user working for Danzo was Yakumo. Or a member of her clan, but given that she was the only one alive who manifested such brand of genjutsu, there were no other options.

"Do you feel it's your responsibility to take her down, sensei?" Haku asked.

"It's my fault that she is in such predicament to begin with," Kurenai replied. "I was her sensei. I should have protected her. Yet I let Danzo fool me into thinking she was dead, and poor Yakumo ended the paying the price."

"Sensei, what happened to her, while tragic, can't be your fault," Haku rebutted. "You told us that the fire happened in her house at night. You weren't there to protect her. There was nothing you could have done."

"Maybe I could have insisted more in searching her, given that her body was never found, with good reason," Kurenai said. "But I do know that wallowing in past mistakes solves nothing. What matters is what I can do now. And what I can do is rescue her from Danzo's clutches."

"Remember that you're part of the Assault Squad, Kurenai-sensei," Haku reminded her. "Don't doubt for a second that Hinata-san, Naruto-kun and myself won't hesitate to be at your side when the time to face Yakumo arrives."

Kurenai chuckled softly at Haku's eagerness to help.

"I'd say this is something that I have to do myself, but I've been your sensei for far too long to know that you're going to get involved, no matter what," Kurenai replied, leaning her head back against the tree's trunk.

"Given what we plan to do, it should be wise if you told us about Yakumo's abilities," Haku said. "And most importantly, how to counter them."

"Sure. Though keep in mind that Danzo has been training her for more years than I've been training you," Kurenai warned. "Her abilities had probably grown way beyond what I remember of them."

"Still, it's better than nothing," Haku insisted. "It will give us a base to fight her, and we'll know what to expect."

"Alright," Kurenai nodded. She cleared her throat, before starting her explanation. "The Kurama Clan were ninjas specialized in genjutsu, thanks to a Bloodline Limit of theirs. Said Bloodline only manifested once every few generations, but once it did, it was extremely easy to recognize it. One of the hints is such a prowess in genjutsu so absolute, training is barely needed to..."

...

Training Ground Twenty Five

Back with Naruto, the blond jinchuriki and Fukasaku continued to oversee the Sage trainees. As expected, they were having a lot of trouble properly keeping the nature energy under control, and mutations were common.

TWACK!

"OW!" Shizune whined, as she rubbed her head. "Naruto-kun, I think you're enjoying this too much!"

"Hey, I'm doing this for your own good!" Naruto replied, with a cheeky grin, as he tapped the anti-senjutsu staff against the palm of his other hand. Thankfully, Fukasaku had more than one, so Naruto could use several clones to keep watch over the trainees. "You don't want to be a toad, do you?"

Shizune grumbled, and went back to the exercise.

TWACK!

"OUCH!" Karin shouted. "Do you need to hit that hard?"

"Hey, if you want to stay a toad for the rest of your life, just tell me," another Naruto replied.

TWACK!

TWACK!

TWACK!

Soon, the air was filled by loud protest of the indignant -and very sore in the head- trainees, complaining about Naruto's forceful methods, while the blond and his clones tried to justify their actions. The argument was silenced by Fukasaku loudly whistling.

"Enough!" the old toad shouted. "Okay, I think it's time to take a break. You won't make much progress if you aren't calm down. Let's resume the training in half an hour."

The trainees nodded, and started to grumble among themselves as they got up and scattered across the nearby surroundings in order to find a good place to rest, and nurse their pained skulls. Naruto, meanwhile, dispelled all his clones.

"And you, Naruto-chan, should be more careful with the staff," Fukasaku advised in a firm tone. "A little tap on the head is enough to release all the nature energy gathered."

"A little tap on the head?" Naruto asked, now him being the one sounding indignant. "During my Senjutsu training, I'm sure you almost broke my skull!"

"Come on Naruto-chan, don't be such a complainer. A frail old toad like me lacks the strength to cause so much damage," Fukasaku said, shaking his head.

"Frail old toad my ass!" Naruto protested. "You showed me the power of Senjutsu by lifting a giant-ass statue!"

While Naruto and the elder toad argued about the latter's strength or lack thereof, Shisui and Shizune decided to rest together.

"Man, Naruto really needs another way to release that pent up energy," Shisui complained, as he rubbed his head. "Care to lend me your magic hands?"

The black haired medic-nin frowned. "Shisui... do not call them by that name out of the bedroom, understood?" Shizune asked, as she started to heal Shisui's sore head. "What if somebody heard you?"

"Oh come on, if they don't know the context, there's no way they can reach such conclusion," Shisui said, his grin being not so different from Naruto's when he was whacking them with the toad's staff.

As Shizune healed Shisui, she started to wonder how much more she'll have to endure Naruto hitting her in the head with that staff. While she never give much thought over never signing the Slug Summoning Contract, she was now regretting it. Tsunade had learned senjutsu under them, so it was possible. Plus it was probably much less painful.

It was then than a realization dawned upon her.

"Uh, Shisui?" Shizune asked. "Don't you have a summoning contract yourself?"

"Yeah. With crows," Shisui replied. "What about it?"

"Couldn't the crows teach you Senjutsu?" Shizune asked.

Shisui's eyes opened wide, and looked at Shizune as if she had confessed being unfaithful to him.

"Wait... the crows can do that!?" Shisui asked in shock.

"I mean, all summoned tribes can use senjutsu, and teach it to humans," Shizune explained. "That's how human Sages came to be. Didn't you know that?"

"No! Of course not!" Shisui shouted, completely indignant. His expression of shock was replaced by a mask of fury, as he clenched both fists, which were vigorously shaking. "They could have taught me Senjutsu all this time, and here I am, letting Naruto break my head open! Oh, those carrion gobblers have so much explaining to do!"

"Now, now, don't jump to conclusions, I'm sure they had their reasons," Shizune reassured. "Or maybe they can't teach senjutsu? Who knows."

As Shisui continued to complain about his summoned tribe, Rin was sitting by herself on the grass, looking at the clouds in the sky, hoping that the calm environment would relax her little. She needed to be relaxed in order to master Sage Mode. Too bad for her, she was about to meet somebody who was the complete opposite of "relaxing".

"Hello!" a loud, cheerful female voice said behind her.

Rin looked up, and saw a rather tall and muscular girl dressed in revealing white clothes, with tan skin and green hair, smiling brightly

at her. Rin stood up, and turned to face the newcomer. While she knew who she was, she had never met the girl in person.

"Um, hi," Rin replied, as he wiped a strand of hair from her face.

"You're Rin Nohara, right?" the green haired girl said, as she extended her hand. "My name is Fu! Pleased to meet you!"

Rin smiled back, and shook her hand. Fu's handshake was as powerful as her muscular frame suggested. Fortunately, the medic-nin didn't end up with any broken fingers.

"I know who you are as well," Rin replied. "Shino told me about you. You're his girlfriend, right?"

"Damn right I am!" Fu proudly stated. "And hey, glad to see that Shino tells his friends about me, hehe! How do you know Shino, by the way? He mentioned you a few times, but he didn't specify how are you connected to him."

"I used to be his sensei's former teammate," Rin replied. "Until, well, I died. And then came back from the death."

"Yeah, they told me that. At first I thought that they were playing a prank of me, but they were really serious," Fu solemnly said, before her face brightened up again. "So, what did my little Shino told you about me? Good stuff, I hope!"

Rin chuckled lightly. "Nothing to worry about, that's for sure," Rin reassured. "So, you're from Taki, right?"

"Yep!" Fu replied again, turning aside so Rin could see the Takigakure forehead protector she had tied to her bicep. "Sadly, I need to be here until the whole Akatsuki threat passes. Then I can go back home."

"I guess that you may feel a little homesick, but at the very least, I hope you're enjoying your stay at Konoha," Rin gently said.

"Oh, sure! Konoha is awesome! Plus here I can be with my boyfriend and friends!" Fu beamed. "But there's no place like home, you know?"

"Oh, I can relate to that," Rin replied. "Though unlike you, I can't go back to my home."

Fu raised an eyebrow, and scratched a temple in confusion. "Wait, I thought you were from here?"

"It's less a matter of *where*, and more a matter of *when*," Rin punctualized. "I've been dead for more than fifteen years. During that time, Konoha and its people continued moving forward, and when I returned... the place I once called home was hardly recognizable."

"I see. Man, that has to suck. And here I am complaining for having to stay here for a few months," Fu said, shaking her head.

"No, you have right to complain, Your village was nearly destroyed, for Kami's sake!" Rin insisted. "Besides, even if it was kind of hard at the beginning, I'm getting used to it."

"Really?" Fu asked.

"The hardest part was to accept that the friends I used to know who were my age are now grown adults, while I'm still a teen," Rin told her. "Making new friends helped easing it. That's why I tried to befriend Kakashi's students. They've been really helpful with all this adapting to the future stuff."

"Any friend of Kiba, Tamaki and my Shino are friends of mine as well!" Fu loudly stated. "So if you ever need anything, or do you want to talk about something, don't be afraid to ask me, okay?"

"Sure. You seem like a pretty nice girl," Rin praised.

Fu giggled in return. "I want to have a hundred friends! And you can't make friends if you aren't nice, can you?"

"Guess there's no arguing against that logic," Rin replied, chuckling a little.

"It's always great to have one more person I can call a friend! So, now that introductions are out of the way... how are you going with this Senjutsu training?" Fu asked. "I was so happy when Naruto said that he could teach me Senjutsu after he told me first that he couldn't, but man, this is much harder than I expected!"

"It has to be. There's a reason as for why there are so few Sages," Rin replied. "I wonder if all of us here will be able to master it."

"Well, I won't rest until I master it, that's for sure! If Naruto can do it, then so can I!" Fu energetically declared. "That way, when those Akatsuki idiots come for me, I'll give them an even bigger ass whooping I gave to Kakuzu!"

"You seem determined. That's good," Rin praised, giggling as well.

"What about you, Rin?" Fu asked. "Any reason as for why you want to become a Sage?"

"Well... I'm mostly here because Hokage-sama asked me. I do have the requisites of large chakra reserves and good chakra control to become a Sage, and hey, whatever helps Konoha," Rin said with a weak smile, before her expression turned more solemn. "Though then, I realized that I also need this power to take down a certain somebody from Akatsuki."

"Akatsuki are after you too?" Fu asked, sounding even more interested. "Are you a jinchuriki as well?"

"No, I'm not a jinchuriki," she told Fu. "It's just... one of the Akatsuki used to be a friend of mine."

"Oh," was all what Fu could say. "That... has to suck a lot..."

"That's putting it lightly," Rin replied, shaking her head. "It was my death what pushed him into the group to begin with. And it was him who brought me back to life. That's why I feel... that I'm the one who has to take him down. Not to just stop him from harming others but... to stop his suffering as well."

"I hope you make him see reason," Fu replied. "Seeing one of my friends turning bad like that... I can't even imagine it..."

...

One of Orochimaru's Lairs, Undisclosed Location

"So, are you and your men ready to go?" Orochimaru asked.

The Snake Sannin was walking through his latest lair alongside somebody who had become a fellow missing-nin of Konoha, Danzo Shimura, whom Orochimaru was giving shelter for the time being.

"Indeed. Soon both me and my men we'll be out of your mind," Danzo promised the Sannin. "I guess I should thank you for your assistance before leaving."

"There's something you can do for me before you leave, if you're feeling as grateful as you say," Orochimaru replied, licking his lips.

"If it's within my power, I shall do it," Danzo said. "But keep in mind that my forces are still recovering. It will be a while before-"

"It's not something that requires physical effort," Orochimaru cut him. "Just a little information gathering."

Danzo didn't reply immediately, and shoot Orochimaru a scrutinizing stare. "What kind of information?"

"It came to my knowledge that you managed to acquire a substantial piece of DNA of a girl named Rin Nohara," Orochimaru began. "The girl Obito-kun resurrected, who was reborn with Wood Release, among other perks. Even if I held her in one of my hideouts for a

short time, I was unable to get any DNA sample from her, as those annoying Zetsus never left her side. So tell me, Danzo, what did you find about that?"

"I see. It's only logical that such thing also drew your interest as well," Danzo replied, his tone remaining neutral. "It seems that the girl had her DNA spliced with one of those Zetsu things. That's where her Wood Release and regenerative powers come from. The way their DNA was combined surpasses anything either your or my scientists did so far."

Orochimaru's expression darkened. Danzo knew that it wasn't because of his jab, but because the Sannin couldn't stand that somebody was able to surpass him in a scientific field of his interest, and having no idea of how they did it.

"And were your scientists able to replicate the process?" Orochimaru asked, trying to hide his admittedly small frustration behind a veil of calmness.

Danzo shook his head. "They managed to use it as a base for some improvements over your work, but that's about it. Like I said before, whatever Obito did goes beyond you and me."

"Obito never had any background in human biology, am I right?" Orochimaru inquired. "And not just him. Neither his sensei nor teammates possessed such advanced knowledge of both biology and Hashirama's DNA to attempt something like that."

"You worked under him. I should be the one asking you that," Danzo shot back. "Though, I'm curious about the Zetsu creatures. You say that they follow Obito's orders?"

"Every single one of them," Orochimaru confirmed.

"It's safe to assume that those creatures are artificial beings, probably man-made using the same technology," Danzo concluded.

"And that whatever he used to resurrect the dead girl, was the same, or similar process to create those monsters."

Orochimaru rolled his eyes in annoyance. "I reached that conclusion as soon as I laid my eyes upon one of them. Your conclusion is that Obito is working for somebody else who provided him with such means, right? I reached that conclusion as well."

"Yet you seem to be at an impasse, right?" Danzo asked. The question was irritating by itself, and Danzo's neutral tone only made it worse. "The reason you're not finding the answers you seek is because you aren't making the right questions."

"And what questions would those be, then?" Orochimaru asked.

"First of all, if those creatures were created from Hashirama's DNA, then you should ask yourself first: how did Obito managed to acquire it?" Danzo asked.

"He probably stole it from Konoha. That's no mystery," Orochimaru said, rolling his eyes again.

"Yet had such thing happened, we would have learned about it," Danzo countered. "It was because of your unauthorized use of Hashirama's DNA in your experiments that Hiruzen was able to uncover them. After such incident, security measures towards the remaining samples were increased tenfold, and we know Obito's fall from grace happened after your defection."

"Where are you going with this?" Orochimaru asked.

"This leads us to the second question: is it possible for somebody out of Konoha to possess samples of Hashirama's DNA?" Danzo asked.

"God of Ninja or not, Hashirama was a ninja and took part in battles. I'm sure somebody could make him bleed, take a piece of skin, anything," Orochimaru said in a dismissive way.

This time, it was Danzo who shook his head. "No, no normal man could make Hashirama bleed. Unlike you, I saw him fight during the First Ninja War, and there was absolutely no one who could push him to fight to his fullest."

"Yet Hashirama died during that very war," Orochimaru rebutted.

"Yes, he did. But the reason behind his fall was extreme exhaustion after his duel against Madara," Danzo explained. "He refused to take any time to recover, and rejoined the war as soon as possible, as he thought his power was necessary to end it. However, the ninja who killed him was quickly killed afterwards by our forces, and many measures were taken to ensure not a single piece of his DNA ended in the enemy's hands."

"And again I need to ask, what is your point?" Orochimaru asked.

"The answer to this second question is the only man who could make Hashirama bleed: Madara Uchiha," Danzo replied. "It's obvious it's him the one who instructed young Obito. And it's obvious that, just like he resurrected Rin, is planning to do the same with his former master."

"That doesn't make any sense," Orochimaru retorted. "Madara was killed by Hashirama. His body was brought to Konoha, where its death was confirmed once again, and was subjected to extensive autopsy. And after several months, it was finally buried in a secret place. Trust me, Danzo, I had many people over the years looking for Madara's place of final rest."

"And once again, Orochimaru, you're blinded by your own arrogance," Danzo said. "You're possibly, the most gifted and intelligent man I worked with, but there are things that even you don't know."

"And what things would be?" Orochimaru asked, sounding irritated.

Danzo allowed himself to smirk. "Do you know about a forbidden jutsu named Izanagi?"

...

One Orochimaru's Former Lairs, Undisclosed Location

While Orochimaru was with Danzo in one of his main bases, Kabuto was tasked with overseeing the evacuation of the old bases.

One of the many downsides that Orochimaru's betrayal of Akatsuki brought was that they needed to evacuate and relocate all their bases, since Akatsuki didn't tolerate traitors, and their revenge would come sooner or later.

Then again, Orochimaru had assured that Pain and Obito were so worried with capturing the remaining Tailed Beasts as soon as possible, that they would take some time to retaliate. And they would use that time to prepare for the inevitable backlash.

"That is, if the backlash comes," Orochimaru had said, followed by a confident chuckle. "I have the feeling that Akatsuki is going to have their hands full in the foreseeable future."

Kabuto had been tempted to ask what did Orochimaru know that he didn't, but decided to trust his master's judgement. While the Snake Sannin prepared the final part of his plan, the silver haired medic-nin was tasked with evacuating one of the lairs. A masked Oto ninja then walked to him.

"Kabuto-sama, all the labs have already been emptied," the Oto ninja informed. "Everything essential has been moved out, while everything else has been left here, to be claimed by the flames when we destroy the base."

"Good job," Kabuto replied with a nod. "Remember that the boxes with the red marks are to be destroyed, while the boxes with the black marks should be safely stored and taken away."

"Understood, sir," the Oto ninja replied. "Everybody has left already. Do you want to check the base one last time, or should I give the order to bring the base down?"

"One last check won't hurt. I'd hate if because of one man's incompetence, Orochimaru-sama lost something irreplaceable," Kabuto said.

The Oto ninja nodded. "As you wish, sir. I'll be waiting for you outside," he said, before vanishing.

Kabuto went to check the lair one last time, to make sure everything was in order. He knew that, if somebody was amiss, Orochimaru would lay the blame on him, and he didn't want to take any risks. The last part of the plan was the most delicate so far, and a single mistake could ruin it. Fortunately, every room that he checked only had red marked boxes.

"Okay, everything seems to be fine," Kabuto said, as he walked towards the last storage room. "If everything's fine, we can finally say goodbye to this lair."

He opened the door, and entered the room, and the moment he did, the silver haired man loudly gasped in shock. The reason was that he saw a black marked box. As if that wasn't bad enough, the box was opened, and one could see its contents had been emptied. This was distressing enough, but what made it such a shocking sight was the bloodied corpses of Otogakure ninjas scattered around the room.

"I wish I didn't have to kill them," a voice said behind Kabuto. A voice he recognized. "They were good men. But they needed to die, since they would stop me in my endeavor."

Kabuto immediately turned around, as his hands started to glow with a blue light of chakra, as he activated his chakra scalpels. However, the moment he turned around to face his enemy, said enemy dropped a flashbang, filling the whole room with blinding white light.

A light Kabuto was unable to shield his eyes against, and was promptly blinded.

"AAAAARGH!" the medic-nin cried, as he instinctively took his hands to his pained eyes, the chakra scalpels dispelling.

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Thick wooden roots emerged from around Kabuto and tightly wrapped around his body, leaving him completely immobilized.

"You, on the other hand... I'm going to enjoy killing you..." the person said, as a kunai appeared in their hand. Kabuto felt an intense pain as the kunai pierced his gut. "I can't wait to see Orochimaru's reaction when I throw your decapitated head at his feet."

"Ack..." Kabuto coughed, spraying some blood. "Orochimaru-sama... you won't be able to... he has powers now that... that you can't..."

"You think I'm too weak to kill your beloved master?" the attacker said, as Kabuto was stabbed two more times.

This time, Kabuto didn't reply, and focused his chakra into the wounded spots, in order to heal them with the Wound Destruction, a jutsu he had developed that allowed him to heal any part of his body without having to use his hands. Hopefully, he could fool his assailant into thinking that he was dead. He knew there were some medical supplies in some of the boxes ready to be discarded. Once his would-be assassin went away, he could use some of them to heal himself properly.

But it seems that his assassin wasn't going to give him the chance, as Kabuto felt another onslaught of stabbings. As more and more blood poured from his body, his vision was starting to blur, and his head felt lighter.

"Maybe you're right," the assassin said. "Even if I catch that traitor... even with the First Hokage's power, it might not be enough to end his miserable life. But hey, as long as he dies, I don't care if I'm not the one who kills him."

And with that, the assassin left. The Wooden bindings quickly vanished, and Kabuto's body dropped to the ground. Kabuto knew this was his chance. As he continued healing his wounds as best as he could, he crawled towards one of the boxes, leaving a trail of blood behind.

It was then when he heard several sizzling sounds. The kind of sizzles that explosive tags make. The sound came from his very back.

Kabuto didn't have time to react before he was engulfed by a chain of explosions, putting an end to his life.

...

Training Ground Twenty Five, the Next Day

When the Sage trainees arrived to the training ground to continue their instruction, they noticed that there was something different. Namely, that there were multiple long stalagmites emerging from the ground, most likely being the result of one or several Earth Release jutsu. Besides the stalagmites was a pile of thin stone slabs.

Naruto and Fukasaku were already there, with Naruto grinning in anticipation, as if expecting the trainees to ask what those stalagmites were for.

"Hey there! Good to see you back!" Naruto cheerfully said. "I'm sure you're wondering what these stalagmites and stone slabs are for, don't you?"

"Yeah," Shisui said, before his expression became contrite. "You don't plan to hit us with those slabs in the head, do you?"

"Come on guys, I don't hit you THAT hard, do I?" Naruto protested. He was met with several angry glares that told him otherwise. The blond then frowned and crossed his arms. "Anyway, too bad, because the smacks in the head won't stop until you learn to mix nature energy properly."

"Naruto-kun, you didn't told us what those things are for," Hinata pointed out.

"You'll use them for today's exercise," Fukasaku stated. "So far, you seem to get the hang of sensing and collecting nature energy. But you have troubles with both collecting it at a greater speed, and keeping them under control in order to properly mix them with your chakra. The key for both things is to learn how to be completely still."

"We already know that," Karin said, as she placed both hands on her hips.

"You do, yet you're unable to remain completely still! You won't be Sages until you learn how!" Fukasaku replied, sounding like he was reprimanding a child.

"If somebody like Naruto, who oozes energy from every pore of his skin, is able to do it, I think all of us here can do it as well," Asuma replied, before giving Naruto a conciliatory smile. "No offense, kid."

"No worries. It took me a while to get that part done," Naruto replied, smiling back. "Thanks to the exercise we're going to show you now!"

"Yes. In order to attain the stillness you lack, you'll be put into a position that will force you to stay completely immobile," Fukasaku began. "Naruto-chan, care to show them?"

Naruto nodded, grabbed a stone slab, and after climbing the one of the stalagmites, he placed the slab on its tip, before sitting on it in the lotus position. While both the slab and Naruto wobbled a little bit and threatened to fall down, the blond quickly found balance, and stood completely still atop it.

"See? In order to avoid falling down, Naruto-chan had learned to stay completely still. And once you attain that level of balance, you'll be able to gather and mold nature energy much easier!" Fukasaku told them.

"Now, time for you to do it!" Naruto said, as he jumped down from the stalagmite. "It will take you some time at first, but with effort and perseverance, you will do it!"

"Naruto-sensei, how long did you take it to remain completely still?" Hanabi asked, as she raised her hand.

"About four days," Naruto replied. "But don't get discouraged if you take longer than-"

"Heh, I bet I can do it in just two!" the youngest Hyuga said, as she telekinetically pulled a slab to her hands, before flying towards one of the stalagmites. "The Gentle Fist puts a lot of emphasis on footwork and balance, so this will be piece of cake!"

Hinata just sighed, as she followed her sister, while shaking her head. "Guess Naruto-kun isn't the only one who oozes energy from every pore of their skin..."

Naruto and Fukasaku watched as everybody placed the slab at the tip of one of the stalagmites, and tried to sit on it. "Tried" being the key word, since many of them couldn't find the proper balance at first, and were unable to stay at the top for more than once second, and fell to the ground.

"AAAAAAAAHHHHH!" Rin screamed, before her body hit the ground. "Ouch... I thought that Naruto-kun hitting us with that staff was bad, but this appears to be even worse!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!" another one screamed. This time, it was Hanabi, who fell to the ground. "Ouch... my strategy to use the tenseigan to keep the slab still didn't work..."

"Of course it didn't!" Fukasaku chided the youngest Hyuga. "Being completely still also means not channeling any other jutsu either! If such thing was possible, this exercise wouldn't have a reason to be! Now come on, get back up there!"

On top of having to endure Naruto and Fukasaku's smacking their heads, the Sage trainees had to add falling from several meters high to the ground to the list of hazards they had to suffer in order to master the power of Senjutsu.

And, unfortunately, those hazards were nothing but a minor inconvenience compared to what they, along with the rest of Konoha's population, were about to face.

...

Outside of Konoha, a couple hours later

"So, are we all here?"

Just like Orochimaru had used the thick forests around Konoha to cover his army, Akatsuki was using the same strategy before launching their attack. They were all carried to that spot by Obito, one by one, until the six Akatsuki members were present.

However, half of their members found that there were more than six Akatsuki members present.

"Uh, question," Deidara said, raising his hand. "Who the hell are those guys?"

Behind Pain stood his other five bodies, looking as stoic and emotionless as the man the Akatsuki called their leader.

"They're Pain," Konan answered, as if that solved everything.

"And what's that supposed to mean!?" Deidara asked again.

"Enough! You can ask about Pain later, now we have a job to do," Obito cut the Explosion Release user. He then turned at Toneri. "Are they in the village?"

Toneri, whose Tenseigan was gleaming with a teal light, had his eyes fixed on the village, scanning every centimeter of it.

"Yes, I see all of them. The jinchuriki of the Nine Tails is inside a large house, I presume it's his home. The jinchuriki of the Seven Tails is in another large building. I believe it's a clan compound." Toneri informed. "My Byakugan Princess and her sister are also in the village. This will be a golden opportunity to secure her as well.""

"That means we will have to deal with her as swiftly as possible. We don't know how much their powers had grown since the last time," Obito guessed, a hand under his chin, before looking at Toneri again. "However, I must ask you to focus on the jinchuriki first and foremost. If we fail here, we won't have any other chances," Obito told him in a mild reprimanding tone.

"Worry not, Obito. Have I not served the organization faithfully and competently?" Toneri asked the Uchiha. "I shall capture the jinchuriki myself if the situation demands it."

"We'll see about that," Konan said, as she narrowed her eyes at the Otsutsuki.

"Are our main forces ready?" Pain asked, as he looked at both Toneri and Obito.

"Five thousand Zetsu clones are buried under our very feet," Obito told him. "They are all waiting my orders to attack."

"My puppet army is in position as well," Toneri followed. "They will also provide some additional air support."

"In that case, there should be no more waiting," Konan said.

"Haha, yes! I can't wait to begin!" Kisame said in great delight. "The last time I got to fight in another village was Kiri, and my fun was cut short too soon."

"Worry not, Kisame, for you will have plenty of fun," Pain replied. "Your job will be to cause as much mayhem and destruction as possible, in order to weaken Konoha's defenses. Obito, Konan and I will take care of the jinchuriki."

"Deidara, Toneri, given that you can fly, besides attacking from the sky, your job will be to make sure the jinchuriki of the Seven Tails doesn't escape again through the air," Obito ordered.

"Now, let's commence," Pain declared.

"Alright, given that this is a major invasion, I'll break out the C2 Dragon from the get go!" Deidara claimed, as he fed some explosive clay to one of his hand mouths. The mouth chewed the clay, until it shaped it like a tiny dragon. Tossing the dragon forward, it increased its size a hundredfold, before Deidara jumped on its back. "I'm ready to go!"

"Before you do, take this Path with you," Pain said, as the Animal Path jumped onto the dragon's back as well.

"Yeah, whatever. Let's go!" Deidara said, as his dragon started to flap its wings, gaining attitude as it raised gusts of wind, before it took off into the sky above Konoha. Toneri was quick to follow.

"Kisame, you go and attack the main gate. Try to draw as much attention as possible," Konan told the shark ninja.

"You can count on that, hehe!" Kisame said, as he leaped forward, ready to wreak havoc.

"Now all we have to do is wait," Pain finally declared. "This day, this village shall know the meaning of pain."

Author's Note: Despite the chapter not being that long, there's a lot to unpack here. Let's begin!

First of all, what I think was the most impactful moment of the chapter: Kabuto's death. Truth be told, I've been wanting to kill Kabuto for some time since I didn't know what to do with him anymore. I originally planned to have him killed two chapters ago; he would die fighting against Shisui and Shizune while buying Danzo time to escape. However, I ended up discarding it because there's no way the Uchiha couple, exhausted as they were, could have been able to kill Kabuto when he had so much backup. So I came up with this scene instead. Speaking of which, now the identity of the killer has been narrowed down considerably, since there aren't that many people who can use Wood Release.

You know, while I'm mostly indifferent to him, Kabuto was one of the characters I was planning to kill before I even started writing this story. Like, after all the shit he did during the Fourth Ninja War, all the people he died because of him (and I'm not talking about the war itself; he had to kill a shitton of people just to create his Edo Tensei army) he gets away scot free? Like, are you fucking kidding me, Kishimoto? So yeah, even if Kabuto on this story hasn't done that, I believe that helping Orochimaru was enough to warrant a karmic death.

As for the main plot of this chapter, just like Hinata getting a Tenseigan, more people besides Naruto and Jiraiya getting Sage Mode was on my list of things I wanted to do. Though, unfortunately, they won't be able to master Sage Mode in time for the Akatsuki invasion.

And speaking of which, yeah, the Akatsuki already arrived Konoha, and the invasion will begin the next chapter. This will be a very battle-heavy arc, one not seen since the last time Konoha was invaded. Though you can tell that now it's going to be much worse than when Orochimaru did it. Still, Konoha is

also much stronger now, but it's strong enough to weather the red and black storm that's about to fall upon them?

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, the Akatsuki Invasion begins next chapter! What are your expectations? Tell me about them, as well as your thoughts on this chapter, in your reviews! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part I

Author's Note: After quite some time, Son of the Sannin's Spinoff "The Two Twisted Timelines", by Shinobi420 and Animephilosopher1, has been updated. So you should go and read it once you're done reading this new chapter. Now, enjoy the beginning of the Akatsuki invasion:

Chapter 83:

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part I

or

Konoha Under Attack!... again

Senju Residence

"I'm home!" Tsunade announced, as she entered in the house.

"Hey there, mom," Naruto's voice replied.

When Tsunade entered her house, she found that Naruto was sitting in the living couch, reading a book. While the blond wasn't averse to such activity, he often preferred to spend his spare time doing something to burn his constant overflow of energy, rather than such a quiet and calm activity.

"Hello, Naruto," Tsunade greeted him as she entered the living room. "Your dad and sister aren't here yet?"

"Nope. Dad's still at the office, and Kaida must be training," Naruto told the blonde Sannin. "In fact, I wasn't expecting you to be home so early."

"There was a slow day at the hospital, and for once, I managed to end all my daily work with some time in advance," Tsunade said, as she sat besides Naruto. "I was hoping to spend some quality time with the whole family, but guess that you'll have to do for the time being. So, how's the Sage Training going?"

"We're progressing. I think," Naruto told Tsunade. "I mean, I'm new to this teaching thing, so I don't really know. But they're getting the hang of nature energy and the like."

"Senjutsu isn't something anybody can attempt to master," Tsunade said. "Even if one fits the requirements, it is possible that you're not fit to master it after all. There's a reason as for there are only a couple Sages every few generations."

"Well, we've been only training for two days. I needed more than a week to master it," Naruto pointed out. "Maybe in a few weeks, the others will be able to master it as well."

"Having multiple Sages would give Konoha a huge edge not only against other villages, but against Akatsuki as well," Tsunade mentioned.

"Yeah," Naruto sadly agreed. "Maybe with more Sages, we could have saved more jinchuriki."

Tsunade bit her lip, instantly regretting bringing that topic. Looking around the room, she tried to find something to change the topic, until she found it on Naruto's hands. "Say, what are you reading?" Tsunade asked, as she took a peek at Naruto's book. "That doesn't look like something your father wrote."

"Because it isn't," Naruto replied, as he handed the book to her. "It's old man Roshi's."

"The jinchuriki?" Tsunade asked, as she took a look at the pages.

Naruto nodded. "He kept several journals of his journeys. He visited multiple countries and villages, and wrote about his experiences there. Did you know that he's been on Konoha twice?"

"Really? How is that we never noticed him?" Tsunade asked.

"Well, both times were before I was even born and both you and dad returned for good," Naruto explained. "Let's say, Roshi was really good at keeping a low profile."

"I see," Tsunade replied. "He sounded like an interesting man."

"You can bet he was. Now, thanks to Akatsuki, all of us missed a chance to meet somebody great," Naruto said, shaking his head. "He was planning to publish his books once he felt he had finished his journey, so he could share his experiences with the others, as well as what it feels to be a jinchuriki."

"Well... maybe you can publish those books yourself?" Tsunade suggested.

Naruto looked at her with his eyes wide open. "It's... it's that okay? I mean, I didn't write those books."

"So? It's not that you want to appropriate them, right? You can still say those are Roshi's journeys," Tsunade continued. "That way, Roshi's memories will be alive even long after his death."

"Hmmm... I think you may have a point," Naruto replied. "Problem is, the books doesn't have an end, given what happened with-"

Suddenly, mother and son heard a chain of explosions, followed by the house lightly trembling. A feeling of dread washed upon them.

"What... what the hell was that!?" Naruto asked.

"Nothing good, that's what is," Tsunade said, as she bolted from the couch. "Naruto, go and gather your teammates! I need to go to the hospital and see if Hagane is okay!"

Naruto nodded, and the two blondes quickly left their home.

...

Skies above Konoha, a few minutes earlier

Deidara and Toneri were flying above the village, at an altitude high enough to be mistaken for actual birds, and not be detected by the sensors or the ninjas managing the barrier. Thankfully, the time for stealth would soon come to an end.

"I'll be getting down here," Ponytail Pain told Deidara. "Delay your bombardment so it splits Konoha's forces."

Without further ado, Pain jumped from the bird, allowing himself to fall into the village. Deidara wondered how did he plan to survive such a fall, but his leader had shown that he had way more tricks under his sleeve that it appeared at first glance. Deidara just shrugged, and decided that Pain knew what he was doing. Smiling wickedly, he grabbed a handful of explosive clay, and feed it to the mouths inside his hands.

"Not every day I have the chance to show my art to a village, so I'll make sure to use my very best, hn!" Deidara said, as several clay figurines appeared on his hands. "Down you go!"

A chain of powerful explosions rocked Konoha, drawing everybody's attention to the point of origin. That momentary distraction was all what Pain needed.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

After a burst of smoke, Ponytail Pain was surrounded by the other five paths, as well as Konan.

"Scatter!" the Main Pain ordered. "Create as much chaos and destruction as possible! That will draw the jinchuriki to us!"

Wordlessly, all of them leaped in different directions, while most Konoha ninja were heading towards the explosions Deidara had caused.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Animal Pain used his only jutsu once again, this time summoning a large, multi-headed dog that went on a mad rampage the instant it was summoned. Not far away from there, puppet Pain deployed his whole arsenal, raining missiles on ninja, civilians and buildings alike, attacking nearby people with his flamethrower and chakra beam cannon. Meanwhile, the main Pain, assisted by the chakra-absorbing one as well as Konan, engaged the few ninjas left that were still in the area.

...

Hokage Tower, that very moment

Even if Deidara's explosions didn't happen in a place close to the Hokage's tower, the explosions were loud and visible enough to be seen and heard from there. Jiraiya, who was working as usual, was startled by the explosions, and quickly opened his window to see what was going on. Not only it was followed by even more explosions, but several gigantic animals were wrecking the village.

Undeterred, Jiraiya bit his thumb, and made five hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Fukasaku and Shima appeared from a burst of smoke, looking around, noticing where they were.

"Jiraiya-chan? Why did you summon us here?" Fukasaku asked, noticing the Sannin's distress.

"Yeah, it better be important! We were about to have lunch!" Shima protested.

"I don't know. Would you call Akatsuki invading the village important?" Jiraiya sarcastically asked.

"WHAT!?" the two elder toads asked in unison, both equally shocked.

As if to answer their question, another chain of explosions made the tower tremble. These ones happened much closer.

"The day I've been fearing so much is finally here. That means that Akatsuki have captured the other seven jinchuriki. They only need Naruto and Fu for their plan to succeed," Jiraiya explained. More explosions rocked the tower. "And with their targets in a single village, guess they decided to toss subtlety out of the window and launch an invasion on the village."

"You can count on us, Jiraiya-chan!" Shima, whose attitude had gone a complete twist, energetically offered. "What do you need us to do?"

"Ma, I need you with me for Sage Mode," Jiraiya said. The female toad nodded, and jumped into his shoulder. "Pa, look for Naruto and Fu, and protect them with everything you have."

The male toad nodded as well.

"Those kids won't fall into Akatsuki's grasp as long as I breathe!" Fukasaku declared, as he leaped out of the window.

Jiraiya then walked towards the right wall of the office, and started to feel it until he found what he was looking for: a hidden switch he had installed a couple years ago. Pressing the switch, a rectangular section of the wall opened with a clicking sound as if it was a door. Jiraiya pushed the door, and entered the room.

"Jiraiya-chan, what are you doing?" Shima protested. "We should head outside to the battle!"

"I know!" Jiraiya replied, as he walked towards the wall in front of the door. On said wall there was a complex sealing pattern. He placed his hand in the center of the pattern, and sent a pulse of chakra. "But I need to do this first."

The seals started to glow with a blue light, and more seals started to spread, first across the room, then the office, and beyond that.

"What is this seal, Jiraiya-chan?" Shima asked.

"A little defense mechanism we implemented after our war against Yagura," Jiraiya said, with a confident smirk. "This will increase our chances of victory even further!"

...

Gates of Konoha

With all the chaos that was going in the village, it didn't take much effort for Kisame to break into the village through the main gates. That's not to say that he didn't find any resistance, though said resistance was hardly an obstacle for him. By summoning a gigantic tsunami, he crushed the gates of Konoha, as well as the ninjas manning it. Naturally, many more Konoha ninjas arrived to see what was going on.

"Fire Release: Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

A Konoha ninja exhaled a stream of fire from his mouth at Kisame. The shark ninja, however, merely laughed and blocked the attack with Samehada. His trusty sword quickly absorbed the jutsu.

"I thought I was famous enough to know that you aren't supposed to use ninjutsu against me," Kisame chuckled, as he shook his head. "Oh well, guess I'll have to work harder."

"No... no ninjutsu?" the Konoha ninja stammered, as he struggled to pull a couple of kunai from his ninja tool pouch.

"Sorry, it's too late for you to learn that lesson!" Kisame shouted.

The shark ninja dashed forward and delivered a horizontal swing, separating the man's upper half of his body from his lower half, killing him instantly. More Konoha ninja landed besides him.

"That's Kisame Hoshigake!" the most veteran of the newcomers said. "Beware of that sword! It can absorb ninjutsu!"

"Oh, so somebody in this disgrace of a village knows who I am after all," Kisame laughed, as he stabbed his sword into the ground, as he started to make hand seals. "Then again, you're about to find that there's much more to me than Samehada. Water Release: Exploding Water Colliding Wave!"

Much to the Konoha ninja's shock, Kisame expelled a massive amount of water from his mouth, quickly drowning the Konoha ninjas, and completely flooding that section of the village. Kisame, standing atop of the colossal mass of water, watched as his victims tried to swim to the surface. His smirk widened, as he bit his thumb.

"Dinner's served, my pets!" Kisame said, as he made five hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

Slamming his palm into the surface of the water, a fourths of sharks were summoned. The sharks quickly swam towards the hapless Konoha ninjas, and tore them to shreds, dying the water mass dark red.

"Ah, there's nothing like a taste of foreign cuisine to broaden your experience," Kisame laughed, mostly to himself.

"DOUBLE KONOHA WHIRLWIND!"

Kisame had barely any time to react before two green blurs dashed at him from different directions. By stopping the release of chakra through his feet, the Akatsuki sank into the water, barely avoiding the double flying kick. The duo landed in opposite directions, revealing to

be a man and a young teen, both clad in green with ridiculous bowl haircuts and extremely thick eyebrows.

"Tenten! Now!" the younger one said.

Still underwater, Kisame's eyes drifted towards a girl with brown hair styled in a pair of buns, who dashed towards the water. He didn't know what she wanted to do, but there was no way she could harm him.

"Gate of Opening, Open! Gate of Healing, Open!" Tenten shouted, as chakra burst from her body in the form of a green aura. She then pulled out a small sealing scroll from under her clothes, and unsealed a kusarigama. "Okay, time to fish some Akatsuki!"

Tenten channeled her boosted chakra into the kusarigama, which started to glow with a blue light. She then threw the weighted chain of the weapon at Kisame, who watched in shock how the water failed to sap it of any momentum.

" *What the hell?*" the Shark ninja thought, as the chain wrapped around his body.

"Neji, get ready!" Tenten said.

Displaying her enhanced strength, Tenten violently pulled Kisame out of the water construct, and threw it at an Hyuga, placed a few meters behind her.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Neji turned into a spinning dome of chakra just seconds before Kisame was slammed against him. The spinning force was great enough to knock Kisame back as soon as he touched the chakra dome, before crashing against a nearby building.

"Did that get him?" Tenten asked, as Gai and Lee landed besides her.

Kisame, however, not only managed to pull himself back, but he looked completely unharmed.

"Now... that was sure something," Kisame said, laughing a little, as he rested his sword onto his shoulder. "You made me feel pain! Heh, it seems that I found myself some worthy adversaries!"

"He... he doesn't have any wounds!" the black haired teen said in shock.

"He does, but they're healing," the adult said, as he noticed how a couple cuts on Kisame's face closed and disappeared.

"It's that sword," Neji pointed out. "That sword it's alive and has chakra. It's supplying the Akatsuki with chakra, which also heals him. I believe this man is Kisame Hoshigake. Karin's team fought against him not long ago. Beware that sword, it can also absorb ninjutsu."

"It can absorb ninjutsu, you say? Ha!" the adult roared. "Then it's such a luck that all of us are mostly taijutsu specialists! Neji, Lee, Tenten, we must take this Akatsuki down, for we're the best suited to fight him!"

"You think you lot are the first taijutsu specialists I face? Pitiful," Kisame said, shaking his head. "Maybe you aren't as worthy as I thought."

"Let us prove you wrong then, for you're now against Maito Gai, Konoha's Noble Blue Beast, and his three youthful students!" Gai said in an overly theatrical matter.

"Maito Gai...?" Kisame asked, narrowing a single eye at the green clad Jonin. "Oh, I think I know who you are! A ninja named Maito Dai made a name on the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist during the latest war! If you're related to him, then you must be pretty strong! Very well then, you managed to draw my interest!"

Both Team Gai and Kisame rushed towards each other, ready to fight without holding back.

...

Unfortunately for Konoha, the Akatsuki members weren't the only ones who were attacking it. A multitude of Zetsu clones climbed the walls and poured into the village, attacking every human they saw, either be ninja or civilian, children or adults, like a voracious locust swarm devouring a crop.

And joining them were Toneri's puppets. Even if fewer in number, they proved to be far more deathly than the Zetsu thanks to their resilience combined with their ability to mold and use chakra, which they used in the form of deadly golden blasts. And the threat wasn't tied to the ground: multiple puppets, riding huge winged mechanical constructs covered in tattered clothes -which gave the illusion of looking like birds- bombarded the village from above.

"Fire Release: Ash Pile Burning!"

Asuma exhaled a huge cloud of dusty gunpowder at the incoming White Zetsu, before igniting it with the sparks produced by quickly hitting his trench knives against each other, resulting in a chain of explosions that obliterated the clones. However, from the resulting cloud of smoke, three puppets emerged, their hands cupped around a spehere of golden chakra that they launched at Asuma.

"Shit!" the Jonin cursed, as he did his best in order to avoid the attacks.

As Asuma fought against the incoming invaders, his students escorted a large group of civilians towards the underground bunkers, task which was no easy given the Zetsus' penchant for attacking them.

"Don't stray from the main group!" Shikamaru shouted. "We can protect you better if you stay together!"

"Shikamaru, watch out!" Ino warned, as she made several hand seals. "Water Release: Water Gun!"

Ino expelled a stream of water from her mouth that sailed just above Shikamaru's head, hitting in the chest a leaping Zetsu, whose intentions were rather predictable.

"Guys, I need some help over here!" Choji cried.

Shikamaru and Ino turned around, and saw that their teammate was pretty much buried under a pile of White Zetsu clones.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of them!" Ino replied, as she formed a rectangle with her thumb and index fingers. "Multiple Mind Disturbance Jutsu!"

The Yamanaka heiress took control of three of the White Zetsu that were suffocating Choji, not only relieving him of their weight, but also attacking the other White Zetsu, forcing them to drop from the Akimichi, who quickly rejoined his teammates.

"Thank you, Ino," the breathless Akimichi said.

"Don't thank me yet, more of those things are coming!" Ino shouted, pointing to a nearby street, which was crowded with more Zetsus.

"Damn, where is everybody else? We can't protect the civilians ourselves!" Shikamaru protested.

That moment, several circular sealing patterns suddenly appeared in the ground. Not just in that street, but across all of Konoha as well. Many Konoha ninjas knew the meaning behind those seals.

"Shikamaru, are those seals...?" Ino asked.

"I think so," Shikamaru said, his distress disappearing, as a confident smirk formed in his face. "It seems that Hokage-sama knew that something like this could happen, and planned accordingly."

"What do you mean?" Choji asked.

Ino smiled at her rotund teammate.

"That means that we're about to get reinforcements really soon," Ino told him.

The seals then burst into small explosions of smoke, and from those clouds of smoke, emerged a Chakra Golem each. Unlike the red golems used by Yagura or the black golems used by Root, these golems had a green body, blue arms and legs, a red spiral on their back, and were even wearing actual forehead protectors around their small heads, to the point that they looked like they were wearing Konoha's standard uniform.

With several metallic hums, the golems became operative as the sealing patterns around their bodies started to glow with the same blue light. The mechanical constructs quickly identified the White Zetsu clones and the puppets as the invaders, and immediately went to face them. Their armored exterior rendered them almost impervious to the White Zetsus' physical attacks, while the chakra-absorbing seals made them immune to the puppets' golden blasts. Soon, the battle began to not quite turn in Konoha's favor, but give the defenders a much better chance to breathe and fight back.

"Oh yes, after fighting these things so many times, it feels so good to finally have them on our side!" Ino gushed.

"Come on guys, don't get distracted! Don't drop your guard just because those fancy machines are helping us now!" Asuma called out, as he engaged a couple of puppets.

"Yes, sir!" the three of them chorused, as they rejoined the battle with renewed strength.

...

Aburame Estate

After the initial surprise attack, the Aburame Clan found its home besieged by a horde of White Zetsu Clones supported by a few of Toneri's puppets, who fiercely tried to get inside the place. It was obvious what they were looking for: thanks to Toneri's Tenseigan, they had realized that was where Fu was staying for the time being.

"Aburame Secret Art: Insect Tornado!"

With a giant gesture, Shino commanded his swarm to attack a group of incoming Zetsu. The insects started to fly in circles around them, trapping the artificial creatures inside a tornado. The insects then proceeded to eat them as fast as they could.

However, as Shino did this, he was too late to notice two more White Zetsu emerging from below, the closest one delivering a swipe with his sharp fingers, slashing Shino's arms, and making him tumble backwards, while the other lunged at him.

"Aburame Secret Art: Swarm Armor!"

A second swarm appeared before Shino and the White Zetsu, compressing itself into a thick wall of carapace, successfully repelling the White Zetsu's attack. Taking advantage of this, Shino pulled a kunai, lunged forward, and stabbed it into the now defenseless Zetsu's throat, while his savior also dispatched the other assailant with a powerful kick to the head.

"Thank you, father. That was a close one," Shino said, sounding as calm as ever despite the ongoing situation.

"Stay close. These things are pretty dangerous," the Aburame Jonin told his son, as more Aburame clansmen started to gather. "Where is Fu-san?"

Shino pointed out into Fu's direction, and Shibi saw how the green haired jinchuriki was using a White Zetsu clone as a weapon to maul his brethren to death.

"Fu-san!" Shibi called. "Return here at once!"

Fu nodded before launching the White Zetsu in her grasp into the sky.

"These things won't stop coming," Fu observed, as more White Zetsu broke into the compound. "Any ideas?"

"First, we need to leave the compound and go into the village," Shibi told them. "And find a larger group so we can form an unified front in order to repel the invaders."

"Such thing won't be hard to accomplish. The sound of multiple battles happening around us can be heard from pretty much any direction," Shino stated.

"Though some of us will need to create a distraction in order to allow Fu-san a safe escape route," Shibi stated. "Shino, I trust her safety to-"

"Whoa there, time out!" Fu cut the Aburame patriarch. "I'm not going anywhere!"

"Fu-san, these Akatsuki are here for you. Each second you stay in the village is a second you are in danger of being captured," Shibi calmly told her.

"I know how you feel, but my father is right," Shino added. "We will be able to fight against the enemy better if we know you're safe."

"Absolutely not!" Fu loudly protested. "I already lost my home village to these monsters! I won't lose my adoptive home as well!"

"Please, be reasonable," Shibi insisted. "With your ability to fly, escaping won't be-"

"Father, Fu, watch out!" Shino called.

The arguing duo saw too late one of Toneri's puppets throwing a particularly large golden sphere of chakra at them, resulting in a huge explosion that send Fu and the Aburames alongside her flying in different directions.

"Ugh..." Fu groaned, as she tried to get back on her feet. She blinked a few times, trying to locate her boyfriend. "Shino? Are you okay? Shino...?"

However, there was no trace of Shino. Fu's field of vision was quickly filled with white and green, as more White Zetsu clones rushed to her.

"You have nowhere to go, jinchuriki!" one of the White Zetsu cried, as he and some of his brethren charged at her.

"Fire Release: Blistering Firecat!"

However, the Zetsu's charge was interrupted by an incoming giant cat made of fire, resulting in an explosion that engulfed them in a mass of flames, bruning them down to ashes almost instantly. The remaining White Zetsu stopped on their tracks, trying to look for the new enemy, but this moment of hesitation was all what the newcomers needed.

"Fang Passing Fang!"

"Cat Claw Dash!"

Almost appearing out of nowhere, two living tornadoes skewered the group of White Zetsu, followed by a green and brown blur that slashed to pieces those who avoided the initial attack. Kiba, Akamaru and Tamaki landed besides the green haired jinchuriki.

"Guys, you came!" Fu squealed in joy. "Your timing couldn't have been better!"

"Yeah, we were pretty quick. Nobody surpasses the Animal Squad when it comes to speed," Kiba boasted, with Akamaru barking in agreement.

"Are you okay, Fu?" Tamaki asked. "Where is Shino?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Fu said, before she bit her lip. "As for Shino..."

"I'm alright as well," Shino's voice said, as the Aburame joined his teammates. "While I suffered some injuries, there's nothing my medical ninjutsu can't heal. While I appreciate your presence, why did you decide to come here?"

"Well, obviously those Akatsuki are here for both Fu and Naruto, so it was a no brainer that they would attack the place she lives in," Kiba explained. "And we were right-"

This time, it was Akamaru who interrupted his master, when he tensed up and started to bark loudly. Kiba immediately realized what this meant.

"Guys, watch out! More enemies incoming!" Kiba pointed out to the direction from which three puppets came from.

The puppets were ready to fire their golden chakra orbs at the Konoha ninja and Taki jinchuriki, but before they could multiple wooden roots emerged from underground, wrapping themselves around the mechanical humanoids, immobilizing them completely.

"Lightning Blade!"

The Chunin of the Animal Squad saw Kakashi appearing pretty much out of nowhere and cutting down all three puppets in less than a second with his signature ability. Once done, Rin landed besides him.

"Look at that, it seems that just for once, I wasn't late," Kakashi nonchalantly said. "Is everybody okay?"

Kakashi got several affirmative responses in return, much to the Jonin's relief

"Alright, we now have two priorities: we need to drive Akatsuki out of the village, while at the same time stopping them from getting their hands on Fu and Naruto," Kakashi explained. Such thing should have been obvious, but he wasn't going to leave anything to chance.

"We know. We suggested Fu that she should evacuate the village while we keep the enemy busy, but she refused," Shibi explained.

"I told you I'm not going anywhere!" Fu fired back, stomping her foot. She then looked into the sky, and pointed upwards. "Besides, it's not that I can escape as easily this time around. It seems that Akatsuki learned from what happened in Taki, and they brought an air force to make sure I won't leave."

Looking into the sky, the rest of the group could tell Fu was right. The moment Fu left the ground, those flying puppets would be drawn to her like moths to a candle.

"Those things are going to be a problem," Kakashi said, as he studied the flying puppets. "But without an air force of our own, we won't be able to deal them in an effective manner."

"I'm afraid you're right," Shibi conceded. "That means we will have to smuggle Fu out of the village through other means."

"Ugh, you're impossible, you know that!?" Fu shouted, as her wings appeared from her exposed back. "I have your air force right here!"

Before anybody could stop her, the green haired kunoichi shot into the sky like a rocket, and, as expected, a group of flying puppets was immediately drawn to her. Not that Fu cared, since she was also flying towards them.

"Shino," Shibi called his son. "Go and make sure she's safe."

Shino wordlessly nodded, before biting his thumb, and making five specific hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Shino slammed his palm into the ground, and after the initial burst of smoke dispelled, he found himself at the top of a gigantic rhinoceros beetle.

"You called me, Aburame-san, and I responded," the beetle said in a low, guttural voice. "Your command?"

"I need you to take me into the sky, and help me defeat the enemies on it, Mushikoehi-sama," Shino asked the giant beetle. "I also need you to help me protect a special someone."

"Understood," the beetle laconically replied, before its carapace opened up, revealing a pair of translucent wings, which started to flap, rising several gusts of wind, before finally taking off. "You can count on me, Aburame-san. After all, not every day I have the pleasure to meet Nanabi-sama."

The rest of Shino's teammates and the Aburame clan watched how Shino joined his girlfriend in the fight against the flying puppets.

"It all rests on Shino now," Kakashi said with a bit of resignation. "We can't afford to stay idle! Tamaki, Kiba, Akamaru, the village is under attack! Let's track the nearest Akatsuki member and dispose of them!"

"Yes, Kakashi-sensei!" Kiba and Tamaki said in unison, with Akamaru barking energetically.

...

Konoha Hospital

It took very little for the village's hospital to get flooded by a constant income of injured people, both ninjas and civilians, and in no time,

there was no more room inside, and had to put the newcomers in the reception and the halls due the lack of space. Those with less grave injuries were placed outside, not just to avoid filling more space, but so they could return to the battle once they were healed.

And, as if it wasn't bad enough, the enemy considered the hospital a point of interest to take out, so the White Zetsu clones and the puppets were relentlessly attacking it, regardless if the jinchuriki weren't there. So far, the ninjas that were defending the hospital managed to keep the attackers at bay, but couldn't help but wonder how long could they resist.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Sasuke's blade crackled with electricity, and as the Uchiha dashed towards a group of incoming White Zetsu clones, delivered a swift motion with his blade, instantly splitting them in half, ending their lives.

"Sasuke, don't move!" Shisui shouted, as he tossed several shuriken in his direction.

Sasuke's Sharigan told him that, given their trajectory, none of the steel stars would hit him. And indeed, the weapons flew past him, before embedding into the heads of more White Zetsu.

"Thanks," Sasuke muttered, before his eyes located the next enemy. "Above us!"

Looking into the sky, they saw a trio of puppets riding those bird-shaped mechanical constructs, ready to bombard the hospital with their golden chakra blast.

"Everybody, don't let them attack! Force them to retreat!" Shisui ordered, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Sasuke, let's use wide range attacks! Use the same jutsu I'm going to cast!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!" Sasuke replied, already doing those same hand seals.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke and Shisui breathed a volley of fireballs upwards, which, alongside other elemental jutsu fired by the rest of the Konoha and ANBU guarding the hospital, managed to take down one of the aerial raiders, while forcing the other two into retreat.

"That was close," Sasuke said, panting a little. "You okay, cousin?"

Shisui merely smiled and gave him a thumbs up, before turning to a group of medic-nin, his wife among them, treating wounded ninjas. "Shizune-chan! How is it going there?"

"We're working as fast as we can, but the injured come faster than we can treat them!" the black haired woman protested, while trying to heal a dislocated arm from a Konoha Chunin.

"Mom and I are even letting them bite us so we can heal them faster!" Karin added.

"Sadly, there's nothing much we can do," Sasuke said, shaking his head. "Continue with your job, and we'll try to keep you safe as much as possible."

The sky started to darken as clouds turned black. Lightning bolts started to jump from one cloud to another, while several distant thunders could be heard.

Sakura's eyes suddenly grew wide while her iris shrunk, and her face turned several shades paler. "Uh, Sasuke-kun... do you think you can protect us from THAT?"

Sasuke and Shisui turned around, and much to their shock, they saw a gigantic ox charging at them, demolishing any building that it came

in contact with, and trampling White Zetsu and Konoha ninja alike in its mad charge.

"Shit, we can't allow that thing to get to the hospital!" Shisui exclaimed, as he rushed forward. "Sasuke, we need to divert its attention to us!"

"On it!" Sasuke agreed, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a massive fireball, aiming directly at the ox's head. The ox plowed through the fireball as it was a ball of haystack, though it left several burn marks in its head. Letting out a bellow of pain, the giant summon focused its Rinnegan eyes on Sasuke, before charging at him.

"Good one, Sasuke!" Shisui praised, as his hands continued to fly through hand seals. "I'll stop it on its tracks with a genjutsu! Demonic Illusion: Cold Hands of Winter!"

Suddenly, the giant ox stopped in its tracks before it could trample Sasuke. In its mind, a blizzard started to blow, quickly covering it in snow and frost. The ox tried to break free, but was unable to, and was soon encased inside a mountain of ice. In the real world, the ox merely dropped on its belly.

"Let's hope this guy won't give us anymore trouble," Shisui said, as he walked towards the downed animal. "There has to be a way to undo the summon-"

That moment, the ox quickly got back on its hooves, and slammed Shisui with a hit of its snout, sending him flying against a nearby building.

"SHISUI!" Shizune screamed in horror. The young woman dropped what she was doing, and rushed towards her husband.

"Shizune-sensei, wait!" Sakura called out. "Watch out!"

In her distress, Shizune didn't realize that the giant ox was charging towards her. The medic-nin turned at the incoming animal in horror, now regretting being so rash and wondering what she could do to avoid being trampled to death.

Fortunately, just seconds before the giant ox could stomp on Shizune, a dragon-shaped lightning bolt fell from the skies into the ox, like the divine punishment of a wrathful god. The lightning attack carried so much power, the Ox was instantly unsummoned. The ox dealt with, Sasuke landed besides his sensei.

"Thank goodness I had prepared that Kirin a moment ago," Sasuke mentioned. "Are you okay, Shizune-sensei?"

"I could be worse if it wasn't for you," Shizune thanked the Uchiha. "Now come on, we need to get Shisui some help."

Suddenly, there was a huge tremor, and a building near them collapsed just as a massive red and black centipede emerged under it, sending several pieces of debris falling at the medic-nin and the Uchiha, forcing them to jump in different directions. Taking advantage of their predicament, the centipede lunged at Sasuke, who struggled to get back on his feet.

"SASUKE-KUN!" Shizune shouted.

But just like how Sasuke had saved Shizune at the last possible moment, Karma repaid Sasuke in full when Tsunade, leaping out of nowhere, landed on the centipede's head with a powerful kick, sinking the giant arthropod into the ground, before it was finally dispelled.

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune cried, as she ran towards her master. "Oh, thank goodness that you're here!"

Tsunade nodded, and after helping Sasuke on his feet, both she and Shizune went to retrieve the wounded Shisui.

"How is the situation here?" Tsunade asked.

"Catastrophic," Shizune told her, sounding exhausted. "Not only are the wounded pretty much piling up, but we will quickly run out of medicines, bandages and other essentials if the flow of injured continues like this."

"Not to mention the constant attacks on the hospital," Sasuke added. "We repelled this wave, but I'm sure another one will be coming in less than five minutes."

Tsunade nodded once again, and wordlessly, she bit her thumb, before making five hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Tsunade slammed her palm into the ground, summoning Katsuyu the giant slug. Said slug looked around, as if assessing the situation.

"Tsunade-sama, what can I do for you?" Katsuyu asked. "It seems that Konoha is under another invasion."

"That's correct, old friend," Tsunade sadly confirmed. "I need you to split and heal as many Konoha ninjas as possible. I'll transfer you as much chakra as possible."

"Consider it done, Tsunade-sama!" Katsuyu said, before splitting in multiple, much smaller clones of herself, one of them small enough to ride on Tsunade's shoulder.

"This should alleviate some of our forces," Tsunade said, before her eyes rested on Shizune again. "Shizune, continue treating the wounded while the other ninjas protect the hospital. I need to go to the hospital to check something."

"Very well, Tsunade-sama," Shizune replied with a nod. "You can count on us!"

Tsunade nodded, and she rushed towards the hospital. People there greeted her warmly, praising how that, now that she was here, their jobs would be much easier, but Tsunade ignored them, for there was only one thing in her mind. She climbed the stairs as fast as she could, until she reached the floor she was looking for.

Once there, not going any slower, moved towards a certain door, before opening it. She gasped in horror to see the room empty.

"NO!" she screamed.

Her son was nowhere to be found.

...

"Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

Frost and snowflakes started to gather in a whirlwind around Haku, before condensing for a single moment, and exploding into a mass of large ice spikes. A group of charging White Zetsu clones were unlucky enough to be skewered by said spikes, ending their lives in an instant.

"Haku, watch out!" the Ice Ninja heard Kurenai warning him. Turning around, he saw even more Zetsus charging at him. Fortunately for Haku, his sensei was already making the next move.

"Earth Release: Earth Dome Jutsu!"

Sand, pebbles and dirt started to gather around Haku, forming a whirlwind not unlike his previous attack, before condensing and compressing into a dome around the Land of Water native. The White Zetsu clones slammed their faces against the sudden barrier.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Arrow!"

Using her chakra bow, Hinata fired several arrows made of pure lightning at the momentarily dazed White Zetsus with utmost accuracy, piercing spots the Hyuga Clan Head had correctly

guessed were vital, guesses that were proven correct when the Zetsu clones dropped dead.

The earth dome quickly dissolved into sand and dirt that was quickly blown away by an incoming breeze.

"Thank you, Kurenai-sensei, Hinata-san," the Ice Ninja said, as he pulled out his own chakra bow as well. "This is insane. Not even Orochimaru's invasion was this brutal."

"It seems that Akatsuki is throwing everything they have at us," Kurenai replied, as she looked at the destruction that was happening around them, and frowned. "They won't stop at anything until they get their hands on the remaining jinchuriki."

"Speaking of which, Hinata-san, where is Naruto-kun?" Haku asked the Hyuga.

"I... I don't know," Hinata said, shaking her head. "When the Akatsuki attacked I met a clone of him, he said that the real one needed to go to his house to do something, but I didn't see him since then."

"We can't take any risks. Check his house and see if he's still there," Kurenai ordered the Hyuga. "We need both to keep Naruto safe, and his power as well if we want to repel this invasion."

Hinata nodded, and directed her expanded sight towards the Senju Residence. But much to Hinata's shock, Naruto was nowhere to be seen.

"He isn't there!" Hinata panicked. She then started to scan the rest of the village, but with all the fights going on, it was going to be quite the task to find her boyfriend. "I... I can't find him!"

"There's no way Akatsuki had captured him already," Haku firmly stated.

"No. they're clearly looking for him, or else they would be focusing all their efforts on Fu," Kurenai pointed out. "And there's no way Naruto decided to leave the village. He has to be somewhere."

"Speaking of Fu, is she alright? The Akatsuki didn't capture her already, did they?" Haku asked.

Pausing her search for Naruto, Hinata quickly found Fu, fighting in the sky above the village against the airborne puppets. However, that wasn't going to be the only enemy she was going to face.

"I see her," Hinata said, before her eyes grew wide. "And I see Toneri too! She's going after her! There's no way Fu can defeat that man on her own! Not after unlocking so much power of the Tenseigan!"

"Go and help her, Hinata," Kurenai told the Hyuga. She placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, leave Naruto to Haku and I. I promise you we'll find him and keep him safe."

A bit hesitantly, Hinata nodded, before flying into the sky, ready to fight Toneri one more time.

...

If there was one good thing that Fu's rash decision of shooting into the sky in order to fight the airborne puppets, was that she managed to draw their attention, and thus they were no longer bombarding the village from above. On top of that, Fu made sure to fly above them so their chakra blasts wouldn't hit the village below.

"Come on, you plastic-brained idiots! Let's see if you can catch me!" Fu taunted, as she flew around them as fast as she could.

The taunt's reply came in the form of a barrage of golden chakra bolts aimed at her. Still, none of them found their mark, as Fu made an astounding display of agility, moving from side to side at an almost imperceptible speed, expertly dodging the incoming projectiles, while she got close to them.

"Drop dead!" Fu yelled, as he smashed both the puppet and the mechanical bird he was riding with a single, devastating punch.

Following this, Fu would move to the next flying puppet, which she would smash to bits in one punch again, then to the next, and the next, and the next.

"Fu, watch out, from both above and below!" Shino warned her, as the Aburame flew close to her atop his beetle summon.

Quickly looking up and down, Fu realized the flying puppets were trying to surround them. She would have fell prey to an ambush if she didn't got a heads up from her boyfriend.

"Very well then, I'll create an opening," Fu said, as she made a hand seal. "I'll deal with the guys above, you get the guys below!"

"Understood," Shino agreed, as he maneuvered the beetle down.

Fu then clapped her hands together, as she opened her mouth as wide as possible.

"Hiding In Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu exhaled from her mouth a huge cloud of glittering powder, and after a few seconds, produced such a bright flash of light that it blinded pretty much all of those caught between them. Besides Fu, who was immune to her own jutsu, the only one unaffected was Shino, thanks to the shades he was wearing -and Mushikoehi, whose eyes were closed as instructed by Shino-, leaving them an open field to attack.

"Let's end them in one single blow," Shino said, as he spread his arms, and a cloud of beetles emerged from under his sleeves, quickly covering the blinded puppets. Shino then made a hand seal. "Aburame Secret Art: Giant Beetle Growth!"

The designated beetles for the jutsu quickly grew to the size of a large dog. And since said beetles had been placed inside the puppets, the sudden growth destroyed the mechanical construct from the inside out almost immediately, while leaving Shino now with a squad of gigantic insects.

The flying puppets above didn't fare much better against Fu. It seemed the jinchuriki was bored of tearing them apart with her bare hands, so she resorted to ninjutsu in order to accelerate things. She flew towards one of the puppets as tornadoes started to form around her arms.

"Hurricane Punch!"

The wind-enhanced punch destroyed the puppet even faster than her normal punches, reducing it to even smaller shards of scrap. The punch also produced an air shockwave that shattered the other puppets flying close to him.

"Good, soon there won't be any of these guys bothering us anymore," Fu said, as she proceeded to trash the last remaining airborne puppets.

It was that moment that she saw a golden light from the corner of her eyes. Her instincts pretty much screamed at her to move aside, and thankfully she did.

"Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Fu moved just in time before a golden beam of chakra coming from below could hit her. The Taki kunoichi could feel the heat and sheer power that radiated from the beam of chakra. Had it hit her, she wasn't sure she could have survived that.

"You have keen senses, jinchuriki, " a new voice said.

Fu turned around, and saw a pale skinned man with white hair, and the same eyes as Hinata and Hanabi, wearing an Akatsuki robe,

floating in front of her.

"Arent you supposed to capture me alive?" Fu asked, a bit indignant.

"I am. I'm positive you would have survived that blast," the man replied. "I'm usually very good at gauging my opponent's strength and choosing how much power should I use to end the fight."

"You are Toneri, aren't you?" Shino said, as he and his giant beetle appeared besides Fu. "Naruto told us about you. The Otsutsuki Clan member who wanted to abduct Hinata."

"I'm sure that truant said nothing but lies about me. Oh, who cares," Toneri said, shaking his head. "Soon he will be out of the picture, and no one shall stop me from claiming Hinata as my wife. Unfortunately, Akatsuki also wants you as well. Nothing personal, girl, we just do what needs to be done."

"Toneri!" a female voice shouted.

"Ah, Hinata," Toneri said in delight, without turning at her. Hinata could sense his Tenseigan focusing on her. "Such impeccable timing. Fear not, I'll be with you once I'm done with the jinchuriki."

"Just for once, I agree with you," Hinata replied, as she scowled at the Otsutsuki. "It was good that I arrived before you could hurt Fu-san or Shino-kun!."

"You plan to fight against me, Hinata?" Toneri asked, almost in a mocking tone. "I'm afraid it won't do you any good. I'm sure your sister must have told you how much my powers have grown since our last meeting."

Hinata gritted her teeth, as she was forced to admit that he was right. Hanabi had told her how Toneri had evolved the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak to the next level, giving him and his abilities a considerable boost. Chief among them being doubling the number of Truth Seeking Balls he could summon.

"She won't fight you alone!" a third voice said.

Hinata's eyes opened in shock as Hanabi appeared besides her.

"Hanabi-chan! What are you doing here?" an alarmed Hinata asked.
"This man is dangerous!"

"I know. But you won't be able to beat him alone," Hanabi replied. "If we join forces, our powers might be able to match his."

"Your naivete is adorable, Hanabi," Toneri chuckled, shaking his head. "You know, I've been thinking what I could do with you. Given that you also have a Tenseigan as well, it would be a waste to kill you. Then it hit me... there's nothing that stops me from marrying you as well! Between the three of us, we could produce the greatest dynasty that shall rule the Earth once Akatsuki purifies this decadent world."

"If you think I'm going to let you touch any of them," Fu hissed, her fists clenching, as red chakra started to form around her body. "Then you're way dumber than you think."

"Fu..." Shino said.

"Shino, things are going to get really ugly, and I have the feeling this guy is on a completely different level," Fu said, without turning her head to look at him. "I can't fight and protect you at the same time."

Shino wanted nothing but protest, to say that he didn't need protecting, and that the two of them would fight together. But alas, logic has always been a huge part of the Aburame psyche, so Shino didn't say any of that.

"I understand," was what he said. "Please be careful."

"I will," Fu replied, her body now covered in Tailed Beast chakra, looking how Shino returned to the village. Her eyes then landed on

Hinata and Hanabi. "Hey, sky sisters, ready to give this idiot the beating of his life?"

"I'm more than ready," Hinata replied.

"You're going to pay for what you did to Hagane," Hanabi hissed at him.

Toneri merely smiled, and chuckled in a condescending manner.

"Very well then! Come at me with all you have!" Toneri said in a taunting fashion. "I want to see what my future wives are capable of!"

...

Meanwhile, in another part of Konoha, a gigantic rhino with Rinnegan eyes plowed through the streets, trampling both ninja, civilians and White Zetsu alike, while also taking down any building that so much graced it with its skin. Fortunately, there was somebody who was about to stop that beast.

"Alright brats, that's our target!" Anko said, pointing out at the charging Rhino.

"You want us to fight that thing!?" a shocked and justifiably terrified Zaku asked.

Anko shook her head. "No, I know you wouldn't be able to do a thing about that. Leave that to me, just make sure the civilians are okay and that no white naked guys gets in the way."

"Yes, ma'am!" her three students said, as they went to fight the nearby White Zetsu clones.

Anko, meanwhile, bit her thumb, while making five hand seals.

"Summoning jutsu!"

Anko slammed her hand into the ground, producing a huge burst of smoke, and from said cloud of smoke, a gigantic snake with dark blue skin appeared.

"Anko-sama, your orders?" the giant snake asked.

"See that rhino over there, Aoda?" Anko asked, pointing at the charging animal. "I need you to help me send it where it came from."

"Understood," Aoda laconically replied. "Hold on."

The giant snake swiftly lunged at the incoming rhino. The rhino, in return, tried to skewer Aoda, but the snake was much limber and managed to dodge the attack. Anko decided to use that moment to make her attack, and jumped from the snake's head, while making several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Blazing Snake!"

Anko fired a stream of fire that, like the name implied, took the shape of a snake. The fire snake zigzagged its way towards the rhino, before blasting against one of its eyes, making the summoned animal to bellow in pain.

"Now the other one!" Anko said, while landing on the animal's forehead, just between the eyes. "Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Multiple snakes shot from under Anko's sleeve, aiming for the other, still unhurt eye. The rhino was forced to close its other eye before the snakes could damage it, but even then it could still feel the pain as dozens of venomous fangs dig into its eyelid. Blinded and in pain, the giant rhino started to trash wildly.

"Aoda, now!" Anko commanded.

Swiftly slithering towards the rhino, Aoda wrapped his body against the Rinnegan-wielding animal, immobilizing it completely.

"Good job, Aoda! Squeeze it until it dies or the summon it's undone, whatever comes first!" Anko cheered the giant snake.

"I shall do as you say," the snake said, as he tried to increase the pressure as much as he could. Something then caught his eye.
"Anko-sama, we might be in trouble now."

Looking at the direction from which Aoda was looking, Anko saw a colossal bird with a massive, drill-shaped beak diving towards them, probably trying to release its partner.

"Oh shit!" Anko cursed, before jumping to a nearby roof. "I'll try to keep it away from you, Aoda!"

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Suddenly, a colossal toad appeared just above the giant bird, falling down and taking the giant flyer under its weight. The bird cawed in pain before the damage the sheer weight of the toad was causing was too much to sustain, and was promptly unsummoned. A few seconds later, the giant rhino also succumbed to Aoda's hold, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke as well.

"Hn. Never thought I'd see the day in which a toad would help me," Aoda commented in a neutral tone.

"I'm not exactly happy helping your kind either, so show some gratitude!" the giant toad fired back.

"Gamabunta, enough!" the man atop the toad's head, Jiraiya spoke.
"We're all on the same side here. Please put aside your antagonism for snakes."

"Yes, don't make me go down there, boy!" Shima said in a tone of a mother chastising her misbehaving son.

"Hmph!" Gamabunta grunted, as he crossed his arms.

"Hokage-sama!" Anko shouted, as she rushed towards him.

Jiraiya jumped from Gamabunta's head, and went to meet the Special Jonin.

"Anko, what's the situation here?" Jiraiya asked.

"Those things are making a number on the village," Anko began.
"Even if we win, the collateral damage is going to leave the village looking like shit."

"The fastest way to deal with these summoned animals is to find and defeat the summoner," Jiraya told Anko. "That way, we can deal with all of them in one go."

"Easier said than done. Any idea of who he is?" Anko asked.

"Yes. But finding him won't be easy, with all the chaos-"

"Then let me save you the trouble, Jiraiya-sensei," a deep, male voice said, drawing the attention of both Jiraiya and Anko.

Turning around, Hokage and Special Jonin saw Pain, the leader of the Akatsuki. Or better said, all six bodies that composed his being, with Konan joining them shortly after.

"You know why I'm here, sensei," the main Pain said in his cold and emotionless voice. "Hand me the two jinchuriki immediately, or by the end of the day, your village will be nothing more than a smoking ruin."

Jiraiya's eyes were wide open in shock upon seeing Yahiko and Konan, two of his beloved students, looking at him with cold, dead eyes. The Hokage thought that he was mentally prepared for this moment, but that wasn't true.

"I didn't want to believe it was true but now..." Jiraiya mumbled.
"Yahiko... Konan... I'm sorry... I failed you..."

"We don't want your apologies, sensei," Konan harshly interceded.
"The jinchuriki. Now."

There was a moment of silence, in which Jiraiya's face adopted a contemplative, almost meditative expression, as if he was pondering their demands, much to Anko's shock.

"Hokage-sama, you won't be thinking in-" Anko began.

"Yes, I failed you. The fact that you're part of Akatsuki is the proof," Jiraiya sadly admitted. Then, his expression changed to one of determination. "However, I can't let my past failures to keep making new ones! Konoha is my home, and everybody who live on it, jinchuriki or not, are under my protection! So if you want to take Naruto and Fu, you'll have to kill me first!"

Pain, however, looked undeterred.

"So be it then... sensei," was all what Pain said.

Author's Note: And thus, Konoha's greatest challenge begins!

Konoha using the Chakra Golems is something I've been dying to write since I introduced them all the way back during the Kirigakure Civil War. Guess that, after fighting against them for so long, it was about time to use them themselves. Especially since Konoha is the village that houses the remnant of the Uzumaki clan.

I hope that those who asked more of Team Gai are satisfied. I know that Team Gai fighting Kisame already happened in canon, but frankly, I was unable to think in anybody better suited to deal with him. Though unlike canon, I wanted to put more emphasis on Neji, Lee and Tenten rather than Gai. And don't worry, Team Gai will have more chances to shine in the arcs to come.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

The Invasion of Konoha begins! Who will live, who will die? Will Akatsuki claim at least one jinchuriki, or will Konoha finally break their streak of victories? Tell me your thoughts on this chapter with a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part II

Author's Note: People seems to be pretty excited for this arc. That's good! Because let's say that tackling this arc intimidated me a bit. With some of the past arcs, improving them was easy, but how do you improve what's considered one of the best, of not THE best arc of Shippuden? Anyway, enjoy the second part:

Chapter 84:

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part II

or

The Most Powerful Bloodline Limit

Jiraiya and Anko were standing in front of the six paths of Pain plus Konan, both parties involved tensed up, waiting for the other to make the other move. Still, Jiraiya wasn't ready to fight. At least, not yet. He needed some answers first.

"I can't understand it... what happened to you? Why did you end up joining Akatsuki?" Jiraiya asked, some sadness seeping through his voice.

"We didn't 'join' Akatsuki, sensei," it was Konan who replied, taking a step forward. "Akatsuki is our very own creation. A tool that will shape the world into a place where conflict does not exist, where no children will have to see their parents getting murdered before their very eyes, a place where revenge and suffering won't be allowed to exist."

"Exactly," Pain agreed. "Sensei, you said you wanted to bring peace to the ninja world. But all your efforts have been in vain. Even with all the power you now possess as Hokage, the world isn't much better

than it was twenty years ago. The apprentices shall succeed where the master failed."

"You call THIS to make the world a more peaceful place!?" an outraged Jiraiya shouted, spreading his arms around in order to emphasize the wanton destruction going around him. "It seems that my failure as your teacher was even greater than I thought if you got that idea from me."

"Sometimes, sacrifices are needed in order to obtain a better tomorrow," Pain rebutted. "Yes, this is a war, I won't deny it. And many people will die. But it's a war to end all wars. Once Akatsuki is victorious, conflict will be a thing of the past."

"It's not that easy, and you know it," Jiraiya angrily replied. "The people you are killing today have loved ones. Loved ones that, even if you succeed at the end of the day, will seek revenge on you, feeding the cycle of hatred that plagues the ninja world. That's why conflict cannot be ended with more conflict!"

"Yes, I'm aware of that possibility. But once our plan succeeds, such thing will be irrelevant," Pain replied. "Because what are a bunch of people seeking revenge compared to the power once wielded to the Sage of the Six Paths?"

"So, that's your endgame? To use the power of the Ten Tails to impose peace by force?" Jiraiya asked.

"Peace imposed by force is a better alternative than letting conflict to happen freely," Konan stepped in.

"No, it isn't! Peace can't never be forced, it's something that can only be achieved once all the parts of a conflict reach an understanding," Jiraiya rebutted. "Otherwise, you aren't eliminating conflict, just pushing it under the rug! It will do nothing but fester and grow up, until it can't be hidden anymore!"

"In the current situation, maybe. But like I said before, it won't happen in the new world order Akatsuki is planning to create," Pain reiterated. "Enough chit-chat, sensei, you know what we want. Give us the jinchuriki of this village, and we shall leave in peace."

"You know I can't do that, Yahiko," Jiraiya replied, before he raised an eyebrow. "Or is it Nagato?"

"Neither Yahiko nor Nagato exist anymore, sensei. Only Pain remains," Pain ominously replied, as he took a step forward. "Pain that you, too, shall experience."

"Hokage-sama?" Anko asked. "Your orders?"

"Anko, we are about to fight somebody who wields the most powerful Bloodline Limit that has ever existed," Jiraiya grimly warned her. "My advice would be to stand back and support me from afar, or else you might end up dead. I can't fight and protect you at the same time."

Anko couldn't help but sigh in resignation. "This is like Orochimaru's invasion all over again..."

"Don't beat yourself for this, Anko. No ninja expects to face an enemy of this caliber in their lives," Jiraiya reassured her.

"Alright. I'll try to help as much as I can without getting in the way," Anko told him.

One of the Pains, the one with the ponytail, started to swiftly make hand seals, as he prepared to use his only jutsu.

"Summoning Jutsu! Summoning Jutsu"

Slamming his palm in the floor twice, Ponytail Pain summoned a gigantic, multi-headed dog with maroon fur and Rinnegan eyes, as well as an equally massive crustacean.

" So, that's the body that can summon giant beasts to battle. All those other animals wreaking havoc around us must be his doing

then. Though I doubt he has that many summons in reserve, meaning that he can't summon more without recalling them from their original positions. And if I can kill him, the summons will be canceled," Jiraiya quickly analyzed. "Gamabunta! Go for the crab! That dog will create clones of itself if it's struck with a bladed weapon!"

"Leave that to us then! Aoda!" Anko shouted.

The toad and the snake lunging forward, Gamabunta delivering a swing of his sword at the giant crustacean, which grabbed the blade with one of its claws, while Aoda wrapped himself against the dog, who trashed wildly in an attempt to free itself from the giant snake.

At that point, puppet Pain decided to attack. He detached his left forearm from the rest of the arm, which was connected by a long cluster of segmented missiles. Said missiles quickly took off, flying at Jiraiya and Anko. Jiraiya quickly countered that attack with a jutsu of his own.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

Slamming both hands into the ground, and pouring nature energy into the jutsu, Jiraiya erected a massive wall between himself and his enemies, the wall being twice as tall and thick as they normally were. There were several explosions that caused a small tremor, but the wall resisted.

"Jiraiya-chan, above you!" Shima shouted.

Jiraiya looked up and saw Konan floating above him, having just finished to prepare a jutsu.

"Paper Drizzle!"

From her paper wings, Konan fired a massive barrage of paper darts at Jiraiya and Anko. Fortunately, Anko was quick enough to prepare a counterattack.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Anko breathed a massive stream of fire at the incoming paper, but for some reason, not only she failed to counter the attack, but the paper barrage was slowly pushing the fire back at her, much to her shock.

"Anko, jump back!" Jiraiya shouted.

Both him and Anko jumped in different directions, as they ran away from the rain of paper projectiles, that fell with a force strong enough to shatter the ground.

"The fuck? Papers are supposed to burn!" Anko protested. "How is that bitch able to-"

"Shima, I need some oil!" Jiraiya called.

"You got it, boy!" Shima replied, as her dewlap swelled, before releasing a wide stream of oil at the incoming paper darts, stopping them on their tracks, and even carrying enough momentum to continue flying towards Konan.

"Anko, again! The two of us together!" Jiraiya told her.

Anko nodded, as both she and Jiraiya started to make hand seals.

"Fire Release: Flame Toad Bullet!"

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fi-"

However, only Jiraiya was able to use fire to ignite the oil, as Anko was attacked from the side by one of the Pains, the one with long, loose hair, as he tried to skewer Anko with a sharp black rod he produced from under his sleeve.

"Shit!" Anko cursed, as she barely parried the blow with a kunai. Her enemy continued delivering vicious swings at her, making her to take a step back with each attack she parried. "Shit, shit, shit!"

"Anko, behind you!" Jiraiya warned.

Anko quickly looked back to see another Pain, one with broad shoulders and a very unfriendly face, about to attack her with one of those black rods.

"OH SHIT!" Anko shouted once again, as she made a hand seal just before the two Pain bodies skewered her.

The moment the black rods pierced her body, "Anko" quickly melted into a puddle of mud, causing the two Paths of Pain to frantically look around in different directions. The real Anko appeared from behind a mountain of rubble, and launched her attack.

"Hidden Shadow Snake Hands!"

Once again, more snakes shot from under Anko's sleeve, ready to dig their fangs into the burly Pain, the one who had her back turned at her. But much to her surprise, her would be victim ducked in the last second. The other pain rushed towards her, forcing her into the defensive once again.

"What the...? How the hell did he know I was going to attack?" Anko said, as she and the other two Pains traded jabs. "Come on you dipshits, get-WHOA!"

Anko was interrupted when she felt a long tongue wrapping around her waist, and pulling her upwards towards the roof of a nearby building with such strength, one could mistake said tongue for a steel cable attached to a crane. When her feet touched solid ground again, she saw she was besides the Hokage, and it was the small toad on his shoulder who pulled her back.

"Goob job, Ma," Jiraiya told the toad.

"Yeah, nice save there, granny," Anko thanked her.

"Don't mention it," the old toad replied. "Come on kids, you need to step up your game! Those guys are kicking your asses!"

"We noticed, Ma, thanks for the observation," Jiraiya replied, rolling his eyes. "In case you didn't hear me before, we're fighting against somebody who wields the most powerful Bloodline Limit to ever exist, so cut us some slack."

"It seems that the intel we have on those guys isn't even complete," Anko pointed out. "That Rinnegan allows them to see in an area around them, kinda like the Byakugan."

"Naruto told me something similar when they fought him in the past," Jiraiya said, rubbing his chin. "Albeit I don't think it's the case, since they sometimes managed to catch them off guard quite a few times."

"What can it be, then?" Anko asked.

But Anko got no question when the Six Paths of Pain landed in the same roof behind them, forcing the two Konoha ninja to turn back and adopt a fighting stance.

"You can't escape from me, sensei," the main Pain said in a menacing tone. "The jinchuriki is your adopted son, yes? If you refuse to tell me where he is hiding, then if I make you scream in agony, he shall come to me."

"You're very bold of you to make such claim, Nagato. Rinnegan or not, you're way above your head," Jiraiya told him back.

"It's you who's over your head, sensei," Pain said, staking a step forward, while raising a palm at him. "You're the one willing to fight a god, after all."

...

Meanwhile, at another part of Konoha, Kisame continued his duel with Team Gai. What it used to be a street was now nothing but

mountains of rubble flooded by water, thanks to all the collateral damage of the battle. For most part, Gai and Lee engaged the Akatsuki in hand to hand combat, while Neji and Tenten supported them from afar, trying to capitalize any opening.

"Water Release: Multiple Shark Bullets!"

After finishing the hand sequence, a multitude of globs of water shot towards all members of Team Gai, taking the shape of ravenous sharks, their jaws full of teeth wide open and ready to taste the flesh of the Konoha ninja.

And, as they defended from Kisame's attack, the shark ninja dashed forward, going past Gai and Lee, and heading towards Neji. In less than two seconds, he was already besides him.

"You go down first, Hyuga!" Kisame laughed, as he brought down Samehada.

"I don't think so!" Neji started to rapidly spin as he released chakra from every point of his body, until he turned into a chakra dome.
"Heavenly Spin!"

The dome started to splash water everywhere, and in a few seconds those splashes became waves. Kisame tried to push his sword with greater strength, as the two opposed forces grinded against each other. But in the end, Neji's defense coupled with the generated waves won out the struggle, with Samehada being unable to absorb the chakra that moved that fast, and was blown away from Kisame's hands.

"Good job, Neji!" Tenten praised, as she leaped above the now unarmed Akatsuki, while unfurling a medium sized scroll. "Now's the chance to take him down! Manipulated Tools: Electric Steel Rain!"

Multiple kunai, shuriken, swords and other bladed weapons rained upon Kisame. And much to his chagrin, said weapons were all crackling with electricity, meaning that he wouldn't just get cut if he

was hit. Still, Kisame managed to dodge all the weapons in an impressive display of agility, even making use of backflips and sideflips for added flair.

"Incredible. I never thought a guy his size could be so fast," Tenten said, panting a little.

"Not bad. Your teamwork is excellent. I think I can consider you a worthy challenge," Kisame praised, as he held out his hand. "But that doesn't mean that you'll walk out of this as the winners."

As if it was pulled by an invisible string, Samehada flew towards Kisame like a missile, the shark man grinning in anticipation as his lost sword came back to him.

"NOT SO FAST!" Gai loudly shouted, falling from above, as he stomped the flying sword so hard, not only its momentum was stopped, but it was even buried underwater with a great splash. "Maybe we can't use this sword ourselves, but we can still stop you from using it! Lee, Neji, Tenten, go!"

"YOSH! You got it, Gai-sensei!" Lee shouted, he dashed towards Kisame. "Gate of Pain, open!"

With the additional power boost of the Fourth Gate, Lee turned into a green blur, constantly dashing towards Kisame and delivering punches and kicks fast enough not to give the Akatsuki any time to counter. Still, the Akatsuki member was able to block most of Lee's hits, who failed to hit any vital spot.

" *Amazing... even with four gates open, he can still keep up with me!*" Lee thought, though he was also rather eager to fight such a challenging enemy. "*Should I go for the fifth one?*"

"Lee, watch out!" Neji warned, snapping Lee from his thoughts. "Below you!"

"Huh?" the green clad ninja asked.

But it was too late. A Kisame clone formed below him, and pulled him down underwater. Lee tried to push him away, but even with his boosted strength, being underwater greatly slowed down his movements. And much to his horror, the Kisame clone wasn't the only threat: a couple of hungry looking sharks swiftly swam towards him.

"Lee!" Neji cried, as he rushed towards what he presumed was the real Kisame. "Release him at once!"

"Care about yourself first, Hyuga," Kisame said with a chuckle, as he finished another hand seal sequence. "Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet!"

The water behind Kisame rose in the form of a spiraling pillar. And from said pillar, a serpentine dragon emerged, before lunging at Neji, letting out a distorted roar. Neji was forced to stop and counterattack.

"Gate of Opening, open!" Neji cried, as his body flared with a green glow. "Multiple Vacuum Palms!"

Neji thrust his palms back and forth, firing a barrage of vacuum shells at the dragon. Seeing that the dragon was pushing through, Neji increased the intensity and speed of his palms thrusts, generating even more vacuum missiles. His efforts paid off as the dragon was successfully repelled and destroyed.

Unfortunately, the attack was a mere distraction. Even if he had his Byakugan activated, Neji was so focused on the water dragon, he didn't notice Kisame dashing past him until it was too late, heading towards his true target from the very beginning.

"Gai-sensei, he's coming for you!" Neji cried.

Meanwhile, the green clad Jonin was trying to keep Samehada at bay, which was a much harder task than it could appear at first glance. Samehada would sprout spikes on its handle if Gai tried to grab it, while making its extremely sharp scales grow if Gai tried to

touch any other part. Thus, Gai was pretty much reduced to kicking and punching the sword whenever it tried to return to its master.

"Water Release: Water Bullet!"

Gai, fortunately, heard Neji's warning, and had ample opportunity to avoid Kisame's attack. On the other hand, that meant that there was nothing between Kisame and his sword, and soon the two of them were reunited once again.

"I admit that your strategy was a sound one," Kisame praised, as he made a couple of one handed swings in the air. "But as you can see, nothing can keep me away from Samehada for long."

Rather than looking annoyed or frustrated, Gai smirked. "That sword is sure something, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Samehada's already transferring me the chakra he absorbed from you while you were trying to futilely keep it away from me," Kisame stated, as he rested his sword over his shoulder. "The longer you take to defeat me, the smaller the chances of such thing happening!"

"I see," Gai said, looking a little pensive. "If that's the case... then I'll have to beat you with my next move!"

"Oh? And what move will that be, taijutsu specialist?" Kisame asked, genuinely curious. Still, the Akatsuki didn't drop his guard, and prepared for pretty much anything.

"I shall incinerate you with my flames of youth! No matter how proficient you are with Water ninjutsu, you won't be able to put them out! Gate of View, Open!" Gai's body exuded so much chakra, it started to blow gusts of wind in every direction, as his skin turned dark red and his eyes opened completely wide. Gai then dashed towards Kisame, the sheer speed carved a path in the water, with the shark ninja almost unable to see him.

"Wha...?" Kisame babbled, as he raised his sword in order to block the incoming attack.

Gai delivered a swift kick to Kisame's chin, sending the Akatsuki flying upwards, before the green clad Jonin leaped into the air, passing Kisame, and readied to deliver his attack.

"Shit, this is bad! Samehada!" Kisame cried as he tried to put the sword before the incoming onslaught.

"MORNING PEACOCK!"

Gai delivered a brutal flurry of punches so fast, his fists were nothing but red blurs. The speed of each punch was such that due to the air friction, it produced a fireball with each hit. The flying fireballs created a fan of flames around Kisame, looking almost a bird made of fire with its wings spread out. Gai finished his combo by kicking Kisame in the chest, sending him flying back to the water with a loud splash.

Gai landed on his feet, but as soon as the effects of the Eight Gates kicked in, his body returned to normal, and dropped to one knee.

"Did I... expend more chakra than I thought...?" Gai wondered, panting.

"Gai-sensei!" Lee cried, as he and his teammates went to check his master.

Kisame, meanwhile, stayed underwater for the time being. His whole body hurt as if he had been trampled by a stampede of wild boars. His Akatsuki cloak had been completely burned and torn apart, now only a few tatters remaining. Fortunately, not only he was able to use Samehada to block some of the damage, but the sword had managed to absorb some of Gai's chakra whenever his fists touched the sword, which was now being used to nurse his wounds.

" I don't think I've ever experienced an attack that brutal before," Kisame reflected, as his body slowly recovered. He realized Gai's state, and smirked. *"That idiot, he used a technique that would let him completely drained and defenseless. He gambled and lost. Now, it's about time to end this! "*

Feeling confident with the amount of recovered chakra, Kisame dashed out of the water towards the now defenseless Gai.

"You're mine!" Kisame said with a predatory glee.

"I can assure you he's not!" another voice said.

Suddenly, Rock Lee appeared between Gai and Kisame, as he delivered a roundhouse kick at the shark ninja. Who was forced to back off. Lee continued his assault of punches and mostly kick combos, before standing on his hands, spreading his legs, and spinning around himself.

"Konoha Reverse Whirlwind!"

Lee spun at such speed, he even formed a tornado around himself, which pushed Kisame backwards. At that point, Tenten appeared just behind him, her body glowing with a green aura, and a huge sword on each hand.

"Raging Bladestorm!"

Tenten started to spin as well, turning herself into a razor-sharp tornado. Pumping chakra into his feet, Kisame leaped away before he could be skewered. He thought that he had avoided her attack, but he noticed that cuts were starting to open in both his arms and his chest.

"Vacuum Blade Palm!"

While still mid air, Kisame saw several blades of vacuum flying at him, fired by Neji. Using Samehada, Kisame was able to deflect the

first two, but the third one blew the sword out of his hand, as the two of them fell to the water below with a splash.

"Good one, Neji!" Lee praised, giving his teammate a thumbs up.

"Time to finish that oversized piece of shushi off!" Tenten declared.

Suddenly, the water flooding the wrecked streets started to roar, before its level started to decrease, slowly but surely.

"W-What's going on?" Tenten asked, keeping her guard up. "Neji?"

"Kisame is trying to escape by going underground!" Neji told them, as he saw the shark man digging away. "And since he used his chakra to create and maintain all this water, it's disappearing now that Kisame is no longer here."

"Should we go after him?" Lee asked.

Neji shook his head. "No. We have plenty of things to do here. We need to protect the civilians, as well as deal with the enemies still attacking the village."

"Not to mention, we need to take Gai-sensei to a safe place!" Lee said.

"No, I'm... I'm okay," the green clad Jonin said, as he stood back on his feet. "Using the Sixth Gate left me a bit drained. I may not be able to help much, but I can still defend myself. You don't have to concern yourself with me."

"But Gai-sensei-" Lee tried to protest, before Gai raised a hand to silence him.

"I appreciate your thought, Lee, but remember, you're no longer a Genin. You need to know who needs to be protected the most," Gai replied. "And right now, the civilians and the wounded take far more priority than me."

"I... you're right, Gai-sensei," Lee said, before giving Gai a thumbs up, his face radiating determination. "We won't let you down, Gai-sensei! You can count on us!"

"I'm seeing a group of ninjas escorting a civilian group towards one of the bunkers," Neji stated, as his Byakugan scanned the nearby area. "However, the White Zetsu clones are giving them some trouble."

"Then that's where we need to go," Tenten said, with her male teammates nodding in agreement.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Dosu, Zaku and Kin were fighting a bunch of White Zetsu clones, alongside a couple of chakra golems. So far, they managed to clear a street of them, which could be used as a safe passage for civilians. However, Dosu would soon find out that it wouldn't remain safe for long.

"I'm hearing multiple steps coming to this direction," Dosu warned his teammates. "They appear to be more White Zetsu."

"Ha! Let them come! We'll blast them into bits like we did with their friends!" Zaku boasted, hitting his fists together.

And just like Dosu said, a horde of White Zetsu clones made itself known in no time, letting out multiple yells and cries as they charged forward.

"I'll stop them in their tracks!" Kin said, as she took a step forward, while making several hand seals. "Demonic Illusion: Spiraling Vertigo!"

The genjutsu took hold of the Zetsu, at least those in the first lines of attack, and they quickly tripped and fell to the floor on their faces as if they were drunk. They tried to get up, but slipped and fell again, much to their still unaffected brothers' frustration.

"You're under a genjutsu, idiots! Dispel it!" one White Zetsu said.

"Maybe we should liberate them ourselves," another clone stated, as he knelt down beside a fallen clone, touched his back, and sent a disruptive wave of chakra through his body.

"Oh no, I won't let you!" Zaku said as he aimed his hands forward, "Decapitating Airwaves!"

Zaku two streams of pressurized air and soundwaves from the holes of his palms, blasting both the incapacitated and abled Zetsu clones away, though those standing the furthest weren't hit by the radius of the attack.

"Good job. It seems you were able to back your boasts this time," Kin praised her teammate with a rogue smirk.

"Yeah, I know, right?" Zaku replied, before Kin's words sunk in, and frowned. "Hey, what do you mean 'this time'?"

"Guys, jump to the side!" Dosu warned, as he charged towards them.

The two of them were startled by the sudden cry of alarm, but managed to do so just in time, as a couple of White Zetsu clones emerged from below them, and tried and failed to grab their legs.

"Underground Sonic Boom!"

Dosu slammed both his Melody Gauntlets into the ground between the Zetsu, sending a powerful sonic blast that ripped the ground apart, killing the artificial creatures almost instantly.

"How many times do I need to tell you not to lower your guard?" Dosu asked, his voice sounding a little frustrated. "Stay alert, here they come more of them!"

And indeed, since Zaku had only been able to destroy the first few lines, more White Zetsu remained in the further back, which took

note of Zaku's wide area of attack, and were now advancing by crawling through the walls of the buildings that made up the street, something that wasn't lost on the spiky haired teenager.

"Shit! I can't hit all of them at once!" Zaku complained, as he tried to decide where should he aim.

"Not to mention, your attack is going to cause one hell of collateral damage if you aim at those buildings," Kin added.

The solution, however, came in the form of the couple of chakra golems, who aimed their cannon forearms at the White Zetsu, before releasing a stream of fire at them, with enough precision to burn the crawling humanoids but only cause minimal damage to the buildings. Seeing their advance foiled, the Zetsu started to fall back.

"HELL YEAH!" Zaku said, pumping his fists. "Konoha has the coolest toys! I'm so glad we switched sides to them!"

As Zaku cheered, Dosu's ears picked a new enemy arriving.

"Something is coming!" Dosu warned.

"More White Zetsu?" Kin asked.

"No, this is... much bigger!" Dosu said, before turning around and pointing to a nearby building. "It's coming from that roof!"

As soon as his words left his bandaged lips, something that looked like a White Zetsu but was much bigger leaped from the roof of said building, and landed on top of a golem, crushing it into scrap metal almost instantly.

"THE HELL!?" Kin screamed. "What the fuck is that!?"

The creature looked like a White Zetsu indeed, but it was far larger. It had a very muscular body, six arms, two thick legs, and three heads mounted on top of each other. The creature turned at the other golem, who raised its flamethrower arm to burn it to a crisp. But the

Zetsu mutant was faster, grabbed the arm and ripped it from the body as if it was nothing. Then he used the arm to beat the golem into a pile of scrap. Then, he turned his three heads at the former Oto ninjas, who took a step back, and snarled.

"I think he found the next thing to smash," Kin whimpered.

"DIEEEEEEEE!" the three heads of the monstrous Zetsu said at once as he charged forward.

"Zaku, Kin, stop him on his tracks!" Dosu ordered.

"Very well then," Zaku agreed, not showing the enthusiasm he displayed before, before taking aim at the hulking Zetsu.

"Decapitating Air Waves!"

The huge Zetsu was hit by the two streams of pressurized air and soundwaves, but it only succeeded in slowing him down. That moment, Kin decided to make her move, as she picked a bunch of senbon from her ninja tool pouch.

"Aim for the heads!" Dosu commanded.

Kin nodded "Lightning Release: Electric Needle Barrage!"

Kin's hands crackled with electricity, which transferred to the steel needles, before tossing them at the cluster of three heads, all of them hitting their mark, with some even stabbing into an eye. The White Zetsu aberration roared in pain, that moment of distraction making him to be pushed back by Zaku's stream.

"Now's my chance!" Dosu said, as he dashed forward to his foe, before leaping, landing on the creature's massive shoulder.

"Resonating Sonic Cage!"

Dosu slammed both fists against the trio of heads, creating a cage of high intensity soundwaves that constantly clashed and bounced against each other. The soundwaves soon started to mess with the

heads, which started to swole until they exploded like ballooons with too much air inside. The white giant fell forward with a loud thud, as Dosu expertly landed back on his feet.

"Whew, we did it," Kin said, panting a little.

"Yeah, nothing can beat us!" Zaku said, his pride coming back in full force.

As soon as Zaku said that, a huge white meteor landed between them, impacting with so much force it opened a crater and sent the three former Oto ninjas flying in different directions. When the cloud of dirt disappeared, they could see it was yet another mosntrous White Zetsu.

"DIEEEE!" the three heads screamed in unison, as the creature charged at Zaku, who was trying to get back on his feet.

"Zaku, get away from there!" Dosu cried, as he tried as best as he could to get back on his feet and assist his friend.

"Rasengan!"

However, just before the monster could get any of his six hands on Zaku, yet another white and blue meteor fell, this time landed on the giant creature, the impact creating yet another crater, followed by a chakra explosion that turned the giant Zetsu into white mush, which was splattered everywhere. From the smoke produced by the blast, a lone figure emerged. A young boy with spiky white hair.

"Hey, are you okay?" the newcomer asked.

"Y-You!" Zaku said, as he hobbled towards him. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in a coma?"

"Given that I saved your life, a 'thank you' would be appreciated.," Hagane said, as he frowned a little while crossing his arms.

"Thank you for your assistance, Hagane-san," Dosu said, bowing his head a little. "But my teammate's question remains. When did you get better?"

"Well, you see-"

"HAGANE!" a female voice screamed, as yet a third meteor landed besides them opening another crater. A very angry looking blond woman emerged from that crater.

"Oh, hey mom!" Hagane nonchalantly greeted Tsunade -who had a small Katsuyu clone on her shoulder-, who stomped towards him.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!?" Tsunade roared, as he grabbed her son by his shoulders, and started to shake him.

"Leaving the hospital without telling anybody, and going to fight on your own! You could have been seriously hurt!"

Hagane lowered his head. "I'm sorry mom. When I woke up, I saw through the window that we were under attack, and went to find out what was going on. I was on my way to meet with Kaida and Tenzo-sensei when I ran into them. But I understand that I acted rashly and without thinking, something my sister would do. I could have at the very least left a note."

Tsunade's anger mellowed out a little after hearing that explanation, and most importantly, seeing that her son was fine.

"Alright. I'll let this incident go, given the circumstances," Tsunade replied. "Can you sense your father or Naruto?"

Hagane closed his eyes, and made a hand seal. "Dad is at the other side of the village, to the southeast. He's fighting against a very powerful Akatsuki. As for Naruto-niisan... wait, this can't be right, I can't sense him anywhere!"

"Don't worry about Naruto, I'm sure he's fine," Tsunade confidently said. "Now I need to go and help your father. I'm sure the Akatsuki is

fighting against is Pain himself. That idiot wants to convince his former apprentice to switch sides and drop Akatsuki, but all what he'll achieve is getting himself killed."

"I'm going with you," Hagane stated.

"Definitely NO, young mister!" Tsunade firmly stated. "I'm not going to tell you to find somewhere to hide, but stay away from Akatsuki or any enemy that might prove too much of a challenge, understood?"

Hagane sighed in resignation. "Yes, mom. However, there's something you need to know. It's about one of the Akatsuki, Toneri."

"The guy who put you in a coma," Tsunade seethed, as she narrowed her eyes. "What about him?"

"I remembered my fight against him. I was able to overcome his Truth Seeking Balls, and I think I know how," Hagane stated. "I infuse all my moves with senjutsu chakra, which makes me realize that maybe that's the key to defeat him."

"Right now, besides you, the only ones able to use Senjutsu are your father, Naruto and myself," Tsunade said, placing her hands on her hips. "Your father appears to be busy right now, and I'm not good against aerial opponents. Guess it'll have to be Naruto. Katsuyu, you heard that?"

"Right, Tsunade-sama," the clone on her shoulder replied. "If any of my clones see Naruto, I'll make him know."

"Good," Tsunade nodded, before her eyes drifted towards Anko's students, who looked like they've been put through a grinder. "You three, stay with my son and make sure he doesn't try anything stupid."

"Come on mom, I'm not Kaida, I don't need a babysitter," Hagane complained.

"And while you're at it, you should heal their wounds as well," Tsunade finished. "Now I don't want to hear that you fought against an Akatsuki on your own, you hear me? Alright, see you soon."

And with that, Tsunade leaped into the sky, ready to help her husband.

...

Little by little, the Katsuyu clones started to spread around the village, quickly healing the wounded and allowing them to return to the battle, or just stopping them from being harmed in the first place so they could fight uninterrupted.

One such group was made of Haku and Kurenai, alongside several ANBU lead by Yugao, who continued to fight against the horde of White Zetsu clones and the Moon puppets, though unfortunately they were being pushed back. Haku pulled his collapsible chakra bow.

"Ice Release: Freezing Arrow!"

Haku fired several ice arrows in quick succession at the incoming Zetsu clones. Some of them found their mark, partially freezing the humanoid creatures, though some of them were deflected or blocked. Those who managed to avoid the ice arrows continued forward, and two of them even managed to go all the way to the Ice Ninja.

"DIE!" one of the Zetsus cried, as he leaped at him.

Haku muttered a curse as he jumped backwards while generating a spear made of ice in his hand, but such defensive measure was going to prove unnecessary.

"Hazy Moon Night!"

The White Zetsu clones were suddenly cut into pieces, just as Yugao appeared in front of Haku.

"You okay?" the purple haired woman asked.

"Yes. Thanks for the help, Yugao-san," Haku greeted, before his eyes darted again to the Zetsu clones. "Watch out!"

"Let's attack from afar!" one of the Zetsu clones commanded, as he and his brothers started to make the same chain of seals. "Wood Release: Wood Stake Throw!"

Sharp wooden stakes burst from the Zetsus' bodies, before being fired at great speed at the Konoha ninja, which they tried to either dodge or deflect them, some succeeding, others not. Kurenai prepared a jutsu to counter this attack.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

The Genjutsu Mistress slammed both hands into the ground, erecting a large wall of earth and rock, which stopped the incoming stakes in its tracks. Unfortunately, it did little to stop the Moon Puppets to blow it to pieces with their golden chakra blasts, allowing the Zetsu to continue their advance unimpeded

"Fall back!" Yugao called, moving back while tossing kunai and shuriken as well.

"Haku," Kurenai called her student. "If we can't defeat these enemies in direct combat, then an indirect approach may work."

Haku nodded, understanding perfectly what she meant.

"Everybody, get ready. Things are going to get a little..." Haku began, as his lips curved into a small smirk, as he made a single hand seal. "... hazy. Hiding in the Mist Jutsu!"

A dense fog quickly covered the streets blinding both friends and foes alike.

"Quickly, use Fire and Wind Release ninjutsu to dispel this fog!" one of the Zetsu commanded.

The others nodded in agreement, and made the proper hand seals before expelling from their mouths streams of fire and gusts of wind. But much to their shock, the mist didn't even waver.

"What the... what's with this mist?" one of the clones asked, as a figure appeared behind him, a kunai in their hand. "AAAAAARRGH!"

Soon the screams of the Zetsu clones started to fill the air as they were being picked one by one by the Konoha ninja, who either were unimpeded by the mist, or could navigate around it thanks to some extraordinary senses. That's it, until one of them realized what was going on.

"Everybody, listen! The mist won't dispel because it's not real mist! They trapped us in a genjutsu!" a White Zetsu clone said in realization, before bringing his hands together in a seal, and sending a burst of chakra through his body. "Release!"

Said action was echoed by the rest of the Zetsu, who started to disturb their chakra as well, and soon, they saw how the mist started to dispel...

"Yes! Ha, they think they could trick us with such a simple genjutsu!" one of the Zetsu clones boasted.

... before the mist quickly reformed.

"WHAT!?" Several Zetsu cried in unison. "What's with this genj- AAARGH!"

The Zetsu continued to drop like flies until none of them were left, all of them dying without realizing the truth. While it was true that the mist was a genjutsu, it was one cast by Kurenai. Haku had used the real jutsu as well, creating two layers of mist, one illusory and another real. Because as Kurenai used to say, the beauty of genjutsu was that it could make you doubt reality itself.

"Well done, Kurenai, Haku!" Yugao praised her friend and her adopted son. "Now only the puppets remain!"

Despite being alone against the Konoha ninjas, the Moon Puppets showed no signs of falling back, and prepared to attack. Then again, the Konoha ninja wouldn't be able to use the same tactic to beat them, since as inorganic beings that lacked a mind of their own, they weren't affected by genjutsu.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Of course, being crushed under the weight of a massive toad suddenly summoned a few meters above their heads was something they weren't unaffected by.

"Hey there!" Naruto said, waving from atop the toad's head, before landing besides Kurenai and Haku. Fukasaku, the Toad Sage, was riding on his back. "Sorry for the lateness, hehe!"

"Naruto, where have you been?" Kurenai asked, as she rushed towards the blond. His golden eyes indicated his Sage Mode was active. "Hinata has been looking for you, but her Tenseigan was unable to find you anywhere in the village!"

"I was in the bunker under my house. It's protected against all kind of doujutsu, so guess that's why she was unable to locate me," Naruto replied, as he placed a hand in the back of his head. "Sorry if I worried you."

"Took me a while to find the lad," Fukasaku said, sighing a little. "But now he's here."

"It's okay, what matters is that Akatsuki didn't get their hands on you," Haku stated in a somewhat relieved tone. "What were you doing there?"

"Getting prepared," was Naruto's answer. "I summoned three clones, and the four of us were gathering nature energy for Sage Mode. I

had to do that in order to keep the clones protected. Akatsuki knows they have to target them if they want to cut Sage Mode off of me."

"A very intelligent strategy, Naruto," Kurenai agreed with a nod. "Though we could have used your help here a little earlier."

"By the way, where is Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked.

Haku merely pointed into the sky, where some flashes of light could be seen every few seconds.

"She's fighting Toneri alongside Fu," Haku told him.

"Then I need to help the two of them as soon as possible!" Naruto said, as he was ready to leave.

"Naruto, wait! You have no way to help somebody fighting an aerial battle!" Kurenai told him. "Even with that jutsu of yours-"

"Actually, Naruto-kun might be of more help than you realize," a Katsuyu clone said, just as she landed on Naruto's shoulder.

"Naruto-kun, I bring news from your little brother."

"Hagane? Is he okay?" the blond asked, a bit worried.

"He is. He has awakened, and joined the fight alongside Tsunade-sama and other Konoha ninjas," the slug fragment informed.

Naruto sighed in relief. "Thank goodness he's alright," he then crossed his arms, and frowned a little. "Though he could have chosen a better time to wake up, you know?"

"I also have an important message from him," Katsuyu continued. "He told me was able to overcome Toneri's Truth Seeking Balls thanks to his Senjutsu. Truth Seeking Balls can't nullify ninjutsu if it has nature energy on it!"

"Heh, I've been a Sage most of my life, and I wasn't even aware of that" Fukasaku said, chuckling a little. "It's true what they say that no

matter how old you are, you can always learn new things."

"Really? Great!" Naruto said, as he punched his palm. "Because I have Rasenshuriken with Toneri's name on it!" Naruto then jumped a top of the toad's head, and pointed in the direction of the aerial fight. "Come on, Gamaken! There's a pale ass in dire need of a good kicking!"

...

Several blocks away from there, Kakashi's Animal Squad, accompanied by Rin, were clearing the streets of White Zetsu clones. And just like it happened to the Assassination Squad, they also encountered a bunch of monstrous White Zetsu clones. Unlike them, however, they saw how they were born: three White Zetsu clones merged together, becoming a mass of white flesh, until it took a vaguely humaoid form with multiple arms and heads.

"Just when you think that those things couldn't be anymore disgusting..." Tamaki gagged in disgust.

"Disgusting or not, they're going down!" Kiba yelled, as he and Akamaru rushed forward. "Passing Fang!"

Kiba turned into a living drill, as he and Akamaru dived at one of the merged Zetsu. However, the giant Zetsu countered their charge with a couple of brutal punches that send the Inuzuka and his dog flying back.

"Kiba!" Tamaki yelled, before turning at the White Zetsu, and snarled. "You're going to pay for that! Fire Release: Blistering Firecat!"

Tamaki exhaled a massive wall of fire that took the shape of a large cat. The fire cat dashed forward, but the merged Zetsu were already prepared for that, and made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Two of the mutant Zetsu heads exhaled a torrent of water from each of their mouths, creating a small tsunami that threatened to flood the street, and everyone on it.

"Shino, Rin, let's lift a barrier, together!" Kakashi commanded, as the three of them went through the same seal sequence. "Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

The three of them slammed their hands into the ground, erecting a large and thick rock barrier that acted as a dome, successfully containing the incoming water.

"Good job, you three," Kiba said, as he hobbled towards them, followed by Akamaru.

"That will only delay them. We need a more permanent solution to deal with them," Rin pointed out.

"Alright, it seems like this is a good moment to use a new jutsu I developed!" Tamaki said, before biting her thumb, and making five hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

From a cloud of smoke, one of Tamaki's cats, Hina, appeared.

"How is summoning a cat going to help?" Kiba asked dismissively. "Akamaru and I have been practicing a new jutsu as well. That will what will help us turn the tables!"

"That's not the jutsu I was talking about! I just need Hina to do it!" Tamaki protested. "Hina, it's time."

"Alright!" the female cat said, as she climbed the kunoichi, and set on her head. "Ready whenever you are!"

Tamaki nodded, and made three hand seals. "Human Beast Combination Transformation: Cat Warrior!"

Tamaki and Hina were engulfed by a cloud of smoke, and when it dispelled, Hina was nowhere to be seen, while Tamaki had changed

drastically.

"Whoa..." Rin said in awe.

Tamaki now looked a bit taller and more muscular, but that was the least noticeable change. Her hair had grown longer, and became fuzzier. Her eyes were now yellow with slitted pupils. Her human ears had disappeared, replaced by cat ears that grew at the top of her head. And lastly, Tamaki now had a tail similar to that of a cat.

"In this form, I shall tear those things apart!" Tamaki boasted, before turning at Kiba, and smirked. "What do you think about this transformation?"

"You... you..." Kiba stammered, before his face reddened with anger. "You totally copied my jutsu!"

"What? No, just because I combine with an animal, doesn't mean that-"

"Bah, forget about it!" Kiba huffed, as he sat on Akamaru's back, and made a hand seal. "Human Beast Combination Transformation: Berserker Werewolf!"

Like Tamaki before her, Kiba merged with Akamaru, but while his previous transformation resulted in a large two headed wolf, this one was a much smaller white furred werewolf - relatively small, it was still larger than Kakashi,- which still kept some of Kiba's clothing.

"No wonder Kiba thought that Tamaki had copied him," Rin pointed out.

"Still, they'll have to sort their rivalry later," Shino said, pointing forward, as the two merged Zetsu clones teared the rock barrier down, allowing multiple normal Zetsu a free way forward.

Both Tamaki and Kiba smirked, the former looking at the latter. "Bet I can kill more Zetsu than you."

"Oh, you're on!"

Both cat girl and werewolf dashed forward at a speed unseen previously from them, and started to tear the Zetsu apart like they were made of paper. Some of the Zetsu tried to jump back and attack them with ninjutsu, but neither of their attacks found their mark, and soon they found themselves losing limbs and their very lives to vicious claw swipes and brutal bites. Even the merged Zetsu had trouble keeping up with them.

"The two headed wolf was powerful, but it was too big and hard to control and maneuver," Kiba thought, dodging a kick from a Zetsu, before splitting it in half with a claw swipe. "But this form allows much greater control while keeping the same power."

Rin placed her hands on her hips, and smiled. "Well, look at that, it seems they can back those boasts."

"Indeed," Kakashi agreed. "But better join them. I'm afraid they're going to let their power go to their heads and drop their guard."

"Oh, come on Kakashi, I think your students are old enough to take care of themselves," a new voice said.

Kakashi and Rin froze upon hearing such voice, and turned to the direction it came from. Standing at the roof of a partially collapsed building was Obito Uchiha. The Akatsuki was now wearing a slashed Konoha forehead protector that had a piece of cloth covering his left eye, where Shisui's eye used to be.

"Obito..." Rin apprehensively said.

"Hello there, Rin," Obito said, as he unsheathed his katana. "Now, are you two ready to play with me a little? Team Minato was long overdue of such a reencounter."

Author's Note: And thus, the battle continues. One of the Akatsuki is already out, but there are still many of them causing trouble.

Now you know what happened with Hagane. After so much time, his coma finally ended and is good and kicking! And even better, he was able to pass on the key to bypass Toneri's Truth Seeking Balls. Yeah, I know I didn't show any progress on Toneri's front, but don't worry, the next chapter will fix that. And yeah, Naruto is also back. Given what happened with Pain the first time they fought, he wanted to make extra sure that he has access to his Sage Mode so he can fight at the top of his game.

Another Akatsuki that also showed up is Obito, and naturally, he did so in front of Kakashi and Rin. Rin already fought Obito once, but I think it was about time that Kakashi went to face his former teammate. Though given what happened the last time Obito showed up... yeah, you can imagine what's going to happen next.

You know, I loved the White Zetsu's ability to merge into a single monster. Sadly, they only used that fusion ability once against Naruto and Killer B, and it wasn't very effective. I wish they used this ability more. Hence, I'm going to feature it more prominently. Also, there are going to be different kinds of mutant Zetsu in the future, so the armies of the bad guys don't look so homogeneous and dull.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading the chapter.

The invasion of Konoha continues! With one Akatsuki down, the good guys' chance of winning increase! But there are still plenty of enemies left, and a couple that haven't appeared yet. Tell me your thoughts of the chapter and the arc so far in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part III

So, what do you think about my take on Pain's invasion? Liking it so far? Hope so. With this chapter, we reach the middle point of the arc. Enjoy it:

Chapter 85:

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part III

or

Clash on Earth and Heaven

"We haven't seen each other since you took Rin away from Orochimaru's lair, haven't we?" Obito asked, looking at Kakashi. "Of course, I did get the pleasure to see Rin back in Kumo, when she took Shisui's eye from my face."

"Did you come here to take that eye back?" Kakashi asked. "Or do you want the eye you gave me before becoming an Akatsuki?"

"That eye was a gift, Kakashi, one that I did not regret giving you, even if the circumstances about us changed drastically," Obito said with a smirk. "No, I'm not here for any eyes. You should know that the only thing Konoha has that interests me, besides Rin, are the jinchuriki. We won't leave until we have the two of them."

"Then prepare to be disappointed," Kakashi defiantly replied.

"Why I should? So far, we have captured almost every jinchuriki we got our sights onto," Obito rebutted. "This won't be an exception, especially since Akatsuki is unleashing every resource at its disposal to destroy Konoha and capture its jinchuriki."

"No matter how many missing ninja, self-powered automatons or artificial creatures you throw at us, you will never crush this village," Kakashi fired back. "Naruto and Fu are ninjas of this village, and everyone who fights do so not just to stop Akatsuki from claiming a jinchuriki, but to protect two comrades from the enemy."

"Yeah, yeah, the 'Will of Fire' and all that crap..." Obito dismissively said as he rolled his eyes. "You might have grown taller, Kakashi, but deep down you're still a kid. It's kind of ironic that you used to be far less naïve when you were younger."

"Kakashi isn't naïve, Obito. He believes in something greater than himself, like you did one time," Rin interceded, taking a step forward. "Please Obito, stop all this madness. It's not too late."

Obito grimaced a little, more in sadness rather than disgust, as if he was forced to admit that there was some truth in the words of his former crush.

"I can't," he stated. "Not when I'm so close to the end. Not when I invested so much time and resources. Not when a world free of strife and suffering is at hand!"

"You're doing nothing but creating more suffering!" Rin shouted back, her face turning red with anger, until she felt a hand on her shoulder. A hand belonging to Kakashi.

"Enough," the silver haired Jonin calmly said. "Nothing we say can bring Obito from the darkness he was sunk in. All we can do now is fight to drive him and his Akatsuki pals out of the village. It's time to fight, not to speak."

"For once, you said something intelligent, Kakashi," Obito complimented in a mocking tone. "Though I should point out that it is you who is still deep in the darkness of ignorance. My eyes were opened to the light the day Rin died."

"Shut up already!" Kiba roared, as he and Tamaki leaped towards the half-masked Akatsuki, ready to tear him to shreds with their bare hands.

"You never learn, don't you?" Obito laughed, as he was about to activate his Kamui, letting the swipes phase through him. However, something caught his attention: Kakashi was also using Kamui, opening a portal that quickly sucked his third student in. Obito's only visible eye opened wide upon realizing what Kakashi was planning. "SHIT!"

The Uchiha was forced to leap back before Kiba and Tamaki could reach him. However, the two feral ninjas merely leaped at him again, and this time, Obito had to defend himself.

" Guess this shouldn't be a surprise. After Sasuke found my secret, it was a matter of time before Kakashi learned to use his eye to counter mine," Obito bitterly thought, as he unsheathed his katana in order to parry a claw swipe from Kiba.

" By sending one of our own into Obito's pocket dimension, we make sure he won't be able to use his intangibility or teleportation," Kakashi thought, a smirk forming under his mask. *"Not unless he wants Shino's bugs to eat him alive. And even if for some reason I can't get him out of there, Shino can escape on his own with the Reverse Summoning Jutsu."*

"Thundering Roar!"

Gathering chakra into his throat, Kiba let out a powerful roar in the form of destructive sonic blasts, which hit Obito squarely, sending him flying. Still, Obito showed that there was more to him than a powerful eye ability. He threw a kunai with wire attached to it towards a nearby wall, breaking the momentum of the impact that sent him flying, while finding a solid footing, even if it was a vertical one.

As this happened, Tamaki made a hand seal.

"Feline Secret Art: Speed Burst!"

Tamaki quickly rushed after him, walking on all fours, moving so fast she left a trail of afterimages in her wake, climbing the wall Obito was attached to using chakra control, she began her vicious assault towards him. Even if Tamaki was fast as lightning, Obito's Sharingan was able to follow her movements -if with some difficulty- and keep her pace.

Then, Obito pulled out a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it, but much to Tamaki's confusion, rather than throwing it at her, he stabbed it into the wall, before jumping away. The second he did that, Kiba burst from said wall, in a failed attempt to catch him off guard.

"Kiba! Wait-"

But it was too late. Obito detonated the explosive paper, which send the animal-like ninja tumbling down the ground again. The one eyed Uchiha laughed.

"This is the best you can train your students, Kakashi?" Obito mocked his former teammate.

"Tamaki! Kiba!" Rin shouted, as she rushed towards them, Kakashi following behind.

"Are they hurt?" Kakashi asked.

"Just a little," Rin said, as she started to heal the two of them at once. "It seems their new forms made them far more durable. An explosive tag so close could very much kill any human being. Question is, how did Obito know that Kiba was going to attack from that direction?"

"I don't know, but I plan to find it out," Kakashi said, as he moved his forehead protector, revealing his Sharingan. "Hey Obito, do you

know what else is long overdue? You getting a good beating from yours truly. It will be like in the old times."

"Heh, the old times..." Obito chuckled a little. "I bet you look at the past with fondness, right? Before I 'went evil' and Rin and Minato-sensei were alive and well. Too bad Kakashi, things will never be like they used to be. And that also includes the time in which I was unable to do nothing but lose to you!"

Kakashi's hand was coated in electricity, sounding like a thousand birds chirping. "No, things will never be like they used to, but I can fight to make them even better than they were!"

Kakashi and Obito dashed towards each other, ready to clash for the first time in decades.

...

Meanwhile, in the skies above Konoha, Hinata, Hanabi, and Fu continued their fight against the last Otsutsuki unimpeded. It appeared as if Toneri wanted no interruptions to his fight, and commanded the flying puppets he still had to attack other zones of the village. It worked both ways, since the trio of kunoichi wouldn't have to worry about possible interference from the enemy.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Fang!"

Hinata brought her hands together, generating a mass of lightning that was shot at Toneri. The electricity formed the head of a huge lion, ready to sink its teeth into the Otsutsuki's flesh. Toneri, however, made a hand motion, and one of his four Truth Seeking Balls intercepted the attack, nullifying it completely.

"No effect..." Hinata sadly said.

"Come on, we gotta keep trying!" Hanabi insisted. "Hagane was able to beat this guy, and if that bore with a stick up his ass was able to do it, then so can we!"

"Yeah, every jutsu has a weakness," Fu agreed. "And if we can't find it, we'll find a way around it! If I can only get close enough, I think I can end this in one punch!"

"You're awfully confident in yourself, jinchuriki," Toneri stated. "I can't help but feel a bit insulted."

"I already beat an Akatsuki before, so I don't think why this time the result it's going to be different," Fu rebutted, before pointing at Hinata and Hanabi. "Especially since I have a back-up as awesome as this one! Plus, behold the weapon that already beat an Akatsuki!"

Fu unslung her backpack, revealing a large storage scroll. From the scroll, she unsealed a massive tree log, its branches and roots cleanly cut, with the symbols of Konoha and Taki carved at each of its ends.

"That's your mighty weapon? Don't make me laugh-"

However, Toneri was silenced when Fu suddenly vanished and reappeared from behind him. Startled, the Otsutsuki tried to move the Truth Seeking Balls to intercept the attack, but it was too late. While he was able to project a repulsive force field to counter the impact, Fu gave her log way too much momentum to be stopped, and the giant piece of wood slammed into Toneri's chest, sending him flying.

"YES! Way to go, Fu-san!" Hanabi cheered.

"Arbor-chan never disappoints!" Fu said, while resting the log on her shoulder, and patting it like it was alive.

"No time to celebrate! Come on, we need to finish Toneri off before he recovers!" Hinata urged them.

The trio of girls all flew towards the tumbling Toneri, who was trying to regain his balance. They surrounded him, and went for the kill from a different angle. However, the Otsutsuki was far from finished,

as he managed to direct three of his Truth Seeking Balls towards one of the girls each.

"Emerald Reincarnation Explosion!"

The Truth Seeking Balls started to glow with a green light, before it exploded all of sudden, catching the Konoha and Taki ninjas off guard, the former two not being able to use their own orbs as a means of protection.

"Just... what the...?" Fu asked as she noticed something off. Much to her shock, her Tailed Beast cloak was gone. "The hell!? What happened to my Tailed Beast chakra?"

"As you could see right now, I have the power to remove other people's chakra," Toneri told the green haired girl. He coughed some blood. "You managed to land one good hit on me, jinchuriki, but don't think you'll be that lucky again. I'm done playing around."

"Bold statement for somebody who does nothing but cower behind his little barriers," Fu taunted back, as she drew more Tailed Beast chakra, restoring her Chakra Cloak, while gripping her log.

"I can do more than just cower," Toneri calmly replied, but still felt like he was addressing the insult. He brought his hands together in a seal. "Watch."

Large pieces of debris from below shot into the sky, stopping around Toneri. He changed the hand seal, and the large pieces of rock and concrete shot forward towards the trio of kunoichi, like a storm of meteors.

"Hanabi-chan, Fu, behind me!" Hinata urged, as her hands started to crackle with electricity. "Lightning Release: Protection of the Eight Trigrams!"

Hinata started to thrust her open palms back and forth, releasing lightning bolts with each thrust. In no time, she created a massive web

of electric bolts that reduced the incoming debris to little more than pebbles and gravel. Some of the lightning bolts flew all the way to Toneri, but the Otsutsuki merely deflected them with his Truth Seeking Balls.

"Impressive, Byakugan Princess," Toneri complimented. "The last time we met I was sadly unable to check your fighting prowess. It's reassuring to see that it matches your beauty."

"You won't find it so reassuring, once you fight with me a little," Hinata coldly said, her brow furrowing. She made a hand seal, and her two Truth Seeking Balls grew and elongated until they turned into giant nail-like spears. "Take this!"

The giant nails flew at Toneri, but the Otsutsuki merely used two of his Truth Seeking Balls to form a barrier, which successfully stopped the attack. He then commanded the remaining two to do the same, blocking another pair of nails, which were made by Hanabi.

"You won't be able to blindside me," Toneri boasted. "With the Tenseigan, I can see everything!"

"Let's see what you do without it then!" Fu shouted as she made a hand seal. "Hiding in the Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu exhaled from her mouth a cloud of glittery powder, covering the entire zone. Clapping her hands together, the powder started to shine with a bright light. Hinata and Hanabi closed her eyes in time, but Toneri was caught off guard, and his enhanced vision made the pain of the jutsu even stronger.

"MY EYES! Not again!" the Otsutsuki cursed, as he shielded his eyes with his forearm.

"NOW!" Fu yelled.

The jinchuriki and the youngest Hyuga flew towards the Akatsuki, ready to pound him in, however, when they got in close combat

range, Toneri's hands shot sideways, gripping the two of them by their necks. The sudden pressure to her neck made Fu drop Arbor-chan, which fell to the ground below. The Otsutsuki's hold was far stronger than his frame suggested.

"Again you try the same trick against me," Toneri stated, sounding mildly angered, his eyes closed shut. "Didn't I tell you that I've been blind all my life, and as such, I'm more than capable of fighting without sight?"

"Y-yeah," Hanabi choked. "But you aren't using your Tenseigan right now."

"Huh?"

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

Coming from below, Hinata's electrified palm slammed into Toneri's chin, sending him flying upwards, while forcing him to release Hanabi and Fu. The jinchuriki then shot upwards as well, caught the Otsutsuki in no time, and broke his momentum by grabbing him by the shoulders.

"Hinata, Hanabi, get ready!" Fu shouted, before putting all her strength into tossing Toneri down towards the elder Hyuga.

Hinata's whole body started to crackle with electricity, as she started to spin just as Toneri was about to crash into her.

"Lightning Release: Heavenly Thunderstorm!"

Hinata turned into a spinning sphere of lightning just a split second before Toneri crashed into her, resulting into an explosion of chakra and electric bolts that send the Otsutsuki flying again in a different direction, the same direction Hanabi placed herself in, anticipating the trajectory he would take. Hanabi's palms were coated in flames.

"Fire Release: Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Burning Palms!" Hanabi delivered the Hyuga's strongest combo with utmost precision, each blow releasing a burst of flames for added damage. "Two strikes! Four Strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! Thirty-two-

But before Hanabi could finish her combo, she was tackled by Fu, who took her out of close combat range. Hanabi was about to protest and ask why Fu had done that, when suddenly four sharp spikes made out of Truth Seeking Balls skewered the position she was in, piercing nothing but empty air, much to Hanabi's surprise.

"Thanks," the youngest Hyuga said. "You have good reflexes. Not even my Tenseigan caught that."

"Don't sweat it, but try being more careful," Fu advised Hanabi before allowing her to float on her own.

"That was a good team effort," Hinata said, as she studied their foe. Toneri now had a few burns and bruises, and his clothes were severely damaged. He also looked much angrier than before. "We did manage to do him some harm, but we also enraged him."

"I'm afraid to admit you were right, Bykaugan Princess," Toneri snarled, as he wiped some blood trickling from his broken lip with the sleeve of his robe. "You are indeed quite powerful, and so are your sister and the jinchuriki, thus making my job all the harder. Guess it's time I drop the kid gloves if I want to end this."

"Yep, we definitely angered him," Fu observed, sounding almost nonchalant. Two tails of chakra formed on the back of her cloak. "I'll try using some more of Lucky Seven's chakra. We're going to need it."

...

Little by little, most of the civilian population were being escorted to the safety of the underground bunkers while the ninjas continued the fight. That's not to say that all of them managed to safely reach such

havens, and some of them tragically died at the hands of the White Zetsu Clones or the Moon Puppets.

Though not only the civilians were in need of a safe refuge to be protected; ninja clans had also vulnerable members such as young children or the elderly that needed to be evacuated.

The Hyuga were one of those clans. Even with all the losses they sustained during the Uchiha Insurrection, they were still one of Konoha's largest clans, and thus they had quite a lot of elderly and children in need of protection, meaning that they had to dedicate quite a few ninjas to escort them to safety.

And large groups rarely go unnoticed.

"Vacuum Blade Palm!" Hizashi thrust his palm forward, releasing a crescent shaped wave of air that sliced in two a Zetsu that was about to attack one of the Hyuga elders. "Come on, don't stop! We're almost there!"

Even if the Main House/Branch House division was no more, most former Branch House members found themselves carrying the same tasks and roles as in the last time such an event happened in Konoha: protect those most vulnerable while the Main House members faced the threat head on. Not that Hizashi or anybody else complained. All of them knew that their task was as important as being in the middle of the battle. It was something that felt natural to them, a role they had no trouble keeping up for the sake of the clan.

"It's hard to keep fighting while we move!" a younger Hyuga complained, as he struggled against a White Zetsu Clone.

"Watch out! Something big is coming!" Tokuma warned.

And just like the Hyuga who was often tasked gate duty predicted, a couple of merged Zetsu landed besides them with a loud thud, cracking the ground when their feet landed. The sight of such horrifying creatures magnified the already intense panic the Hyuga

escortees were feeling, with many of them screaming in terror and running away.

"Don't panic! Don't panic!" Hizashi shouted, futilely trying to elevate his voice above the cacophony of screams. "If you separate from the group, it will be harder to protect you! Adults, keep the children tight, and don't lose sight of them!"

"Hizashi-san, what should we do?" a female Hyuga asked. "Should we focus on the bigger ones, or should we get rid of the normal ones first?"

Hizashi quickly analyzed the situation, as both the two giant Zetsu and the smaller ones menacingly approached the group. It was indeed a good question: if they focus on the larger ones, the smaller ones could sneak past them unnoticed, even with the Byakugan. But on the other hand, the larger ones could do the more damage.

"Let's get rid of the bigger ones first. Those can make our task even harder than they already is," Hizashi said. "I'll try to draw their attention to me. Cover me, and make sure none of the smaller creatures get their hands on our clansmen!"

"Yes, Hizashi-san!" the other Hyuga chorused in unison.

The former head of the Branch house dashed forward towards an intermediate point of the two giant Zetsu clones, before sending his taunt.

"Multiple Vacuum Palms!"

Thrusting his arms in quick succession, each arm facing a different direction, Hizashi shot several vacuum shells at the larger enemies, which didn't seem to take much damage, but got the intended effect of drawing the attention to him. Several of the smaller Zetsu who wanted to attack him or go past him were skillfully intercepted by other Hyugas.

"Alright then, get ready to feel the might of the Hyuga Clan!" Hizashi shouted, as he slipped into an offensive fighting stance. "Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Palms! Two Strikes! Four Strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! Thirty Two Strikes! Sixty Four Strikes!"

Despite their size, the giant White Zetsu were slower than the normal White Zetsu, and thus had difficulty dodging the barrage of palm strikes that sealed their tenketsu off. They also tried to use their superior strength to crush Hizashi, but the former Branch House Hyuga dodged their blows with skillful grace.

Jumping back, Hizashi scanned the large aberrations with his Byakugan to check the result of his attack: if it was a single enemy, it would be unable to continue fighting. Unfortunately, not only did he have to split the attack between two foes, but they possessed far more tenketsu than a normal human being, meaning that they could still use chakra. Though, on the bright side, it wasn't that the attack didn't cause any harm, far from it

"Come on, finish them off while they're weakened!" Hizashi cried, as he led a group of his clansmen towards the mass of White Zetsu.

While Hizashi and the Hyuga who stayed behind finished off the White Zetsu clones, the other half of their ninja clansmen took the opportunity to make a run for the underground bunkers.

"Come on, just a little more!" Natsu encouraged, as she scanned the area with her own Byakugan. "I'm seeing one of the refuges! We're almost there!"

The news had a balsamic effect on the escorts, who started to cheer and even run at a greater pace. Unfortunately, their joy was doomed to be short lived, as a few golden chakra blasts rained upon them, cutting them off.

"Everybody, stand back! These things are way more dangerous than the green haired weirdoes!" Natsu warned the others, as she and her fellow Hyuga ninja placed between the two puppets and the

group of elderly and children. "Hinata-sama and Neji-san told me about these things. They're as strong as one of our Jonin, don't feel pain, and can use powerful ninjutsu. And since they're mechanical, the Gentle Fist won't work on them."

"Just great," an older Hyuga groaned. "Did they tell you how to defeat them?"

"Use more brute force than skill, and aim for the head," Natsu told the others.

The second group of Hyuga reluctantly engaged the puppets, but soon they found that, just like Natsu said, they proved to be more formidable enemies than the White Zetsu clones. Their speed was almost unmatched, and their blows packed a lot of power behind them. Not to mention the sheer destructive power of the golden chakra blasts.

"Force them away from the non-combatants!" Natsu cried.

None of Natsu's warnings were of any use, as it were the puppets, not the Hyugas, who were dictating the pace of the fight, forcing the Hyuga into the defensive. The number of Hyuga defenders started to whittle down, until only Natsu and a couple others remained, with the terrified non-combatants watching with fear-filled eyes.

"Hizashi-san, we need your help!" Natsu cried, before one of the puppets tossed her into the ground with a powerful punch to the jaw. "H-help... !"

Natsu watched helplessly as one of the puppets prepared a golden chakra orb to finish her off. Then, her eyes caught a blur crossing her field of vision, and the golden orb quickly dissipated. And much to her confusion, the puppet fell down to pieces, as if somebody cut it down multiple times.

"What...?" Natsu asked. She then turned around when her Byakugan caught the second puppet, a golden chakra sword in its

hand, leaping at her, ready to cut her down. However, the puppet was then caught by a giant, ghostly skeletal hand, and was held firmly in its grip.

The Hyuga saw the hand was connected to an equally ghostly ribcage. And inside said ribcage, was no other than Itachi Uchiha.

"One of my team's sensors detected a large group incoming, and I decided to come here to help just in case you run into trouble," Itachi replied, as the giant ghostly hand squeezed the puppet, crunching it into an useless and unrecognizable form, before his strange jutsu disappeared. "Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes," Natsu said, as she got back on her feet. "Thanks a lot for your help. Not only you saved my life, but those of my clansmen as well."

Itachi took a look at the dead Hyuga that littered the streets. "Sadly, not all of them. And unfortunately, there's no time to mourn their loss. We need to take this group to the shelters. Um..."

"Natsu. Natsu Hyuga," the young woman said, making a slight bow, while smiling a little.

"Itachi Uchiha," he replied. "Now, let me help you escort this group to safety."

"Yes, let's," Natsu agreed with a nod.

Even if it happened many years ago, the Uchiha Insurrection, and its effect on the Hyuga Clan was still in the young woman's mind. While she didn't blame the surviving members for all the lives that were lost that day, she didn't feel any sympathy for them either, and often tried her best not to associate with them. Which was all the more surprising when this Uchiha not only happened to be close, but decided to help them.

"Neji-san would say that fate has strange designs," Natsu thought, before looking at Itachi, and smiled again. "Or a very ironic sense of humor."

...

Hinata, Hanabi and Fu's fight against Toneri wasn't the only clash that was happening above the skies of Konoha. Or at least, it wouldn't be for long.

"Yeah, how about this!"

Riding on his clay dragon, Deidara laughed maniacally as he dropped his explosives to the fighters below. Some of his explosions also caught the White Zetsu clones and Toneri's puppets, but not that he cared. Those creatures were expendable in his eyes -though he did make sure no other Akatsuki member was near when he dropped his load, he knew he could get into trouble if he did that-.

That's why he avoided all the zones with Akatsuki on it, even that meant not taking active part in the jinchuriki hunt -the blond had already two successful captures and wasn't afraid of using them as a shield, nevermind that he had just as many failures, the last one being still recent-, though that doesn't mean he wasn't contributing; by killing Konoha ninja, he would weaken the village and thus make the jinchuriki capture all the easier.

So now, Deidara just forgot about the mission, Akatsuki, and everything else, and enjoyed the rare occasion of being able to display his art in all its glory over a major village. He only did that once, in Iwa, shortly before defecting as a "parting gift" so to speak, and he was quickly chased away by the Tsuchikage himself, who, like Deidara, could fly -though unlike Deidara, he could fly on his own-. Though here, nobody would be able to stop his rampage.

"Ice Release: Thousand Ice Needles of Death!"

Or at least, that was what the blond thought at first, as ice needles started to form around him, before diving at him. Maneuvering his dragon, he was able to dodge most of them, though a few nailed his clay flying mount. Not that it mattered, since the dragon wasn't really alive.

Frowning, the blond Akatsuki looked around, and saw the source of his troubles: two Konoha ninjas riding large birds that were made of ice, leaving a trail of frost behind. Their appearances ringed a bell, and after a few seconds of digging through his memories, Deidara remembered.

"Hey, I know you two!" Deidara said in realization. "You two were part of the group who tried to rescue the Kazekage's son, didn't you? Yes, I remember you. The Ice Release user. And the other one who could use genjutsu."

"So, you remember us?" Kurenai asked. "Should we be flattered?"

"I never forget the face of an enemy I don't defeat, bitch," Deidara snarled. "This is the last time you two get in my way!"

Deidara angrily shoved his hand into his clay pouch, and feed some clay to his mouth hand. Said mouth chewed the clay giving it the shape of a small bird, which Deidara threw at them, before making a hand seal. In a poof of smoke, the clay bird multiplied into dozens of them, splitting into two groups, one aiming for Haku, the other going for Kurenai.

"Now taste my art!" Deidara shouted.

Of course, neither the Ice Ninja nor the genjutsu mistress were going to let Deidara blow them to bits.

"Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Haku breathed a massive gust of freezing air, which was magnified by Kurenai's own gale of wind, quickly engulfing the incoming explosive birds, covering them in frost, and making them too heavy to fly, thus they fell to the ground below.

"Your art wasn't that impressive," Kurenai deadpanned.

"That was just a warm up! You want to see what I'm capable of? Fine, I'll skip directly towards the heavy hitters!" Deidara said, his hand mouths already working on another jutsu. Once they were finished chewing, they both spat each a blot of clay at Kurenai and Haku, while Deidara quickly made several hand seals. "Explosion Release: Explosive Clay Twin Hive Queens!"

The two shapeless blobs of clay burst into smoke, increasing their size and taking the shape of a large insect similar to a bee, with a bloated, oversized abdomen, in the likeness of an egg sack.

"I used this jutsu to put down the jinchuriki of the One Tail! Let' see how well you do against it, hn!" Deidara said, as he made a single hand seals.

Each of the Hive Queens spat multiple balls of clay at the genjutsu mistress and her student, albeit from opposing directions, so they couldn't combine their attacks again. Still, both Haku and Kurenai managed to counter this attack the same way they did before. Just like Deidara was expecting.

"Huh?" Haku looked up, noticing a large shadow flying above him, and saw that while he was preoccupied with the Hive Queen, the blond Akatsuki had dropped more of his bombs from above.

"Die!" Deidara shouted, making a hand seal.

Haku frantically maneuvered his ice bird as he tried to dodge the chain of explosions as best as his skill allowed him to. Unfortunately, an explosion hit far too close, and his frost steed was shattered into

thousands of tiny bits of ice, making the Land of Water native pummel to the ground below.

"HAKU!" Kurenai screamed, as she made her own bird dive in order to save the falling ninja.

Fortunately, her intervention wouldn't be needed, as while he fell, Haku kept calm and made another chain of hand seals as fast as his hands allowed him to.

"Ice Release: Crystal Bird!"

Using the very same shards of ice as raw matter, Haku quickly created another ice bird below him, breaking his fall just in time. Kurenai sighed in relief.

"His strategy is to divide us and then go for the kill when we are vulnerable," Kurenai told Haku. "We can't let him to dictate the pace of the fight, we need to attack!"

"Agreed," Haku said with a nod. "Any ideas?"

"I think one of us should take care of those clay insects, while the other deals with Deidara," Kurenai suggested. "Your ice is pretty good at shutting down his explosives, and my genjutsu would only work on him alone, so I think I should be the one to face him while you cover my back."

"Understood, Kurenai-sensei," Haku agreed again.

Deidara, however, wasn't impressed in the slightest, and merely laughed at Kurenai and Haku's plan.

"You think that you can stand against me and my art?" Deidara mocked, as he prepared more explosives. "Very well! If you want to become part of it, I'll be happy to oblige!"

...

Meanwhile, not far from there, another of Kurenai's students continued her fight against another aerial Akasuki both of them flying above the village of Konoha.

"Time to end this," Toneri said, as he cast one hand forward. "Silver Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

All of Toneri's Truth Seeking Balls merged into a single orb of silvery chakra, which exploded into a conical tornado that quickly sucked all the flying Kunoichi in. Hinata and Hanabi, being familiar with the jutsu, thought that they could counter or escape it, but they soon found out that its potency was far greater than what they could produce.

"Pull yourselves towards me!" Fu shouted, extending her arms at each sister. "We need to stay together!"

Hinata and Hanabi nodded, and used her kinetic powers, the two Hyuga sisters pulled themselves towards Fu's position, the mint haired girl's hands quickly gripping their own with great strength, bringing them closer.

"Now, let's move towards the eye of the hurricane!" Hinata told them.

Joining their forces, the three of them were able to resist the tornado until it ceased.

"Are you okay?" Fu asked.

"I think so," Hinata breathed.

"I've been better," Hanabi complained.

That moment, a Truth Seeking Ball slowly descended upon them, taking place in an intermediate space between the three kunoichi, much to their confusion.

"Uh guys? Is this thing from any of you?" Fu asked.

The Truth Seeking Ball started to glow with an emerald light, and all three instantly knew the answer, much to their shock. They tried to break apart and fly away in opposite directions, but the orb exploded before they could, and all four of them were engulfed with the explosion. Hinata and Hanabi had their own Truth Seeking Balls to absorb part of the blast, but Fu wasn't so lucky. Besides damaging her whole body, it turned her wings into dust, and thus, the green haired jinchuriki pummeled to the ground, landing with a loud thud.

"FU!" Hinata screamed, as she dived towards her. Unfortunately, she was forced to alter her course in order to dodge a barrage of green chakra blasts.

"Not so fast, my princess," Toneri interjected with a confident smirk. "Don't concern yourself with the jinchuriki, not when you have me to deal with."

Through her Tensiegan, Hinata saw that Fu was well enough to stand back on her feet, much to her relief. But her relief was short lived as she saw a threesome of puppets dogpiling her. Normally, the Taki kunoichi would get them out of her back as if they were nothing, but the explosion made a number on her body, and nothing but a fraction of her usual energy remained.

"Fu..." she whispered, greeting her teeth.

"Now, you'll have the honor to be the first one to witness the true extent of my power," Toneri said, his grin widening, as he cast his hand forward, his four Truth Seeking Balls merging into a single orb of golden chakra.

Upon seeing that, Hanabi paled. "Nee-chan! I've seen that jutsu before! It has enough power to level the entire village!"

"If that's the case, then use Truth Seeking Balls as protection won't be enough. I can't let the village to be damaged any further! I need to counter that jutsu with one of my own!" Hinata thought, as she also

cast one hand forward, her two Truth Seeking Balls merging into a purple colored orb of chakra.

"I see you remember it well, girl," Toneri nodded, pleased. "But even if what you said is true, I'm confident in my bride's strength to survive it. Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The energy contained in the golden orb exploded in the form of a huge beam of golden chakra, fired directly at Hinata. That moment, Hinata her move.

"Amethyst Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Hinata's own orb exploded into a storm of purple colored lightning bolts. Both attacks clashed, but Toneri's jutsu packed more power than Hinata's, and it easily pushed it backwards.

"And admirable effort, my love, but useless!" Toneri said with almost sadistic glee.

"Leave my sister alone!" Hanabi screamed, as she flew towards them, holding a teal orb of chakra between her hands, before motioning it forward. "Turquoise Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Hanabi's orb exploded in the form of a stream of bluish-green flames, which joined Hinata's lightning bolts against Toneri's beam of light. Even if it slowed it down considerably, it failed to stop it completely.

"Ugh..." Hanabi groaned, as she tried to pour as much chakra as possible into her attack. "Hinata! He's... too strong!"

"D-Don't give up, Hanabi-chan!" Hinata encouraged her little sister. "We must... win... at all costs!"

"You can't," Toneri simply said, as he floated forward, pushing his beam of light further on them. "You and I are bound to be together, my princess. You can't win, not because you're fighting against a

strong enemy, but because you're fighting against fate itself. Your arrival and awakening of the Tensiegan was foretold ages ago, my princess, as so was our union. Don't you see that it's futile?"

"Fate, you say?" Hinata asked, and, even in her current situation, found herself chuckling. "You aren't the only one to use that word to put me down. All my life... I was told that things are the way they are because of fate. My apparent weakness. How I wouldn't amount to anything. How my clan would forever remain divided. And guess what? I proved them wrong. I proved all of them wrong! And I shall prove you wrong too!"

"Resolve without power is meaningless," Toneri countered, as he pushed his attack even further.

"Resolve is everything! Resolve, willpower and never giving up! Plenty of people have power, either born with it or acquiring it on their own! Everything I achieved, everything I am... I didn't manage to do it by just giving up and accepting it as 'fate'!" Hinata replied, her voice booming louder. Even Hanabi couldn't help but feel in awe. "Hanabi-chan, we can't let this man win! Fight with everything you have!"

Hanabi nodded, and smirked, her confidence renewed. "You got it!"

The two Hyuga sisters let out a shout, as they started to draw every little bit of power remaining in their body, trying to make their attack as strong as possible. And much to their joy and Toneri's shock, they started to push back.

"What? How can they...?" Toneri asked in surprise. Through his Tensiegan, he could see that the chakra of Hinata and Hanabi, which threatened to dim any moment, shone with renewed light, so bright it was like looking directly into the sun. "Can this be...?"

Hinata and Hanabi's basic Chakra Cloak also started to glow with more intensity, until it took the shape of a cloak of flames, not

different from Toneri's own Chakra Cloak. Soon, their combined power started to push Toneri's attack even faster.

"They unlocked the next level of the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak!?" Toneri asked in shock. *"This was unexpected..."*

Toneri put even more chakra into his attack, forcing the two attacks into a stalemate, pushing each other a little back and forth, but for the most part, not moving at all. Eventually, all the gathered energy reached a critical point, and was released in the form of a massive, blazing white explosion.

"N-Nee-chan..." Hanabi said, just as her Chakra Cloak suddenly petered out, and faded into unconsciousness.

"Hanabi-chan!" Hinata screamed, as he caught her little sister before she could fall, and, summoning more Truth Seeking Balls -much to her surprise, she could summon up to four now- she morphed them into a sphere encasing both she and her sister, just in time before the explosion.

Hinata then lowered the hollow sphere to ground level, as it slowly dissolved back into the four Truth Seeking Orbs that composed it. She gently placed Hanabi's body on the ground. Even if Hanabi's chakra was completely drained, there was nothing a good night of sleep followed by a copious meal wouldn't fix.

"Rest for the time being, Hanabi-chan," Hinata cooed. "You've done enough already."

"Hey!"

Hinata turned around, and saw Fu walking towards her, limping a bit. She was carrying the arm of a puppet in one of her hands.

"Fu-san! I'm so glad to see that you're okay!" Hinata said with a smile.

"Hehe, yeah! You need something more than a bunch of stupid marionettes to beat yours truly," Fu boasted, though Hinata could see that her body hurt far more than she let her on. "Man, I could use some healing. Do you mind- EEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAACK!"

"Fu!"

Fu was suddenly yanked by an unseen force. Following her direction, Hinata saw Toneri with his hand outstretched, its fingers closing around Fu's neck once she was close enough.

"Now, let's make sure you don't fly away," Toneri said, as one of his Truth Seeking Balls moved away from him, started to glow and expanded, taking the shape of a golden cage with its door open. Toneri threw Fu inside, and the door closed on its own with a loud clang. "That should be enough. Now, Hinata-hime, I'd hate to force you into a cage like a mere animal, but I will if you don't-"

"Hey, dumbass!"

Toneri didn't turn around, as his Tenseigan already saw the newcomer from a distance. Said newcomer must have known this, hence why he didn't bother with a sneak attack.

"... I'm the only one allowed to call Hinata 'princess', you got that?" Naruto snarled in fury.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata squeed in joy.

"You've done a good job here, Hime. Let me finish this," Naruto praised his girlfriend. Hinata tried to protest, but Naruto spoke before she could. "Don't worry, I'll be fine. Trust me, this guy doesn't know what's coming. Come on, go and find your sister a safe pnce to rest. I'll take care of both Fu and this creep."

Reluctantly, Hinata nodded, and did as she was told. Toneri felt the need to stop her, but he knew he couldn't do that unless he got rid of

Naruto first. Oh well, Hinata could wait. After all, the main obstacle to his princess' affections was standing in front of him.

"Ah, Naruto Uzumaki. While I never welcome your presence, in this case I will," Toneri said, turning around, and waving at the captive Fu with one hand. "As you can see, I already captured one of the jinchuriki. So polite of you to both saving me the effort of having to track you and giving me the pleasure of ending you myself."

"Yeah, like hell that's gonna happen," Naruto seethed, making a single clone. While Naruto powered up a Rasengan, said clone started to pour wind chakra into it.

"Ah, that jutsu of yours. I remember it," Toneri said, as his three remaining Truth Seeking Balls floated in front of him. "Back in our earlier clash, I didn't have the means to counter it, but things have changed now."

"Oh, you don't have the means to counter it, you just haven't realized it," Naruto said, as he raised the shuriken of wind chakra above his head, the clone disappearing once his work was done. "Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto threw the wind shuriken forward, which flew towards Toneri, making a loud, whirring sound in its wake.

"Like I said, useless," Toneri boredly said, as he merged two of his three black orbs into a large shield that covered him completely, and smirked. *"I know what you're planing. You want me to focus my attention on this attack while you ambush me from another side. However, you are the one who's going to be ambushed,"* The Otsutsuki thought as he discreetly moved his remaining orb to his back.

The Rasenshuriken hit the barrier, and Toneri expected the real attack to happen at any moment. But said attack never came.

CRACK!

"What...?"

And much to his shock, the barrier started to break.

"What? No!" Toneri cried, as seeing how the crack expanded more and more. "No, not again! This can't be possible! The Truth Seeking Balls shouldn't be able to be pierced by mere ninjutsu! What kind of trickery is this!?"

"Katsuyu-san was right," Fukasaku said, still clung to Naruto's back. "Senjutsu is key to beat those things!"

The barrier was shattered completely, just as the Rasenshuriken exploded in a dome of chakra and razor-wind currents. Toneri tried to fly away, but he was caught in the explosion. Would Toneri get caught inside that explosion, he would have been done for. Even then, if the explosion only hit him when it expanded, it made a number on him. The powerful wind shredded his clothes and left several deep cuts in his body, while violently hurling him into the sky.

Toneri let out a scream before he disappeared into the vast blue yonder.

To confirm Naruto's victory over Toneri, the golden cage holding Fu quickly vanished, dropping the harm jinchuriki to the floor.

"Ouch!"

"Fu!" Naruto said, rushing towards her. "Are you alright?"

"I'll survive," the green haired girl said, making a weak smile. "Though I don't think I can keep fighting if I don't see a medic first."

"Hinata could patch you up in an instant," Naruto confidently said, as he helped his fellow jinchuriki back on her feet. "Come on, let's find her, she shouldn't be too far away."

"Let's hope," Fu said, as she rested her body on Naruto's to help herself walk. "Good job with that weirdo. Too bad you didn't finish

him for good."

"Eh, don't worry, I'll get him next time," Naruto said with a confident grin.

"However, he raised a valid point," Fu replied. "Truth Seeking Balls nullify all ninjutsu. How were you able to bypass that?"

"Senjutsu," was Naruto's answer. Fukasaku nodded. "Hagane was also able to break his defense when they fought during the mission to rescue Roshi. He wasn't sure how he did it, but he thought it had to be the nature energy his Bloodline Limit allows him to gather freely. And turns out he was actually right. Heh, that kid might not have Kaida's raw power, but he's far smarter than she and I together."

Fu nodded, and smiled as well. "That's good to know. Besides, once we finish our Sage training, we won't have to rely on you the next time that guy... uhhh, Naruto?" Fu asked, noticing the blond had turned pale and his eyes widened. "Are you okay?"

"I... I don't know..." Naruto said. "I feel something... terribly wrong..."

The two of them a massive burst of smoke many streets away. But it was what came out of the smoke what left him speechless.

...

As the same time as Hinata, Hanabi and Fu fought against Toneri, Kakashi's Animal Squad plus Rin were fighting against Obito Uchiha. Or better said, Kakashi and Obito fought while Rin healed Kiba and Tamaki.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Obito breathed a massive fireball aimed at Kakashi, lined in a way with Rin, Tamaki and Kiba, so Kakashi wouldn't be able to dodge

unless he wanted his students to die -Obito was confident Rin could survive that blast-.

Kakashi got the hint, and his hands blurred through hand seals before slamming his palm into the ground.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

The Copy Ninja erected a rock barrier between himself and Obito. The fireball crashed against the wall, creating an explosion that cracked the barrier and blew a few chunks of it, but overall was unable to take it down. Kakashi's Sharingan caught some flicker of movement coming from the resulting cloud of ash and dust, and his hand crackled with electricity.

"Lightning Blade!"

Kakashi's electrified hand thrust towards the cloud of smoke coming from the right side, just in time as a surprised Obito emerged from it. Kakashi's attack pierced the Uchiha's heart. But the Uchiha merely smirked before disappearing in a poof of smoke, revealing itself to be a clone.

"A clone? Dammit... !" Kakashi cursed under his breath as he turned around.

"Too late!" Obito shouted, as he gleefully thrust his own katana into Kakashi's body.

The silver haired Jonin grabbed the blade of the katana with his gloved hand in order to stop it. Blood started to seep from his palm as a wave of pain coursed through his hand, but it was a small sacrifice to pay in order to avoid a worse injury. Kakashi generated electricity from said hand, shocking Obito, and forcing him to drop the sword, which his opponent grabbed with his other hand.

"Not bad, Kakashi," Obito admitted, as he started to make hand seals. "But can you stand before THIS? Wood Release: Great Spear

Tree!"

The ground started to shake as wooden roots emerged from the ground, and lunged at Kakashi tried to impale him with their sharp and pointy ends. Kakashi, however, wasn't intimidated, and gripping the stolen katana in one hand, and channeling lightning chakra into the other, he started to move as fast as possible, cutting down the razor roots as soon as they emerged, while moving towards Obito.

"You killed sensei, Obito," Kakashi coldly said, as he continued mowing down the growing roots. "Him and Kushina-san. Why? How could you become so rotten as to cause the death of a man that was like the father you never had, among countless others!?"

"Don't get all sentimental on me, Kakashi. Sensei was a powerful ninja, but a failure of a teacher and protector," Obito seethed, as he summoned a Fuuma Shuriken from a sealing scroll. "He lost not one but two students! I don't mind that he wasn't there to help me, but I can't forgive him for letting Rin be captured to begin with!"

"Don't blame sensei for other people's failures!" Kakashi shouted, as he closed the gap with his former friend.

"And he proved me true once again when he failed to protect his wife and son from me!" Obito said, tossing the shuriken at Kakashi, before his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Flaming Shadow Shuriken Jutsu!"

The Fuuma Shuriken was covered in a coat of flames, before a dozen or so other identical flaming starts appeared before the original, all flying at Kakashi. The silver haired ninja tossed the katana away, as he weaved seals as fast as his hands allowed him.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Kakashi expelled a massive stream of water from his mouth -which weirdly enough, bypassed his mask without breaking it- stopping the

shuriken and putting the fire out. Or at least, most of them, as some others flew past him, and headed towards Kiba, Tamaki and Rin.

"Guys, watch out!" Kakashi warned.

But when turned around, he saw that his students and other teammate were not there anymore, much to his relief, and a little confusion.

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

The ground started to shake again, and from under Obito's feet, a serpentine dragon made of wood emerged, its jaws wide open trying to bite the Akatsuki. Obito jumped backwards, just as he turned around, and grabbed Tamaki by the wrists before the cat kunoichi could slash him with his claw.

"You can't catch me off guard, you should know that by now," Obito told the brown haired girl.

Tamaki, however, smirked. "Think so?"

Obito then realized that Tamaki was holding something in one of her hands, before opening it and letting it fall. He knew what it was but it was too late do anything about it. The moment the flash grenades touched the ground, they exploded, engulfing the entire area in a bright white light.

"AAAAAAHHHH! MY EYES!" Obito screamed, as he pushed Tamaki away.

"Kiba, now!" Tamaki called.

Both Kiba and Tamaki kept their eyes closed and relied exclusively on their enhanced sense of smell in order to track the Akatsuki. The Inuzuka clan heir moved first, as he ran towards Obito, his feet burning with blue light of chakra.

"Crescent Moon Kick!"

Upon reaching close combat range, Kiba made an impressive backflip, hitting Obito's chin with his feet, creating an arc of chakra, and sending the Akatsuki flying upwards.

"Your turn, Tamaki!" Kiba said, as he put his hands together.

Tamaki jumped into Kiba's hands, and the werewolf gave the cat kunoichi a mighty heave upwards, with such force, Tamaki easily surpassed Obito's altitude. Once she was high enough, she prepared her move.

"Here I come!" Tamaki said, as her whole body started to flare blue with chakra. "Feline Aerial Bomber!"

As she fell towards Obito, Tamaki smashed her posterior into Obito's face, making a cracking noise as the hit shattered forehead protector. Obito fell to the ground, while Tamaki landed gracefully on all fours.

"Good job, guys!" Rin praised the duo.

"Thanks," Kiba said, giving her a friendly smirk -which in his current form was more of a terrifying snarl-, before turning at Obito. "Not so thought without your Kamui, are you?"

Despite the brutal combo he was victim off, Hashirama's regeneration soon kicked in, and Obito's injuries started to heal, allowing the former Konoha ninja to stand back on his feet. He shot his enemies a look of hatred. Rin gasped a little when he saw the other side of his face.

"You were right, Kakashi-sensei," Tamaki said. "He had a Byakugan all along."

"No wonder there was no way we could catch him off guard," Kiba agreed. "Good thing he didn't notice the flash grenades, and the fact that we don't need our eyes to orient ourselves."

"Congratulations, you managed to land a few good hits," Obito said, as he wiped some blood from his mouth, and smeared it on his palm. He started to make five hand seals that all of them recognized, but only Rin could see their magnitude. "Let's see if your little tricks can stand against THIS!"

Rin panicked, and rushed forward. "Quickly, stop him before-"

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Obito slammed his palm against the ground, producing a massive burst of smoke, followed by an incredibly strong wind, forcing the Konoha ninjas to fall back a few meters. The smoke took no time to dispel, revealing what Obito had summoned. Kakashi, Tamaki and Kiba looked in horror, while Rin had a look of worry in her face. A giant fox with maroon fur and nine tails.

"Sixteen years ago, I released the Nine Tails in order to destroy Konoha. Today, he will finish the job!" Obito shouted, while standing on top of the Nine Tails' head. "Now, kill them!"

The Nine Tails' Sharingan eyes focused on the Konoha ninjas below, and raised one of its massive paws in order to smash them into pulp...

Author's Note: Yep, given that Obito appeared the previous chapter, you should have expected the other Nine Tails being summoned to cause even more destruction. What will the good guys do against this new threat? Will they attempt to seal it inside Naruto, merging both halves? Though if they do that, Naruto won't be able to help Jiraiya against Pain...

Speaking of Naruto, after much buildup, he finally put Toneri in his place (even if he will live to fight another day), thanks to Hagane's discovery of Senjutsu chakra bypassing the Truth Seeking balls. I hope you found it cathartic. That makes two Akatsuki that have been defeated and driven away from the

battle so far. Still, the worse hasn't come to pass, not just because of the aforementioned Nine Tails, but because Deidara has stepped to fill their spot with his unusual brand of art. Still, just like how Kisame's fight left Gai unable to fight anymore, Hinata, Hanabi and Fu won't be able to contribute to the battle any further. Still, the girls earned some rest.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Now that one of the three "important" fights have been solved, the next chapter will focus on the other two: Pain and Konan, and Obito and The Nine Tails.

So, what do you think about the chapter, and the arc so far? Share your thoughts with me in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part IV

Author's Note: So here we are with another chapter of the Akatsuki invasion. D0n't worry, I can assure you that we already passed the middle point of this arc, and it will build up towards its end from now on. How will it end, thought? That's the question. Enjoy:

Chapter 86:

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part IV

or

The Wrath of God

"Shinra Tensei!"

Once again, Jiraiya was blown away by Pain's signature jutsu in his futile attempt at getting close to him. He managed to land on his feet, sliding across the ground, until he finally came to a stop. Jiraiya glared at his stoic rival, and gritted his teeth in anger.

"Dammit! Ninjutsu won't work since that other body will absorb it," Jiraiya thought, as his eyes drifted towards the fat Pain for a moment. *"And whenever I try to get close, he blows me away! What the hell can I do?"*

"Come on, Jiraiya-chan! We have to keep trying!" Shima encouraged, though even the old toad was started to become frustrated and a little tad desperate.

"We can't just try the same thing over and over again," Jiraiya replied. "We must think something new!"

"I believe it's my turn to attack, then," Pain stated, and the body that looked like a puppet stepped forward. His right arm opened up, revealing a cannon, which started to gather chakra, before firing a barrage of beams at Jiraiya.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Jiraiya cursed, as he tried to run away from the rain of deadly beams of blue light. And on top of that, the Hokage sensed two more Pain bodies trying to ambush him while he fled. Fortunately, he had a defensive measure against such attack. His hands blurred through hand seals. "Ma, stay close! Neelde Jizo!"

Jiraiya's hair doubled in size and volume, while it hardened into a spiky form, and quickly wrapped around the Toad Sage, forming a protective shell around him covered in sharp spikes. One of the Pain bodies managed to break in time, but the other couldn't, and impaled itself against the hair-spikes.

"And that's not all!" Jiraiya shouted, while making a single hand seal. "Hair Needle Barrage!"

Jiraiya fired a wave of his sharp, hardened hairs in every direction, causing all the Pain bodies around him to scatter, and killing the one who was unable to stop his attack, the one with long, loose hair. The other Pain who did stop in time took its mangled body, and ran away.

" *Wait a minute... those two...* " Jiraiya thought, upon focusing on their respective faces for a couple seconds.

"Jiraiya-chan, focus!" Shima's high pitched shrill didn't allow him to ponder on his thoughts.

And it was a good thing he wasn't, since the main Pain body was heading right straight for him. Once again, he made the same hand seal, and fired another barrage of hardened hair strands at the body of his former pupil.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Once again, Pain's gravity blast was powerful enough to repel Jiraiya's attack, and continued his charge forward. A black rod emerged from under his sleeve, and grabbed it as if it was a sword. Jiraiya, however, wasn't going to let him get that close.

"Ma, together! Fire Release: Flame Toad Bullet!"

Ma expelled from her mouth a stream of oil, which Jiraiya ignited with his fire jutsu, resulting in a wide, large wave of fire that threatened to reduce the Akatsuki leader to ashes. While Jiraiya expected Pain to repel this attack as well -and hopefully find an opening to strike him for good-, Pain instead did something he didn't expect: the Akatsuki stabbed the rod in the ground in order to break his momentum, while also using it as a springboard to jump aside in order to dodge the incoming fire.

"Jiraiya-chan, did you see that?" Ma asked.

"Yeah, I noticed," Jiraiya replied. "He dodged it instead of using that gravity attack. That means that he can't use it non-stop. There must be an interval of a few seconds before he can use that attack again."

"Then all we need to do is strike him during that window of opportunity, and he will go down!" an excited Ma cheered.

A cacophony of whistles warned the two Sages of a barrage of missiles coming at them. However, they were intercepted by a couple of kunai with explosive tags attached to them, making them to detonate prematurely. As that happened, Anko landed besides Jiraiya.

"Nice save, Anko," Jiraiya thanked her.

"Don't sweat it," the snake mistress replied, a bit out of breath. "Man, these guys are tough!"

"They're Rinnegan bearers. We can't expect anything less," Jiraiya said.

Suddenly, both Jiraiya and Anko were alerted by a huge explosion of smoke that happened at the other side of the village. Jiraiya sensed a massive chakra signature appearing on that same spot, whose chakra signature shouldn't exist, since it only existed within his godson.

"H-Hokage-sama..." Anko stutered in shock, upon seeing what emerged from the cloud of smoke.

"So, those bastards brought the Nine Tails as reinforcements," the Sannin said, gritting his teeth.

That very moment, a couple of Katsuyu clones appeared, and jumped onto Jiraiya and Anko's free shoulder. The Snake Mistress visibly flinched.

"Yikes! What the...?"

"Don't be afraid," the slug said. "I'm a clone of Katsuyu, and I'm here on Tsunade-sama's behalf."

"Every help is welcomed, Katsuyu-san," Jiraiya said with a nod. "How's Tsunade-hime?"

"She also entered Sage Mode and is on her way to face the Nine Tails," the slug explained. "I believe she's currently the best suited to deal with a threat of such magnitude."

"She won't be able to do it alone, we need to assist her as soon as possible!" Jiraiya stated.

"Don't even think about leaving this fight, sensei," Pain coldly stated, as he and the other bodies that shared his being closed onto him. "You have nobody but yourself to blame for what's going to happen. I thought that Takigakure would be seen as a warning of what means to oppose us, but alas, you decide to ignore it. By the end of the day, Konoha won't exist anymore."

Jiraiya turned around, and cast Pain a determined look.

"You're so sure of yourself, don't you? Let me tell you something, Nagato. The Nine Tails already attacked Konoha once, and we managed to survive," Jiraiya defiantly said. "This time it won't be different."

"If you think so," Pain said, his tone remaining the same. "Then let you and your ninjas' actions prove me wrong, rather than words."

"It will be my pleasure!"

...

At that moment, far away from Jiraiya and Pain, the Nine Tails laid waste to the already wrecked ninja village, while Kakashi's Animal Squad, Rin, and a few nearby ninjas tried to hold the gigantic fox, without much success.

"Come on, Nine Tails, crush them! Crush them all!" Obito ordered his enslaved beast, as he stood on top of its head.

The Nine Tails let out a deafening roar, before delivering a claw swipe forward. Fortunately, the Konoha ninjas were able to jump back and dodge it. Even then, it packed so much force, it created a shockwave that not only hurled them backwards, but it wrecked nearby buildings as well.

"Shit! How the hell are going to fight that thing!?" Kiba complained.

"To think that Sasuke-kun's team fought against this as well with almost no backup..." Tamaki said, before she realized something. "Rin, you were with Sasuke-kun that other time! What did you do to defeat this thing?"

"We didn't defeat it!" Rin replied, clearly panicked. "And even then, we had the help of a jinchuriki with perfect control of her Tailed Beast! We have no such thing here!"

"For the time being, we'll have to work with what we have," Kakashi calmly said, as his Sharingan eyed Obito, before he looked at his other former teammate. "We do know Wood Release can subdue the Tailed Beasts. Rin, you're our only hope now."

"Alright, but I don't know if I'm powerful enough to subdue it on my own," Rin said unsure, before she also looked at Obito. She then shook her head, pushing away all her doubts, and adopting a determined expression. "No, I can't afford to hesitate! I will stop that beast, you can count on me! I won't let Obito harm anybody else!"

"Very well then. Kiba, Tamaki, cover her and keep her safe. I'll take down Obito," Kakashi stated. "Given that it was him who summoned the Nine Tails, the summoning will be undone if the summoner is neutralized."

"Okay, leave Rin in our hands," Kiba said, before smirking. "Or paws."

"We won't fail you, sensei," Tamaki added.

"I know you won't," Kakashi said, smiling under his mask. "Now go!"

The three of them nodded, and contrary to what their self-preservation instincts screamed, ran towards the rampaging giant fox, though they stopped at a cautionary distance. Rin stared at the best, and sighed.

"This would be easier if I had time to complete my Sage training..." the medic-nin lamented, before making a series of hand seals. "But wallowing in regret won't help anybody. I'll have to do my best. Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The ground started to shake, and a multitude of trees started to emerge under the nine Tails and around it, the closest ones wrapping their branches around his legs, body and neck, immobilizing it completely. The Nine Tails tried to break free, letting out another thunderous roar, but was unable to.

"Good job, Rin! You did it!" Kiba praised.

Rin, however, fell to one knee, her hands still locked in a seal. She was panted heavily, and beads of sweat ran through her face.

"That... was more exhausting than... I thought," the medic-nin said between pants. "I had to expend more than half my chakra on that jutsu alone, and I don't even know how long will it last."

"It's okay, Rin. You did far more than any of us could," Tamaki reassured, patting the other brown haired girl in the back, before looking back at the beast. "Now it's all on Kakashi-sensei."

And indeed, just as Tamaki said those words, Kakashi climbed through the newly formed trees at lightning speed, until he finally reached the Nine Tails' head. His hand crackled with electricity, as he prepared his signature ability to end the life of whom was once his comrade and best friend.

"Lightning Blade!"

Obito, however, sidestepped while grabbing the wrist of the hand that was channeling the jutsu, and used Kakashi's own momentum against him by hurling him away. Kakashi, however, managed to land on his feet on one of the trees around the Kyubi, and shot himself again towards Obito. Obito repeated the same maneuver as before, but didn't realize that Kakashi's momentum was much greater, and even if the Copy Ninja failed to pierce the Akatsuki with his attack, he managed to push him out of the Nine Tails' head.

"Don't think that you can escape from our duel just because you summoned that monster," Kakashi said in an icy cold tone.

"You think I need to escape from you?" Obito asked, sounding indignant, while kicking Kakashi away from him. "Ha! I welcome this chance of getting my eye back!"

"I thought you say that you didn't regret giving it to me?" Kakashi mockingly asked, as he made several hand seals. "Wind Release: Vacuum Blades!"

Kakashi exhaled several blades of wind through his mouth. Obito's Sharingan quickly analyzed their trajectory, and allowed the Uchiha to nimbly dodge them.

"Given how much of an annoyance you're turning out to be, I changed my mind," Obito angrily replied.

"It's not polite to ask for a gift you gave yourself freely," Kakashi replied, as he landed on his feet, before he made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!" A clone popped besides Kakashi, and the two of them started to make hand seals as well. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu! Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Kakashi exhaled a fireball at Obito, while his clone blew a powerful gust of wind from his mouth. The two attacks merged into a massive firestorm that quickly engulfed Obito. After a few seconds the massive fire quickly receded, revealing nothing but a hole underground. The copy ninja immediately knew what this meant.

"I need to stop him before he can attack!" Kakashi said, as his hands quickly flew through hand seals. "Lightning Release: Breaking Thunderbolt!"

Kakashi closed his hand into a fist, which started to crackle with electricity. He then slammed said fist down, sinking it into the ground, releasing lightning bolts everywhere, which shattered the ground as they traveled. It produced the desired effect when Obito was forced to appear in the surface before he had intended. Kakashi smirked under his mask, and went for the kill.

"Lightning Blade!"

Obito barely had time to react before Kakashi's electrified palm pierced his whole torso, impaling his heart. Obito wheezed, as his

eyes grew wide while his irises shrunk. Kakashi let out a sigh of both relief and sorrow as the electricity on his hand died out. He shoot Obito a look full of pity and regret.

"Obito... I'm sorry this had to end this way..." Kakashi said.

Obito didn't say anything, just stood there, immobile, with his eyes threatening to jump out of their sockets, as he clung to his last bits of life. However, Kakashi realized that something was wrong. He didn't hear the Nine Tails vanishing. What was going on?

"Kakashi, watch out!" he suddenly heard Rin shout. "That's not the real Obito!"

Obito's eyes turned back to normal, and smirked. "You will be sorry, Kakashi," Obito said, as he grabbed Kakashi's arms, stopping the silver haired Jonin from pulling it out of the Uchiha's body, leaving him trapped. 'Obito' then lost all color, as his clothes and skin started to turn in what appeared to be tree bark.

"A wood clone?" Kakashi said, realizing of the mistake too late. "Don't tell me he wanted to...?"

"He wants to liberate the Nine Tails!" Rin shouted again.

And indeed, what he presumed was the real Obito appeared near the trapped Nine Tails. He then threw several kunai with explosive tags attached to them at the trees that kept it trapped. Kiba and Tamaki dashed at the Uchiha, but he was able to detonate all the explosives before they could get close, destroying some of the trees. Even if the giant fox wasn't completely free, he was able to break the rest of his wooden bindings on his own.

"What was what sensei used to say, Kakashi?" Obito asked in a mocking tone. "To look underneath the underneath? That's a lesson few ninjas take seriously nowadays. Sasuke Uchiha and his teammates made the same mistake you just did."

"Rin, can you summon more trees?" Kakashi asked, trying to sound confident, but desperation was palpable in his voice.

"I'm afraid not," Rin replied, shaking her head, and panting a little. "I poured more than half my chakra into that jutsu. I may have the First Hokage's DNA spliced into mine, but I'm not him. I'll need some time until I can regenerate my chakra."

"It's okay, Rin, you did what you could," Kakashi thanked his teammate, before his eyes focused again on Obito and his enslaved beast. "Then we'll need to buy so that time until then!"

"Like hell I'm going to let you!" Obito shouted. "Nine Tails, time for a Tailed Beast Ball! Wipe them from the face of this world!"

The Nine Tails opened its jaws, and blue and red chakra particles started to gather, forming a dark purple energy orb that grew in size each second. Neither Kakashi nor his students had ever seen a Tailed Beast Ball in action, but they knew that its destructive power was enough to level an entire village. Even a low powered one could ravage several street blocks.

"We need to stop that thing from firing!" Tamaki urged.

"I'll use Kamui to send it to another dimension!" Kakashi said, as he made a hand seal, while focusing his Mangekyo Sharingan on the forming energy ball.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Obito asked, laughing.

"Remember that you send one of your students there in order to stop me from using Kamui. And I don't think you plan to sacrifice him like that, do you, Kakashi?"

Kakashi remained frozen in place, but he was no longer preparing the Kamui. He felt as if he'd been splashed by cold water. Shino. He was so focused on Obito and ending the fight, that he had forgotten about him. And sadly, Obito was right. Even if his sacrifice could

save hundreds of lives, he couldn't send one of his students to his death so easily. He was better than that.

"So, what's going to be, Kakashi?" Obito asked, clearly relishing in the painful dilemma that he had put his former teammate in. "Well, too late to do anything now!"

The ball finished charging, and the fox was ready to fire it in his general direction. However, before he could do that, a yellow blur fell from the sky, and landing onto the Nine Tails' head, slamming his head into the ground, and forcing his jaws shut. He was forced to swallow the Tailed Beast Ball, which exploded inside his body. When he opened his jaws, it let out a massive tower of smoke.

"It seems I arrived just in time," the newcomer said.

"Tsunade-sama!" Tamaki cried, upon seeing the Sannin. "Finally, some heavy hitters!"

Kakashi was also thankful that Tsunade had arrived. He noticed that the Slug Sannin had red marking around her eyes, which were now golden rather than hazel. One of Katsuyu's mini clones was on her shoulder.

"Sage Mode," Kakashi observed. "If Tsunade-sama was strong before, I can't imagine the height of her power now."

"And she isn't the only one here!" another voice said, this one belonging to Naruto. The jinchuriki was also in Sage Mode.

"Good we could make it in time, son," Tsunade said, before she looked at Obito, and smirked. "Hey, brat, remember me? How about if I finish what I started the day of the Uchiha Insurrection?"

"Yeah, and you nearly lost your life in the fight," Obito angrily replied. "You might have Sage Mode now, but that is no match for the power of the strongest Tailed Beast!"

...

Meanwhile, in the skies above Konoha, the aerial duel between Kurenai, Haku and Deidara continued. While Haku tried to keep the two Explosive Clay Hive Queens while the genjutsu mistress focused her efforts on the blond Akatsuki.

"Die already!" Deidara screamed, as he created multiple clay bats, which quickly flew towards the raven haired woman. The bats quickly surrounded her. She tried to swat them away, without any success. Deidara then made a hand seal. "BOOM!"

A chain of explosions engulfed the genjutsu mistress and her giant ice bird. Deidara smirked, as he looked around, trying to see where Haku was.

"Alright, one bitch down, another one to go!" he cheerfully said.

However, before he could proceed, he noticed something weird. The smoke created by his explosions didn't dissipate. Far from it, it was now condensing into a cloud, almost forming into something, like it was alive. Then, the cloud split into smaller clouds, and each cloud grew in size while taking the form of Kurenai riding that giant ice bird once again.

"Your so called 'art' is useless against me," all the Kurenai said in unison, as they began to fly in circles around him.

"What the hell's going on!?" the frustrated Akatsuki asked, looking around, before he finally realized it. "Oh, I see. A fucking genjutsu."

He brought his hands together in a seal, and after a burst of chakra, the genjutsu disappeared and reality returned back to normal, revealing only one Kurenai.

"You really like to mock my art, yet your shitty illusions fail to harm me in any way!" Deidara angrily shouted.

"Genjutsu is more dangerous than most people give credit for," Kurenai calmly replied. "For it makes one to doubt what is real and what is not. From this point onwards, you won't be able to fight me without wondering if what's going on is really happening or not."

"Those are some big words right there, but big words alone will do you no good!" Deidara replied. "Besides, beating genjutsu specialist is easy! I only need to find anything out of the ordinary, and keep my chakra undisturbed! As long as I'm able to do that, you won't be able to touch me!"

"You sound rather confident for somebody who clearly had no prior experience fighting against a genjutsu specialist," Kurenai retorted. "That's it, unless we count our brief clash in the Land of the Rivers."

"I could say the same about you! Let me show you why Iwa's Explosion Corps are feared across the Elemental Nations!" Deidara shouted, as he commanded his clay dragon to attack.

Said clay dragon started to shoot explosive projectiles at the fleeing Kurenai, which she was barely allowed to dodge. As this happened, Deidara's hand mouth spat another blow of clay, which instantly grew in size and took the shape of a bird with a rather long neck, round body, and tiny wings.

"Okay, and this for-" Deidara was about to say, before he saw Kurenai turning around and flying back at him while making hand seals. "Oh no, you aren't going to catch me off guard with that again! Release!" Deidara preemptively send a burst of chakra through his body to undo whatever genjutsu was she casting before it could take hold of his mind. "Like I was saying, this is for my man Sasori! Die!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Kurenai blew a gust of wind from her mouth that not only pushed the projectile back, but it carried so much force it hurled the clay dragon backwards, almost making the Akatsuki fall to the ground.

"Shit, she was using ninjutsu instead of genjutsu!" Deidara said, gritting his teeth in anger. "Enough with your trickery! Fight me like a real ninja, you coward!"

"I'm fighting like a real ninja," Kurenai said, shrugging in an almost comical way. "Ninjas use deception and trickery to achieve victory, while samurai tend to fight upfront. But guess that your love for big flashy explosions made you forget that."

"I'm going to show you how much I love my big flashy explosions!" Deidara said, before taking a chunk of his special clay, and feed it to his actual mouth rather than the one in his mouths. After chewing it a few times, he spat the glob upwards, while making three hand seals. "Explosion Release: Harbingers of Devastation!"

The multiple globs of clay appeared alongside the original, and all of them started to grow and change its shape, resembling deformed humanoid figures with wings on their back.

"Release!" Deidara once again disturbed his own chakra just in case Kurenai tried to put him under a genjutsu. "Now go and get her!"

The winged humanoids all flew in formation towards Kurenai, moving as fast as birds of prey. The genjutsu mistress was left with no other option but to flee, and try to counterattack. So far, she knew that making them explode prematurely was a valid tactic. As she commanded the ice bird to fly away, her hands rushed through hand seals.

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Multiple rocks appeared between Kurenai and the explosive figures, before they launched themselves at the latter. However, the figures skillfully dodged the attack as they had mind of their own.

"You can't hope to outmaneuver my intelligent bombs!" Deidara boasted, as his dragon flew above Kurenai. "Now die already!"

Deidara's dragon shot another explosive missile at Kurenai. She quickly tossed a kunai with an explosive tag attached to it in order to detonate it prematurely. And while she succeeded at doing that, she was unable to stop the explosive flying figurines from closing onto her.

"Damn, this is bad!" Kurenai panicked as, seeing no other options, jumped from the ice bird before two of her assailants exploded near it, shattering it to tiny bits of ice.

"Haha, yes! Now wait until she splats against the ground!" Deidara said with a sadistic glee. However, that moment, a second giant bird made of ice swooped in, and caught the genjutsu mistress in time. "OH COME ON!"

"Thank you, Haku," Kurenai said, sighing in relief. "That was a close one."

"Don't mention it," the Ice Ninja replied.

"Did you get rid of those clay insects?" Kurenai asked.

"They gave me far more trouble than I thought, but in the end I prevailed," Haku replied, sounding a little proud. "I guess this Akatsuki also proved to be a more formidable opponent than we initially thought."

"Your guess is a correct one," Kurenai replied. "But maybe between the two of us, we can bring him down for good."

"Haha, you idiots! If you have your flying mount carry two people, it will fly much slower!" Deidara laughed. "Now go, my creations! Turn them into pieces of art!"

The remaining flying suicide bombers obeyed, and dived at the two Konoha ninjas.

"Haku, those things know how to dodge ninjutsu," Kurenai told her student. "But your elemental jutsu have a wider area of effect than

mine. Maybe you can bring them down."

"I'll try," Haku said, as he switched places with Kurenai so he could face the incoming flying figurines better. He made several hand seals as fast as he could. "Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Haku exhaled a gust of extremely cold, misty air. The clay beings noticed the attack, and they started to spread out in an attempt to avoid it. However, like Kurenai said, the area of effect was larger than average, and they ended up moving away not just from the Konoha ninjas, but from each other as well.

"What the hell are you doing, you idiots!?" Deidara screamed. But he had no time to berate his artificial creations, since the ice bird with Kurenai and Haku was now flying towards him.

"This is our chance to attack!" Kurenai said, as she and Haku started making a hand seals. An ice mirror appeared besides Haku, and the Land of Water native entered it as if it was a portal.

"You won't catch me off guard with your pathetic ambush!" Deidara replied, as he sent yet another burst of chakra to disturb his network, canceling Kurenai's jutsu before it could take root in his brain. A cold breeze warned Deidara of an attack from above, and just like he expected, a second ice mirror formed around him, with Haku emerging from it, several senbon in his right hand. "Too slow!"

Deidara, showing that explosions wasn't the only thing he was good at, gracefully sidestepped the attack, grabbed Haku by his arm and forearm, and used his own momentum to toss him away. Fortunately for Haku, Kurenai was there to repay him the favor and saved him before he could crash against the floor.

"Your pathetic skills can't measure up to my art!" Deidara boasted. "Now, it's time for you to- uh?"

Deidara stopped on his tracks when he noticed bits of frost forming around his hand. The frost started to grow and spread, freeezing his

body as it grew, slowly encasing the Iwakagure missing ninja inside a block of ice.

"What the hell? How did you... !?" Deidara shouted in anger, as he quickly lost all mobility. "Shit, this is bad! I need to get the hell out of here!"

Deidara tried to maneuver his clay dragon into flying away, but with all the ice getting in the way, he was unable to, and the artificial beast started to wildly fly in erratic patterns, before it dived towards the forest surrounding the village, and crashed there.

"Should we go after him?" Haku asked.

Kurenai nodded. "Yes. We need to kill or capture every Akatsuki member when there's a chance. Hopefully, we'll be able to take him alive for interrogation."

"Understood," Haku said with a nod. "I think he fell over there."

"By the way, nice genjutsu there," Kurenai praised. "I didn't even know you could place a genjutsu in such a small window of opportunity."

Haku's mouth curved into a smile. Turn out, when he was about to attack Deidara he pretended to go for a physical attack, when in reality he put the Akatsuki under a genjutsu. And due the nature of said genjutsu, Deidara wouldn't realize immediately that the ice was merely an illusion.

"Thank you," Haku replied. "Let's hope we can do the same with the other Akatsuki attacking the village."

...

Jiraiya jumped away just in time before being crushed by a giant panda bear, with the ponytail-sporting Pain riding atop its head. Jiraiya's hands flew through hand seals as he prepared a fire jutsu.

"Fire Release: Greater Flame Bullet!"

Jiraiya breathed a stream of oil that instantly ignited, turning into a stream of fire that engulfed the gigantic bear. He could hear something that sounded like rocks fathering together and becoming compact, before the Panda walked through the fire completely unscathed. His fur now had a rocky-like texture.

"That animal can harden his skin in order to avoid damage," Shima observed.

"In that case, we'll need to use something such defense will be useless against!" Jiraiya said, as he prepared more hand seals.

"Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!"

The Hokage slammed his palms into the ground, which quickly turned into a muddy swamp. The panda quickly started to sink. He began to trash wildly in a vain attempt to break free, but all what he achieved was sinking even faster.

"And here come the other two," Jiraiya said, as he jumped into the air just before a cluster of missiles fired by puppet Pain reduced him to ashes.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Jiraiya grunted just as an invisible force violently pulled him towards the main Pain, who had his hands stretched out. Fortunately, even if Jiraiya had no way to counter that jutsu, he had some help with him.

"Hang in there, boy!" Shima said, before opening her mouth and wrapping her long tongue towards a nearby broken concrete column. Shima's tongue was strong enough to keep Jiraiya in place and stop Pain's kinetic pull.

"And... now!" Jiraiya said.

Shima relaxed her tongue, which caused both her and Jiraiya to be jerked towards Pain once again. However, this time Jiraiya would use said momentum in his favor, and prepared to deliver a flying kick to the main Pain. The fat Pain, the one who could absorb ninjutsu, placed himself between the two of them, but was yanked away by a mass of snakes.

"Not so fast!" Anko said, as he pulled said body towards herself.

Without any nearby body to use as human shield, and his powers unavailable, Pain had no way to avoid the flying kick to his chest, which hurled him backwards, until it landed on a pile of debris.

"Yes! Finally managed to land a blow!" Jiraiya cheered, pumping a fist.

"Jiraiya-chan, look out!" Shima warned.

"I know, I sensed it too!" Jiraiya said, as he jumped away, avoiding some invisible attack.

The attacker made itself visible, revealing to be a gigantic chameleon with a snake for a tail, with the same Rinnegan eyes on both heads. The reptile then slithered away, and used its tongue as a rope to pull the giant panda out of the swamp Jiraiya had summoned earlier.

"Oh no, you won't!" Jiraiya said, as he summoned a single Shadow Clone. He started to form a Rasengan as the Clone poured fire chakra into it. The Rasengan started to grow and flare with a red-orange light. Once it was completed, it appeared as if Jiraiya was holding a small sun in his hand. "Take this! Fire Release: Spiraling Inferno!"

Jiraiya tossed the giant fireball at the two animals, Ponytail Pain still on the Panda, and the projectile hit both of them. It then blasted into a massive dome of spinning fire, a raging firestorm that could reduce anything inside to ashes. When the fire receded, a crater had formed in the zone of impact, with a single, charred to the point of being

unrecognizable body on it. There was no trace of the summoned animals, thus Jiraiya guessed that, with the death of their summoner, they all had vanished.

"Amazing! Good job, Jiraiya-chan!" Shima praised.

"Thanks, but we aren't done yet," Jiraiya replied, as he looked at Pain, who was joined by Konan, the chakra absorbing body - it seems he managed to break free from Anko, whom landed behind Jiraiya shortly after-, as well as the puppet. "We got rid of quite the nuisance, but those three bodies form a powerful combo that's both offensive and defensive. My ninjutsu won't work as long as that guy... hey, wait a second..."

"Something wrong, Hokage-sama?" Anko asked.

"That man! I know who he was!" Jiraiya said in realization. "He used to be a Kusagakure ninja! I know because I met him when I visited the village! He was a fan of my books! And that other man..." Jiraiya's eyes rested on Puppet Pain, who returned the stare with empty eyes. "He was a puppeteer missing-nin from Suna turned mercenary!"

"So... you know them?" Anko asked.

"Yes," Jiraiya confirmed. "At first I didn't remember them because of the Rinnegan eyes, the dyed hair and all the body piercings. Wait, if those two used to be normal humans, then the others..."

As Jiraiya recalled the other three bodies, his mind went into overdrive as memories poured in. A Takigakure ninja. A mercenary from the Land of Rice Fields. A priest from a destroyed village that was looking for his disciple. And finally, Yahiko himself. Yes, now it made sense. He had finally cracked the secret behind the Rinnegan.

"You aren't really here, are you, Nagato?" Jiraiya asked. "Those are reanimated bodies you're controlling remotely from a safe location. A location that has to be close to the village. Am I wrong?"

Pain remained impassible, but Konan gasped in shock.

"Bravo, sensei," Pain said, as he gave a couple of slow claps. "But figuring such thing out won't do you any good."

"You think so?" Jiraiya said with a cocky smirk, before looking at the small slug on his shoulder. "You heard that, Katsuyu-san?"

"Indeed, Hokage-sama," the Katsuyu clone stated. "Everything I know, my clones know as well. I'll make sure the information reaches every single Konoha ninja."

"There you have it. All I have to do now is to keep you busy until your real body is found by my ninja," Jiraiya said. "You already lost."

"Pain, I need to leave now and go secure the real you!" Konan hastily said, as she prepared to take off.

Pain, however, raised a hand to stop her. "No, he's bluffing. Even if he knows my secret, it's too late to do anything. Even with such knowledge, he has no idea where my real body is, and no Konoha ninja can afford to leave the village in order to search the hundreds of hectares of forest around the village, at least not until every Akatsuki has been driven off. And that's not counting the hundreds of Zetsu and Moon puppets. He's probably expecting you to leave so he can send an spy to follow you and track my real body. Besides, I need you here as well."

Konan seemed to be relieved by Pain's confident statement.

"Very well then. I shall fight at your side," Konan agreed with a nod.

That moment, Gamabunta landed behind him with a thunderous thump, and Aoda slithered by.

"You guys are done already?" Anko asked her summoned snake.

"The creatures vanished as we were fighting them," Aoda replied. "We assumed that the summoner had been dealt with."

"So we decided to give you guys a hand!" Gamabunta helpfully added.

"Yes, Konan, fight alongside the walking corpse of your dead friend," Jiraiya confidently said, as he crossed his arms. "He's going to need that help!"

...

On another side of the village, the Hyuga civilians and Moon Acolytes finally reached one of the shelters, thanks to Itachi and his ninjas protecting them from the White Zetsu clones and the Moon Puppets. There were many sighs of relief and cheers of joy when the gates to one of the underground bunkers was seen, quickly running towards their safety.

Protecting the entrance were a squad of ANBU led by Hiruzen Sarutobi himself, clad in his old and worn but still usable battle armor.

"Another group?" the former Hokage asked. "It's been a while since we saw more survivors. Good to see that there were people alive out there."

"Come on, get inside, quickly!" one of the ANBU urged. "In case there are wounded among your group, we have medical ninjas ready to attend them!"

They didn't need to be told twice. While the new group of civilians fled to their safety, the former Hokage walked towards the Uchiha.

"Itachi, how's the situation out there?" Hiruzen asked. "This group of ANBU and I have been protecting this shelter from constant attack of those creatures, but it seems the attacks have been slowing down over time."

"There are good news and bad news," Itachi said. "I got word that the Akatsuki Kisame, Deidara and Toneri have been driven away by

our forces, and that they're unlikely to rejoin for the remainder of the battle. Meanwhile, Jiraiya-sama is keeping Pain and Konan at bay with the help of some ninjas."

"Good news indeed," the Hokage agreed with a nod, before he prepared for the inevitable. "And the bad news?"

"Obito summoned the Nine Tails in the middle of the village," Itachi said in his usual calm demeanor, and watched how Sarutobi lost all color in his face.

It took the former Hokage a few moments to regain his bearings. He sighed in resignation. "Well, we knew he could be able to do this, and he would be an idiot if he didn't. Still, those are terrible news. Our shelters will be useless against a Tailed Beast's destructive power. Any word on who's dealing with them?"

"According to my crows, Kakashi Hatake and his students were engaging Obito before he summoned the beast," Itachi replied. "Rin Nohara was with them."

"The girl's Wood Release will be an invaluable tool in subduing that monster," Sarutobi stated. "Though I doubt if it will be enough."

"Tsunade-sama was also seen heading in the Nine Tails' direction," Itachi added. "Maybe with her help, the threat can be contained."

"Yeah, let's hope," Hiruzen said, before a realization dawned upon him. "Itachi, you told me about Kisame, Deidara and Toneri being defeated, and Pain, Konan and Obito remaining. What about Orochimaru?"

"Nobody has seen him yet, Hokage-sama," Itachi replied. "At this stage of the battle, he should have made an appearance already. Of all of us, you're the best who knows how Orochimaru's mind works. What do you think he's planning?"

Hiruzen took a pensive stance. That was indeed a good question. "I don't know my former apprentice's mind as much as I would love to, but I agree that Orochimaru should have made his move already. He didn't take long to show up when he invaded the village shortly after the Chunin Exams."

"It is possible that Orochimaru may take advantage of the ensuing chaos to release that minion of his from T & I?" Itachi asked. "You know, the clone of one of Jiraiya-sama's children."

"It's a possibility, yes," Hiruzen said.

"Alright, then that's where I need to go," Itachi said. "If Orochimaru plans to release his minion, I'll be waiting for him."

"Understood. Be careful, Itachi."

...

Meanwhile, back with the Nine Tails, the gigantic beast was glaring at Tsunade below him with hate filled Sharingan eyes. Even under mind control, he still could still feel anger towards the puny woman who dared to kick him in such brutal way, forcing him to swallow his Tailed Beast ball, which didn't do him any good.

She was quickly joined by Naruto, Rin and Kakashi's students. With the Sannin and her son at their side, they felt far more confident with their chances against the mighty nine tailed beast.

"Tsunade-sama, if we can keep this monster busy until Kakashi defeats Obito, then the summoning will be undone," Tamaki told Tsunade.

Tsunade shook her head. "We won't do such a thing."

Everybody minus Naruto gasped at her words.

"What?"

"But why?"

"It's the most logical course of action given the circumstances."

Tsunade merely smirked. "Given that Obito took the effort to bring the other half of the Nine Tails here, it would be incredibly rude if we just turn him back, don't you think?"

"Wait, you're suggesting..." Rin began.

"Yes. We're going to seal the fox inside Naruto!" Tsunade stated.

"Did you hear that? You're going to be whole again," Naruto told the half of the Kyubi inside him, but got no response.

It seems the Kyubi -the one outside under Obito's control- heard Tsunade, and didn't like what she said one bit, as he let out a thunderous, deafening roar, and raised its paw, before bringing it down on Tsunade. The giant paw smashed the ground into a crater when it hit, but unfortunately it missed its mark as Tsunade and the younger Konoha ninjas scattered just in time.

"Okay mom, get ready, I'm going to create an opening!" Naruto said, as he created a single Shadow Clone, followed by a Rasengan. Said clone started to pour Wind Chakra into the rotating sphere, which started to grow and take the shape of a shuriken made of wind. "Alright, take this you furball! Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto tossed the Rasenshuriken towards the giant Fox's face, making an horribly loud metallic noise as it flew. The gargantuan beast barely had time to react before the jutsu hit him square in the jaws, before it detonated, exploding into a spinning dome of razor winds. The Nine Tails cried as the unleashed jutsu pushed him back.

Once the explosion of razor winds died down, the Kyubi opened its eyes, ready to smash the annoying blond into pulp. Or he would, if it wasn't for the fact that yet another Rasenshuriken was flying towards him.

"And another one!" Naruto shouted, as his Sage Mode slowly disappeared.

The Fox, however, owing to his animal stereotype, didn't allowed to be hit by the same attack twice in quick sucession. Ignoring the pain the previous attack had caused, he quickly moved back while using two of his tails to swat the Rasenshuriken away. It was sent into the sky, where it harmlessly exploded.

"Aw shit..." Naruto lamented, unhappy that he had wasted half his nature chakra like that. He made a hand seal, and dispelled one of the three clones gathering nature energy he had left in his house's basement. Soon, he felt a rush of power as all the Senjutsu chakra invaded his body. "Let's hope this time I can make a better use of my Sage Mode."

However, even if the second attack didn't land, it did provide a needed distraction that Tsunade used to get close to the giant beast. Using the remnants of the trees Rin had created, the Slug Princess climbed one of them and used it as a springboard to jump above the Kyubi. Fortunately, he didn't saw her yet.

"Heavenly Foot of Destruction!"

As Tsunade fell foot first, she pumped as much chakra as she could to said foot, which was engulfed by blue chakra flames. The brutal Senjutsu-enhanced stomp connected, resulting in a sick crunching noise, and the surprised Tailed Beast felt as if a whole mountain was dropped on his back, pinning his body against the ground.

"Good one, mom!" Naruto cheered, pumping his fist.

Obito, while still engaged against Kakashi, didn't miss what just happened, much to his shock and disbelief.

"The hell!? No matter how powerful, no mere human should be able to harm a Tailed Beast so easily!" Obito angrily protested.

"This wouldn't be the first time you underestimate Tsunade-sama, do you?" Kakashi mockingly asked, as he traded fast punches and kicks with his former teammates. *"Tsunade-sama's famed strength was devastating before. If she has combined it with the additional strength boost provided by the Sage Mode... there's no limit to what feats of destruction she can accomplish now."*

Even being hit by such a devastating attack, the Nine Tails didn't give up. Converting his pain into rage, and rage into power, once again the giant Fox used his tails as a whip, and tried to use them to swat Tsunade away like he did with Naruto's Rasenshuriken.

"OOF!" Tsunade shouted, as the wind was blow out of her stomach when the massive tail smashed into her body. Still, the Sannin managed to get a grip on the tail. "You aren't getting rid of me so easily!"

"Hold him like that, mom!" Naruto called, another Rasenshuriken ready to throw. "Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Once again, Naruto tossed another shuriken of pure wind chakra at the giant beast. However, the Kyubi wasn't going to fall again for that. Locking his eyes onto the oncoming attack, the Nine Tails opened his jaws, and fired a small Tailed Beast Ball. The two projectiles crashed, resulting in a huge explosion, which lead to a large cloud of smoke. Though apart from getting some wind in the face, he didn't get any harm.

"Wind Release: Bounce!"

From said cloud of smoke, Naruto shoot forward like a missile, both hands cast upwards, each one holding a rather large Rasengan. The Kyubi barely had time to react before said energy spheres smashed into his face.

"Double Big Ball Rasengan!"

The Nine Tails roared in pain as the two supersized Rasengan blew up in his face, pushing him backwards, and blinding him for a moment. All his tails started to swing wildly, bringing down nearby buildings, and killing some nearby Konoha ninjas and White Zetsu clones alike. Tsunade, still clung to one of the tails, let go when it swung upwards, launching her up in an arc.

"Alright, now it's a matter of nailing the landing zone..." Tsunade said mostly to herself, as she positioned herself so the arc made her land on top of the Kyubi's head. "Perfect! Heavenly Fist of Destruction!"

Tsunade's fist burned with blue chakra as she slammed her fist into the Nine Tails' skull, with such force, it slammed his head into the ground. The Kyubi let out a yowl of pain, before his eyes rolled back into his head, and his entire body slumped. The Sannin jumped from the head, landing safely onto the ground.

"Rin, are you ready?" Tsunade asked, shaking her sore fist.

Rin was sitting on her knees, with a Naruto clone placing his hands on her back, transferring chakra into her.

"Yes, the recharge is now complete!" Rin said, standing up. "Thank you, Naruto! That ability to share your chakra is so useful!"

"I know, right?" the blond proudly replied, before chuckling.

The brown haired medic nin walked towards the allegedly unconscious Tailed Beast, and fighting off the sense of deja vu, she formed a sequence of hand seals as fast as she could.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The ground started to shake as big, large tree roots emerged around the Nine Tails, wrapped themselves around his neck, limbs and tails, immobilizing it completely. Even if it didn't appear that he would move anytime soon, one couldn't be too confident in this kind of

situation. Once the beast was tied, Rin allowed herself to sigh in relief.

"Sorry Obito, you lose this time," Rin whispered to herself, before turning at Tsunade and Naruto. "Tsunade-sama, the beast is immobilized! Commence the ritual at once!"

Tsunade nodded, and made a hand seal. "Let's not waste another second then. Eight Trigrams Divination Seal!"

A burst of smoke produced in front of Tsunade, and when it dispelled, there was an octagonal platform with a stone altar in the middle, and eight lit candles at each of its corners.

Close to them, Obito and Kakashi continued their duel. Even if Kakashi did his best to keep Obito away from the Nine Tails, Obito always managed to push him back. Naturally, he witnessed the defeat of his ace in the hole, and how Konoha was about to claim it.

"No! How can this happen!? How can the Kyubi be defeated so easily!?" Obito angrily shouted.

"Face it Obito. No matter how many times you invade Konoha, no matter how many allies you gather or powers you get, your fate will always be defeat," Kakashi said in a taunting manner. "Guess that I should thank you for bringing the other half of the Nine Tails back to us. Guess that deep down, there's still some love for Konoha inside your withered heart."

Obito watched in anger and impotence how Tsunade and Naruto prepared the ritual to seal the Nine Tails into the latter. As much as it pained him to do it, there was no other option but retreat for now. He made a single hand seal.

"Summoning Jutsu: Cancel!"

The bound Nine Tails disappeared, leaving a cloud of smoke behind.

"Like hell you're getting your hands on the other half of the Nine Tails!" Obito shouted, as he was slowly absorbed by a vortex around his right eye. "Enjoy this victory as it lasts, Konoha scum, for it will be the last one!"

And thus, Obito disappeared.

Sighing in relief, Kakashi allowed to relax his muscles, and calmly walked towards the group of his students, Rin, Tsunade and Naruto. Both blondes looked rather upset, Naruto especially.

"Aw damn! I can't believe we let the Nine Tails escape!" Naruto protested. "A few seconds more, and he would have been ours!"

"A pity indeed," Rin agreed. "But guess we should be happy that we forced Obito to recall it."

"Yes. It will be only a matter of time before he uses it against us again," Shino interceded. "And then, we will be prepared."

"The key is to break the summoning contract," Kakashi said, as he joined the conversation. "Sensei knew how to do it, though I believe it's not too hard for somebody versed in fuinjutsu," Kakashi suggested, before knowingly glancing at Naruto.

"Yeah! Leave that to me!" Naruto proudly stated. "Next time we see-"

However, the blond was interrupted by a tremor shaking the entire village. Everybody turned around to face the direction from where the tremor and the noise came from. All of them lost all trace of color from their face.

"What... what the hell is THAT!?" Tsunade asked in shock.

...

While Tsunade and Naruto were busy taking down the Nine Tails, Jiraiya and Anko, with Gamabunta and Aoda looming behind them, continued their fight against the Six Paths of Pain and Konan. So far,

only Yahiko's body, the puppet, and the one who absorbed chakra remained. Gamabunta decided to attack first.

"There's nowhere to escape!" the Toad Boss said, as he brought down his gigantic sword. "DIE!"

Pain, however, merely jumped into the air, dodging the gigantic sword as it carved a large trench into the ground. Once he reached the Toad's eye level, he cast both hands forward.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Gamabunta wasn't expecting that such a tiny creature could project such a force so massive it could be able to violently hurl him away as if he weighed nothing.

"GRAAAAAHH!" the giant Toad screamed, as he painfully rolled away.

"Bunta!" Jiraiya called, futilely.

Anko, however, knew it was the chance to strike.

"The five second cooldown! Aoda, crush him, quickly!" the snake mistress commanded.

"As you say," Aoda obediently said, as he quickly slithered towards Pain, just as he was descending. Aoda opened its jaws, ready to swallow Pain whole.

However, before the giant snake could gobble the Akatsuki leader, Konan swooped in and grabbed him just a second before Aoda snapped his jaws shut. The giant snake hissed, as he gave chase to the two Akatsuki.

"Damn, we failed," Anko lamented. "Anyway, while they're busy, we should get rid of-"

Anko then was suddenly silenced when a hand was placed on her head. Her eyes rolled back into her skull, as if the mere touch was enough to knock her out.

"YOU!"

Jiraiya saw in shock how one of the Pain bodies, the one with long hair, whose abilities still remained unknown, kept Anko immobile with his mere touch. Then, he pulled the hand back, gripping between his fingers a plasma-like substance with Anko's form, almost as if he was pulling the Special Jonin's very soul out of her body.

Anko then fell to the ground facefirst, and didn't move. Jiraiya couldn't sense her presence anymore. She was dead.

"NO!"

Aoda, still giving chase to Pain carried by Konan, disappeared all of sudden, leaving a cloud of smoke behind. The immediate danger gone, the blue haired woman dropped Pain back on the ground. The moment his feet touched the floor, he started running towards Jiraiya, with his second in command flying behind.

"The snake mistress has been dealt with," Pain declared. "Now it's time to send the Hokage to his grave."

Thanks to his shared vision, Pain could see Jiraiya fighting against three of his bodies, while the summoner was being resurrected as it happened. It seemed that Anko's death had a demoralizing effect on Jiraiya, who fought with far less fire. And now, he would put out that fire permanently. He raised a hand towards the unsuspecting Sannin.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Unlike the other times, the attack wasn't aimed at the Sannin, but at the toad on his shoulder. Shima gasped in shock upon being pulled towards Pain.

"Ma!" Jiraiya cried. He wanted to catch her, but the other Pains got in the way.

A black rod emerged from one of Pain's sleeves. His fingers wrapping themselves around the tool, he used it to impale Shima in her gut just as she reached him. The poor elderly toad was killed almost instantly.

"MA! NO!" Jiraiya shouted even louder.

"You also possess Sage Mode, but unlike Naruto, you don't seem to rely on clones for it," Pain stated. "Then it hit me. That toad on your shoulder. She was the one keeping your Sage Mode active, wasn't she?"

"You... you will pay for this," Jiraiya seethed.

"I think not," Pain said, raising his hand at Jiraiya once again, the cooldown of his jutsu reaching its end as he did. "Chibaku Tensei!"

Pain fired a small, pure black orb of chakra at Jiraiya, at such speed he wasn't able to dodge it. The orb, no bigger than a marble, imbedded itself into the Sannin's chest, and started to lift him into the air. And as it happened, chunks of earth, debris and dirt were pulled towards it, burying Jiraiya inside it. After a few seconds, the Toad Sage couldn't see the light of the sun anymore.

As it gained attitude, more and more chunks of earth, rock, metal and concrete were being pulled into the forming asteroid, until it became a small planetoid. This one was even larger than the one he had used against Naruto during the fight for the Six Tails. Finally, it stopped at about one hundred and fifty meters above the village. No more chunks were being added to its form anymore.

"Now it's time for Konoha..." Pain said, as he motioned his hand down. "To disappear."

And with that motion, the asteroid was brought down.

Author's Note: Yep, RIP Anko and Shima. I know a certain somebody is going to be especially pissed at me for killing Anko off (well, several people probably, given that Anko is a pretty popular character). And Jiraiya isn't going to fare much better as you could see. But that's what happens when you fight against such a powerful opponent. Now, will they revive like it happened in canon with the people who died during Pain's attack, or will they remain dead for the rest of the story?

Though, not everything is bad news. Deidara, Obito and the Yin nine Tails have been removed from the battle as well, meaning that only Pain and Konan remain as threats to the village. For some reason, I had quite a lot of reviewers expected Deidara to die. Do you find him that expendable? Also, I know many of you were also expecting Naruto to get the other half of the Nine Tails as well, though sadly, I cannot do that yet. I need that other half for a future plotline.

I also had the feeling that I had Yin Kurama lose too easily but... he was fighting against not one but two Sages, one of them being Tsunade who is strong enough without Sage Mode, while in canon Sage Mode Naruto was a pretty good match for the fox.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter, the climax of the Akatsuki Invasion! I'm sure you're excited to see how this is going to end! In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part V

Author's Note: As you can see, this story has a new cover. Thanks a lot to the artist, me, who took some time of his (not really) busy schedule and drew something somewhat passable. If somebody who actually knows how to draw wants to do a better cover, I'd appreciate it (though it will have to be from the kindness of your heart since I can't afford to pay an artist, or else I would have hired one sometime ago).

Now, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 87:

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part V

or

Can You Fight a God?

Naruto, Tsunade, Rin, Kakashi and his students watched in both horror and awe as a small asteroid emerged from the ground, and elevated into the air, as chunks of earth and stone were ripped from the ground and became part of it, becoming larger as it flew higher.

"What... what the hell is THAT!?" Kiba asked in shock.

"I know what is it!" Naruto shouted, alarmed. "The Chibaku Tensei! That's one of Pain's most powerful jutsu! He used it against us when we were trying to secure Uakata."

"If that thing falls into the ground upon gaining enough altitude..." Shino began, as the implications of his words started to slowly sink on everybody else.

"I... I'm sensing Jiraiya inside that asteroid!" Tsunade said, her voice quivering with worry and fear. "He's barely alive!"

"Shit, we have to go, now!" Naruto urged. "Quickly mom, jump into my back!"

Without asking why, Tsunade did what her adopted son asked, while Naruto made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Riding the Hurricane!"

A powerful tornado formed around Naruto's legs, elevating both him and Tsunade into the air as if they weighed nothing. The tornado then began to quickly move in the direction the asteroid was being former, with mother and son praying that they could reach it in time.

...

That very moment, outside of Konoha, Haku and Kurenai were looking for Deidara, without much success. With each passing second, they worried about how much they could be helping in the village. But capturing an Akatsuki, or at least neutralizing him, was too good of a chance to pass.

"This would be much easier if Naruto or Hinata were with us," Kurenai complained, as she looked behind every bush and large rock that could be used as a reasonable hideout. "They would track that guy in no time."

"Guess that's an area we could use some improvement once this mess is over," Haku replied, searching as well. "One can never be to-"

"Haku!" Kurenai called. Urgency could be heard in her voice.

The ice ninja quickly rushed to her position, thinking that she had finally found the Akatsuki. But all what she found was his clay dragon, laying there on the grass, motionless.

"You were right about the crashing zone," Kurenai confirmed.

"Meaning that he has to be close. How strong was your genjutsu?"

"Pretty strong," Haku replied. "But if he isn't here, then he must have dispelled it and ran away."

"What should we do, then? If that's the case, he can be anywhere, and we can't leave the village when there's-"

The genjutsu mistress was interrupted by a brief but powerful tremor shaking the earth, which almost made the duo fall on their butts. They were filled with a sense of dread.

"I don't like the sound of that," Kurenai said.

"I bet you wouldn't. We need to return to the village at once. I think I have an idea of what caused this tremor," Haku urged, as he started to run towards the village. "Let's hope it won't be too late."

Kurenai nodded, and ran behind him, leaving the clay dragon where they found it. After a couple minutes, once neither their footsteps nor their chattering could be heard, the clay dragon burst into a cloud of smoke, revealing a badly hurt Deidara once it dispelled.

"You aren't the only one who knows how to use trickery to their advantage, bitch," Deidara groaned, as he tried to get back on his feet. "Shit... I don't think I'm in shape to keep fighting..."

...

A few minutes later, the asteroid had reached its final intended side, and stopped at more than three hundred meters above Konoha. From a safe distance, Pain watched proudly his display of power, the power of a god. He could still feel Jiraiya inside the asteroid, clinging to life as he consumed the last remnants of nature energy inside his body. Then again, no amount of nature chakra would allow him to survive what was about to come.

"Now it's time for Konoha..." Pain said, as he motioned his hand down. "To disappear."

And with that motion, the asteroid was brought down. The collision would create both a shockwave and a tremor powerful enough to level the entirety of Konoha. After that, seeking the jinchuriki would be child's play.

"Pain!" Konan cried.

The Akatsuki leader was snapped from his thoughts as a blur pierced his asteroid, and came from the other side. Said blur turned out to be Tsunade, carrying a badly wounded and bloodied Jiraiya in her arms.

"H-hime..." Jiraiya croaked, coughing some blood.

"Shhh, don't talk," she whispered. "Now I'm going to take you somewhere safe and treat your wounds. Don't die on me, understood?"

And she wasn't the only newcomer.

"Wind Release: Double Rasenshuriken!"

Two shuriken made of wind chakra flew towards the pummeling asteroid, and exploded upon contact, forming two spinning blasts of wind, which they soon merged into one. The blast quickly grinded the asteroid into gravel, destroying it completely before it could crash against the ground. Rinnegan eyes scanned who was the one who had countered his jutsu with such relative ease.

The culprit landed about ten meters away from him, making a loud thud, raising a small cloud of dust. Two golden eyes glared at the Akatsuki leader.

"Mom, take dad away," Naruto said, not taking his eyes from Pain. "I can take care of this."

Tsunade nodded, as she carried Jiraiya away, leaving Naruto alone with the Akatsuki. "Alright, but be careful. I'll come back to help you as fast as I can."

For a moment, nobody said anything, as both Naruto and Pain's main body stared intently into each other's eyes, trying to figure out their thoughts and potential course of actions. Pain was the first one to open his mouth and break the reigning silence, which was only interrupted by the noise of the battles still going on around the village.

"Your Rasenshuriken is a sight to behold. To think that there's a jutsu able to negate my Chibaku Tensei..." Pain began. "However, in the end, it will be for naught. Do both yourself and your village a favor, and surrender already. Enough lives have been lost."

Pain waited for Naruto's response, expecting some sort of bravado about how he was going to "kick his ass" and protect the ruined village. But Naruto's response wasn't something the Akatsuki leader was expecting in the slightest.

"Your name is Nagato, right?" Naruto asked, his voice sounding calm. "Dad told me about you."

"Who I was in previous life doesn't ma-"

"Nagato Uzumaki," Naruto finished.

This seems to take Pain aback a little, but his astonishment was short lived.

"Oh, I see," Pain said in realization. "That's your plan, right? To appeal to our common ancestry in order to reach an understanding, and from there, an outcome that benefits both you and your village. You're wasting both our times. I couldn't care less about being from the same clan. You could be my very blood brother, and the result would be the same."

"How... how can you say that?" Naruto asked in shock. "What happened to you to have such a bleak worldview?"

Oddly, Pain smiled at such question. It wasn't a smile of mockery. "Now you're asking the right questions. See, two people with different worldviews, like you and me, will never reach an understanding. Because one person has experienced pain, and the other didn't. Or maybe both did, but of different kinds. We might be related, but our experiences growing up were completely different. Konan here is the only one who ever shared my pain, and thus is the only one I call my family. Besides, why are you putting so much importance on blood ties? After all, you aren't the product of your parents' union, are you?"

"So, because you had a crappy childhood, now you go inflicting misery on the innocent!?" Naruto asked, enraged. "Just what's wrong with you!?"

"Such a childish worldview," Pain said, shaking his head. "Yes, you probably see me as some sort of villain from a story book. Somebody evil for the sake of being evil, who only exists so the hero can beat him."

"You ravaged my home, killed my fellow jinchuriki and harm my family! How else should I see you!?" Naruto roared.

"Just like how, during the Great Wars, Konoha and other major villages destroyed my home and killed my friends. Now you understand my pain a bit better," Pain replied, though Naruto didn't react. "This body I'm using as an avatar belonged to the best friend I ever had. He was brave, caring, kind and compassionate. His dream was a world of peace, a world without strife, and fought to achieve it, for both mine and Konan's sake. He and Konan were in love. They deserved to get married, have children, and live a long and happy life. But alas, that wasn't his fate. He died because of Danzo, a Konoha ninja, who saw our efforts for peace as a threat to his plans. But I won't let Yahiko's dream go to waste. To honor his memory, I

shall create a new world in his image, a world where no children have to grow up the way we did."

"Danzo is no friend of Konoha either!" Naruto protested. "If you really fight for peace, then cease this carnage immediately! This is no peace, this is nothing but pointless bloodshed!"

"From your perspective, perhaps," Pain replied. "But sometimes, sacrifices are need to be made in order to achieve a greater goal. Just like how Yahiko sacrificed his life so Konan and I could live, the jinchuriki and those who protect them must die so this perfect world can be born."

That moment, Fukasaku, still, attached to Naruto's back, saw something that made him gasp, as tears started to form around his yellow eyes. Getting off of Naruto, the old toad hopped towards where it laid the corpse of his wife, Shima.

"Shima..." Fukasaku sobbed, as he held one of her hands. It was cold as ice. "No... not you..."

A saddened Naruto watched the display, before his eyes turned towards Pain, stoic and unflinching as ever. The jinchuriki's scowl deepened. He took his Wind Blade from his ninja tool pouch and activated it. A blade of wind was projected from the modified kunai as Naruto channeled his own chakra into it.

"I'm done trying to reason with you," Naruto coldly stated, before leaping at Pain.

Naruto was expecting the Akatsuki leader to use his signature jutsu to repel him, but instead, he was intercepted by the body with the long hair, parrying Naruto's Wind Blade with a chakra rod. They struggled against each other for a couple seconds, before Naruto sent him flying with a brutal kick to the chest. Pain's main body merely sidestepped as the long haired body flew past him.

"After Toneri, the other Nine Tails, and that meteor, I'm down to just one clone. I better not waste any nature energy. I must save the Rasenshuriken for critical moments," Naruto thought, as he prepared his next jutsu. "Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Cupping his hands and casting them forward, Naruto released a powerful horizontal tornado, which thanks to the nature energy he had imbued into the jutsu, was wide and strong enough to swallow all of Pain's bodies

Another Pain, the fattest of the lot, landed in front of his brethren, and began to pull the tornado towards his body, absorbing it.

"Thanks for taking the bait, sucker," Naruto said, as he made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Two clones popped into existence at each side of the blond. Without having to issue any order the clones and the original rushed forward, heading for the fat Pain, was still absorbing the cyclone Naruto had summoned earlier.

"Naruto-kun, if you plan to ambush Pain, it won't work," the Katsuyu clone told the blond. "The Rinnegan seem to give them some sort of peripheral vision, like the Byakugan."

"Don't worry, I have a plan," Naruto assured her. "I have an idea of how the Rinnegan works based on what I saw the first time I fought him."

"Clever," Pain praised, watching Naruto closing on his main defensive body. "But not enough."

Pain's main body and Puppet Pain moved to intercept Naruto and his clones. Just as the puppet transformed his arm into a cannon, the Naruto clones tossed a smoke bomb forward, covering the entire area in a mantle of darkness.

"I don't need to see you in order to stop you," Pain boasted, as he raised a hand forward. "Shinra Tensei!"

The smoke was blown away in an instant, and so were Naruto and his clones, the latter being destroyed by the sheer magnitude of the attack. While Naruto was blown away, Konan brought down a storm of paper flechettes upon the blond, while Puppet Pain showered him with chakra bolts. Letting out a scream of anguish, Naruto fell to the ground, motionless...

"That was much easier than expected," Pain commented.

... before disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

"What? That was a clone too?" Konan asked, as she increased her attitude in order to see the original. "Where did he-"

But it was too late. Naruto emerged from underground at the rear end of the group of Pains, where the Pain body capable of reviving the others was. Completely unprotected.

"You're mine!" Naruto said, as his fist started to crackle with electricity. "Lightning Release: Heavenly Hammer!"

Naruto's electricity coated fist pierced the target's body, electrocuting him from the inside out, sending lightning bolts in every direction. Once the jutsu stopped, Naruto couldn't sense anymore chakra from the body, meaning he had killed him.

"Well done, Naruto-kun! Now Pain has no means to replace lost bodies!" Katsuyu cheered. "But how they didn't see you?"

"Easy. It's not peripheral vision, like the Byakugan. It might appear as such, but I realized that when we fought the Pain bodies separatedly, they didn't have such ability. Which made us realize that their field of vision is linked somehow."

"So, that's why you threw the smoke bombs?" Katsuyu asked.

"Not exactly. I used them so he wouldn't see me creating a third clone and going underground," Naruto replied. "I needed Pain to think that I was trying to bring down the chakra-absorbing body, so his attention was away from the other bodies, and thus drop his guard."

"That's a very clever plan," Katsusyu said, before noticing the five remaining Pains and Konan closing in. "But I'm afraid that such thing won't work again."

"I don't need it to. Now I only need to destroy their bodies once," Naruto confidently said. "And I still have plenty of Senjutsu chakra to spare!"

"Outstanding move, Naruto," Pain sounded more genuinely impressed rather than angry due the loss of one of his most important bodies. "Let's see if you can repeat it."

Ponytail Pain took took a step forward, and prepared his only jutsu.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Slamming his plam into the ground,. Ponytail Pain summoned a giant multi headed dog, all its heads barking furiously.

"That's one hell of a mutt," Naruto said, letting out a whistle. He mimicked the enemy by biting his thumb and making five hand seals. "My turn! Summoning Jutsu!"

Once again, Naruto summoned Gamaken to his side.

"I'm ready to fight again, Naruto," Gamaken said, before looking at the dog. "Is that my enemy?"

"Indeed it is," Naruto said. "But try not to behead or cut it. It will split into multiple bodies if it's slashed."

"Yes, I do remember that insidious ability from the first time you asked me to fight that beast," Gamaken nodded, as he put his shield

forward, while rearing his Sasumata back. He knew the drill: he'll keep the dog at bay, while Naruto tried to bring the summoner down, and thus undoing the summon. While the giant toad and the giant canine engaged each other in a fierce battle, Naruto prepared his next move.

"Now, it's my turn! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Once again, Naruto created other two clones, and the htree of them charged forwards.

"I doubt he will try to use the same tactic twice in a row, but try to be careful!" Konan warned him from above.

Pain silently nodded, as he prepared to take in whatever attack Naruto planned to launch.

" Losing the Naraka Path was careless on my part. I need to let him attack, consume all his nature energy, and then exhaust him until he can't fight anymore," Pain thought, as he watched the blond coming. *"As long as the Deva Path survives, I can win this. The other bodies are expendable."*

The blond created yet another Rasengan, while the clones imbued it with wind chakra. Since he was using two clones, the Rasenshuriken formed much faster now. The blond grinned confidently at Pain, as he held the destructive spinning chakra shuriken above his head.

" He's expecting me to use the Preta Path in order to absorb the jutsu, and strike it down in the middle of the absorption," Pain deduced. *"However, I have more than one method to nullify his attacks!"*

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto threw the wind shuriken forward, in a straight line towards the main Pain. He was expecting that Pain would use his chakra-absorbing body to counter it, but none of the other bodies made any hints to move. Other than the target, who merely raised a hand forward.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Pain shot yet another kinetic wave forward, which managed to successfully dispelled Naruto's jutsu. But unfortunately for Pain, Naruto had already took that into account.

"He's vulnerable now! Five seconds!" Naruto said, as he pulled out his Wind Blade once again, before his clones launched him at Pain at a blurring speed.

Pain was literally taken aback by such tactic. Naruto was coming really fast at him. He had no time to dodge or wait for his power to recharge. His only option was to use another body as a human shield. Fortunately for him, there was an almost literal angel watching above him.

"Paper Drizzle!"

Konan flapped his paper wings once, creating a storm of razor sharp paper darts towards the incoming blonde. Many of the paper darts stabbed themselves into his flesh, stopping him on his tracks. Unsurprisingly for both Pain and Konan, Naruto disappeared leaving a small burst of smoke behind.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

"What?" Konan asked.

While she and Pain had their attention drawn towards the incoming Naruto clone, they had forgotten about the original and his remaining clone, who prepared and launched another Rasenshuriken. Of course, his tactic wasn't going to work.

"I have this one," Pain said, as his chakra-absorbing body placed himself between the incoming jutsu and the rest of the bodies.

However, when the Rasenshuriken was about get close enough to be absorbed, it suddenly shot forward, aiming right for Konan. Both

Akatsuki were startled. They were so sure Naruto would be focused on Pain, that neither of them took into account that he could target Konan as well. No time to dodge or outrun it, she could only counter it with brute force.

"Paper Shuriken!"

Konan moved backwards as she unleashed a barrage of shuriken-shaped papers on the incoming Rasenshruiken. She managed to detonate it earlier, but the size of the blast was much larger than she had anticipated. She continued unleashing paper projectiles on the ever growing blast of razor winds, but she failed to curb it.

"AAAAAAAARGGH!"

Konan screamed as the explosion reached her. And just like Toneri before her, while she would have instantly died had she been engulfed by the initial explosion, the shockwave was powerful enough to hurl her into the sky, away from Konoha.

Naruto could sense how Konan's chakra signature moved further and further until he couldn't sense her anymore. He could also feel the last remnants of nature energy vanishing from his body as well. The moment he sensed that, he made a hand seal, and dispelled the last clone gathering nature energy in order to reactivate Sage Mode.

Given that Pain had said that Konan was the only truly important person to him left, he was expecting him to be consumed by rage. But all five remaining bodies stayed as stoic as ever.

"Don't worry, Konan, I shall finish the job for the two of us," Pain whispered to himself, before his rippled eyes focused on Naruto. "See? This very battle is the proof that I am right. Just like how I harm people important to you, you in return seek to harm me and those who are important to me. It's a cycle that will never end if the world is left as it is."

"Spare me your bullshit," Naruto growled. "The world will be a better place once you and your lot are wiped away from the face of the planet."

"You keep proving me right," Pain insisted. "Akatsuki and I killed the other jinchuriki, and harmed your friends and family in the process. And in return, you seek retribution you see as just. Not that I'd blame you for doing it. It's not your fault, but this rotten world we were forced to live in."

"But answer me this, jinchuriki. If by sacrificing one person you could save a hundred, wouldn't you do it? One thousand? One million? Because by sacrificing nine people, I can save the entire world from itself."

"All you're going to achieve is releasing a beast so powerful you won't be able to control," Naruto retorted. "The Ten Tails isn't like the other Tailed Beasts. Its power is too big to be directed or controlled."

"For normal humans, maybe. But I'm beyond normal humans," Pain replied, his Rinnegan flashing with a purple glint. "You see these eyes, and you only think in a powerful Bloodline Limit. And you would be right, but there's so much more to the Rinnegan."

"Do you think the Rinnegan can control the Ten Tails?" Naruto asked, outraged. "If that was the case, the Sage of the Six Paths would have done it back in the day!"

"But the Sage of the Six Paths did exactly that," Pain replied, taking Naruto a bit aback. "Not in the way Obito controls the Nine Tails, of course. No, he controlled it in a much more pure, focused way: by absorbing it into his body, and becoming its jinchuriki. Only one born with these eyes can do such a feat."

"Just because you have the same eyes as him that doesn't make you the Sage of the Six Paths!" Naruto hollered. "The Sage preached peace and understanding, and valued freedom above everything else!"

"That, he did," Pain agreed. "He didn't want to use his power to impose himself as an emperor or a god. And look what happened. Do you know why I am here, jinchuriki? I am the reincarnation of the Sage of the Six Paths, who returned to this world to right the past wrongs. Humans have proved time after time that they can't achieve peace on their own. Reaching understanding is an utopic ideal. That's it, unless somebody else comes and ends all conflicts by force. I am that person. And to do so, I need to recover the power that was once mine. Once I'm complete, I shall use the power of the Ten Tails to usher a new world order of peace, security and prosperity."

"Kaguya already tried that, and she failed!" Naruto replied.

"Kaguya's regime would have lasted to this very day if it wasn't for her two sons," Pain shot back. "But unlike Kaguya, once I'm complete, there won't be anybody powerful enough to challenge me anymore."

"So that's your grand plan? Imposing your will by force?" Naruto asked.

In a rare display, Pain smirked.

"If you have a better idea on how to achieve world piece, I'm willing to listen," Pain replied. Several moments of silence passed, with only the wind and the sound of distant fights being heard. Naruto's expression became more and more frustrated as he made his brain work, unable to find an answer that would satisfy his opponent.

"That's what I thought. Now jinchuriki, if you truly want peace too be a reality and not an utopic dream, surrender now and give me your half of the Tailed Beast."

Naruto's expression changed, from frustration to determination as his gaze met Pain's.

"I may not have the solution that problem now," Naruto replied. "But that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. And if you want the Nine Tails,

you'll have to beat me first!"

"Very well then," Pain stated. "I wasn't expecting you to make this any easier."

Naruto could sense something coming from underground below him, and jumped just in time before a gigantic centipede burst from the floor. As Naruto was in the air, Pain raised one hand,

"Bansho Ten'in!"

The blond jinchuriki felt his body mass turn to nothing as a strong invisible force pulled him towards the main Pain. On the other hand, Pain generated a one of those black chakra rods. Naruto, however, was ready.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Pain suddenly saw a tsunami of orange threatening to bury all his bodies. Fortunately, said bodies jumped into action. Puppet Pain removed one of his forearms, revealing a flamethrower inside, which he used to torch the clones, while the giant crustacean summoned by Ponytail Pain released several bales of water from its mouth. While most of the clones were destroyed, Naruto was able to escape unscathed, and jumped back, putting some distance between him and his enemies.

He didn't forget from the giant centipede from before, which lunged from the back, ready to sink its large and sharp jaws into the blond's flesh. Naruto, however, managed to grab said jaws with each hand before they could eviscerate him. Making use of his Senjutsu-enhanced strength, Naruto lifted the colossal arthropod, and tossed it against the giant lobster. Ponytail Pain was unable to jump in time, and fell to the ground, before the two tumbling animals crashed on top of him. Unable to resist so much weight piled up on him at once, the body gave up, and died. As a result, the two animals disappeared, leaving clouds of smoke behind.

"And another body down!" Naruto said with a triumphant glee. "Four more to go!"

The four remaining bodies placed themselves in a formation, with the fat Pain in the middle, long haired Pain to the left, puppet Pain to the right, and the Main Pain behind all three of them. It was obvious which body Pain considered the most valuable, but even then, Naruto couldn't get confident. Just like how he misdirected their attention to get rid of Konan, falling into a trap could prove fatal.

Naruto eyed the long haired Pain. So far, he only saw him using physical attacks. But he deduced every body must have some sort of special ability.

"Katsuyu, do you know what the Pain to the left does?" Naruto whispered to the slug on his shoulder.

"I believe he has some way to kill somebody by just touching them," the slug clone replied.

"The hell!?" Naruto asked, louder than he had intended.

"He touched Anko-san's head and then... it appeared as if he was able to rip the soul out of her body," Katsuyu explained, much to Naruto's horror. "However, given that the Akatsuki want you alive, I seriously doubt he'll use that ability on you."

"Still better not taking any chances," Naruto replied, lowering the volume of his voice again. "Though if he's limited to physical attacks, he should be the easiest one to go down."

Naruto quickly dashed towards the long haired Pain, Wind Blade in hand already active. Despite his speed, his target was able to create yet another black rod from under his sleeve and use it to parry the blow. Still, said blow carried so much force, he was pushed backwards. His senses warned him of the other three Pains closing in. Time for another ambush. Taking his hands to his ninja tool

pouch, Naruto quickly grabbed and tossed another smoke bomb, engulfing all combatants in a cloud of smoke.

"I won't fall for that trick twice," Pain said, kneeling down and placing a hand on the ground, while the other three bodies jumped away in opposite directions. "Shinra Tensei!"

Pain sent a powerful wave of telekinetic energy underground, ripping the earth apart as it traveled, forming a crater while it expanded. And among all the rocks and pebbles that were thrown away, there was also Naruto Uzumaki, hurled into the air, with an expression of incredulity adorning his face.

"Got you," Pain said.

Puppet Pain stepped forward, generated a second right arm, and shot his hand like a cannon. The hand was attached to the rest of the arm by an extensible steel cable, which was reminiscent of Kakuzu's bizarre body modifications. The hand closed its fingers around Naruto's neck, before being violently pulled towards them.

However, even with the pressure on his neck, Naruto was able to make a single hand seal. And said seal was enough for his body to produce an electric current that the steel cable carried to the Puppet Pain, shocking him and forcing him to release him. Naruto coughed as he massaged his sore neck, while getting back on his feet.

" Okay, I can't use the Rasenshuriken just yet. As long as the chakra absorbing asshole is still there, it will be useless," Naruto thought, as he eyed the enemies in front of him. *"And even if I'm able to bypass him, there's that gravity attack Pain can use to nullify it... damn, if I only had more than two Rasenshuriken... come on, think!"*

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Pain taking the initiative snapped Naruto of his thoughts. Though, unlike the other times, he didn't feel being pulled towards the hated Akatsuki leader. Had his jutsu failed?

"What the- ACK!"

The answer came in the form of a large boulder that flew from behind and smashed against his back, launching him forward, painfully landing facefirst against the ground. Before he could react, Fat Pain and Long Hair Pain dogpiled him, with the former grabbing both the blond's hands, and started to suck his chakra.

"If I try to pull yourself to me, you'll simply create an army of clones to overwhelm me with," Pain replied. "But as you can see, there's more than one way to use my abilities."

"Shit!" Naruto shouted, as he struggled to break free. "My chakra...!"

"Let me help you, Naruto-kun!" the Katsuyu cloner said, as she jumped from his shoulder towards the chakra absorbing Pain. "Acid Spray!"

The small slug sprayed the portly Pain with a small but effective splash of corrosive liquid, burning his face, and instinctively making him to nurse his wounded face with his hands, stopping the chakra absorption. Relieved from such burden, Naruto used his superior strength to push the two bodies away from him, and dash towards Pain.

"Now is my chance!" Naruto thought, as he made a beeline for the main body of the Akatsuki leader.

However, Puppet Pain got in the way. Removing his Akatsuki cloak, the humanoid abomination revealed his whole upper body to Naruto: he had six arms, and on top of the black piercings that other bodies also had, this body also had numerous screws and bolts embedded on it, giving it an even more mechanical appearance.

Several bladed weapons grew from each of the six arms, and the puppet launched a flurry of attacks that the blond could only dodge or parry, while pushing him away from the main body. Naruto knew,

much to his frustration, that he was only stalling for a few seconds so the main Pain's attack could recharge.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Naruto was proved right when Pain once again threw him back with a powerful kinetic blast. Was this battle going to be like that all the time? With Pain tossing Naruto from one side to another like a ragdoll?

"Give up, jinchuriki," Pain insisted. "Your fate is the same as your childish delusion of a future where everybody can understand each other: to disappear so an actual utopia might become a reality!"

Puppet Pain opened multiple compartments inside his body, revealing several clusters of small missiles that fired at Naruto. The blond, still getting back to his feet, was unable to dodge, and he was quickly engulfed inside several fiery explosions.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Vortex!"

Suddenly, all the flames were sucked into a single point, concentrating them into a small area, revealing Naruto, none the worse. Thanks to his Sage Mode, the flames didn't hurt him much, leaving his body with a couple minor burns. He then motioned his hands forward, releasing a stream of flames towards Pain.

Pain's jutsu hadn't activated yet, needing still a couple more seconds. Fortunately, Fat Pain landed in front of him, and began to absorb the flames into his body. Or at least, that's what he was trying. For some reason, he was unable to, and the body was quickly burned to death, leaving nothing but a blackened, charred corpse.

"What the... how did Preta Path fail?" Pain asked, sounding shocked for the first time.

"Because what you tried to absorb wasn't a fire jutsu, but actual fire," Naruto said, a confident grin adorning his face. "There was no

chakra to absorb!"

"Well done, !" the Katsuyu clone praised. "Now you can use ninjutsu without trouble!"

"Not exactly," Naruto replied. "The main body still can nullify my jutsu through his abilities. Though given the five second window between attacks, I might be able to sneak a decisive hit if I time it right. Okay, let's do it! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Several clones popped into existence besides Naruto. Two of them threw a smoke bomb each, engulfing their battlefield inside a black cloud. Pain's three remaining bodies raised their guard.

" He's probably trying to ambush me. The first attack will be a diversion, but I can't be sure. Still, I better watch every side," Pain thought, as the three bodies placed themselves looking in a different direction so he could have a 360° field of vision and thus avoid any attacks from behind.

Naruto's attack made itself know when an horribly loud whirring noise pierced his ears, and a large chakra shuriken flew at Pain. He raised a hand at the incoming projectile.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The moment he did that, the Rasenshuriken turned into a Naruto, which quickly poofed after being blown away.

"The hell? He disguised a clone as the jutsu?" Pain asked in shock.

Another whirring sound, and another Rasenshuriken flew at him.

"Damn that jinchuriki and his trickery! I have no way to repel that blast! If it hits me, then these bodies are dead!" Pain thought, pushing away the panic, as he did the only thing he could think of.

The Puppet Pain moved forward, and using his arm canon, shot a chakra blast at the deadly wind shuriken, prematurely detonating it.

Pain's three bodies were about to move in order to avoid the expanding blast, the wind dispelling all the smoke around them. His eyes caught too late a Naruto clone waiving seals before slamming his hands into the ground.

"Earth Release: Mobile Core!"

Suddenly, a circle was cut in the ground around the Pain bodies, which quickly sank several meters below surface level.

"There's no escape from this one!" Naruto said, another Rasenshuriken in hand, before he tossed it at the trapped orange haired men. "This is for Utakata! Wind Release. Rasenshuriken!"

Pain watched impotently as the Rasenshuriken dived at his three remaining bodies, as that infernal noise filled his ears.

" *Three seconds.*" Pain thought.

The Rasenshuriken drew near.

" *Two seconds.*"

It was close enough for him to see it in close detail.

" *One second... !*"

The Rasenshuriken hit, and the three Pain bodies were engulfed inside an explosion of brutal razor winds. There were splashes of black and red spinning around the white and blue explosion, as the Akatsuki's cloak and flesh were torn to shreds.

"YES! Naruto said, pumping a fist in the air, just as his Sage Mode vanished. "Yes! Take that, Akatsuki! Your leader is down! Wohoo!"

...

From a safe distance, Jiraiya's broken and battered body was lying down on the hard floor, as his wife did her best to heal him as best

as she could. Tsunade had removed all the black rods Pain had impaled into his body, and worked to fix all the wounds. He could feel all the wounds slowly closing, broken bones rebuilding themselves, and some of his energy returned. The process was slow and painful, but he endured.

"Tsunade..." Jiraiya began.

"Shh! Don't talk! You need to conserve your strength," Tsunade chided, as she continued the healing process.

"I may hurt but... I think I'm... out of danger..." Jiraiya weakly protested.

"Who's the doctor here?" Tsunade snapped.

"Don't give me the- OUCH!" Jiraiya yelped after Tsunade after more pressure than necessary to a wound. The Slug Princess smirked at him. "Don't do that!"

"Guess that, if you're that talkative, you're indeed out of danger," Tsunade conceded in defeat. "What's so important that it can't wait until later?"

"Nagato..." Jiraiya said. "Pain, I mean... the real one, is none of those bodies. Those are puppets reanimated by his power."

"Yeah, I know, Katsuyu told me about that," Tsunade told him. "Nice finding, by the way."

"What I want to say is..." Jiraiya continued, before coughing a couple times. Tsunade saw the lack of blood in those coughs as a good sign. "Nagato is somewhere around the village. We need to find him before he leaves."

"Those bodies of his seem to be covered in smaller versions of those black rods," Tsunade pointed out, her gaze shifting towards the bloodied pieces of metal she had pulled out of her husband. "Do

you think he might be using them as mean to control them? You know, as receptors used to catch the original's chakra."

"It might be, yes," Jiraiya conceded.

"Then..." Tsunade began, as she stopped healing Jiraiya, grabbed one of the black rods, and cleaned it with her blouse, as she grimaced. "Boy, this is so unhygienic..."

"Hime? What are you going to do?" Jiraiya asked, having recovered enough of his strength to sit up. And much to his shock, Tsunade jabbed the rod into her shoulder. "WHAT THE HELL!?"

"Katsuyu..." Tsunade said, as she struggled with the pain. She could feel Pain's chakra coursing through her body, which was a good sign. "Sage Mode, please."

"Right now, Tsunade-sama!" The slug clone obediently said, realizing what her summoner was trying to do.

In less than a minute, Tsunade's eyes turned gold as red markings appeared around them. And most importantly, she could sense everybody around her. Using the sensing ability she now possessed, she was able to track Pain's original body. He was in a large tree made of paper, to the north, not that far away. She could sense Pain's anger at being located.

"Got him!" Tsunade said. Before tossing the rod away, and began healing the wound on her shoulder, while deactivating the Sage Mode. "I know where he is!"

"Good," Jiraiya said, trying to get back to his feet. "Let's get him before he escapes!"

"Not yet," Tsunade replied. "First we need to help Naruto dealing with that asshole. He had his Sage Mode, so I hope everything went fine. But there's no harm in going."

"Right."

"By the way, even among all the chaos and destruction going around us, I have a piece of good news," Tsunade smiled. "Hagane just woke up. Our son finally woke up, Jiraiya."

The white haired man sighed in relief. "You have no idea how happy I am to hear that. I want to hug him and tell him how much I love him after this."

"Yes. But first, we need to make sure Akatsuki doesn't take our other son away from us," Tsunade reminded him.

Jiraiya nodded with determination. "Right. Lead the way, hime."

...

Naruto panted, his muscles relaxing as he saw how the Rasenshuriken explosion slowly shrank, until it dissipated into nothing. Once it was finally over, he made a single hand seal, and cancelled the previous earth jutsu, putting back the piece of ground he had sunk where it originally was.

"Man, I'm so glad I decided to master all five elements," Naruto chuckled. "Okay, now let's check this guys are truly death."

Naruto walked towards the blast zone. The Rasenshuriken had made quite a number on the Pain bodies. First, there was the Puppet Pain. As expected, the innards of his body weren't blood and guts, but metal bolts, joints and plates. A machine that looked like a man. Then, there was Long Hair Pain. This one was organic, as the ungodly amount of blood splattered everywhere could attest. In fact, it was the remains of his long, orange mane the only thing that could be used to be identified.

And lastly, there was the body of the main Pain.

"Uh? Where is it? There should be three bodies here!" Naruto asked.

And that was the problem, that it was nowhere to be found. Looking around, Naruto then saw a hole that was partially hidden by Puppet Pain's body. The ground beneath his feet started to rumble, but it was too late. Pain emerged from under him, slammed his elbow into Naruto's back, making him fall onto the ground facefirst, and quick as lightning, stabbed two black rods into each hand, making sure he wouldn't be able to use them, or move it.

"Your strategy was a good one, jinchuriki," Pain praised. Even if he had avoided the Rasenshuriken, he didn't dodge it completely, as his cloak was partially shredded, and had cuts and bruises everywhere. "Unfortunately for you, you aren't the only one with mastery over all five elements."

"Shit!" Naruto cursed, as he tried to pull his hands from the rods, to no avail. "So, you can also use all elements? Is there anything those eyes of yours can't do?"

"That's a good question," Pain enigmatically replied. "One you won't live to hear the answer, may I say. Though if it's any consolation, think that your death will make possible the existence of a much better world."

"You're wrong," Naruto growled. "Even if you succeed, even if you become the jinchuriki of the Ten Tails, there won't be peace," Naruto said, defiantly looking at Pain. "People won't give up their freedom, and will continue to fight you until your reign is over."

"Then they shall perish," Pain firmly stated. "Just like a shepherd kills a wolf who gets too close to his flock not because he hates wolves, but because he wants to protect the sheep from their predators, I shall too protect the people who wish for peace from those who want to disrupt it."

"That's how you see people, right? Not as humans, but as sheep," Naruto said.

"People are indeed sheep, ninjas more than anybody. For what are humans but cattle waited to be sacrificed for the benefit of others?" Pain asked. "The people who start wars are never affected by them. They spend their time in the safety of their palaces, protected by the best bodyguards money can buy, while ninjas cut each other down in the name of lords they never met, while civilians are caught in the middle. Yes, people are sheep, and this world is nothing but a slaughterhouse. But thanks to Akatsuki, it will change soon."

"There are other ways," Naruto insisted. "Peace can't be imposed by force. All those who tried failed!"

"Those who tried before lacked the power I will have," Pain rebutted. "Because even the Kages are powerless to change anything. Jiraiya-sensei also shared my dreams of peace, yet with the power of a village at his beck and call, what did he achieved? He wasn't even able to keep his own ninjas in check, if the tales of Root are to be believed!"

"My dad has accomplished plenty of things!" Naruto shouted. "He made alliances with Kiri and Suna! And is working to build bridges with other villages as well! Not to mention helping Kirigakure achieve a new era devoid of blood! At era that happened because one of your lackeys brainwashed their Kage!"

"Yes, impressive accomplishments, indeed. But answer me this, Naruto," Pain replied. "Jiraiya is nothing but one man. And one day, he will die. What if the next Hokage doesn't agree with what he did, and burns all the bridges that Jiraiya built? Somebody like Danzo Shimura, whose supremacist views are well known. Or a new Kazekage or Mizukage. Just like Mei Terumi ended the Blood Mist, another Mizukage can bring it back. No, Naruto, we live in a world where change, no matter how good, it's irrelevant, because somebody will come and undo it. Only somebody wielding absolute power can enforce peace."

"The discussion is over. Take a good look at Konoha, for it is the last time you'll see it."

"I see," Naruto said, almost conceding defeat. "In that case, then I have no choice but end you right here, and right now."

For the first time since he met the Akatsuki leader, Pain smirked.

"And how do you plan to do it? Because you aren't in a good position to fight back," Pain pointed out. "Not even your Sage Mode was enough to beat me."

Naruto smirked back. "Yes, your power is amazing. But it also makes you underestimate your opponents."

And "Naruto" disappeared, leaving a small cloud of smoke behind. Pain's eyes widened, as he looked around.

"A Shadow Clone! Where did he-"

A shadow appeared over him. Looking up, he saw Naruto, presumably the real one, diving at him with a gigantic sphere of chakra in his hand. His face was a mask of pure anger. Panicking, Pain raised a hand.

"Shinra Ten-"

"BIG BALL RASENGAN!"

Pain was too late, and Naruto's attack connected, resulting in a spiraling blast of blue and white chakra, that carved a large crater into the ground, as it grinded Pain's body against the unforgiving floor, killing him almost instantly.

"Didn't you think I noticed that your main body dug a hole just before the Rasenshuriken hit?" Naruto asked Pain's corpse, even if he knew he couldn't answer, or even hear him. "I still had some nature energy in my body when you pulled that stunt. That's what you get for underestimating Sage Mode!"

"Good job, Naruto-kun," the Katsuyu clone in his shoulder praised. "I have more good news! Tsunade-sama not only healed Jiraiya, but he

also located the position of Pain's real self!"

"That's great!"

"Indeed," the slug nodded. "Tsunade-sama is heading this way. She and Jiraiya should be here in a couple minutes."

"It's a pity they couldn't have come earlier," Naruto said. "I could have used their help against Pain."

"Fortunately, it all ended now," Katsuyu said. "According to the other clones, the remaining Akatsuki have been defeated, or are retreating from the village. Konoha has won."

Naruto looked around, and for the first time, took a moment to contemplate the destruction Akatsuki had brought to his home. Konoha was in ruins, even worse than when the Nine Tails attacked the first time. How many people have died because of them? However, Naruto now had the chance to put an end to this.

...

After Naruto met with his parents, the three of them decided to go after Nagato immediately before he had any chance to flee. Tsunade at first protested that Jiraiya shouldn't go just in case his former pupil decided to set one last trap before going down, but the Toad Sage had insisted, arguing that he needed to see his former student again. In the end, Tsunade relented, and allowed him to come, though he wouldn't take an eye from him.

Just like Tsunade said, they found a fake tree made of paper on a nearby hill to the north of the village. They easily broke into the hideout, when they were met by a badly hurt and wounded, but still battle ready Konan.

"Stand back!" Konan shouted. "I won't let you touch Nagato! You'll have to kill me first!"

"Konan, stand back!" a voice said from the shadows. "It's over. Let them come."

Reluctantly, the blue haired girl returned to the side of her master, allowing the two Sannin and their son to get close. As their eyes got used to the darkness, they could discern a figure in the shadows. An emaciated, frail looking man with red hair, sitting on what appeared to be some kind of mechanical walker. There were multiple black rods sprouting from his back.

"So, you won, and decided to come here in order to claim your just retribution," the redheaded said. He moved his head, his eyes becoming visible, revealing them to be Rinnegan, which rested on Jiraiya. "Hello, Jiraiya-sensei. It's been quite some time, hasn't it?"

"Nagato," Jiraiya replied, upon seeing his former student for the first time in years.

Author's Note: And with Pain and Konan defeated, the Akatsuki Invasion of Konoha comes to a close. There will be one more chapter that will deal with the Sannin and Naruto confronting Nagato and Konan, and what's going to be of the two of them after their defeat. It will also explain some parts of the altered backstory in relation to canon, so be sure not to miss it.

I know there were some reviewers who wanted Tsunade and Jiraiya to fight together, but I couldn't do that because if Tsunade helped either Jiraiya or later Naruto, the battle would have ended much, much earlier than I wanted (and in a much more anticlimatic way). But worry not, because I have a battle involving Jiraiya and Tsunade fighting together against a more fitting enemy planned down the road, which I know you're going to love.

My beta asked how does Pain know about Kaguya. The answer is that Obito told him? And how did Obito know? Madara told him. And remember that yes, Madara knows about Kaguya,

since he mentioned her for the first time in the series. Though, I do plan to reveal in a future chapter how Madara and Obito know so many things about the Sages and other ancient history that was never elaborated in canon.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

The battle is won, but there's still one loose end to wrap up before this arc ends for real. What do you think will happen? What are your thoughts about the arc in general? Leave your thoughts in a review! reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part VI

Author's Note: I've been receiving messages from people asking me to help them with their stories. At first I had no problem, but eventually there were so many, I was overwhelmed. So even if it flatters me greatly that you think I'm a good enough writer to help you, I'm afraid I have to ask you guys to stop asking me to help you with your fics. My spare time is limited, and I want to use some of it to work on my story. For those whom I already agreed to help you, don't worry, I'm not going back on my word.

Now, enjoy the chapter.

Chapter 88:

The Akatsuki Invasion, Part VI

or

The Fall of a God

Under the shadow of the fake tree made of paper, was Pain, or Nagato. Or what was left of him, anyway. Far from the powerful figure that was Pain, Nagato was a frail and sickly looking man, one that could die at any moment. Despite his predicament, his eyes showed no fear, only a mixture of acceptance and resignation. Konan stood besides him protectively.

Jiraiya took a step forward, to see his former student a bit better.

"Nagato..." Jiraiya began, his eyes reflecting a deep sadness.

"Just... what happened? How did you end like... like this?"

Nagato didn't say anything at first. His expression being just as cold and stoic as Pain's. He then lowered his gaze.

"You took us in when we were nothing but defenseless children, sensei," Nagato began. "You trained us into capable ninjas, and most importantly, you gave us hope. Hope that a better future was possible. Hope that we could make a difference. Hope that this world wasn't beyond salvation.

"Said hope, however, took little time to be crushed," Nagato said, as he raised his gaze once more.

"Yahiko..." Jiraiya began, his lower lip quivering. "What happened to him? Did you...?"

Konan bristled at the unsaid implication. "How dare you suggest we betrayed Yahiko like that!"

"Konan, calm down," Nagato said in a firm tone. His words seemed to soothe the bluenette a little, before his attention was on Jiraiya again. "Yes... Yahiko. Fitting you ask for him, given that it was because of him that we did this. You see, after you left Ame, Yahiko decided to create an organization whose purpose would be to bring peace and eradicate war and poverty.

"The name of the organization was Akatsuki, since would bring the dawn of a new era. Everything went fine at first, but things quickly went south..."

Nagato told the Sannin and their son all the good they did, and how much Akatsuki grew. Prospect for the future of their organization and what it entailed were bright, However, as they grew in power and influence, they also made enemies that feared them for what they could do or how could change the status quo. The most dangerous of those men was Hanzo, Amegakure's leader.

Hanzo asked Yahiko, Konan and Nagato to meet him so they could join forces and spread Akatsuki's pacifist goals beyond the borders of the Land of Rain. But alas, it was a trap. While the trio went alone, not only did Hanzo brought a small army of his best ninja, but Danzo Shimura and a squad of Konoha ANBU was there as well.

Apparently, Danzo had convinced Hanzo that Akatsuki was a threat to his power and told him to lay a trap.

There was a brief fight, and Hanzo managed to catch Konan. He tossed a kunai at Nagato, and ordered him to kill Yahiko, or Konan would die. Nagato, however, was unable to do it, so Yahiko threw himself at the kunai, ending his own life. His last words were for Nagato to carry on on their dream of a better future, and that he was the key to make it happen.

Something broke inside Nagato, and unleashed a power unlike any other and summoned the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, and used it to wipe out most Ame and Konoha ninjas, saving Konan, even if Hanzo and Danzo managed to escape with their lives. However, for some reason, the statue stabbed multiple black rods into Nagato's back, leaving him perpetually paralyzed from the waist down.

"Damn Danzo," Naruto cursed, his hand clenching into a fist. "That man poisons everything he touches!"

"If only we knew the extent of his unauthorized operations in other countries..." Jiraiya added. He felt really stupid for not doing something about Danzo earlier. How many troubles could have they saved, or even prevented from happening to begin with if it wasn't for him?

"And that's when you decided to change Akatsuki to what is it now, right?" Tsunade guessed, as she placed a hand on her hip.

"Yes... but not immediately," Nagato replied, before he started to cough. Tsunade could see some droplets of blood flying from his mouth.

Konan took a step forward. "Sometime before Yahiko's death, we were approached by a myserious masked man, who was accompanied by a truly bizarre creature, half man, half plant." Everybody guessed who those two people were. "The masked man

introduced himself as Obito Uchiha, and claimed he used to be a disciple of Madara Uchiha, who had been alive until recently. And according to Madara's investigations, Nagato is the reincarnation of the Sage of the Six Paths, and the one destined to usher a new era of peace and prosperity upon the world..."

...

Konoha

Meanwhile, back in the village, many people started to breathe in relief as the fights started to slowly die down, until every Akatsuki, be a member or an easily expendable mook, either left the battle or was slain.

Naturally, the hospital was the spot almost everybody was heading to. Very few people have come out completely unscathed from the invasion, and thus plenty of ninjas and civilians wanted to be healed of their wounds. Or to have a friend or loved one healed. Naturally, the medics were overwhelmed, especially since their boss, Tsunade, had been seen leaving the village with Jiraiya and Naruto. Nobody knew why, but they hoped that she would return soon.

The Konoha Hospital wasn't prepared to hold such a huge number of wounded, so in the end, the most senior medics, who took charge of the situation in Tsunade's absence, decided to restrict the Hospital for those with grievous wounds or in critical condition. Multiple medical tents were set around the hospital where the less gravely wounded were attended.

In one of those tents was Hinata Hyuga, working tirelessly to heal the injuries sustained by her sister. Thankfully, even if Hanabi didn't come unscathed out of the fight with Toneri, her wounds were mostly superficial, and hoped she would get better after several hours of uninterrupted rest.

"Is she okay?" Fu asked.

Hinata offered to heal the muscular girl -who got quite a beating from the last Otsutsuki as well-, but the jinchuriki refused, claimed that other people needed her help more than her, and that, as a jinchuriki, she healed faster than most people. And even if Fu didn't heal as fast as Naruto, Hinata could already see some of her wounds closing, and her chakra regenerating at a rapid pace.

"Yes. Thankfully she didn't bear the worst of the fight," Hinata said with a nod.

"Yeah, it was the two of us who did!" Fu loudly replied with a vigorous chuckle. Upon feeling the piercing glares the rest of the people in the medical tent shot at the mint haired girl, she sheepishly grinned and whispered an apology. She then turned back at Hinata, and in a considerably lower voice said: "That Toneri guy hits hard. I don't think I'd be able to sleep if I knew a guy like that wanted to get inside my proverbial pants, and be so persistent about it!"

"Sadly this won't be the last time I have to deal with him," Hinata replied. "He'll come back, both for me and for Naruto."

"You think so?" Fu asked, as she scratched her temple. "I mean... Akatsuki pretty much threw at us everything they had, and still failed. If I were them, I would give up."

"They don't seem to be like the kind of people to give up after a single setback, no matter how big," Hinata countered. "Plus they still have six Tailed Beasts under their control. That alone makes them a huge threat to every Elemental Nation."

"I remember Naruto saying that we must find a way to release the beasts they captured," Fu said, placing a hand under her chin. "Though getting them out of that statue is going to be hard."

"Now it would be a good moment to counterattack, but I don't think we're in a position to do so, with so many wounded and deceased," Hinata lamented. "While we recover and regain our strength, Akatsuki may do the same."

"What about the other villages?" Fu asked. "They fight against Akatsuki as well, and Konoha helped them in the past. Maybe they can lend us a hand in return?"

"That's... a very good idea, Fu-san," Hinata praised. "Let's hope we can talk about it with Hokage-sama once he gets back."

Fu smiled earnestly at the compliment. That moment, a small group entered the tent, all of them being Hyugas led by a woman Hinata knew too well.

"There you are," the woman, Hikari, said, her voice filled with relief upon seeing Hinata. However, her relief was short lived upon seeing the unconscious Hanabi lying on a bed on the floor. "Hanabi! Is she-"

"She's okay, mother," Hinata reassured the older woman. "She only needs to rest a bit. I already treated all her wounds."

Relief seems to return to her once again, but worry didn't leave her heart completely. "I saw you two and the Seven Tails jinchuriki in the sky flying and fighting against that Akatsuki that's obsessed with you. I was afraid for the two of you."

"I appreciate your concern, mother. But as you can see, we came out of this alive," Hinata said in a reassuring tone. "What have you been doing during the battle, mom? I was worried about you and the rest of the clan as well."

"Those miserables launched an attack on the compound," Hikari said, seething with anger at the memory. "I led a group of ninjas in order to drive them away, while I had Hizashi-san escort the civilians and the Moon acolytes to the underground shelters. Let's hope they arrived safe and sound."

Hinata didn't reply. Her Tesneigan flashed for a fraction of a second, and her eyes became unfocused, as if she was zoning out. Hikari was about to ask if she was okay, but Hinata apparently regained her senses before that.

"They're okay. I can see Hizashi-san and other Hyugas, as well as the people they escorted, getting out of the shelter."

Hikari sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. I was already afraid that this would be another catastrophe like the Uchiha Insurrection. When Konoha is under siege, there are scumbags who always target us in order to get our eyes."

"Anyway, not to sound rude. I'd love to stay and talk more with you, but as a medic-nin, I have the duty to attend all the wounded here," Hinata reminded her mother.

"Oh, right! Sorry, I won't distract you anymore," Hikari replied. "I'll stay here with Hanabi for a bit, if it's not a bother."

"Of course not, mother," Hinata said, before turning towards the jinchuriki. "Fu-san, may I have your help in this endeavor?"

"Sure! It's nice to help in a way other than punching other people for once," the energetic jinchuriki said.

...

Not far away from there, Hiruzen Sarutobi was leading a group of ANBU, trying to find all the people, both ninjas and civilians, not accounted for so far. They had found quite a lot of people trapped under crumbled buildings. Some of them were alive and only needed medical attention. Others, unfortunately, weren't so lucky.

At one moment, another ninja clad in complete black save the green flak jacket appeared before him. His face was as unreadable as ever, but the old Hokage could see some worry into the man's onyx eyes.

"Ah, Itachi-kun," Sarutobi said. "Do you bring news? I trust everything was fine in the T & I department."

"It was," Itachi confirmed. "There were a few Zetsu who attacked the building, but I doubt they realized of its significance, and were only there to cause damage. I managed to repel all of them."

"Those are good news indeed," Hiruzen said, nodding and even smiling a little. "Yet I see there's something that's troubling you."

"Indeed, Sarutobi-sama," the Uchiha confirmed. "Unlike what I was expecting, Orochimaru didn't appear to rescue Hebimaru, nor did he send anybody in his stead to do so."

Hiruzen chuckled sardonically. "And that surprises you, Itachi-kun? As much as it pains me to admit it, Orochimaru cares for no one but himself. That boy, Hebimaru, might be strong, but I doubt my former student would consider him vital."

"I'm aware of that, Sarutobi-sama, and that action on itself is not what worried me," Itachi clarified. Sensing the old man's confusion, he continued. "I've been asking some people, who fought at different areas of the village, and not a single person saw Orochimaru."

"He didn't take part in the attack?" Hiruzen asked, surprised by the revelation. "That's... odd."

"And now you understand the source of my worries," Itachi said. "So far, every other Akatsuki that's still alive was seen in the fight. Pain, Konan, Kisame, Deidara, Toneri, Obito. And even Zetsu in the form of an army of clones. But Orochimaru was nowhere to be seen."

"Maybe Orochimaru was kicked out of their group?" Hiruzen guessed. "Maybe even a band of criminals like Akatsuki couldn't stomach Orochimaru's lack of concern and respect for life."

"An overly optimistic assumption, Sarutobi-sama," Itachi replied. "Though even if that may be the case, we can't count Orochimaru out just yet. I think that he's planning something. Something big. And given that Konoha is now weakened after this attack, he might make his move now."

"And understandable concern, Itachi-kun," Hiruzen said. "Alright, I'll bring it to Jiraiya the next time I see it."

"I appreciate that, Hokage-sama," Itachi said, before making a polite bow. "Now, if you excuse me, I need to check if my little brother and Shisui are okay."

And Itachi vanished as quick as he had appeared.

...

"It was shortly before Yahiko's death that Obito came to us," Konan was the one continuing their story. "We didn't know how he knew of us, and how he knew that Nagato had the Rinnegan. He claimed to be Madara's disciple."

"Madara's disciple? Oh come on!" Tsunade scoffed. "Madara has been dead for decades. My grandfather saw to it."

"The thing is... there's no way that man could know all the things he knew if that wasn't true," Konan added. "Listen, we aren't idiots. We didn't get to live as long as we did by trusting the first stranger claiming nonsense."

"We made a background check on Obito before considering his offer," Nagato continued. "We know he used to be a Konoha ninja, who apparently died during the Third Ninja War. How did he survive, we never know. But like Konan said, he knew things nobody of his background should know."

"And then there's that weird creature that always accompanied him like a shadow," Konan added. "Zetsu."

"Obito told us all the things he learned under Madara," Pain continued. "How both he and Madara had been trying to achieve a world without conflict and war for a long time. And how, after much research, they managed to find a way: a new Sage of the Six Paths needed to be awakened in order to lead the world to such age."

"You haven't answered my question," Tsunade interceded. "How can Madara be still alive? Hashirama brought his corpse to Konoha, where Tobirama himself realized an autopsy and he confirmed his death. He then buried the body in a place whose location took to the grave."

"We... have no answer to that question," Nagato admitted. "Like we said, we decided to strike an alliance with Obito in order to bring the world to an age with no wars nor suffering."

"And it was Obito who told you to capture the Tailed Beasts to do it?" Naruto asked, sounding a little incredulous.

"You're aware of the history behind the Tailed Beasts and the Sage of the Six Paths, yes?" Nagato asked. Naruto nodded. "Then you must know that there was a time in which Hagoromo Otsutsuki had the Ten Tails sealed inside him. And thus, he was immensely powerful. But he didn't use that power to create a better world. He merely became a preacher, and then wasted such power by splitting it in nine pieces and giving them a mind of their own."

"And do you know why Hagoromo did that? Why he didn't choose to reign over mankind as a living god?" Naruto fired back. "Because he already saw what such thing led to. Safety and security are meaningless if we lack freedom."

"Yes, I know that," Nagato stated. "It was what sparked conflict between his sons. Asura believed that the key to peace was love. Indra believed it was power. Yet Asura was proven wrong the very same moment Hagoromo chose him as his successor over his older brother, given that Indra started a feud that continued to this very day. No matter how much 'love' Asura and his followers preached, it wasn't enough to stop those who had darkness in their hearts."

"And what's your solution? More conflict? More death?" Naruto angrily asked. "Did you see in what state Konoha is!?"

"Necessary sacrifices," was Nagato's only answer.

"It's easy to talk about sacrifices when you're not the one doing it," Naruto scoffed.

Nagato pierced Naruto with his glare. "Didn't you hear what I just told you? My best friend sacrificed himself so Konan and I could live. So we could carry his dream in his stead. Don't dare lecture me about sacrifices."

"Yes, I'm sure your friend Yahiko, wherever he is now, would be so damn proud of everything you've done," Naruto seethed, narrowing his eyes at the two Akatsuki, who visibly bristled. "Ask yourselves, would Yahiko want this? Would Yahiko want you to kill innocent people?"

"Shut up!" Konan loudly shouted, anger restoring some of her energy. "You don't have any right to speak about Yahiko! You have no idea of what kind of man he was, or how far he was willing to go to achieve his ideals!"

"For the way you speak, Yahiko sounded like a pretty cool guy," Naruto replied. "That's why I don't think he'll approve of what you're doing. I mean, come on guys, did you ever see the kind of people you're working with? All of them violent and psycopahitic missing ninja! Are you telling me they are fighting for a better world?"

"They're merely means to an end," Nagato said matter-o-factly, before being interrupted by another coughing fit. "Not that it matters anymore, given that I failed Yahiko today, regardless if we follow yours or my interpretation of his wishes. Come on, Naruto, end me already. I took too much from you. Just like how I killed the man who took everything from me, you also earned your just retribution.

"My only request is for Konan to be spared," Nagato asked. "All she did was to follow my orders. Even if her hands are stained with blood, she deserves another chance."

Naruto took a step forward. In front of him was the man who created the organization who hunted Naruto's kind since its inception. The

one who ravaged Taki to the ground. The one who killed Utakata and Roshi, and nearly killed Hinata, Haku, Jiraiya, Gaara and many others. And now, he could put an end to it.

"And what good would I make by killing you?" Naruto asked. "Would your death bring back all the people you killed? Not to mention, if I killed you, all I would do is perpetuate the cycle of hatred. You killed the other jinchuriki. I kill you in return. Then, Konan would resent me for doing so and would plan killing me too. Then my loved ones would avenge my death. And so on. Isn't this what ninjas have been doing for generations?"

Nagato looked incredulous. "Are you telling me that you don't feel angry at me? That you don't think your revenge is justified? That you don't want me to pay for my crimes?"

"You WILL pay for your crimes, Nagato," Naruto firmly stated. "However, it won't be me who will decide your fate. The Hokage and the rest of Konoha will be the ones to say that."

"So... this is your answer," Nagato said, chuckling. "You have the willpower not to give into revenge. That's... I don't think I even met somebody like that. I thought that, after all I did to you and your home, you'd be dying to end my life already."

"Listen, Nagato, there are people who thrive off conflict. But those are a minority," Naruto continued. "The Senju and Uchiha clans were locked in a bloodthirsty feud for generations. Uchiha killed Senju, Senju killed Uchiha in revenge, rinse, repeat. Until the First Hokage decided to put an end to that, and took the first step towards peace. And guess what? Most of the Uchiha wanted that as well! Madara, the one still giving into revenge, was alone. That's why nobody wanted him for Hokage. That's why he ended up leaving a village that had no room for a warmonger."

"Yes, and that worked so well," Nagato fired back. "Didn't the Uchiha tried to take over your village a few years ago? And you had to kill all of them to quell the insurrection."

"Not all of them rebelled or were killed," Jiraiya interceded. "Some stayed loyal to the village, and continue to do so to this day."

"Because in the end, everybody wants peace," Naruto continued. "Nobody wants wars, and seeing their loved ones die. But many people are still unable to let go of past hatreds, and stir conflicts, and everybody else are dragged with them. But if we raise our voices, we can silence those who can't let go of the past. Those who want conflict as a mean to satisfy past offenses against them."

"None of us were alive to see the Warring Clans Period, but even with all the faults of our current system, it's still a paradise compared to what it was back then," Tsunade added. "Shouldn't that be a signal that, even if we still have a long way to go, we're on the right path?"

"It wasn't 'paradise' for us, that's for sure," Konan fired back with a scoff.

"Yes, we know. People still suffer, die, or see their loved ones die," Naruto said. "If fighting against you taught me something is that you can't save everyone. But I will continue fighting to save as many people as I can. To make the world a little better. I will probably die before seeing the kind of world we speak about, but I'll die happy knowing that I managed to made the world a little better for the next generation. And one day, we will reach an age in which wars and hatred will become a thing of the past. But since we have reached such age naturally, nobody will try to fight against it."

There was a moment of silence as Naruto's words sunk in. Konan looked at Nagato, who was deep in thought, expecting his answer, as if she had already reached her own conclusion but needed her leader's approval and validation. After a few more tense moments of silence, Nagato raised his gaze, and much to everybody's surprise, he chuckled.

When Nagato's eyes rested on Naruto, a memory of Yahiko manifested in the form of an image, overlapping with the orange-clad blond. It was now when he noticed the uncanny resemblance

between the jinchuriki and his fallen friend. Their unbound optimism and their unfettered hope for a better future. Hell, even their hairstyles were similar. This made Nagato to smile as well.

" Maybe it wasn't me who carried Yahiko's will all along..." Nagato thought, entertaining that idea. *"Sorry Yahiko... I failed you a second time..."*

"You seem to be very confident in which this world can improve and become something better," Nagato said. "And you want to do it without making sacrifices or taking drastic measures."

"Because if the world needed such things, it wouldn't be worth saving," Naruto replied. "But I know it's not the case. I know we can make things better."

Another memory hit Nagato. This time, their time when Akatsuki was in its first incarnation led by Yahiko. That's what Yahiko wanted to do. He wanted to make things better by convincing people that his ideas were right and were worth fighting for. They only fought when there was no other option, and Yahiko always advocated for sparing their enemies if more bloodshed could be avoided.

" Yes... Yahiko's ideals were so inspiring... but guess that when he died, my faith in his ideals died with him," Nagato sadly reflected.

"Naruto, even without the Rinnegan, you proved to be my better. You seem to be like somebody who, no matter what life throws at you, will always stay true to yourself and the path you've chosen... unlike me," Nagato said, as he brought his hands together, making the Ram seal, putting Naruto and the Sannin on guard, while Konan gasped. "And just like Yahiko trusted his dream to me, I will trust both our dreams to you."

"Nagato, are you going to...?" Konan stammered.

"My pain was so big, that I wanted everybody to share it with me. But doing so only caused more misery. I'm afraid I can't bring back any

of the jinchuriki Akatsuki has captured, nor the people we killed in our quest to capture them. But I can undo the last of my sins," Nagato said, before turning at Konan. "Konan, words can't express how much I valued your loyalty, and above all else, your companionship. I know how much Yahiko's loss affected you, and how you don't want to lose me either. But I have been lost for quite some time, and worse, I've dragged you with me. It's too late for me, but not for you. Fight for our dreams, but do it correctly this time. Make me and Yahiko proud."

Tears started to stream from Konan's eyes, as she tried to form what would be her last words to her last living childhood friend. "I-I will, Nagato... you can leave everything to me!"

Nagato nodded, and smiled one last time. The Ram seal turned into the Snake seal, and the Akatsuki leader started to glow with an intense white light.

"Outer Path: Heavenly Rebirth!"

A beam of white light shot from Nagato into the sky.

...

Back in Konoha, Hiruzen and his ANBU were overseeing all the corpses that they had gathered, lying down in rows in the middle of a clear area, so their relatives and loved ones could identify them, and say their goodbyes. It was a heartwrenching sight, seeing so many people looking at the corpses, desperately wishing that their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, parents, spouses, and the like weren't among them.

But alas, fate wasn't kind to everybody, and every couple minutes they could see somebody falling on their knees, sobbing, upon recognizing a corpse. Hiruzen was no stranger to such feeling, so he could empathize with the poor people perfectly.

"Sarutobi-sama?" an ANBU besides him wearing a lizard mask asked. "Are you okay?"

Hiruzen nodded. "Yeah, I am, more or less. It's just... this sight. So much sorrow and pain. I already saw it in all three Ninja Wars. It never gets any easier."

"I understand," the ANBU replied with another nod. "We ninjas are trained to weather this kind of tragedies, but deep down we're just human."

"Still, it's a good thing that there were no more corpses," Hiruzen noted, desperately trying to look for a bright side to their situation. "Given the scale of the attack, I was expecting at least twice as bodies as the time Orochimaru-"

"Hokage-sama!" another ANBU, one wearing a mouse mask, shouted as he pointed into the horizon. "What's that!?"

He didn't need to ask what he was talking about, as the old ex-Hokage saw a pillar of white light shooting into the sky. Then, the clouds themselves started to glow with the same white light, before multiple beams started to rain above them.

"What's the meaning of this!?"

...

Not far away from there, in another field of corpses, the three youngest members of Anko's Assassination Squad were kneeled around the deceased form of their teacher. Dosu remained stoic, but Zaku and Kin, being more emotional, had tears running through their cheeks.

"First Mizuki-sensei, and now her," Zaku sobbed, as he triped to wipe his tears away. "Is there something wrong with us?"

Despite the comment, the trio of former Oto ninjas didn't miss Mizuki in the slightest. The man was strong, but his tracking methods left too much to be desired, and Dosu had the suspicion that he was afraid that the three younger ninjas could surpass him. Something that seemed closer to the truth after they were told about Mizuki.

But with Anko, it wasn't the same. The snake mistress had a sadistic streak, and pushed the trio to their limits. But she was always fair, and the results of her training soon became evident. In Otogakure, they were told not to form bonds, as they were a source of weakness, and to obey without question. Anko, however, was different, and during the three years they spent under her tutelage, they grew to love her as a big sister.

"Guys, stay strong," Dosu told them, barely holding his own grief. "Anko-sensei would have hated to see us crying like little kids over her. She would have wanted us to move on."

"Those assholes are going to pay," Zaku seethed, as he clenched his hands into fists. "I'm not going to stop until every single one of them is dead."

"Yes! Anko-sensei would have avenged us if we died instead of her!" Kin agreed.

Before they could discuss their plans any further, they noticed that the sky had turned bright white, and beams of light of the same color started to rain from above, much to their shock.

"What is this!? Another enemy attack?" Dosu asked, as he jumped to his feet and adopted a fighting position.

The beams started to fall around them, all of them hitting the nearby corpses. And when a corpse was hit by said beams, it suddenly sat up and opened its eyes as if said person returned to life. It didn't take long to realize that that's what was exactly happening. Even the corpses that were mangled beyond recognition were rebuilt and

restored, looking as if they never suffered any harm or damage, before coming back to life.

Then, one of the beams hit Anko.

"AAAAAAHHHH!" the Special Jonin screamed, as she suddenly sat up. "... uh? What happened?" the confused kunoichi asked, looking around. "Where is Hokage-sama? And Pain? And what are you brats-"

"ANKO-SENSEI!" the three shouted at once, before tackling their teacher into a hug, with such force they made her fall on her back again.

"WHOA THERE! What the hell are you doing, brats!?" Anko shouted, trying to push them away. "Seriously, you have three seconds to get out of my skin before I murder you all!"

...

Not only the humans were grieving their lost loved ones. Fukasaku was sitting besides his wife's corpse.

"I always thought that I'd kick the bucket before you would, Ma," Fukasaku sadly said, grabbing Shima's cold hand. "Let's hope you're now in a better place, away from all this- uh?"

Fukasaku was startled by the beams of light that rained above Konoha. Once of those beams hit Shima, which instantly healed her injury, and made her open her eyes and rise, as if she just woke up from a dream.

"Pa?... what happened?" the confused toad asked.

"MA!" Fukasaku shouted, as like most people in this situation, tackled his loved one into a hug. "Oh, I thought I had lost you forever! I don't know what happened, but-"

...

Hiruzen Sarutobi was a man that had lived more than most people, especially those that choose a career with such a high mortality rate. And during that long life, he had seen many strange and powerful jutsu. Some in the recent years, such as Orochimaru's Impure World Resurrection or Hinata's Tenseigan led him to believe that nothing could surprise him anymore. Of course, fate is a petty mistress, and decided to prove him wrong.

Much to his shock -and those with him-, the corpses they had gathered not long ago weren't dead anymore. The beams of light that rained from above had resurrected them. Even those whose bodies were far too injured had their wounds completely repaired, almost as if they were never there to begin with.

Naturally, the people that a few seconds ago were mourning their loved ones were now shedding tears of joy rather than sorrow, and loudly praising and thanking whatever deity had decided to grant this miracle to them. Because there was no other way to call this event.

"Hokage-sama, I have news from other parts of the village!" an ANBU said, tapping his ear, where an earpiece was. "Deceased people are coming back to life as well in the whole village! All those reported death are now completely fine!"

"It's amazing. This invasion could have left Konoha on its deathbed, but thanks to this..." another ANBU said in awe. "If the number of casualties drops to zero, we'll be able to bounce back to our previous strength in no time!"

Hiruzen smiled and nodded, before looking at the direction from where the pillar of light shot. From what he was told, that's where the leader of Akatsuki hid his true body, and Jiraiya, Tsunade and Naruto went to confront him. He couldn't wait for them to come back so they could explain what did they exactly do for such a miracle to happen.

...

Back in Nagato and Konan's hideout, Nagato had finally stopped glowing. His previously red hair had turned white, and his body looked even more emaciated than before, almost skeletal.

"Maybe... I should have done this... when Yahiko first died..." Nagato wheezed. "Now, Naruto... make this world... a better..."

Nagato couldn't finish his sentence, as he fell prey to a fit of coughs, before his body stopped working altogether. Konan closed her eyes, and wiped out her tears.

"Can somebody explain to me what the hell just happened?" Tsunade asked.

"Nagato used the Rinnegan's ultimate jutsu to resurrect all the Konoha citizens who died fighting our forces," Konan explained. "The Heavenly Rebirth. However, the price for such a power..."

Konan left the sentence unfinished, the trio of Konoha ninjas being able to fill the obvious blank. The fake tree then started to fall apart, the individual sheets of paper that formed it splitting from each other and being carried away by a gentle wind into the sky. Light started to pour around them.

"Thank you, Nagato," Jiraiya said, even if his former student couldn't hear him anymore. "I knew you weren't completely lost."

"It was said that the Sage of the Six Paths could use this jutsu without dying, or even suffering any sort of ill side effects," Konan explained. "But for some reason, he hardly used this ability. Nagato used to say that, once he became the jinchuriki of the Ten Tails, he would be able to stop people from dying pointlessly. Become a true god."

"How do you know so much about the Rinnegan and the Sage of the Six Paths?" Tsunade asked. "Because there's no way anybody could teach Nagato about it, since everybody thought to be nothing but a myth."

"Obito taught Nagato how to use it," Konan replied. "That's why I strongly believe Obito's words about Madara being his master. He possesses knowledge no human being should have. And even then, we had the suspicion that he knew even more than he let on."

"That brat is turning out to be even more dangerous than we initially thought," Tsunade said, as her body felt prey to a wave of uneasiness. "If his words are true and Madara is still alive..."

Konan then took her Akatsuki cloak off, and walked towards Jiraiya before handing it to him.

"Take this, sensei," Konan said. "Accept it the symbol of my new beginning... and a token of surrender. I'm ready to face my sins."

"You will, in time," Jiraiya said, as he grabbed the black and red cloak. "But for the time being, you might be able to atone for them helping us taking down Akatsuki."

"Starting with the Tailed Beasts," Naruto interceded. "We need to find a way to release them from that statue!"

"The Demonic Statue of the Outer Path," Konan said. "If you know the Ten Tails, then you're aware of the statue's true nature," the Konoha ninjas nodded. "You'll need the Rinnegan to summon the Statue. Then... well, I'm not really sure, but there has to be a way to make the Statue release the sealed beasts inside it."

"Understood," Jiraiya said, as he walked towards Nagato's corpse. He pulled it from the mechanical walker, and placed it on the floor. He then pulled a kunai, and gouged the Rinnegan eyes out. "Not that I wasn't planning to do this to begin with. These eyes are weapons of mass destruction. I wish we could get rid of them right now, but sadly, no can do."

"Whose going to get those eyes?" Naruto asked.

"According to Obito, only those who descend from the Sage of the Six Paths have the right chakra to wield the Rinnegan without being consumed by their power," Konan began.

"The Senju, Uzumaki, and Uchiha clans," Naruto finished.

Konan nodded in return. "Yes. I believe there are people in Konoha who fit those requisites."

"Very well then. We'll have to choose carefully whom we should entrust this power," Jiraiya said, after sealing the eyes inside a storage scroll. He then took Nagato's corpse, and carried it over his shoulder. "Come on, let's go back to Konoha."

They were about to turn around and return to the village, but Konan stopped them.

"Jiraiya-sensei, I know I'm not in a position to ask anything..." the bluenette began. "But I wish for Yahiko and Nagato's bodies to be returned to Amegakure, so they can be buried and rest in peace."

"Don't worry, Konan. I'll see for that to happen," Jiraiya reassured his former pupil.

As the three Konoha ninjas and the ex-member of Akatsuki headed back to Konoha, Jiraiya was alerted by a low caw. Looking up, he saw a crow flying in circles above him.

...

A few moments earlier, at the cells under Torture & Interrogation Department

Sai wasn't sure what was going on. For the past few hours, thundering noises could be heard from above, some of them which caused multiple tremors. He knew there was a battle in the village, though he couldn't tell who was the invader. His best bet was

Akatsuki, but the ninja tasked with keeping an eye on the prisoners refused to confirm it.

Said confirmation came in the form of Itachi Uchiha. The Uchiha Jonin joined the ninja protecting the department under the assumption that Orochimaru was the only Akatsuki not seen, and that he more than likely would be planning to liberate the clone of Jiraiya's youngest son, Hebimaru. The Uchiha took command of the place, and organized a defense for the incoming attack.

An attack that never came. Then again, he couldn't fault Itachi. Danzo had taught him that it was better to be prepared even if the situation didn't demand it, than the other way around. Itachi had left when another ninja came and told them that the battle was over and Akatsuki has been repelled. Naturally, there were many cheers and cries of joy, but if Itachi was happy, he didn't show it, as his usual stoic façade did not break. He said he needed to find and talk with either Jiraiya or Hiruzen, whoever found first.

Sai thought that was the end of it, but after an hour or so -it was hard for him to tell how much time passed given his predicament- the Uchiha returned, and much to his surprise, entered Sai's cell.

"Hello, Itachi-san," Sai said, smiling at him. "I must admit I'm surprised to see you here."

"I need to talk to you about Danzo. I want you to answer some questions I have about him," Itachi ordered. His tone carried a bit of urgency, odd given the situation.

"Of course," Sai replied. "But I must tell you that I've been both thoroughly interrogated and my mind scanned. I don't think I'll be able to tell you anything the other interrogators don't know already."

"I'm sure there are things they slipped their mind," Itachi said, sounding sure of himself. His eyes flared with a red gleam as the Sharingan came to life.

"Very well then," Sai said, agreeing to cooperate. "What do you want to know?"

"What was Danzo's relationship with Orochimaru?" Itachi asked.

"From what I know, Danzo-sama had a partnership with Orochimaru for many years. Far more than what I've been alive," Sai began. "I don't know most of the details, but Danzo-sama believed Orochimaru could be a powerful ally in his endeavor. Said alliance continued even after Orochimaru was forced to flee the village when his experiments with human subjects were discovered, and the Sannin joined Akatsuki."

It wasn't hard to figure out why Danzo was so interested in Orochimaru. Shisui had revealed that the leader of Root had some of Hashirama's DNA spliced into his own, which granted him a boost to his stamina and life force, as well as Wood Release. Such work had Orochimaru's signature all over the place.

Of course, anybody who knew Orochimaru knew that the Sannin wasn't helping Danzo out of the goodness of his heart. Orochimaru must have wanted something from Danzo in return.

"What did Orochimaru ask in return from Danzo?" Itachi asked. "We know Danzo helped Orochimaru stage his invasion of Konoha in a bid to become Hokage. But there has to be something more."

"I haven't been in many of their meetings, but in those I was present, the topic was almost always the same. Orochimaru was interested in ninjas with Bloodline Limits. He had perfected a way to integrate them into a human body," Sai replied. "Danzo-sama would track and kill ninjas with the desired abilities, hand the bodies to Orochimaru, and in return, Orochimaru would share with him the way to apply said abilities to another body."

"We already knew that," Itachi said, sounding a little exasperated.

"Sorry. I already warned you that I said everything I know about Danzo-sama and Root," Sai replied.

"But not everything about Orochimaru, I'm sure of that," Itachi insisted. "Did Orochimaru ever mentioned tensions within Akatsuki? Did he ever have any intention to leave the group?"

"Orochimaru didn't seem to be very committed to the Akatsuki cause. He appeared to be part of the group because of the boons he got from it," Sai replied. "Though, from what I remember, it seems that the leader was the reason he joined."

"Pain? What about him?" Itachi pressed on. "What's his relationship with Orochimaru?"

"Orochimaru said that he was interested in the leader's doujutsu. That, when the right moment came, he would claim Pain's eyes for him."

Suddenly, the last piece of the puzzle clicked, and everything began to make sense. Orochimaru abandoned Akatsuki when they were about to attack Konoha hoping that the attack would fail, and Pain would either be killed, or left vulnerable enough. If it was the latter, Orochimaru would swoop in and deliver the coup de grace himself. But if it was the former, he also knew that Konoha would claim the Rinnegan, if only to prevent the enemy from having them. Then, Danzo would use his spies to steal the eyes, and give one to Orochimaru. Or maybe Danzo would betray Orochimaru. Or Orochimaru would betray Danzo. Those outcomes were of no concern to the Uchiha now.

Of course, such plan had gone to waste after Danzo and his forces were forced to flee Konoha. Shisui said that Kabuto Yakushi, Orochimaru's right hand man, spearheaded the rescue operation. Still, Danzo himself and many of his men were able to escape. Among them, a genjutsu specialist so powerful, not even the Sharingan was able to pierce through their illusions, if Sasuke was to be believed.

"Thank you, Sai. You made Konoha a huge service today," Itachi said, as he left the cell.

Sai smiled at him. "I only live to serve Konoha."

Itachi knew what he had to do. First, he had to contact Jiraiya. And he needed to find Shisui. They weren't out of danger yet.

...

Konoha Hospital, a few moments later

Upon arriving at the hospital, Jiraiya ordered Naruto and Konan to be hospitalized -much to the blond's protests-, and in Konan's case, he also ordered to have chakra-suppressing seals for the time being, as well as her room to be watched by sentries every hour of the day. With that out of their minds, Jiraiya handed his wife the two Rinnegan eyes, not needing to tell her what he wanted to do, or what she needed to do.

Tsunade wasted no time and quickly placed the Rinnegan eyes on a sealed tube each filled with alcohol in order to properly preserve them. After that, said tubes were placed inside a strongbox on the hospital's basement.

"Okay, they should be safe here while we decide what to do with them," Jiraiya said.

"We better decide it fast," Tsunade replied. "The moment the word that we have the Rinnegan leaks and spreads, it'll paint an even bigger target on the village than Naruto and Fu's presence."

"I'll make sure the security of the hospital is increased tenfold," the Toad Sage promised. "I wouldn't put past Akatsuki to come back to get the eyes, even after suffering such a defeat."

...

Meanwhile, outside of Konoha, a group of individuals wearing black cloaks and white and red masks were gathering under the protection of the lush forests. They remained still and focused, as if waiting for something to happen, for an order to be issued, for a critical piece of information to be delivered.

Which was about to happen soon, as another of those masked ninjas joined the group, coming from Konoha's general direction.

"Report," one of the masked ninjas, the one who appeared the group's leader, said in a commanding tone.

"It is as we suspected," the newcomer began. "The Akatsuki leader has been killed, and the Hokage collected his eyes."

"I trust you weren't detected, nor were followed to this place," the leader said in an almost chastising tone.

"Given the village's current state, they can't afford to care about potential spies, even if logic says now would be the best moment for an infiltration. Specially after how all those who fell in battle miraculously returned from the grave."

"They're going to take them to the Hospital."

"Pity. Had the Akatsuki won, our mission would have been far easier. There aren't that many of us after the Hokage raided our base and thinned our numbers," the leader lamented. "Still, we can't fail Danzo-sama. If things go as planned, Danzo-sama will possess a power so vast he'll be able to absorb the entire village into root. Akuma," the leader called, and another of the masked ninjas took a step forward.

"I'm ready to act," Akuma said, her voice revealing her gender.

"Good, because this operation relies on you. Now come on, we need to move out quickly before they realize our presence."

The entire group nodded, and quickly dispersed while rushing towards Konoha, careful that nobody could see them.

Unfortunately for them, despite the care they took to make sure their gathering wasn't witnessed by prying eyes, they failed to notice a small crow quietly perched on a branch, under the shadow of a large branch that, combined with his dark feathers, basically made him invisible. Silently, the bird spread his wings and flew towards Konoha as well.

Author's Note: And with Nagato's death, Konan's surrender, and the resurrection of the fallen Konoha ninjas, the Akatsuki Invasion is finally over. Flawless victory for Konoha! I hope you guys find it satisfying, given how the good guys would lose against Akatsuki constantly during past arcs (and yes, I admit I could have made them a little less dark). Now, a few things to comment.

First of all, I didn't want to do the mass resurrection thing. I didn't like it when it happened in canon, as it cheapened the arc and robbed it of much of its impact, and I didn't like that I had to resort to that. But I wanted Nagato death, but I didn't want him to die at the hands of Naruto, Jiraiya or any of the good guys, since it goes against the whole point of his character. And I was unable to come up with anything else, so I had to use the Heavenly Rebirth. That's why I didn't bother to kill that many people, since they were going to be revived anyway.

Though, given how many reviewers hoped that Anko would be revived, I hope that you're happy with the outcome. I do plan to give Anko a bigger role than she had in the War Arc, which she spent unconscious and her only purpose was to provide Sasuke the means to revive Orochimaru. And now that I think about it... the fact that Anko was instrumental in reviving the man she hated the most is something that would have driven her insane with fury.

Now, to another point from the manga that I found unbelievably dumb: Nagato is dead, and Naruto KNOWS that his eyes are weapons of mass destruction. So, he does the sensible thing, and takes his eyes away, right? NOPE! He lets Konan take the whole body away! Akatsuki's plan would have failed if either Naruto or Konan decided to destroy the Rinnegan. Sure, it would have ended with the Tailed Beasts forever trapped inside the Statue, but by then Naruto had no idea they were sentient. And funnily enough, I've never seen a fanfic that points such stupidity out.

Though, even if Akatsuki has been driven away, Konoha isn't out of danger. Weakened as they are, Danzo decided it's now time to make his move, and will try to get his hands on the ultimate Bloodline Limit. Will he be succesful?

Thanks a lot to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

And thus, the Akatsuki Invasion comes to an end! What are your thoughts on this arc? And what do you think will happen next, now that Danzo prepares to attack? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Return of Root

Author's Note: After the action of the last arc, normally I'd write a slower paced chapter focused on character interactions to serve as breather. As you can guess by this note, this isn't such a chapter, though I did my best to include bits to leave the reader some time to breathe. Enjoy:

Chapter 89:

The Return of Root

or

You can't uproot bad weeds

Perched at the top of an electric post, Itachi surveyed the village. One couldn't appreciate the sheer magnitude of the destruction and ruin brought by Akatsuki until it was witnessed from bird's eye view. While the Uchiha had been in many battles and killed far more people than he could remember, he had never witnessed the aftermath of such catastrophe.

He hadn't been present during Akatsuki's invasion of Taki. Given that the village of the waterfalls was much smaller and thus had a weaker defense force, he wondered if it ended up worse than Konoha.

" Though unlike them, we were lucky enough that our number of casualties is zero," Itachi reflected. "Houses can be rebuilt, but a life that has been ended is lost forever."

The Uchiha was snapped from his thoughts by a loud caw, accompanied by the sound of wings flapping. Turning around, he saw a crow flying towards him. Itachi held one arm, and the bird gently landed on it. He then brought the bird closer to his hear.

"What news to do you bring?" he asked.

The crow cawed softly into Itachi's ear for about twenty seconds, with the Uchiha nodding a couple times.

"Understood. Thanks for your help, you did an excellent job," Itachi replied.

The crow merely made a small head bow, before spreading his wings and flying into the sky once again. Itachi then vanished from the top of the pole, as if he never has been there.

...

Konoha Hospital

Needless to say, word about Jiraiya taking the Rinnegan from the Akatsuki Leader and placing them on a strongbox in the hospital's basement spread quickly, despite the Sannin's best efforts to suppress them. Still, the increased security detail and -thankfully temporary- entrance restrictions did very little to dissuade these rumors.

So far, the only people allowed to enter the hospital, besides the usual staff were other medic-nin. New patients were submitted to a short inspection to ensure they were really sick and needed to be admitted. People who wanted to visit their loved ones had to submit a form, then the patient in question would be asked if he or she knows that person, and their permission on entering or not.

Naturally, there were many protests regarding these measures, but the Hokage wasn't really in a position to soothe these complaints. He was hoping they could choose a new wielder for the eyes soon, so things could return to normal.

The only ones not affected by these restrictions were important ninjas or those close to the Hokage professionally, such as the Jonin

Commander, the ANBU Commander, the Advisors, and of course, the jinchuriki. Even if one of them was a patient himself.

"I swear I'm good," Naruto said, lying on his bed, surrounded by his immediate family. "I don't need to be here."

"Yes you do. Your doctor said so," Tsunade insisted.

"You're my doctor, mom," Naruto replied, as he scowled and crossed his arms.

"That doesn't invalidate my statement," Tsunade said. "You spent quite a lot of chakra during that fight, and you didn't come out of that fight completely unscathed. Even you have your limits. You're going to stay here until tomorrow morning, and that's final."

Naruto was going to protest again, but Jiraiya spoke before he could. "Give it a rest, kid. You've fought against two of the most powerful Akatsuki members. We just want to make sure nothing awful comes out of it."

Naruto sighed heavily, seemingly conceding defeat.

"It's okay, brother," Hagane said emphatically, patting Naruto's shoulder. "While you were fighting the Akatsuki, mom forced those ex-Oto ninjas to babysit me, for my 'protection'. Nevermind they were the ones who needed me to protect them."

"Son, the last time you fought an Akatsuki you ended up almost dead," Jiraiya sternly said, glaring at his youngest son.

"Hanabi fought against that Toneri guy again," Hagane countered.

"Yeah, and she's in another hospital room, with her family worried about how long until she wakes up again," Jiraiya retorted.

"I talked with Hikari-san. Hanabi is only exhausted. Don't be so dramatic, dad," Kaida said, as she rolled her eyes.

"I would have liked to get some payback from that lunatic bastard," Hagane said, crossing his arms. "Guess I'll have to console with the fact that Hanabi and Hinata-san did it on my behalf."

"Think it was thanks to you discovering the Truth Seeking Balls' weakness to nature energy that Hinata-hime and Hanabi managed to win against him," Naruto reminded him. "So you did contribute to his downfall in a way."

This made Hagane smile a little. "Heh. Guess you're right."

"Man, I'm so glad that I had the idea to teach other people about Senjutsu, Hinata in particular. The next time that creep comes for her, she'll be able to kick his ass easily without my help," Naruto said, nodding in satisfaction. "Or she will, once we finish the training. All of them were almost there. I can't wait until everything goes back to normal so we can resume and complete the training."

"A squad of Sages will improve Konoha's might greatly. Especially in the face of the threat that's to come," Jiraiya agreed.

That moment, there was a knock in the door. Tsunade opened the door, and there stood Hinata, standing a bit awkwardly.

"Um... I was told Naruto-kun is here..." Hinata began, twiddling her fingers. "It's okay if I come in...?"

Tsunade smiled knowingly, as she exited the room. "Sure thing Hinata. But make sure he doesn't move much. I need him to recover as soon as possible."

"I will, Tsunade-sama," Hinata said, making a head bow.

"Come on everybody, let's give these two some space."

There were no protests, as Jiraiya and the twins quickly followed after Tsunade, leaving the Uzumaki alone with his girlfriend.

"Hey there," Hinata said, as she closed the door behind her, and walked towards the bed. "You look good. When I was told that you were hospitalized, I feared for the worst."

Naruto rolled his eyes. "Blame my mom. She got all paranoid that I might suddenly drop dead or whatever."

"After what happened to Hagane-kun, I couldn't blame Tsunade-sama for fearing for her children's safety," Hinata gently said.

"Still, she should trust me a little more. I'm not a kid anymore," Naruto complained.

"Given what you did, I guess so. Plus the hospital is kind of becoming quite the usual spot for us, isn't it?" Hinata noted with a soft giggle.

"Kind of depressing, when you think about it," Naruto said, making a slight grimace. "So, how about you? I see Toneri didn't touch you that much."

"Thankfully, no. Hanabi-chan and Fu-san were the ones who took the worse of the fight," Hinata told him. "Fu-san is a jinchuriki and heals fast, but Hanabi-chan is going to need more time before she recovers."

"Hope she recovers quickly, or else she's going to lag behind you on your Sage training," Naruto told her.

Hinata's brow furrowed a little, and crossed her arms disapprovingly. "Naruto-kun, do you think it's a proper situation to talk about training? After all this?"

"What's wrong with that?" Naruto asked, scratching his temple.

"We just came out from one of the worst debacles that had befall upon our village," Hinata said. "Maybe we should try to enjoy this reprieve, relax, and have some fun?"

Those words seemed to have a deep effect on the blond, who first a looked a bit astonished, before his face became more pensive.

"Guess you have a point. I had nothing but Akatsuki in my mind for the past months, and I think it's starting to take a toll on me," Naruto admitted.

"We won't have to worry about Akatsuki for some time," Hinata said, as she came closer and sat on the bed. "How about if we plan something fun? Maybe something with the rest of our friends. They surely need to relax as well, given that they all fought against Akatsuki, or so I heard."

"Yeah. I don't think we've ever done anything together since we attended Kurenai's wedding," Naruto said, as he gave Hinata's idea some thought.

"Glad you're on board, Naruto-kun. Now, let's see what we could do that's suitable for a large group..."

...

Inside one of the hospital's waiting room was Shizune's Medical Squad, plus Shisui. Once the battle was over, Shizune's team had been busy helping to heal all the wounded. Sasuke and Shisui also helped in every way they could, despite their lack of medical skills. After working for many hours, and the number of patients in need of immediate attention substantially decreased, they were finally told to get some rest.

"Ugh, I'm so tired..." Sakura groaned, as she slumped onto the waiting room's not very comfortable chairs. "The Kiri Civil War was nowhere near as bad as this one."

"You're not the one who was bitten all over her body and had her chakra drained," Karin complained, as she shot the pinkette a dirty look. While the Uzumaki girl only allowed people to bite her during emergencies, that word had lost most of its meaning during the past

hours, given the amount of wounded in critical condition she had to heal through this unpleasant method.

"Come on Karin, this was an exceptional situation. Nobody's going to make you do this on a daily basis." Shizune said, baby Shiro in her arms.

After the battle was over, Shizune immediately left for her home, where the Genin team she had hired to babysit her children were when she saw them last. The house was empty. That was good, meaning that the Genin did the sensible thing and fled towards one of the underground shelters. And thankfully, her assumptions proved to be true. After retrieving her kids -and giving the Genin a little extra money for their good job- she returned to the hospital.

"Also, did you notice that they captured one of the Akatsuki and brought them here?" Shisui asked, as she was holding his daughter. "Man, that Naruto. Killing an Akatsuki and capturing another."

"Tsk. I should have been sent to fight them as well," Sasuke scoffed. "Had I fought an Akatsuki, either they would have died by my blade, or begged me to spare them. I mean, how did so many Akatsuki managed to escape like that?"

"Akatsuki is made of S-Class criminals. Those kind of people didn't get to stay that long in the business if they allowed themselves to be captured or killed so easily," Sakura intervened. "Don't worry Sasuke-kun, you'll have your chance to bring them down in the future."

"Yeah. They still need to capture Fu and Naruto-niisan," Karin added, before a terrible realization dawned upon her. "Oh shit! Does that mean that they'll be back soon!?"

"I find that unlikely," Shizune said, shaking her head. "On top of all the expendable minions, they also lost two of their most prominent members. They'll need time to heal their wounds and recover from their losses."

"Not to mention, they need to put up a new hierarchy, if word of the Leader being killed is true," Sakura helpfully added.

"I'm confident Obito decided to take the reigns of the organization now," Sasuke mentioned. "Which makes them more dangerous, as Obito is a far more unhinged individual than this 'Pain' was, or so I was told."

"Regardless, not even Obito would be stupid enough to attack us so soon," Shisui replied. "All he'd accomplish is losing the rest of his forces."

"Even if you have a point, underestimating Akatsuki is never a wise thing to do," Shizune reminded him. "One time we thought we were going to beat them, and BAM! They summon another Nine Tails!"

Before the conversation could continue, a newcomer, the remaining Uchiha, arrived the waiting room.

"Hello," Itachi greeted them in his usual stoic tone. "I'm glad to see that all of you seem to be fine."

"Brother," Sasuke greeted back. "Where have you been, by the way? During the battle, I mean. I heard that you disappeared in the middle of the battle."

"I was preparing for an ambush that never came," Itachi replied. "And yes, it made me mad that I decided to leave the battle for nothing in the end. I did hear that your team and Shisui had a hard time defending the hospital."

"And that's putting it lightly," Karin piped in. "Healing the wounded in the middle of a battlefield is even more stressing and nervewracking than fighting."

"But we managed to do it," Sakura added.

"Anyway," Itachi then turned at his cousin. "Shisui, may I speak with you for a moment? In private."

The oldest Uchiha raised an eyebrow, but got up from his chair. "Uh, sure," and handed Shizuka to Sasuke before walking towards his cousin.

"Itachi?" Shizune asked, sounding a bit worried.

"It's nothing, Shizune. Or at least, I hope it will be nothing," Itachi said, as he and Shisui left the waiting room. "Just take care of Sasuke and the girls. We'll be back before you realize."

As the two oldest Uchiha left, Itachi lead Shisui to the hospital's room. Even if Shisui didn't show it, he couldn't help but feel uneasy at him. What was so important that Itachi had to hide from Shizune and the others?

"Okay, cousin, spill the beans," Shisui demanded, though he tried to still sound gentle. "She might have not shown it before, but I can tell you made Shizune a little upset."

"I know," Itachi solemnly replied. "But I can't talk about this with a large group of people, in a zone where prying ears might hear it."

"Okay, what is it?"

Itachi turned around, and locked his eyes into Shisui's.

"Danzo knows about the Rinnegan. The Hospital is going to be attacked by his goons, probably tonight, in hopes of stealing Pain's eyes for himself," Itachi stated.

...

Another person was leaving the hospital as well, another medic-nin. Like Shizune's medical squad, this young woman had been treating the injured non-stop to the best of her ability, and after many hours of

hard work, was told to go and get some rest. Feeling exhausted and appreciating the offer, she decided to head back home.

"Not even Hashirama's cells' regenerative properties will be able to curb this tiredness," Rin said, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Yo," a familiar voice said from behind.

Rin turned around, and saw Kakashi leaning against the wall besides the hospital's doors, reading one of those porn books written by the Hokage. It was the one thing she could never get used to, no matter how many times she saw it. Tamaki, Kiba and Shino seem to find it normal, though, even if they didn't approve of their sensei's literary tastes.

"Kakashi," Rin said, forcing herself to smile. "How long have you been there?"

"Not much, really," Kakashi answered, thankfully closing the trashy novel and putting it on his back pocket. "I've been with Gai some time, but I find hospitals a bit oppressive, and found myself in need of fresh air."

"I see," Rin replied.

Truth be told, one of the nurses kicked Kakashi out when she spotted him reading that book in public, but the silver haired Jonin had enough shame not to admit that in front of the few people he cared and respected.

"What about you? Have you been helping the hospital staff all this time?" Kakashi asked.

"That's right. I was going home, but I can go for a walk with you if you want somebody to talk to," Rin offered.

"I'll take up on your offer," Kakashi said, as both he and Rin started to walk away from the hospital. "And maybe I can be somebody you

can talk to as well. You look like you need it more than I do."

"I'd be lying if I deny it, right?" Rin said with a sad chuckle. "I admit that seeing and fighting Obito again has been quite the challenge."

"Yeah, I feel you, Rin," Kakashi agreed.

"No, what I mean is..." Rin tried to explain. "You know I already fought Obito once. When I was sent as an add-on to Shizune-san's team when the other half of the Nine Tails attacked the Land of Lightning."

"Yes," Kakashi said, as he quickly connected the dots. "Were you expecting that your second fight with Obito would be different?"

While Rin was a bit surprised that Kakashi caught her intention so quickly, she hid her surprise and merely nodded. "I thought this time would be easier. I thought that I'd be prepared to face him."

"I see," Kakashi laconically replied. "I'm afraid to tell you that such thing will never become any easier. Or maybe it will, but not anytime soon. Obito used to be part of our team, and a dear friend. It will take some time before we stop seeing him like that."

Rin didn't say anything, she just nodded silently.

"Though, for all that it's worth, you fought amazingly," Kakashi praised her.

"You... you think so?" the medic-nin replied, rubbing her arm a little.

"Of course. Not only did you kept all of us healed when Shino was in the kamui dimension, but without you subduing the Nine Tails, there's no way we could have forced Obito to retreat," Kakashi told her. "If it wasn't for you, well... Kami knows how much harm Obito and his pet Nine Tails would have done."

"I'm not the only one here with Wood Release. Somebody else could have filled my role," Rin replied. "That Tenzo guy, for example. I did

met him some time ago."

"Oh," Kakashi said in mild curiosity. "And what did you think about him?"

"He's... an OK guy, I guess," Rin said, shrugging a little. "I mean, we didn't even talk that much, but I got a good impression. Though I have to respect how, after going through so many crazy experimentations and being trained by Danzo, the guy still has any sanity left."

"No matter how horrible, there's no trauma we can't overcome," Kakashi reassured Rin. "Tenzo is a man with a powerful force of will. He wasn't going to let his tragedies to define him."

"What about you, Kakashi? From what I was told, before realizing that Obito and me were still alive, it didn't appear that you got over our deaths," Rin pointed out.

"Ah, touché. You don't pull your punches, do you?"

Rin shoot Kakashi a sympathetic smile. "Sorry for such a cheap shot. But you got me worried a little bit when I was told of your... less admirable habits."

"I guess losing Obito, then you, and then sensei..." Kakashi began. "I was afraid that, if I moved on, if I got out from the hole I was in, somebody would push me back sooner or later, and I didn't want to feel that pain again. Hell, the Third pretty much had to force me to take a team of Genin in order to break me out of my funk."

"Did it work?"

"I'll admit that I'm better than I was before, so I'll call it a win," Kakashi said, slumping his shoulders a little.

"They're awesome people. And they're lucky to have you as your sensei," Rin told him, gently patting him in the shoulder.

"I wouldn't call anybody lucky to have me as a teacher," Kakashi admitted, chuckling a little.

"Come on, give yourself some credit," Rin insisted. "They're strong, and they're alive. That has to speak something good about your teaching skills, right?"

"Guess I can't argue with that logic," Kakashi admitted, before his expression darkened a little. "Though, by that trail of thought, that would make Minato-sensei a pretty awful teacher."

Rin stopped on her tracks when the implication of what she thought was a heartfelt compliment hit her like a slap in the face. "I-I didn't mean... ! No, Minato-sensei was-what I mean it's that-" Rin quickly stammered, trying to find a way to undo her unintentional insult to her late sensei.

"Relax, Rin, I know you weren't trying to insult Minato-sensei," Kakashi reassured, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. "Despite all his good things, he was still human. And even if I don't resent him, I think he's partly to blame for what happened to us."

Rin raised an eyebrow, and shot a worried look at Kakashi. She couldn't imagine how Kakashi would blame Minato for their team's downfall.

"Minato-sensei was a powerful and precocious ninja, possibly the strongest ninja this village ever produced," Kakashi began to explain. "And thus, he soon found himself being able to take care on multiple powerful opponents on his own, not needing teammates to cover his back. In fact, he was the one who helped others. That allowed him to fly solo pretty easily."

"And you think that was his mistake with us?" Rin guessed. "Letting us going on our own too soon?"

Kakashi nodded. "Yes. He taught us to the best of his abilities, and we became pretty strong as a result. But he mistook our power with

capability. We might have been strong, but we weren't ready to face greater challenges. You were okay, but Obito and I had a load of issues that needed to be solved before we could do missions without his supervision.

"Obito was something of a pariah among the Uchiha clan, and thus he lacked confidence in his abilities. And I made him feel even more inadequate, that's why I presume he was so fixated on beating me. He saw beating me as proving himself, as well as showing his worth to the other Uchiha. Plus he also wanted to impress you as well."

Rin never realized that Obito liked her until Kakashi told her, shortly after his presumed death. And looking back, the medic-nin realized how incredibly obvious it was. While she obviously liked Obito as a friend, she sometimes wondered if a relationship with him could have worked. Not that it mattered anymore, sadly enough.

"And I wasn't much better," Kakashi continued. "Despite my skill and power, I was the most dysfunctional member of our team. I didn't get over my father's death, and that affected me deeply, both as a person and how I treated other people. Again, even if I don't resent him for it, Minato-sensei should have noticed these issues and realize that we weren't ready to go on our own yet."

Rin pondered Kakashi's words. All her life she always thought of Minato as a great teacher, and she considered herself lucky to have the legendary Yellow Flash to train her. But now her teammate's words made her look Minato under a different light. It was almost funny how Minato missing a few small details about his students ended up in such a tragic outcome.

"I do keep Minato-sensei close to my heart, and will be always happy to have him as a teacher," Kakashi began. "But his memory is also a constant reminder that I need to be a better sensei than him. That I can't let my students end the same way we did. That's why, even if they think that I'm holding them back, I won't let them undertake challenging missions on their own until I see they're absolutely prepared."

"And you think they aren't?" Rin asked.

"You've spent quite a lot of time with them. What's your impression?" Kakashi asked.

Rin's expression became thoughtful, placing a finger under her chin, as she recalled all the interactions she had with the animal squad. Soon, the answer became obvious.

"I'd say Shino is mostly fine," Rin began, looking at Kakashi for a nod of approval or a head shake of negation, only to find neither. Still, she decided to continue. "Kiba and Tamaki are the problem. They sometimes break into arguments, usually over petty things, and have the need to outdo each other. Sometimes, even when there's a bigger problem to take care of."

"An accurate assessment, yes," Kakashi nodded, and Rin visibly relaxed. "Anything more?"

"Despite that, they aren't hopeless. They do care about each other, they simply have a hard time showing it. I think that, deep down, besides a rivalry, they also want to impress the other. I'd even say that they got over their issues, they could even hook up and become a couple."

"Once again, you're correct," Kakashi said with a nod. "All three of them are ready to be at least Special Jonin, but in Kiba and Tamaki's case, I'm not going to allow any promotion as long as they don't resolve their issues."

"Guess that's a good way to protect them from themselves," Rin admitted. "Do you think they'll solve their issues soon?"

"I hope. Though I want them to realize it on their own. I want to protect them, but I'm not going to hold their hands all the way," Kakashi said, making Rin giggle a little.

...

A few hours later

Nighttime fell over Konoha, and people returned to their homes after such a traumatic day. Or at least, those who still had homes. Large tents had to be set in order to give the now homeless ninjas and civilians a place to sleep. A place they'll have to use before new houses could be build.

However, not all ninjas were going to rest that night. Many of them still have to perform their night shifts in order to ensure the safety of the village. Especially those protecting the hospital, given the importance of the place. The hospital had ninjas protecting all entrances, several at ground level, and a single one in the roof.

A trio of Konoha ninja, two Chunin and a Jonin, were tasked with protecting the roof. They were tired, yawning and eager to go home, and couldn't wait anymore for the replacements to arrive already.

"Man, the replacements are surely taking their time, are they?" one of the Chunin, a young man, whined.

"Don't worry, they'll come. The village is simply in desarray," the Jonin intervened. "Things like this are kind of expected. Remember the aftermath of Orochimaru's attack?"

"Maybe the replacements died in battle?" the second Chunin, a woman, suggested.

The first ninja shook his head. "Everybody who died was resurrected after the battle was over. Everybody. Dying isn't a excuse to slack."

"Hey, look, I think they're coming!" the second ninja said, noticing several figures jumping from roof to roof, heading towards the hospital.

"Finally!" the first ninja said, rolling his eyes. "Took you long enough, you jackasses! It's fifteen minutes since-"

"Wait," the female guard said, grabbing his partner's shoulder.
"Something's wrong."

Upon her warning, all of them tensed up. They didn't adopt fighting stances, but their hands quietly moved towards their ninja tool pouches.

It didn't take long for them what she meant. For once, there were six ninjas as opposed to the three they expected to come. Also, they weren't wearing the standard Konoha uniforms, but black robes. And their faces were concealed by white and red masks, not different from those used by the ANBU. Except their instincts pretty screamed that these strangers were no ANBU.

"I'm going to ask this once," the Jonin said in a grave voice, taking a step forward. "Who are you?"

"We are Konoha's saviors," the leader of the group said in a clearly female voice, taking another step forward as well. "Who came to save Konoha from herself."

"Root!" the female Chunin shouted, as she and her partners immediately drawn their weapons.

The masked woman just shook her head, and made a hand seal. "I have no time to deal with you. Temple of Nirvana Jutsu!"

The three Konoha guards saw white feathers falling from the sky around them, while also starting to feel very sleepy.

"It's a genjutsu! Dispel it!" the Jonin ordered, as he brought his hands together in a hand seal, and send a burst of chakra through his body. But for some reason, the sleepyness didn't disappear. "What... how...?"

"There's no person on this world that can resist or undo my genjutsu," the masked woman said, her voice cold and stoic. "Not even the Uchiha."

In a few seconds, the three guards were lying on the ground, completely asleep. The woman walked past them, and entered the hospital through the door at the roof. She then tapped an earpiece under her mask.

"This is Akuma. I'm in," Akuma said.

"Understood. Time until extraction?" a man at the other side of the line asked.

"I presume it won't take more than ten minutes," Akuma said. "Make sure your team is ready. I'll be sending a signal soon."

"Roger that. Good luck with your mission, Akuma-san."

...

A few minutes later, Akuma's team managed to slip completely undetected towards the basement of the hospital. Turns out, while the security on the outside was tight, the inside was barely protected. Jiraiya might have thought that there's no way an intruder could have gotten into the hospital.

"There it is," one of the masked ninjas said.

The room where the safebox containing the Rinnegan eyes was completely dark. Wordlessly, one of the masked ninjas made a couple hand seals, and formed a small orb of white light that illuminated the place.

"Hello there."

Revealing Jiraiya leaning against the safebox, with his arms crossed in a nonchalant pose, smirking confidently.

"I was waiting for you to show up," Jiraiya continued, as he snapped his fingers.

A detachment of ANBU appeared almost out of nowhere, their weapons drawn and aiming towards the intruders' vital spots.

"So, I'm guessing you're Danzo's goons, right?" Jiraiya said, as he walked towards them. "I knew word that we got the Rinnegan would spread. And that Danzo wouldn't resist the chance to get his hands on it. I was hoping that he would lead the heist personally, but guess that was wishing too much."

"Danzo-sama is a wise man, fake Hokage," the leader of the team said. "His intelligence is high and his instinct is sharp. He knows when an enemy is setting a trap."

"Yet he didn't hesitate about sending you to your doom, knowing it was a trap," Jiraiya replied. "I know Danzo considers all his subordinates expendable, but given his current situation, I believed he'll use some pragmatism and try to keep what little troops he still has."

"Again, you underestimate Danzo-sama," the masked ninja insisted. "Tell me, Hokage. Haven't even realized that this might be a diversion in order to draw your attention somewhere else while the rest of us steal the eyes?"

Jiraiya paled upon hearing such words. The masked ninja noticed.

"Yes. We know the Rinnegan eyes aren't here," the masked ninja revealed. "You only put fakes while the true ones are hidden inside your office. There's another team stealing the Rinnegan as you speak."

Jiraiya managed to shoo away the shock, and brimming with anger, stomped towards the masked ninja once again.

"Just who the hell...?" Jiraiya asked as he forcefully removed the mask. "WHAT!?"

Under the mask, there was nothing but a black, empty void.

"You're a nothing but a foolish child, Jiraiya," the faceless ninja said, his voice distorting as he and his teammates started to dissolve into nothingness. "Soon, Danzo-sama will have a power that none of you will be able to match!"

And the faceless ninjas disappeared.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!" Jiraiya cursed, as he dashed out of the hospital basement. "To the Hokage Tower, now!"

Wordlessly, the ANBU quickly followed his lead. A purple haired ANBU with a cat mask quickly caught up to him.

"What... what the hell was that?" Yugao asked. "That couldn't have been a genjutsu! I was sensing those ninja! They were really there!"

"I have an idea of what it can be," Jiraiya replied. "Danzo fooled us the same way the first time he escaped. It seems he's trying the same trick twice."

"And you knew this?" Yugao asked, outraged. At that moment, she didn't care that the Hokage was the superior. What Jiraiya did was a huge negligence. "Then why didn't you prepare for such a situation!"

Jiraiya, however, smirked.

"I did prepare for it," Jiraiya confidently said. "But I had to make sure that none of Danzo's spies knew about my true plans."

...

Akuma and her team were finally out of Konoha, jumping from one tree branch to another, as they moved to the west, to the meeting point with Danzo. The Root leader didn't want to leave any room for mistake, and wanted to have the Rinnegan in his possession as soon as possible, even if he couldn't be able to implant the eyes into his body yet.

Once the delivery was done, they would continue west, towards the coast. Once they reached a small harbor, they would take a ship already waiting for them that would take them into open sea. From there, they could plan their next move without fear of being found.

Even if Jiraiya had forced Danzo and his men out of Konoha, there were still many undercover agents that hadn't been found, which continued to spy and feed information to the Root leader. One of these spies managed to learn that the Rinnegan eyes inside the Hospital's basements were mere decoys, a trap for a potential thief, while the real ones would be kept at the Hokage's office.

So, after casting her illusion on the Hospital, Akuma was instantly summoned to the Hokage Tower via special scroll, so she could help her men break into the building. Even if Jiraiya also increased the security of the tower, none of the guards could resist her brand of genjutsu, allowing her men to enter and take the eyes with them.

And now, with their mission finally close to completion, a new Root could raise, stronger than it ever was. No, a new Konoha would raise, one backed by the absolute power of the world's strongest Bloodline Limit.

Her group arrived to a small clearing, where Danzo, surrounded by more of his Root agents, was patiently waiting for them. Akuma and her team immediately bend to one knee and lowered their heads before their supreme leader.

"Report," Danzo said.

"The mission was a success, Danzo-sama," Akuma said, without even moving a muscle. "Jiraiya was confident that his trick would fool us, but in the end, it was him who proved to be the biggest fool."

"Those are good news," Danzo said, his tone as stoic as ever. "Now come on, give me the eyes. There isn't any time to waste."

Akuma reached her hand under her cloak, pulling two sealed tubes filled with alcohol, the two Rinnegan eyes floating inside. She extended her hand towards Danzo, who was ready to accept the prized orbs.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Suddenly, a volley of fireballs rained from above, creating fiery explosions upon impacting on the ground or the nearby trees. Many of the Root ninjas were hurled away, Akuma among them, who lost the tubes she was holding. As the Root agents quickly got back on their feet and scanned their surroundings to see the enemy. Soon, Itachi and Shisui Uchiha fell upon them, and started to cut down the Root ninjas.

Danzo, however, only had his mind on one thing.

"The Rinnegan! Where are they!?" he shouted, losing his cool, as he frantically looked around, ignoring his ninja under attack.

"There's one!" a masked Root ninja said, as he lunged for the tube, which was thankfully unbroken.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

Said Root ninja was unable to grab the prized item, as a green blur appeared out of nowhere, delivering him such a savage kick, he was sent flying against another tree. Said green blur turned out to be Rock Lee, who was later followed by his teammates and sensei, who proceeded to engage the Root ninja. And as they fought, a black blur dashed over the tube, which disappeared from there.

"I have one of the Rinnegan!" Itachi shouted, as he quickly pocketed the item.

"Well done, Itachi-san!" Gai said, as he was trading punches with more Root agents.

"Take that eye out of here! We can't afford Danzo to get his hands not even on one of them!" Tenten urged.

The Uchiha silently nodded, and Body Flickered out of there, while the others tried to fight the enemy at the same time they were looking for the other eye. Naturally, it was the ninja with the best eyesight who located it first.

" I found the other one!" Neji thought, his Byakugan active, as he ran towards the other eye, which was partially covered by the grass.

However, two other Root ninjas read his intentions, and also rushed towards the same direction, having located the other Rinnegan. Neji was confident he could reach it first, and quickly use Heavenly Spin to deflect the inevitable attack.

But suddenly, his foot sank into the ground, as if he had stepped into a quicksand or a pit of tar rather than solid ground, followed by the other foot.

"What the?" Neji asked in shock, as he started to sink.

"I can't move!" Tenten cried, as her feet also sank into the ground.

"What's going on?" Lee asked as well, finding himself in the same predicament as his teammates.

This was bad, Despite having the Byakugan active, Neji hadn't seen any of the enemy ninjas using any jutsu like that on them. Looking around, he saw that Gai and Shisui had fell prey to the same trap as well. And as he and his teammates tried to break free, the former Branch House Hyuga was forced to watch impotently how the Root ninjas reached the other tube and claimed it for them.

"Danzo-sama!" the ninja who grabbed it said, before tossing the tube at Danzo.

The war hawk expertly caught the tube, before storing it inside his robe.

"Danzo-sama, you and the others flee! I can take care of these people myself!" Akuma claimed.

"Very well then. Thank you for your sacrifice, Akuma. I'll make sure it won't be forgotten," Danzo said, as he and his men disengaged, turned around, and run away, leaving the masked ninja named Akuma with Team Gai and Shisui.

"So, that was Jiraiya's plan, wasn't it?" Akuma said in realization. "Let us believe we have fooled him, so we could lead you to Danzo-sama. Well, too bad that white haired fool didn't count with me!"

Akuma made a hand seal, and suddenly, giant serpentine dragons made of rock emerged from the ground, letting out distorted roars. Neji, however, noticed something unusual through his Byakugan.

"Wait, the way her chakra moved... that didn't look like normal ninjutsu..." he thought, as a realization dawned upon him. "Wait, this isn't ninjutsu! Gai-sensei, Tenten, Lee! We're under a genjutsu!"

"A genjutsu?" Lee parroted. "How can it be possible for you to be affected then, if you have your Byakugan active?"

"There will be time for questions later, Lee! Now break the genjutsu!" Gai ordered, as he brought his hands together in a hand seal, and send a burst of chakra through his body. "Release!"

Gai's action was echoed by his students, but much to their shock, the genjutsu didn't disappear.

"It's not working!" Tenten said.

"My Sharingan can't dispel it either!" Shisui cried.

"Of course it can't," Akuma said, her voice remaining stoic, but with an edge of boastfulness. "My genjutsu can't be broken by normal

means. And soon you will find that even if they're illusions, they can hurt you as badly as if they were ninjutsu. Perish!"

The stone dragons opened their jaws, and lunged at the defenseless Konoha ninja. However, before they could reach their prey, they were stopped by multiple vines emerging from underground, wrapping around them, and applying enough force to shatter them into pebbles. Team Gai and Shisui found themselves pushed upwards as the quicksand returned back to normal.

"What?" Akuma asked in shock. "How did you...?"

"You... aren't the only one confused," Lee admitted, as he checked himself.

"It doesn't matter. Whoever helped us will have my gratitude," Tenten interceded.

"You're welcome then, Tenten."

Everybody turned around to see Kurenai landing behind them. She then walked to the front, her eyes locked onto the Root agent.

"How did you dispel her genjutsu?" Shisui asked. "Not even my Sharingan was able to see through it!"

"Genjutsu of the Kurama clan can't be dispelled by normal means, not even by a Sharingan or Byakugan. You have counter it with genjutsu of your own," Kurenai explained. "And fortunately, not only I'm good with genjutsu, but I'm very familiar with the Kurama clan Bloodline."

"A genjutsu impossible to dispel? Man, that's so unfair!" Shisui complained. Kurenai then shot the Uchiha patriarch a massively annoyed glare, before Shisui realized he was in no position to complain about unfair abilities. "Okay, I get it. Shutting up."

"You should go and make sure Danzo doesn't escape, or at least he doesn't escape with the Rinnegan," Kurenai advised the others. "I stay here and take care of her."

"Very well, Kurenai-sensei. We shall return victorious," Neji replied.

"And Danzo will return without his head," Shisui added.

Team Gai and Shisui quickly left the scene, running towards the west, hoping to catch Danzo and his cronies before it would be too late. Kurenai and Akuma remained in place, staring at each other.

"Take that mask off, Yakumo," Kurenai ordered. "You don't need it."

While she appeared to ignore her at first, Akuma did as she was told. And just like Kurenai expected, under the mask was Yakumo Kurama, the girl she trained a year before becoming her current team's Jonin-sensei. She looked noticeably older, her eyes looked much duller than Kurenai remembered, lacking the glint of determination they used to have. A side effect of Danzo beating her personality and drive into fine powder.

"I knew it. I knew you were alive," Kurenai said, some raw emotion dripping into her voice. "The girl I saw that day on our way to Ichiraku's... it was you, right?"

"Yes, it was me. Or what you thought it was me," Yakumo replied, her voice keeping the same stoic tone. "Not that it matters anymore. The girl you trained back in the day is no more."

"I figured as much," Kurenai said. "I can imagine what Danzo did to you in order to become one of his puppets. But I refused to believe that the hopeful and determined girl who wanted to be a ninja more than anything in the world isn't there, buried under layers of mental conditioning."

This made Yakumo chuckle a bit. "Heh, let's say that Danzo-sama made me realize that being a ninja wasn't as... glamorous as I

thought. Not that it matters. I know that my work is important for the safety of a lot of people."

"No, you got it completely backwards. Numerous lives have been lost because of Danzo!" Kurenai insisted. "Come on, Yakumo, I know you're a smart girl! You must realize that what Danzo and Root do is wrong!"

"There's no such thing as right and wrong! Just Konoha, and its enemies that need to be crushed!" Yakumo replied, raising the tone of her voice, as her hands formed several hand seals. "And for enemies to be crushed, we need to be stronger than them!"

Suddenly, the world around her changed. The grassy soil beneath her feet became a tatami floor, while the trees were walls made of wood. She was now inside a house, which was richly decorated in a very traditional way, with plenty of finely drawn pictures of forests, rivers and mountains hanging from the walls, shoji doors, and tables and chairs of expensive wood. Kurenai recognized the place even if she had only been there a handful of times. It was Yakumo's home.

"Yakumo, listen to me! Danzo poisoned your mind!" Kurenai implored. "Danzo's way can only lead to ruin! Don't you see it?"

"Danzo-sama's way is the only possible way!" she insisted, her voice coming from every direction.

Suddenly, fire started to burst all around Kurenai, quickly consuming the house and everything on it. The fire exponentially grew with each second, until everything, Kurenai included, were engulfed by it.

"I was born weak, but Danzo-sama made me strong!" Yakumo cried. "He'll make sure I won't be able to kill anymore people who doesn't deserve it!"

Suddenly, a malestrom burst among the flames, putting them out as it expanded. The malestrom ceased, revealing Kurenai from within.

"That fire... it was you, right?" Kurenai said in realization. "Your powers went out of control... and your parents paid for it."

There was no response. Kurenai took Yakumo's silence as a confirmation. Then, girl appeared in front of her. Not as a young woman wearing Root apparel, but as the young girl Kurenai remembered, wearing a kimono.

"I thought that I had my powers under control," Yakumo's voice said, as tears started to stream from her eyes. "But they weren't. I didn't know what was reality and what was illusion anymore. And my illusions made my parents' deaths a reality."

"Yakumo, what happened to your parents was a tragedy, but it was an accident! It wasn't your fault!" Kurenai continued. "Don't you see that Danzo is using you? He doesn't care about you! All he sees in you is a weapon!"

"Ninjas are nothing but weapons!" Yakumo said, as she stomped her foot. As she did, hundreds of kunai and shuriken appeared around Kurenai, floating still around her. "And we need to make sure said weapons only hurt those who deserve it!"

The kunai and shuriken all dived at Kurenai, embedding into her flesh. However, the raven haired woman burst into a mass of pink petals, scattering around the place.

"It didn't take Danzo much to bring you to his side, did he?" Kurenai asked, now her voice coming from every direction. "All your life was plagued the chaos caused by your powers... and Danzo offered order. Something you accepted, no matter the cost."

"He succeeded where you failed!" Yakumo cried louder.

"Yes. I admit that maybe I could have trained you better. Maybe I underestimated how much you needed guidance, and how much harm your powers could do," Kurenai sorrowfully said. "I even considered sealing your powers for good and be done with it."

"Maybe you should have done that," Yakumo replied. "It would have been the best for everybody."

"No, that wouldn't have been a solution," Kurenai replied. The pink petals started to gather and took the form of a human, which turned into Kurenai again. "Your powers are something magnificent, and shouldn't be suppressed."

"My powers gave me nothing but misery!" Yakumo loudly cried. "My powers killed my parents! My powers made me an agent of Root! How can you say that?"

"Wait a minute... you don't want to work for Danzo?" Kurenai asked in shock.

"Of course not, I hate it! You have no idea what he did to me in order to ensure I controlled my powers! What I'm forced to do when working under him! But I have no other options! Danzo-sama and Root is everything I have! Danzo-sama is the only one who can assure that I won't harm the wrong people again!" she cried, her face turning red.

"No, that's not true! You still have me, Yakumo!" Kurenai pleaded. "And there are still plenty of people who would help you selflessly if they knew about you!"

"LIAR! Nobody came to help me when I needed it the most! Nobody helped me when I was trapped in my burning house, except Danzo's ninjas! Nobody came to my help when I begged for the Root instructors to stop!" Yakumo said, as the now burned house started to disappear, leaving the two women inside a pitch black void.

"I didn't know that you were alive! Had I know that you still lived, I wouldn't have rested until I had found you!" Kurenai told her. She then took a deep breathe, in order to calm a little. "It's not too late, Yakumo. Come with me. There's still time to make your dreams true."

"No, I... I can't," Yakumo said, her voice trembling. "He won't let me. Others tried to escape and... it never ended well. All I can do is to obey him."

"I can protect you! The Hokage can protect you from Danzo!" Kurenai insisted. "Hell, we won't even need you to be protected from Danzo, since that man's career is pretty much over! His fate is either rot in a cell for the rest of his days, or death!"

"I... no, I can't do that," Yakumo said, shaking her head. "I still need Danzo. I need him to live, no matter how much I hate that man personally. He's the only one who can make sure no other innocent like my parents dies by my hands."

"And how many innocents did you-" Kurenai said, before she stopped herself. Suddenly, something that Yakumo said dawned upon her, and realized that she had the key to defeat Yakumo here and there. It was kind of a cheap shot, but it was her best bet. *"I'm sorry, Yakumo. Don't hate me for this."*

"That's why I need to beat you!" Yakumo said, and made a hand seal.

Suddenly, a giant sword fell from the sky, cutting Kurenai in two. However, Kurenai's two halves burst into rose petals again, before reforming into two humanoid shapes. Said shapes then became two human beings, a man and a woman. Two people Yakumo knew too well.

"Mom... dad..." Yakumo said in a whisper.

"Do you think your parents would want you to do this? To work for a despicable man like Danzo?" Kurenai said. "Do you think they'll feel proud of you?"

"I... they... SHUT UP!" Yakumo screamed, as the image of her parents was shattered in a million crystal shards. "You know nothing about them! You know nothing about me!"

"That may be true," Kurenai admitted, as she reappeared before Yakumo. "But I'm a mother. And I'd hate to see my daughter ending up like you did. Even more if her guilt over my death drove her to such fate."

"I... I..." Yakumo stammered.

"Search your feelings, and ask yourself: Is this what your parents would have wanted?" Kurenai asked once again. "They wanted you have a bright future, not to be the personal assassin of an old war hawk. But you can still make them proud. It's not too late."

Yakumo wanted to retort, but words didn't come out of her mouth. Both she and Kurenai dissolved into nothingness, and the black void where they had been stopped existing.

...

Back in the real world, the fight had ended. Both Kurenai and Yakumo were sitting on the grassy ground, the latter in the former's arms, crying her eyes out, and the older woman gently caressed her brown hair, while whispering words of reassurance.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..." Yakumo sobbed.

"Shh, it's okay. Your nightmare is finally over," Kurenai whispered. "Your nightmare is finally over."

Author's Note: Danzo might have outsmarted Jiraiya, but Jiraiya outsmarted his outsmarting! (with Itachi's help)

A lot of people guessed that Akuma was Yakumo Kurama before, but this chapter finally confirmed it. Once again, I'd like to thank the reader AzureTemplar for suggesting me the idea of introducing Yakumo as a brainwashed Root agent. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been able to create this follow-up mini arc. Also, I hoped you enjoyed Kurenai and Yakumo's duel. I

liked it in that it was pretty different from the usual fights, since you almost never see characters that specialize in genjutsu fight (outside of filler, the only stance of this happening was the beginning of the Sasuke vs Itachi duel, and then they moved to ninjutsu anyway).

I know I'm going to get some hate for my less than savory comments regarding Minato not being a very good sensei, but after rewatching Kakashi Gaiden, and then the episodes about Rin's death and Obito's downfall don't paint a very good picture on him. Like I said, he should have taken the time to solve the issues between Kakashi and Obito (or give them time to solve them themselves) before letting them take dangerous missions without his supervision. Hell, at the beginning of Kakashi Gaiden, Kakashi nearly gets killed by an Iwa Ninja because he didn't realize of a fatal flaw of the Chidori, and had to be saved by Minato.

And yes, as you can see, Danzo is back. I know a lot of people hate Danzo, and they preferred if I just killed him back in chapter 81. But like I said many times, I didn't keep Danzo alive because I liked him personally. I need him to make a certain plotline work.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter, Team Gai and Shisui vs Danzo! Will they be able to claim the other Rinnegan as well, or will Danzo rise victorious? Also, next chapter is going to have a twist I'm sure none of you will see coming, even if it has been very subtly foreshadowed during past arcs, that will put every action of a certain character under a completely different light.

In the meantime, leave a review with yours thoughts on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Darkness Falls, Shadow Rises

Author's Note: Many reviewers expressed worry about Yakumo, but I can assure you that the worst has already passed, and you have nothing to fear for her. Also, I'm glad that so many reviewers agreed with me when it comes to Minato as a sensei. Though, as another reviewer pointed out, senseis in the world of Naruto are pretty crappy overall. Let's hope at least I made a better job on that front.

Now, enjoy the new chapter:

Chapter 90:

Darkness Falls, Shadow Rises

or

I got my eye on you

Forests of the Land of Fire

Karui, Omoi and T traveled through the lush sea of trees that made most of the country that houses Konoha. Used as they were to the Land of Lightning's far rockier and steep terrain, the trio of Kumo ninjas did appreciate the beauty of the forests of the foreign land. Or as much as they could, given that the death of their sensei still clung heavy to their hearts.

"It's getting too dark," Karui said, as the sun started to set. "I think we should set a camp and continue tomorrow morning."

Both Omoi and T nodded. They set up a campfire in no time, and started to cook some fishes that they had caught earlier that day. As they cooked and ate their dinner, nobody said anything. The mood

was gloom. Not being able to take the tension, the blonde decided to break the silence and strike a conversation.

"So..." she awkwardly began. "How long until we arrive Konoha?"

"Two or three days, I'd say," the redheaded girl replied. "If go at a good pace. We've been going pretty slow."

"Yeah well, I don't feel much like doing this, you know?" Omoi replied, his body droopy. "I don't feel like doing anything since Akatsuki got sensei."

"Raikage-sama gave us an important mission. We can't disappoint him," Karui told them.

"Besides, B-sensei would have wanted us to go on and become the best ninjas we can be even without him," T chimed in. "He'd hate to see us all depressed and down."

"True," the only male of the group admitted, before chuckling sadly. "Heh, if he was here, he'd try to cheer me with one of his songs, like he always used to do."

"Plus, by doing this we'll be avenging him," Karui added. "There's no way the rest of the villages aren't going to hunt down Akatsuki with all the shit they did. They were the ones who turned Kiri into such a shithole, among other things."

"Let's hope you're right, Karui," Omoi replied. "Because I can't imagine Konoha being willing to help us, given the history between our villages."

"That's in the past," T said, with a dismissive hand wave. "We were also afraid when we went there for the Chunin Exams. But in the end, nothing happened. In fact, most of the Konoha ninjas we met treated us rather kindly."

"That's right," Omoi said, smiling a little more, before his smile widened even more. "And Karui got a boyfriend!"

The redhead's eyes were wide open with shock, as a faint blush started to spread through his skin. "W-What the hell are you talking about!? I have no boyfriend!"

"No?" T said, as she inched closed towards her, sporting a smug smile. "Then what about the letters you write him?"

"Well, those letters..." Karui began, stammering a little, as she averted her gaze. A scowl developed on her face as she turned back at the girl with the twin braids. "Why the hell do I need to justify myself to you!? Whoever I send letters to is none of your damn business!"

"Now I'm seeing why you want us to get to Konoha so fast," Omoi said, chuckling a little louder than before. "You really want to see your beloved Choji, don't you?"

Omoi and T continued to prod and laugh at their for the time unofficial leader, while the redhead became more heated by the minute, and tried to stop them from bringing up their relationship with Choji, to little success.

That is, until T suddenly stopped laughing, and remained completely still, almost in shock, like she just saw a ghost.

"T? Something wrong?" Omoi asked.

"I'm senseing somebody. Ninjas getting closer to our position," T said, worried. "They surrounded us!"

The three ninjas immediately jumped from their benches, standing back to back as Karui and Omoi drew their katanas, while T pulled out a kunai.

"Shit, we've been too noisy!" Karui reprimanded both herself and her teammates. "How many of them?"

"I'm sensing..." T started to count them in her head. "About sixteen."

"Great, so, they outnumber us more than five to one. Great, just fucking great!" Karui said, greeting her teeth. "Okay, this what we're going to do. When they show up, the three of us use the Lightning Flash in tandem to blind them, and then run as fast as we can. Got it?"

The other two silently nodded.

T could sense how the enemy got closer. As they did, both Kauai and Omoi started to notice them as well. A shadow quickly passing through the trees. A bush briefly rustled. The sound of a little branch snapped in two. Beads of sweat started to run down their heads the more seconds passed, which felt like an eternity. That's it, until two ninjas appeared before them.

"NOW!" Karui shouted.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

The three Kumo ninja started to glow with a bright, intense white light. Anybody unfortunate enough to be looking in their direction would feel like looking directly into the sun. Cries of agony filled the air as the enemy ninjas instinctively covered their eyes with their hands.

"Come on, go, go go!" Karui urged, as she started to run in a random direction, with Omoi and T behind her. Unfortunately for the redhead, neither she nor her teammates went to far, as they found themselves trapped inside a tornado of sand. "What the hell?"

"What kind of jutsu is this?" T asked, looking around.

"Sorry, but I will be the one asking the questions here," a stoic but powerful voice said, as another ninja appeared before them. A boy with spiky red hair and black rings around his eyes. "Starting with what a trio of Kumo ninjas are doing so far away from home."

...

While Kurenai fought Yakumo, and most importantly, brought her back to the side of good, Team Gai and Shisui Uchiha continued the chase of Danzo and his remaining goons. Neji was tracking their prey with his Byakugan, and according to him, they were getting closer to them with each second.

"It seems that Danzo's old age is something he can't ignore, not even with Hashirama's cells giving him a boost," the former Branch House Hyuga mused. *"Even with the head start, he has no chances of running away from us."*

"Neji, how much distance?" Gai asked.

"About two hundred and fifty meters. We shorten the gap by a few meters with each passing second."

Gai seemed to ponder what Neji said, before silently reaching a decision.

"It would be better to catch Danzo as soon as possible. He might have more reinforcements waiting for him further into the forest," Gai decided, before looking at Lee. "Lee, you and I are going to cut his escape. Neji, Tenten, Shisui-san, get ready to fight them once they turn around."

The other three ninja nodded. Shisui's eyes gleamed with anticipation.

"Nobody will save you this time, Danzo," Shisui thought. He could feel his blood boiling with anger, and tried to keep that anger in

check until he could channel it to fight. *"Your karmic punishment awaits."*

"Lee, it's up to us to make sure that miscreant doesn't get away!" Gai boomed. "Let's rush ahead and cut his escape!"

"Understood, Gai-sensei!" the green-clad boy said, as both he and his master got ready.

"Gate of Opening: Open!"

A burst of wind blew from Gai and Lee's bodies as master and student opened the first gate, releasing a wave of chakra through their bodies. With their enhanced capabilities, they shot forward like a pair of green-clad rockets. And in less than ten seconds, Neji saw how his sensei and teammate completely bridged the gap between them and the Root group, running so fast they were almost flying, before falling on top of them, and engaging them in combat.

Danzo wanted to continue fleeing and leave his remaining troops to deal with the pair of bowl-haired ninjas. However they had already anticipated this, and while Gai engaged Danzo himself, Lee would keep the rest of the ninjas at bay to the best of their ability. And since they were no longer fleeing, it took the rest of the Konoha ninjas almost no time to reach them as well.

"Guys, can you provide me some cover?" Shisui asked, as he impatiently unsheathed his tanto. "I have a fight with Danzo pending to complete."

Both Neji and Tenten nodded, being more than aware of Shisui's intense grudge against the Root leader.

"We shall focus on dealing with his minions first, so we all can focus on Danzo and make sure he doesn't escape this time," Tenten said, as she unfolded her collapsible chakra bow. She tensed the chakra string as long as her eyes saw the enemy fighting against Lee. "Precision Arrow Wave!"

"Vacuum Blade Palm!"

Tenten let loose a chakra arrow that quickly split into smaller arrows, while Neji thrust his palm forward, releasing a vacuum blade that flew alongside the arrows, cutting leaves and branches in its path. Shisui closely dashed behind the combination attack.

Already expecting it, Lee quickly noticed the attack, and kicked a Root ninja he was fighting against towards it, before jumping away. On top of that unlucky ninja, Tenten and Neji's combined attack also caught more than half of Danzo's goons.

"DANZO!" Shisui screamed, as he dashed towards his hated enemy.

Danzo, who was keeping Gai at bay with his Wood Release, noticed the Uchiha coming at him like an ebon missile, and quickly made several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Serial Waves!"

Danzo exhaled several blades of wind at Shisui, which cut multiple tree branches in their way, resulting in a small storm of leaves. The Uchiha's Sharingan, however, was able to predict the trajectories of the wind attack, and leaping from one branch to another, skillfully dodged all of them. And using his built momentum, Shisui dashed past Danzo, landing on a tree branch behind him, making sure to cut his advance.

"Your path ends here, Danzo," Shisui seethed, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Meltdown!"

Shisui breathed a fireball that continuously expanded. Danzo's own Sharingan scanned the surroundings in an attempt to find an escape route, but the only one he found was to drop to the ground level, where he'll be more vulnerable.

" *He dodged, meaning that he can't use Izanagi. Or he won't sacrifice the only Sharingan he still has,*" Shisui deduced. "Gai, let's

double team him! He can't use Izanagi!"

"Understood, Shisui-san!" Gai agreed, as the green clad Jonin and the Uchiha landed in front and behind Danzo, respectively, and quickly adopted fighting stances.

Anger and frustration were building inside Danzo, and thus found himself unable to keep his stoic façade, as his facial expression reflected his feelings. This seemed to amuse Shisui.

"What, aren't you supposed to be as cold as a statue?" Shisui said, smirking confidently. "Guess that even you know that this is the end. Without Izanagi, you can't hope to get out of here alive."

"While I admit that Izanagi is an useful ability, it's far from my only trick. I still have my skill, experience, and Wood Release," Danzo said, regaining some of his clamness. Then, his Sharingan took a different shape, one of a three bladed shuriken, with a small dot between each blade. "Not to mention, I still have Fugaku Uchiha's Mangekyo Sharingan."

Gain tensed up upon hearing this. "Shisui-san! What does Fukagu Uchiha's eye can do?"

"I have no idea!" Shisui replied, just as unnerved. "Be ready for anything!"

"Then let me show you the power of Fugaku Uchiha's eye. I was unable to use it alongisde Izanagi, but now I have no such problem," Danzo said, as he made a hand seal. His lone Sharingan took the shape of a three bladed shuriken, with a dot in each space between the blades. And a larger one at the middle. "Okuninushi!"

A burst of chakra came from Danzo, and the air around him looked distorted. Grabbing a kunai, Danzo dashed at Shisui, leaving a trail of negative-colored afterimages after him, much to Shisui and Gai's confusion.

Shisui easily parried Danzo's blow, and was ready to counter, when the afterimages attacked as well. Thanks to his speed, he was allowed to block all of their swings, but while doing so, not only he was pushed backwards, but allowed Danzo to fall back and prepare a counterattack.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Bullets!"

"You're wide open!" Gai shouted, as he rushed at Danzo from behind, ready to deliver a roundhouse kick. "Konoha Great Whirlwind!"

Danzo and some of his afterimages fired a barrage of wind bullets at Shisui, while the rest of his afterimages fired backwards, towards the unsuspecting Gai. While Shisui used a fire jutsu to propel himself upwards, avoiding the barrage of vacuum missiles, Gai was in no position to dodge. One of the bullets hit Gai in the sole of his shoe, producing an explosion of wind that hurled the green clad Jonin backwards. However, Gai was able to land on his feet on the trunk of a tree, and used his momentum to propel himself back at Danzo.

"You won't catch me off guard this time!" Gai said, facing his elbow at Danzo. "Konoha Rock Crusher!"

Danzo turned around, and sent one of his afterimages after Gai. The afterimage tried to block the elbow strike, but the force it carried was too strong, and was shattered into nothingness. Still, it cost Gai much of his momentum, allowing the real Danzo to safely block the attack, before delivering a devastating counterattack with his afterimages.

"For a ninja that relies exclusively on taijutsu, you're quite strong, Maito Gai," Danzo began, as he pushed Gai backwards with a barrage of punches and kicks. "But against this power, mere taijutsu is no rival."

"Of course you'd have such an unyouthful view on power and strength!" Gai replied, as he tried to push Danzo and his afterimages

back. "You've got your power by stealing it from other people! There's no point in having power if you didn't work to rightfully earn it!"

"Power is power, no matter how you acquire it," Danzo calmly said, as he made his afterimages to surround Gai, before they lunged at them from different directions.

"Gate of Healing, Open!" Gai's powerful chakra started to blow wind in every direction, but that didn't deter Danzo. However, the next thing would. "Konoha Earthbreaker!"

Gai focused as much chakra into his fist as possible, before smashing it against the ground, opening a large crater, and creating a powerful shockwave that pushed Danzo backwards and destroyed his afterimages. However, they reappeared besides the original a few moments later.

"As much as it pains me to admit it, Danzo has a point, that jutsu is powerful," Gai thought, as he adopted a defensive stance. *"They're like Shadow Clones that follow Danzo and echo his actions, but he can command them to do something else. And while they're easy to destroy, they respawn almost instantly. Still, I can't give up! I'm confident that if I keep fighting, between Shisui-san and I we'll find a way to overcome that jutsu!"*

That moment, Shisui landed besides Gai, his trusty tanto in his hand.

"Shisui, you fought against Danzo before," Gai spoke. "Any idea on what can we do to beat him?"

"We should turn this into a war of attrition," Shisui suggested.

"Despite having Hashirama's cells, Danzo is still an old man, Both you and I have much more stamina than him. If we can overcome his jutsu, then let's wait until he tires out. All Mangekyo Sharingan jutsu comes with a high chakra cost, and I doubt that one's an exception."

"Not a strategy to my liking, but if there's nothing better, I'll have to swallow my pride and bow to your experience," Gai admitted.

"You aren't going to beat me with that trick again, Shisui," Danzo said, confident. "I know what my weaknesses are, and how to cover them. And once I'm done with you two, your eye will be-"

"As entertaining as it was to watch you lot fight," a new voice said out of nowhere. "I think it's about time to get back what it's rightfully mine."

"That voice..." the leader of Root said.

The three ninja quickly looked around, trying to find the hidden enemy. Then, a spiraling vortex formed a few meters from Danzo. And from said vortex, Obito Uchiha emerged. His mouth was curved in a confident smile.

"You again..." Danzo seethed, as he moved his body to face the Akatsuki, forgetting about Gai and Shisui for a moment.

"The hell!?" Shisui asked, as his eyes shifted back and forth between Danzo and Obito, unsure on whom he should focus.

"We meet again, Danzo," Obito said with the same informality one would address a longtime friend. "Funny how things turn out to be, huh? Many years ago, you took Shisui's eye before I took it away from you. Now, history repeats again with the Rinnegan."

"Danzo," Gai called the elder, his tone dead serious. Danzo quickly turned at him, the tension on his face constant. "Despite our current enmity, Obito and Akatsuki are our mutual enemies. Akatsuki can't take the Rinnegan back. If we join forces, we can defeat him easily."

"I can't believe I'm going to say this but... I agree with Gai," Shisui admitted, looking as if those words hurt him as badly as being branded with a burning iron. "There's nothing more than I want that

cut that ugly head of yours from the rest of your body. But this is far more important than my revenge."

"Ah, isn't it beautiful, seeing deathsworn enemies not even five seconds ago joining forces to fight an even bigger threat?" Obito mockingly said, laughing a little. However, all trace of joviality disappeared after that. "Too bad such thing isn't going to happen again. Danzo, the time has come for the nine to become one."

For a reason neither Gai nor Shisui were able to understand, those words made Danzo stagger as if he had been hit with a hammer in the face. Obito then extended his hand as he walked towards Danzo.

"Now, Danzo, would you kindly give me the Rinnegan?" Obito asked.

Then, much to Gai and Shisui's shock, Danzo pulled the sealed tube from within his robe, and wordlessly handed it to the Akatsuki, who quickly stored inside the kamui dimension.

"Just one? Oh well, guess that'll have to work," Obito said, displeased, but resigned to do what he had been given.

"Danzo! What the hell!?" Shisui asked, his fury resurfacing twice as strong. "You... you fucking traitor! You were always with Akatsuki from the very beginning!"

"Oh, come on, don't blame poor Danzo," Obito said, as he patted the elder's shoulder a couple times. "After all, you should know better than anybody how hard is to fight Kotoamatsukami, right?"

Both Gai and Shisui opened their eyes wide in shock.

"What... what did you say?" Shisui asked. It was him now who was staggering upon hearing Obito's words.

"You heard me. I have Danzo under my control. He has been like that for quite a few years, actually," Obito explained. "I might not

have your eye anymore thanks to my lovely Rin, but the effect still lasts even if I no longer possess the eye."

"But that..." Gai began, trying to fight the shock. "How none of us noticed? How it is possible that...?"

"You see, when I first acquired Shisui's eye, I knew I had to put a high rank Konoha ninja under my control. The question was who. The Hokage? The Jonin Commander? The ANBU Commander?" Obito asked, before shaking his head. "No, I couldn't do that. I already tried that with Yagura, and look how well it worked. But Danzo, the leader of a division that officially doesn't exist? He was perfect. Plus, I knew Danzo was dealing with Orochimaru, so I could use him to spy on that snake as well. You see, if you set a tree on fire, people will see it and rush to put the flames out. But if you quietly poison its roots, nobody will notice until the rot becomes visible. And by then, it's too late."

"So that's why Danzo was feeding you information on the jinchuriki, right?" Shisui asked, his voice full of spite. "He was your puppet all along."

"More or less," Obito admitted with a shrug. "You see, I needed to leave Danzo with some free will, or else I'd have another Yagura in my hands. That's why I implanted an idea inside his mind in order to make him think that letting Akatsuki gather all other Tailed Beasts in a single place was the way to go. It was so subtle, nobody noticed it wasn't his idea at all, not even when he shared it with anybody else. Right, Shisui?"

The Uchiha patriarch gritted his teeth. When Danzo told him about his plans in their previous battle, at no point Shisui considered that the plan may not be Danzo's.

"And, of course, I also implanted a mental trigger that would make him completely subservient to me when the time was right," Obito finished his explanation. He then turned at Danzo, his eyes looking the elder in fake pity. "And now that you gave me the Rinnegan and

can't use you as a spy anymore, I have no more use for you. Danzo, execute the Black Night protocol."

Those words seemed to have the same effect as the ones that put him under Obito's control. Gai and Shisui quickly prepared for the worst. While Obito disappeared inside his spiraling vortex, Danzo ripped his robe apart, leaving his chest exposed. Five black symbols appeared on it, one in the center, the other four around it in an X pattern.

"Sealing Art: Reverse Tetragram Sealing!"

Then, the five seals moved towards the center, merging into a pitch black sphere which started to expand. Without needing to trade words, both Gai and Shisui knew that they had to put as much distance from Danzo as fast as possible. Once the sphere reached the size of a house, it compressed, absorbing everything inside it into Danzo's body. Tree branches, leaves, rocks, soil, even small animals and insects were violently sucked in, and a second later, all that mass was burst in a massive explosion, putting an end to Danzo's long and sordid life.

...

A Few Hours Later, Undisclosed Location

Inside an underground chamber, Zetsu waited patiently. Not long ago, he and his boss were preparing the heist of the Rinnegan, when one of the White Zetsu clones told them that Danzo managed to steal them first.

Rather than being angry, Obito smiled, much to the vegetal being's confusion.

"This is excellent!" the Uchiha had said. "It seems that fortune smiles upon us once again. Wait here, Zetsu, I'll be returning shortly."

That was two hours ago. What the Uchiha was planning to do, Zetsu had no idea. However, his wait came to an end when the familiar spiraling vortex formed before him, and Obito emerged from it, his expression that of triumph.

"So..." the black half began. "Do you have the Rinnegan?"

Obito reached under his robe, revealing the sealed tube with a single Rinnegan floating inside it. Zetsu wasn't convinced.

"Just one?" the white half asked.

"Sadly, I was unable to acquire both," Obito said, as he tossed the tube at his inhuman minion, who easily caught it with one hand.

"Fortunately, one Rinnegan is enough to complete the last phase of our plan. Now, time to work. I want you to remove my Byakugan and replace it with that Rinnegan. Konoha has the other one, and I need to bond with the Demonic Statue before any Konoha ninja does it first."

"Understood, boss. I'll prepare the operation room at once," the white half said, before sinking into the ground.

...

That Night, Hokage's Tower

After successfully recovering the Rinnegan, Jiraiya kept the sealed tube with him rather than put it on a safebox again, despite the threat of being stolen was pretty low now.

Wasting no time, he had his ANBU gather Tsunade, Hiruzen, Shizune, Itachi, Shisui, Konan, Takuya and Nori for an urgent meeting in the Council Room. Ten minutes later, all of those he had summoned were in the room, as well as several ANBU for added security.

Naturally, most eyes were on Konan. The ex-Akatsuki member was now wearing a collar with sealing patterns around her neck, on top of the chakra-suppressing manacles. If Jiraiya, Tsunade or Naruto made a single hand seal, the collar would release an electric discharge, shocking her into submission. Fortunately, the blue haired woman accepted the security measure without raising a fuss.

"Thank you for coming so swiftly, especially at such late hour" Jiraiya said, as he pulled the sealed tube with the Rinnegan on it, and placed it on the table. "I think you can figure out why I summoned all of you here. We need to discuss what are we going to do with this eye."

"That eye is dangerous," Takuya spoke up. "Hokage-sama, you fought against Pain, and experienced firsthand what kind of power he had. If this eye falls into the wrong hands, it could be catastrophic."

"Sadly, it already fell into wrong hands, Takuya-san" Shizune interceded. "Obito managed to steal another one. We'll need this eye to match his power."

"I agree with Shizune-san," Nori said, as she shoot an apologetic look towards her father.

"You will need the eye if you want to release the trapped Tailed Beasts inside the statue," Konan interceded. "Destroying the eye is not an option, at least not now."

"I figured as much as well," Hiruzen stated, as he stroke his beard. "The question is, who's going to wield that eye? If it's anything like the Sharingan, then only a selected few will be able to tap into its powers without any drawbacks."

"Hiruzen-sama is right," Nori said, nodding. "Only a descendant of the Sage of the Six Paths who possess at least one half of Six Paths chakra can wield the power of the Rinnegan."

"That means only an Uchiha, Uzumaki or Senju can do it," Takuya helpfully added, before looking around. "Fortunately, we have plenty of suitable ninja from those three clans."

"So, the ones who can use that eye are Tsunade-sama, Naruto-kun, Hagane-kun, Kaida-chan, Sasuke-kun, Itachi, Shisui and Karin," Shizune recounted. She left her own children out for obvious reasons.

"I'd leave Hagane and Kaida out," Jiraiya interceded. "They're way too young for such a responsibility. Not to mention that their bloodlines already brought them no small amount of misfortune."

"I think either Itachi or myself would be the best suited for it," Shisui began. "After all, we both wield the Mangekyo Sharingan and have experience with-"

He was interrupted by Tsunade slamming her hand onto the table, startled both him and everybody else.

"Like hell I'm going to let the eye of a god in the hands of a kid!" Tsunade energetically protested. "As the most veteran ninja, as well as having both Senju and Uzumaki blood, I'm the best suited for the role."

"Kid? But I'm twenty seven..." Shisui weakly protested. Shizune gently patted his shoulder in consolation.

"Let it go, Shisui," Itachi interceded. "Your arguments are sound, but I think it's better if we let somebody else get the eye. The Uchiha Clan hasn't recovered in the eye of the public completely, and people might grow suspicious if one of us were to acquire the Rinnegan."

"I guess so..." the older Uchiha admitted.

"So, all in favor for the Rinnegan going to Tsunade?" Hiruzen asked.

Everybody raised their hands in approvation. Even Konan. This didn't go unnoticed, and got a few odd stares in her direction.

"I don't know if my vote really counts, but I do think that Tsunade-sama is the best candidate to use the Rinnegan," Konan stated.

"It's decided then. Let's do this as soon as we can. Shizune, take Tsunade-hime to the hospital, and begin the transplant," Jiraiya told the black haired medic. Shizune nodded, and both she and her master got up from their chairs and left the room, not before taking the sealed tube still on the table. Wordlessly, several ANBU followed them. "I will work on a mask with protective seals to ensure nobody will be able to steal the Rinnegan from Tsunade-hime. Konan?"

"Yes, sensei?" the bluenette asked.

"Of all of us here, you're the one most familiar with the Rinnegan and its abilities," Jiraiya began. "Do you think that you can train Tsunade-hime in order to master the Rinnegan?"

"Even if I never experienced such power myself, I saw Nagato using it countless times. I shall teach Tsunade-sama to the best of my ability," Konan stated.

"Excellent. Then, I think we can conclude this meeting. Hope we can end this crisis soon without having to spill more blood."

...

Next Morning, Torture and Interrogation, Underground Floor

Yakumo Kurama sat alone on a bench inside one of the cells under Konoha's Torture and Interrogation department. While she wasn't restrained, she was wearing a pair of metal bracers with chakra-suppression seals on them, as well as a collar with seals that could give her an electric shock if she did anything her captors would deem dangerous or even suspicious.

Despite the name, they had assured her that she would be neither tortured nor interrogated, mostly because what was left of her former boss, Danzo, could be stored inside a matchbox.

She had mixed feelings over such news. On one side, she was afraid that without Danzo to rein in the darkest parts of her power, nothing would stop another accident like the one which claimed her parents' lives from happening again. On the other hand, she felt relieved that that horrible man wouldn't control her life anymore.

Kurenai had promised Yakumo that together they'd find a solution to her problem that didn't involve Danzo's draconian measures. She wasn't sure if the raven haired woman could fulfill such promise, but for everybody's sake, she had to let her try at the very least.

She was snapped from her thoughts when she heard the sound of steps coming closer. A few seconds later, an ANBU appeared, followed by Kurenai. The ANBU opened the door of her cell, letting the raven haired woman in. She sat besides the brown haired girl as the ANBU locked the door once again. They spend a long moment in silence, without even making eye contact, until Kurenai decided to open her mouth.

"So..." Kurenai began, trying to shake off the awkwardness of the moment, as she rubbed her bare arm. "How are you? I hope they aren't treating you too bad."

"Don't worry, compared to what my life used to be under Danzo-sama, this is a spa," Yakumo softly replied.

Kurenai frowned a little. Despite the fact that he was dead, and that Yakumo never liked the man, she still used a respectful honorific to address him. Hopefully she could be able to correct that soon.

"Even then, I spoke with Anko, and we expect that you'll be out here soon, even if under probation," Kurenai reassured her, as she placed a comforting hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "Hokage-sama

knows that no Root agent was working under Danzo by their own volition, and with him dead there's no risk of Root being rebuilt."

"I see," he said, not looking all that excited of being free. Truth be told, she has pretty much forgotten what it meant to be free. "What's going to be of me once I'm free? I have nowhere to go. I have no family anymore, and I can't return to Root."

Kurenai smiled at her. "You'll be living with us. Hiruzen-sama gave me permission to let you live in the Sarutobi Estate. I already got your room ready."

"Really?" Yakumo asked. "And... is everybody else okay with that? Aren't they afraid of letting a former Root agent near them or their children? Especially since I helped Danzo-sama kidnap a few..."

Kurenai frowned a little, as she squeezed Yakumo's shoulder a little tighter to drive her point further.

"Listen, Danzo's sins are only Danzo's, not yours," Kurenai insisted. "All of his unwilling accomplices, you included, deserve a second chance. And I have faith that you'll make good of that chance."

"I..." Yakumo began, before his mouth curved into a small smile. "Thank you, Kurenai-sensei. I promise I will make the best out of this opportunity."

Kurenai smiled back as well.

...

Downtown Konoha

The day after the invasion, and subsequent clash with Root, Jiraiya finally put in motion Konoha's reconstruction. Letters were sent to other villages telling them about what happened and asking for help, countless D-Rank missions were issued in order to help with the reparation efforts.

There were two things that greatly sped the reconstruction: one were the Chakra Golems, which proved to be an incredibly useful asset, as they could be used to remove and carry rocks, pieces of concrete, and debris away, while the humans focused on something else.

The second was a trio of ninjas that had an unique ability that was thought to be lost forever.

"Wood Release: Four Pillar House Jutsu!"

From the debris, a large, two story house made of wood emerged. It had glass-less windows, several balconies and a couple doors. Konoha's emblem was carved in the front. Even if it lacked glass, plumbing and electricity, it was completely habitable. Upon seeing the house emerge, people watching the display let out wild cheers.

"Ugh," Kaida said, as she fell to her knees, trying to regain her breath. "I'm the closest thing Konoha has to a princess, why I'm doing these handicrafts?"

"Because we're the only ones who have the power to do it," Tenzo replied, having erecting another house himself.

"Yes, you should take joy in knowing that your power will speed Konoha's recovery quite a lot," Rin replied, having raised another house as well. "Come on, we're almost done with this block."

"Can't we take a little rest? I'm winded!" Kaida whined.

"Come on, just a little more," Tenzo insisted. "I know firsthand this takes a lot from you, but the people of Konoha depends on us."

"Besides, it's a princess' job to take care of her subjects, right?" Rin asked with a cheeky grin. Kaida merely narrowed her eyes at her in anger.

"Plus, for all you talk about being the First Hokage's great granddaughter, you could try to emulate him a little more," Tenzo

continued. "Did you know that he used this jutsu to create almost a hundred houses in one go?"

Kaida opened her eyes widely. She was aware that Hashirama used Wood Release to create the initial settlement that would become Konoha, but he couldn't imagine how he could build so many houses at once, when a single house left the white haired girl drained.

"R-Really?" she asked.

Tenzo nodded in confirmation. "You can ask your mother if you don't believe me. Now, you wouldn't want people to hold you as some sort of a pale imitation of Hashirama, would you?" Kaida merely shook her head wordlessly. "Then let's continue. Then I'll treat you to a snack."

...

Training Ground One

"Let's do it, Tsunade-sama," Konan stated. "Remember, think of the statue."

Tsunade nodded, bit her thumb, and formed five hand seals.

Training Ground One was a place not many ninjas had the chance to see. While it had nothing significant or extraordinary that made it stand out from the rest of the training fields -being just your standard grassy terrain with a few cluster of trees and some small lakes-, such place was the reigning Hokage's training grounds.

Which didn't get much use since the reigning Hokages don't have that much spare time to train as much as any other ninja would. Still, the fact that Jiraiya had a training ground all to himself -and whoever he decides to bring with him- was something he was being thankful for know, given the current circumstances. Namely, the fact that they had a place to train Tsunade away from prying eyes.

The transplant had been a success, as expected. However, it was advised for Tsunade to rest a few hours before using the Rinnegan, so her body could familiarize with this new power. For protection, Jiraiya created an eyepatch with multiple protective sealing patterns that made sure nothing other than a S-Rank jutsu could break it. Due lack of space for the seals, the actual "patch" pretty much covered Tsunade's left side of her face from the nose up.

And now, deciding that she had rested enough, Tsunade was going to use the Rinnegan for the first time since her transplant, in order to summon and bind herself to the Demonic Statue.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Tsunade slammed her palm into the ground, producing a massive burst of smoke, accompanied by a powerful wind blowing in every direction. Jiraiya held his breath.

"Did she...?"

But when the smoke dispelled, there was nothing there. Tsunade scowled, Jiraiya muttered a profanity, and Konan merely sighed.

"We were too late. Obito must have bonded with the statue already," Konan said, dejected. "And as long as he has the Statue and all the beasts inside it, he will be a threat to the world."

"In that case, I think it's about time we changed strategies," Tsunade stated, punching her palm. "So far, we only reacted to Akatsuki's movements. This time, we should track them down and pound them into dust."

"That's a good idea, if only we knew any of their general HQ," Jiraiya said, before looking at the bluenette. "Konan?"

"Our main based used to be Amegakure, thought that was mostly Nagato and I," Konan said. "We had multiple lairs hidden across the elemental nations, mostly in small countries without ninja villages, or

very small villages, though they were more meeting points where the extractions took place, rather than actual bases.

"With how things are now, the leadership of Akatsuki falls upon Obito. And I'm one hundred percent sure Obito has assets of his own that neither me nor Nagato were aware of. Finding his base of operations isn't going to be an easy task."

"If you give me information on Akatsuki in general, my spies can make an educated guess on where Obito could have his base," Jiraiya said. "In the meanwhile, I think you should begin Tsunade-hime's training."

"Understood. Are you ready to begin, Tsunade-sama?" Konan asked.

"You can bet I am. We've wasted enough time already. Show me what I can do with this fancy eye," Tsunade said.

...

Sakura was walking down the street as she headed towards her destination. Unlike a good chunk of Konoha, the pinkette could appreciate that the damage to the buildings in this zone were minimal. She was happy for the people living there. She also remembered that, during the Uchiha insurrection, her street had been among those ignored by the perpetrators, given that it was on a mostly civilian zone.

She wasn't this lucky now, given that Akatsuki's attack was more indiscriminate. Thankfully, her parents were evacuated to the shelters long before their house was brought down by the ensuing battles.

"Guess it only makes sense that you're the lucky one now, Ino," Sakura said to herself, as she reached her destination, the Yamanaka Flower Shop. "Given that the last time you lost something so precious."

Sakura opened the door, and greeted the people inside, expecting to see Ino, or at least her mother, in the counter.

"Good morning!" Sakura cheerfully said.

"Good morning, Sakura-san. It's nice to see you."

However, it wasn't either Ino nor her mother who returned the greeting, but a male voice. A voice she recognize, and filled her with irritation. It took the pinkette a few seconds to realize that Sai was in front of her, wearing a white apron with yellow flowers over his ninja gear, wiping the floor with a broom he was holding.

After the momentary lapse, Sakura's ninja instincts kicked in, as she quickly reached for a kunai, and tackled Sai, slamming the pale boy into a wall, causing a small tremor.

"YOU! What the hell are you doing here!? How did you escape!? You're going to kill Ino because she busted both you and your organization, don't you!?" the heated kunoichi demanded.

"Actually-"

"What was that noise...?" Ino asked, as she entered the store. "Sai, what are you- SAI!"

"You were lucky I caught this guy sneaking inside your store, Ino," Sakura proudly said, tightening her grip. "I'm sure he was planning to kill you!"

"What? No! Sakura, release him at once!" Ino demanded, as she rushed towards the two. "Sai is working here!"

Sakura felt as if somebody spalshed her face with cold water. Her grip lessened a little.

"What?" Sakura repeated. Upon seeing Ino's glare, Sakura complied, and released the former Root agent, who fell down on his

butt. "Okay, I think I need to hear some explanation as for why this scumbag is working here."

"Sai isn't a sumbag," Ino said, as she helped the black haired ninja back on his feet. "And he's working here as a part of his rehabilitation."

"Uh?" Sakura asked.

"See, most of Danzo's agents didn't work for him willingly," Ino began to explain. "Many of them, such as Sai, were subject to heavy mental conditioning, and thus they can't be made responsible for their actions. So Hokage-sama started a program to de-condition them, so they can rejoin Konoha's proper ninja ranks, or become civilians if they wish so. I volunteered my clan to take care of Sai for the time being."

"That's... so nice of you," Sakura said. "But aren't you worried that Sai might turn on you, or may do something-"

"Ino-san has nothing to worry about," Sai chimed in, as he lowered the neck of his shirt, revealing a collar with small sealing patterns inscribed on it. "If I went to do something inappropriate, Ino-san only needs to make a hand seal, and this collar will immobilize me via electric shock."

"Though I'm pretty sure we won't need to resort to that," Ino added, laughing a bit awkwardly as she patted Sai in the shoulder.

"Oh, I see.." Sakura said, as a feeling of guilt started to creep on her back for assuming the worse and assaulting Sai like that. "I'm sorry for attacking you, Sai. I got a little carried away."

"Apologies accepted, pinky," Sai said, smiling at her.

Sakura raised an eyebrow. "Pinky?"

"Do you find that nickname inappropriate as well?" Sai asked, his smile lessening a little, and his body tensing up.

"We still need to work on your nicknames, but it's an improvement," Ino interceded, before things could escalate any further. "So, wanna go to somewhere and have a coffee, Sakura?"

"Yeah, I was wondering if you were free to hang out a little," Sakura said. "I have some free time."

"Sure. I can leave Sai in charge," Ino said, as she and the pinkette left the store, before turning at Sai one last time. "Be on your best behaviour, okay?"

"Don't worry, I'll be."

...

Sasuke was getting ready to leave his home for some routine training on his own when somebody knocked the door. That was weird, the only ones who ever visited the Uchiha brothers were Shizune and Shisui, and Itachi decided to give them a copy of the apartment's keys so they could drop by whenever they wanted.

Still, Sasuke decided to check who it was. Opening the door, he saw much to his confusion a young woman, who appeared to be a Hyuga, if her eyes were any indication, dressed like a maid, holding what appeared to be a box wrapped in a piece of cloth.

"Yes?" Sasuke asked, sounding a little suspicious. "May I help you?"

"Uh, hello. My name is Natsu Hyuga," the woman said, sounding a little nervous. "Uh, you must be Sasuke Uchiha, right?"

"Yes, I'm Sasuke," the Uchiha confirmed. "Do you have any business to do with me or...?"

"Actually, it was your brother I was looking for," the Hyuga girl replied. "Is he here?"

Sasuke rose his eyebrow, part confused, part suspicious. What did a Hyuga wanted to do with his brother? Then again, Itachi was old enough to fend for himself.

"Brother!" Sasuke yelled, as he walked back into the house, leaving the door open. Natsu interpreted it as being invited in, so he followed the younger Uchiha. "There's somebody here asking for you!"

The sound of steps could be heard, and Itachi walked out of a nearby hallway. She looked at the newcomer.

"Ah, hello," Itachi said, as he walked towards the young woman, clearly recognizing her. "You were among that group of Hyuga I helped during the Akatsuki attack, right? Your name was... Natsu?"

The Hyuga smiled tenderly. "Yes, that's me," she confirmed, before she handed the wrapped box at Itachi. "I wanted to give you this a sign of appreciation for helping us. If it wasn't for you, Kami knows how many Hyugas would have died then and there."

"I see," Itachi said, accepting the wrapped box. "I was only doing my duty. Thank you for the gift. It's very considerate on your part."

Itachi's line was followed by an awkward silence, the three of them standing there, not knowing what to say or what to do, and Natsu growing more restless, as she fidgeted constantly, shifting from one foot to another.

"Well... that's all I wanted to say. I hope you enjoy my gift," Natsu said, making a polite bow, before exiting the Uchihas' apartment.

Once the brother were again alone, Sasuke scowled at Itachi.

"Are you going to tell me what was that about?" Sasuke asked.

"It isn't obvious?" Itachi replied, smiling a little. "I helped her and her clansmen during the invasion, and she decided to give me a gift in return."

"Aren't you going to open it?" Sasuke asked.

"Maybe later. Weren't you going to train?" Itachi replied, as he turned around and walked towards his room.

"Tch, whatever," the youngest Uchiha scoffed, before leaving the house.

...

Training Ground Twenty five

Thankfully, Naruto was released from the hospital the next morning after he was admitted. One of the very first things he did was to gather once again all the Sage apprentices, and resumed their training. Naruto was sure that, had all the trainees were Sages by the time Akatsuki attacked, the damage to the village would have been much smaller.

Fortunately, they covered most of the training before such attack happened. And when they resumed it, all of them were pretty close to becoming Sages themselves. Under Naruto and Fukasaku's watchful eyes, they saw how during the next two days all the trainees mastered the art of Senjutsu, the last day not even needing to use the anti-Senjutsu staff.

Like it happened with Naruto, the Sage trainees' developed colored marks around their eyes. Hinata had purple marks around her eyes that went down half her cheeks. Hanabi's were similar, but they were teal colored instead. Fu's marks had the shape of a winged insect, similar to a butterfly, the same color as her mint hair. Shisui's were black shaped like hooks at corner of his eyes, with one pointing down and the other pointing up. Shizune's were pink, extending from her eyes down her cheeks, in a way similar to the marks of the Inuzuka, only wider. Karin's were as red as her hair, and had the shape of an spiral that started from her eyelids and continued into her cheeks. Asuma had thin red lines on the sides and under his eyes.

"Hmmm... interesting," Fukasaku said, as he stood in front on Rin.

"Something's wrong, Pa?" Naruto asked the elder toad.

"This girl's marks," the toad said. "I already saw them before."

Rin's marks were forest green, starting from the eyes and extending towards her ears. There was an additional round marking in her forehead with a dot on it. The medic-nin felt the urge to say something, but she didn't want to break her concentration. She didn't want to mess it up when she was so close to achieve it.

"Yes, those marks... I remember seeing them on Hashirama Senju's face," Fukasaku said. "Is this girl related to him?"

"In a way, you could say that," Naruto confirmed, shrugging a little.

"I see. I thought that Tsunade-chan and her tadpoles were his only living descendants," Fukasaku said, rubbing his goatee. He then continued to inspect the rest of the Konoha ninja -and one Taki kunoichi- and review their progress. He nodded, seemingly content with what he saw. "Okay, I think that's enough. Guys, open your eyes and stop gathering nature energy! Wait a few seconds so the nature energy properly mixes with your chakra!"

They did as they were told. As soon as the nature energy mixed with their chakra stabilized, they started to feel the more immediate effects of Sage Mode.

"Whoa!" Shizune said in awe. "I... I can sense all the people in Konoha! It's as if I was a sensor!"

"Me too!" Shisui replied, just as giddy. "Coupled with the Sharingan, nobody is going to catch me off guard ever again! Hey, now that I think about it, can Sage Mode enhance the Sharingan in some way?"

"I'm afraid I have no answer for that question," Fukasaku said with a shrug. "For you're the first Uchiha who achieved Sage Mode."

"Really? Well, nice to be a pioneer at something," Shisui said with a nonchalant shrug. "The more fun I'll have figuring out the answer."

"Okay, now it's about time you guys learn the power behind Sage Mode!" Naruto cheerfully said, as he walked towards one of the many giant toad statues that he and Fukasaku had placed there. "Rin, get over here!"

The brown haired medic nin did as she was told.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"I want you to lift this statue with all your might!" Naruto said.

Rin looked at the statue with her eyes wide open. It was easily four meters tall, and while she couldn't tell how much it weighted, she could guess it would be above two tonnes. Physical strength was never Rin's forte, and she doubted that even with Sage Mode, she could do what the blond was asking her.

"Trust me, just try," Naruto said, his smile unwavering. "You're going to be surprised."

Wordlessly, Rin nodded, and crouched down, inserting her hands under the statue's bottom. Once she had a good grip of the statue, she tried to lift it with all her might...

"WHOA!"

And much to her shock, her arms easily lifted the statue above her head. It was as if it was made of plasticine. Then, she let the statue fall, making a loud rumbling noise, as if to remind everybody its actual mass.

"Incredible! I can't believe I lifted something so heavy!" Rin said, amazed, as she looked at her own hands.

"Bah, I could already do that before," Fu sneered with a dismissive hand wave. Then, her eyes opened wide as a realization dawned upon her. "Wait, then does it mean...?"

"What about ninjutsu? It is enhanced by Senjutsu as well?" Hanabi asked.

Before Naruto had the chance to ask, Hinata decided to do a test, and walked towards a nearby large rock -since she didn't want to risk breaking the toad statues-.

"Vacuum Palm!"

Hinata thrust her palm forward, and felt a huge force surging through her arm. However, rather than a vacuum shell or wave, Hinata's hand projected a large, lavender colored spectral arm, which grew bigger as it was released forward. When the spectral hand crashed against the rock, the boulder was shattered in a thousand shards and pebbles.

The Hyuga Clan Head could do nothing but stare in disbelief at what she has just done. She stared at both hands in shock.

"Just... what was that?" she said, almost in a whisper.

"That was... AMAZING!" Hanabi loudly cheered, as she rushed towards her still dazed older sister. "How did you do it?"

"I... I have no idea," Hinata replied. "I was trying to use the Vacuum Palm."

"Maybe it's an effect of mixing Senjutsu with the Tenseigan?" Hanabi guessed.

"I wouldn't know, but it's a possibility," Hinata said, as she rested her chin on her hand. "Maybe we should talk with Nori-san and Takuya-san. They seem to know everything regarding the Tenseigan."

As the Hyuga sisters continued their discussion, another kunoichi decided to test her new capabilities.

"Hey guys, look at this!" Fu cheerfully called.

Everybody turned at the Taki kunoichi, and saw that she was lifting two toad statues with a *single finger* each. They were all watched in a mixture of awe, shock, and a little terror. Everybody minus Karin, who merely crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at the green haired girl.

"Showoff," she muttered.

"I believe that's all," Naruto said, clapping his hands once.

"Congratulations! From this day onwards, all of you are Sages!"

"Be sure to use this ancient noble art responsibly," Fukasaku reminded them. "I'm sure you will need it for the conflicts to come."

"In order to celebrate, let's all go to Ichiraku's!" Naruto cheerfully said. However, his cheer died when nobody replied in kind. He frowned, and crossed his arms. "My treat."

This time, he got the cheers he was eager to hear.

Author's Note: And thus, Danzo's life comes to an end. As many reviewers made it clear in their comments on past chapters that focused on Danzo, they couldn't wait to see him dead, so I hope you guys are satisfied now. I couldn't spoil it back then, but the plan was always for Danzo to die. I simply needed him alive to steal one of the Rinnegan, which in turn would be stolen by Obito. Since I had Jiraiya take Nagato's eyes, but I wanted to go with the Fourth Ninja War arc, I needed one of the Rinnegan to end on Obito's hands, and Danzo was the way to do this. Don't worry, you won't have to suffer him anymore.

I told many of you that there was going to be a revelation about Danzo that would make you see his past actions under a completely different light, and here you have it. Many reviewers complained that Danzo's reasons for helping Akatsuki were a bit dumb, and I told them that they were right, but there was a reason for that. This was the reason. His death is also the ultimate karmic retribution, given that Danzo wouldn't have been brainwashed by Obito if he didn't stole Shisui's eye to begin with. What's commonly known as poetic justice.

Now, onto the other Rinnegan. I know many of you wanted Naruto to get the Rinnegan, but sorry, no, that's not going to happen. I hate when authors turn Naruto into an overpowered Gary Stu, and I refuse to walk that path even if it costs me readers. Naruto is going to get his canonical power ups in the future, starting with control over the Nine Tails before he gets to fight again. Plus, I also needed Tsunade to have the Rinnegan for a future subplot to work.

Though, if it's any consolation, I also dislike the idea of Sasuke with a Rinnegan, so he won't get it in this story either.

Some people asked if I was going to give Itachi a love interest, given that Sasuke and Shisui have significant others. At first I wasn't going to give him any, since the only girl of Itachi's age group is Ayame, and I couldn't think in any way to hook them up in a realistic way. Then I realized that Natsu could look to be Itachi's age as well, and told myself "hey, why not?". I know it's weird, but I hope you guys grow to like this pairing.

Also, Naruto's Sage students finally completed in training! Maybe too late for the Akatsuki invasion, but it will come in handy for the war. Sage Mode is my favorite power-up of Naruto, and I hated that so few people got to use it. Making more people Sages was also one of my goals with this fic. Oh, and on top of this group, there will be more Sages in other villages as well ;)

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

The Kage Summit comes next, followed by the war! But as you can imagine, things are going to be very different from how they developed in canon. I hope you guys are as excited as I am for the arcs to come. Meanwhile, leave yours thoughts on this chapter in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

New Arrivals, Old Friends

Author's Note: First of all, sorry for the delay. I've been super busy and stressed these past few weeks, and it wasn't until now that I should have uploaded a new chapter yesterday. I can't believe it slipped my mind like that.

BTW, for some reason, I'm not getting alerts when somebody sends me a PM. Like, I do get the PM, but the website doesn't send me a message to my email like it usually does. It's just me, or does it happen to you too? So yeah, if you send me a PM, I may take some time to see it and send a reply.

Anyway, enjoy the new chapter:

Chapter 91:

New Arrivals, Old Friends

or

Finally some time to relax!

Ichiraku Ramen

Fortunately for Konoha, Ichiraku Ramen managed to survive the Akatsuki Invasion with nothing but some minor damage. Fortunately for Konoha because, had the ramen restaurant fallen prey to the wanton destruction, Naruto would have been filled with so much rage that he would have unleashed the Nine Tails on a heartbeat. But thankfully they wouldn't have to worry about that.

Today it was a good day for the old cook and his daughter. While it was normal for Naruto to bring somebody with him for a meal - usually Hinata, or his siblings,- never did the blond bring such a large

group with him. And given that they just came from a training session, they were especially hungry.

"Thanks for eating with us! We hope you enjoy your meal!" Ayame cheerfully said as she laid all the orders on the table.

Their hunger made them finish their food quite fast -though not as fast as Naruto, whom nobody saw actually eating. The moment they blinked, the bowls appeared completely empty-, though they decided to stay some more time and engage in some conversation.

"Quickly, come on!"

That's it, until they heard some people, both ninjas and civilians, rushing to the nearby gates, sounding worried. All of them looked at each other, as worry started to spread. Konoha wasn't ready for another invasion so soon. Shisui got up from his chair and walked towards one of the running people.

"Excuse me," Shisui asked a Chunin, who was forced to stop on his tracks. "What's going on?"

"There has been a sight of a large contingent of ninjas heading to Konoha!" the Chunin replied, before resuming his march.

"What?" Shisui asked.

"Are we under attack?" Karin asked.

"They say a large contingent of ninjas is heading here," Shizune interceded. "They didn't say if they were enemies or not."

"Maybe news of the invasion spread and another village wants to capitalize on our weakened state," Rin replied. "Like Kumo or Iwa."

"That makes no sense. Kumo and Iwa are too far away to move their troops so fast," Shizune replied, shaking her head. "Plus, if they really wanted to attack us, they wouldn't have let us spot them so soon."

"There's a way for us not to be in doubt. Tenseigan!" Hinata said, as she expanded her eyesight, before focusing it on the direction the allegedly enemy ninjas were coming. A smile developed on her lips as her sight reached the large group. "They are not enemies! They're Suna ninjas!"

Excitement built inside Naruto upon hearing those words. "Really!?"

"They're bringing wagons with food, medicines, and building supplies! They must be coming to help us rebuild!" Hinata continued, much to everybody else's joy.

"Hinata-hime, is-"

"Yes," Hinata cut Naruto before he could finish that sentence, since she knew what he was going to ask. "Gaara is among them."

...

Training Ground One

"Okay Hime, this is going to be a big one!" Jiraiya said, as he held a truly massive Rasengan between his hands.

"I'm ready!" Tsunade replied, getting into a defensive position.

"Alright, here it goes!" Jiraiya said, as he leaped at Tsunade, before bringing down the gigantic Rasengan upon her. "Ultra Big Ball Rasengan!"

Tsunade raised her hands towards the incoming attack, creating a barrier just as the chakra sphere crashed down. Said sphere started to shrink as Tsunade siphoned its chakra, the Slug Princess feeling how her husband's chakra was converted into her own before being funneled into her chakra network. After a few seconds, the attack was completely absorbed.

Tsunade placed her hands on her hips, and smirked. "So, what do you think?"

"Truly amazing," Jiraiya praised. "We might not even be close to your absorption limit."

"We may be," Konan interceded. "Remember that Tsunade-sama only has one eye. In order to have access to the Rinnegan's full power one must possess both eyes."

"So far, I don't feel like we're close to any limit," Tsunade replied

"Though, you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the Preta Path makes you immune to ninjutsu," Konan pointed out. "As you surely noticed, you need to stand still and channel the ability in order to absorb chakra. You won't be able to do such a thing if you're moving, much less using chakra for something else, like ninjutsu of your own."

"Thanks for the advice, kid. Okay, let's test another power," the Slug Princess said as she spread one of her arms. Said arm then split apart in multiple sections, revealing a machine-like insides rather than flesh and blood, before they reassembled into what appeared to be a cannon. She pointed the cannon to a nearby rock, and fired a blast of chakra, blowing it up to pieces.

"It seems you can use the Asura Path with no problem," Konan observed.

Tsunade's arm returned to normal, as the Senju looked at her limb with incredulity. "This jutsu defy both logic and biology. How can I turn my inner organs into machinery?"

"I'm afraid I have no answer for that question," Konan admitted in a neutral tone, as she started to fly into the air. "Nor I believe it's important to know. We still need to test your abilities further."

"Whatever you throw at me, I will be ready!" Tsunade confidently boasted.

However, before Konan could attack, an ANBU wearing a boar mask appeared before them. They knew it had to be important, or else he wouldn't have dare to enter the private training ground.

"Jiraiya-sama, I have news that require your immediate attention," the ANBU said, his tone stoic and professional.

"Speak," the Toad Sage commanded.

"A large group of Suna ninjas is approaching the village," the ANBU informed. "According to a trustworthy source, they seem to come in order to provide us help in the reconstruction efforts."

A smile developed on the white haired man's face. "Well, those are excellent news indeed! I believe we should give them the greeting they deserve!"

"You should go. I think I'll stay here with Konan and continue our training," Tsunade replied.

"A good decision. We won't have much time until Akatsuki strikes again, and we'll need Tsunade-sama to develop as much skill with the Rinnegan as we can," Konan agreed.

"Alright then. This shouldn't take much. See you later," Jiraiya said, as he and the ANBU Body Flickered away.

Tsunade and Konan resumed their spar.

...

Back at one of Konoha's entrances, a large group had gathered around it. Just like Hinata said, the group turned out to be Suna ninjas who carried plenty of supplies and workforce for the reparation efforts. The Konoha ninjas were more than happy to help them unload all the crates and boxes they had carried from Suna.

They recognized quite a few faces, such as Maki, and her students Matsuri, Yutaka and Mokoshi. And leading this group were no other

that the Sand Siblings, Gaara, Kankuro and Temari. Naruto and Hinata quickly went to greet them as they deserved.

"Thank you guys for coming!" Naruto excitedly said. "Your timing couldn't have been any better!"

"Your presence here is a surprise, but a welcomed one, for sure," Hinata added, giggling a little.

The trio of Suna ninjas stared at the Hyuga, looking a bit surprised. It took Naruto and Hinata a few moments to realize what they were looking at.

"Oh, it's my eyes, isn't it? I don't think we saw each other since Gaara's kidnapping," Hinata said realization. "My Byakugan evolved to a higher level, called Tenseigan. I will tell you in more detail later."

"I see," Gaara said, deciding not to ask about the issue. "Anyway, when our father got the news about Konoha being invaded, he immediately decided to send some help. Guess he didn't forget how much Konoha helped us during our time in need."

"And naturally, we volunteered to be part of the mission," Kankuro chimed in. "We will always take a chance to come to Konoha. Especially Temari!"

For some reason, Naruto and Hinata expected Temari to yell something at her little brother, but the blonde kunoichi merely crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. Not being able to get any reaction out of her seemed to bother the puppet master a bit.

"Anyway," Temari spoke for the first time. "Is Shikamaru here? Because we're going to have a problem if he happens to be on a mission just when I had an opportunity to drop by."

"Let me check," Hinata said, as she seemed to zone out for a bit. "Nope, he's here! In fact, his whole team is coming this way. Though Shikamaru-san is dragging them down considerably."

Temari let out an annoyed sigh. "Better late than never, I suppose."

"By the way, I know you guys probably have a lot of problem with housing right now," Kankuro interceded. "But given that our ninjas and us are going to spend quite some time in the village while we help, I was wondering if we could get a place to stay."

"We did bring plenty of tents just in case there are no hotels or houses we can use," Temari added. "But even then, we do need some space to set them up."

"Don't worry, I'm sure that my dad can arrange something so your stay here is as comfortable as possible," Naruto reassured them. "After all, it's the least we could do, given that you came here to help us!"

"By the way," Hinata interjected. "I can't help but notice that there are not just Suna ninjas among your group. How did you end up with those three?"

Hinata nodded at the trio of Kumo ninjas, who were also helping unload some of the crate wagons. Both she and Naruto recognized them as Killer B's students, who came to Konoha to take part in the Chunin Exams. They knew Choji managed to befriend the dark skinned redheaded girl, the one named Karui, and even became pen pals.

"We found them on our way here," Gaara replied. "At first we thought that they were scouts or spies, trying to assess Konoha's situation for a future attack. To finish what Akatsuki started."

"But given that they aren't restrained or anything, I assume that's not the case?" Hinata guessed.

"Which would be dumb if it were," Naruto added, crossing his arms. "We did help them when Akatsuki attacked the Land of Lightning in a ruse to abduct one of their jinchuriki. In the end Akatsuki won, but the gesture remained."

"We interrogated them, and they claimed that they were carrying out a diplomatic mission," Gaara began. "To deliver a very important message from the Raikage to the Hokage. Our sensor ninjas confirmed that they weren't lying."

"Did they tell you what the message is about?" Naruto inquired.

Gaara shook his head. "They said their orders were to deliver it to the Hokage and the Hokage alone, and that they weren't allowed to discuss it with anybody."

"Though, one of them did let something slip," Kankuro mentioned. "The boy with the oral fixation said that there were other groups of Kumo ninjas delivering similar messages to the other Great Villages, ours included."

"That's intriguing," Naruto said, pressing his lips. "Do you wonder what the message is about?"

"I have some ideas, but nothing concrete," Gaara admitted. "We'll know once they meet with the Hokage and deliver the message."

"You have message for me?" a new voice said.

Everybody turned around, and saw Jiraiya behind them. It appeared that he had arrived just now, and caught the tail end of their conversation.

"Greetings, Hokage-sama. We heard about what happened here regarding the Akatsuki," Gaara saluted, making a small bow. "On my father, the Kazekage's behalf, we brought you various supplies and able bodied ninjas that will help with the reconstruction efforts."

"Suna's help is both welcomed and very appreciated," Jiraiya replied, returning the bow. "You also mentioned a message?"

"It's not them who have a message for you, Hokage-sama," Karui said, as she and her teammates walked to him, having finally spotted

him. "Can we go to somewhere private? It's a delicate matter to discuss."

"Sure. We'll take this conversation to my office," Jiraiya offered.

"Naruto might want to come as well," Omoi suggested. "Given that we came here because of Akatsuki."

Naruto and Jiraiya exchanged worried looks.

...

A few minutes later, Hokage's Office

"What!? No!" Naruto cried. "There's no way Killer B fell prey to the Akatsuki as well!"

Jiraiya had read the message from the Raikage out loud. It informed of Killer B's capture by Deidara and Kisame, followed by a formal summon to a Kage Summit, that would be held in the Land of Iron in less than three weeks. Each Kage could only bring an escort of two ninjas with them, in order to quell any potential threats of aggression. Jiraiya already knew who would be bringing with him.

"I'll send a messenger toad to the Raikage telling him that I will be there," Jiraiya told the three Kumo Chunin. "As for you three, I'll arrange some living quarters for you until you decide to leave."

"It's appreciated, Hokage-sama," Karui replied, making a slight bow. "We know your village isn't exactly in the best shape to accommodate guests."

"Guess this confirms our worst fears," Naruto sadly said. "With Killer B captured and his Tailed Beast sealed, all that was left for Akatsuki was to kidnap both Fu and me in order to complete their plan."

"I've been trying to locate Killer B, but I was unable to," Jiraiya mentioned, before his eyes shifted to the Kumo ninjas. "Where was he, may I ask?"

"We had a special shelter in a place to the north of Kumo called the Valley of Cloud and Lightning," Omoi began. "It's terrain is very hard to traverse, and its location was one of Kumo's top guarded secret."

"Not even we knew where it was," T chimed in.

"Not that it mattered, given that Akatsuki found the place and a way to overcome its difficult terrain," Karui said, scoffing a little. "Anyway, Raikage-sama will be pleased to know that you're going to attend. Hopefully the other three Kages decide to go as well."

"I can assure you that the Kazekage and the Mizukage will go as well," Jiraiya told the redhead. "The Tsuchikage, though, I couldn't tell. We don't have much of a relationship with Iwa."

"Neither you nor any village," T interceded. "They have fame of wanting to do things their way and scoff at the idea of an alliance."

"Let's hope they change their mind, or else Akatsuki will eat us alive," Karui said, as she started to leave, her two teammates behind her. "Hokage-sama."

Jiraiya nodded as the three foreign ninjas left his office.

"So... this Kage Summit," Naruto began. "It's a good thing, right? If they want all Kages to meet and discuss the Akatsuki threat... with the help of the other villages, dealing with them will be much easier."

"In theory, yes," Jiraiya told Naruto. "In practice, not so much. Even with the threat of Akatsuki, tension between villages still exist., and some of them haven't suffered the scourge of Akatsuki like we did, other than the loss of their jinchuriki."

"Suna and Kiri are already on our side," Naruto pointed out. "With more than half the villages on a single front, maybe the other two will join us?"

"I'm counting on that," Jiraiya replied. "Though we should be careful as well. Rather than joining us, Kumo and Iwa may take this as a threat and join together against us."

"But... the Akatsuki is the real enemy here! Plus we did help Kumo with one of their jinchuriki!" Naruto protested, throwing his hands into the air.

"I know, and I do plan to remind them of that," Jiraiya stated. "However, things aren't as clear cut as they are from our point of view. I mean, the fact that it was the Raikage who requested this summit is good, since that means he's willing to cooperate with other villages against the Akatsuki threat. If I play my cards right, there's a good chance we may enlist the rest of the villages for our cause."

"Let's hope," Naruto agreed, before he remembered another part of the message. "The Raikage said that you're only allowed to bring two people with you. Who do you have in mind?"

"That's an easy one. I'm taking your mom and Itachi Uchiha. They're two of Konoha's strongest and well known ninjas, meaning that I can make a show of force in front of the other villages, and I'll have my back covered if things get ugly," Jiraiya explained. Naruto visibly deflated, which didn't go unnoticed by the white haired man. "What? Did you expect me to bring you?"

"I AM among the strongest ninjas in the village. Not to mention one of the two jinchuriki left," Naruto dejectedly told him.

"Naruto, I'm not taking you for several reasons," Jiraiya began. "First, you're much safer here. If I took you out of the safety of our walls, well, that would be like daring the Akatsuki to come and snatch you. And two, given the recent invasion, I thought you deserve a little break. While I'm out on this, you should try to relax and have some fun."

"You aren't the only one who suggested me that," Naruto said, chuckling. "Hinata-hime also told me that I needed to do something

other than training or missions."

Jiraiya's mouth curved into a perverse grin. "Ohhhhhh... does she want some alone time with you?"

Naruto merely rolled his eyes. "Nah. She said to do something with the rest of our friends. She has a point, it's been a while since we did something all together that isn't a mission."

"I see," Jiraiya said, his face returning to normal. He smiled again, albeit this time it was more earnest. "May I give you a suggestion?"

...

"Akatsuki did make quite the number in your village, didn't they?" Temari asked before letting out a whistle of admiration, as she contemplated the ruined buildings around her. "I shudder to think that this could have happened to Suna."

Temari, alongside other Suna ninjas, were helping the Konoha ninjas to move construction supplies such as concrete, sand, or metallic grids to the zones in need of them.

"The saddest part is, this isn't even the first time it happened," Shikamaru, who was working alongside her, replied. "I think we told you about all the other invasions we had to go through, right?"

"The Nine Tails attack, the Uchiha Insurrection, Orochimaru's invasion, and more recently, Akatsuki," Temari recounted, with her boyfriend nodded in confirmation. "Man, if anything, it speaks volumes of how resilient you guys are. Any village that went through so many invasions in such a small timespan should be defunct by now."

"Guess that speaks volumes about Konoha, doesn't it?" Shikamaru asked, feeling a little patriotic pride, which was kind of an odd feeling for him.

"And what about you?" Temari asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, why do you ask?" Shikamaru replied, raising an eyebrow. "Don't I look okay to you?"

"You do. But given the experience, I thought that maybe... well, that maybe the invasion got you down a little," Temari said. "I take you were among the lucky ones who didn't lose a loved one?"

"You could said that," Shikamaru lazily replied.

However, there was something in the way he said that got Temari suspicious. "What do you mean? Did you actually lose somebody or...?"

"No," Shikamaru stated. "But if I did it wouldn't have mattered, because the Akatsuki leader returned everybody to life." Needless to say, Temari was quite shocked at such revelation, her eyes growing wide, but narrowing next upon realizing how much of a nonsense it was. Shikamaru seemed to pick his girlfriend's reaction, and continued speaking. "It's true, you can ask other people if you don't believe me. Some freaky Rinnegan power or something like that."

"Rinnegan? But..." Temari began, flabbergasted. "Even if that were true, how is that the Akatsuki leader decided to help you? It makes no sense!"

"Apparently Naruto went to talk with him. I think Naruto made him feel bad about what he had done, and in order to atone before dying brought everybody back from the death," Shikamaru elaborated. "The other Akatsuki then surrendered without fighting any further."

As the sand blond kunoichi tried to digest Shikamaru's unbelievable tale, another realization dawned upon her. "Wait, did you guys collect the Rinnegan? Because such power-"

"Yeah, we did," Shikamaru replied, not letting her finish her question. "Unfortunately, Akatsuki managed to snatch one of the eyes from us,

with Danzo's help. Old bastard..."

"Well, at least you guys still keep the other eye," Temari said. "You don't know what are they going to do with it, do you?"

Shikamaru shook his head. "Like they're going to make a mere Chunin like me privy of what do they plan to do with such an item of power. Though guess that we'll know soon enough. From what I heard, we need those eyes if we want to release all the Tailed Beasts captured by Akatsuki."

Temari accepted Shikamaru's response with a nod, as the two of them resumed their work, opening crates and unloading their contents, before either stacking them on a pile, or handing them to the people who needed them. After a few minutes of working in silence, Shikamaru decided to open his mouth again.

"So... how long are you planning to stay?" Shikamaru asked.

"Father told us that we could stay as long as the reparation efforts lasted. Unless there's an emergency, we aren't needed in Suna," Temari answered, as she carried another crate, ready to open. She shot Shikamaru a taunting smirk "Why? Are you already counting the minutes until I'm out of your hair?"

"Quite the contrary. Did I give you that impression?" Shikamaru asked, chuckling awkwardly. "I always enjoy when you come to visit."

"Given that other times made you look as if being with me is some sort of chore..." Temari replied, sounding a little hurt.

"Because I love getting a reaction out of you," Shikamaru said, chuckling again, this time more earnestly.

"Do you find it amusing?" Temari asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. But it also tells me that you care," Shikamaru replied. "Though if you want me to stop doing it, you only need to ask."

"Then please drop it. It's kind of childish," the blonde asked.

"As you wish," Shikamaru said, shrugging a little. "Though in all seriousness, I'm really happy to know that you're going to be here for some time. It will be nice to see you several days in a row. I mean, did you know some people think I'm making you up when I told them about you?"

"Really?" Temari asked, suppressing a chuckle. "Well, I can imagine. Some boys from Suna also think that I say I have a boyfriend in Konoha just so they leave me alone."

"That's one weird thing to have in common. Albeit it's obvious that the reasons people think that of us aren't the same," Shikamaru commented. "By the way, where are you staying? I'm afraid all the hotels are being used as improvised infirmaries, storehouses and barracks for our ninjas."

"We know. The Hokage reserved a training field for our ninjas so we can set our tents there," Temari said.

"That doesn't appear to be very comfortable," Shikamaru pointed out. "Especially since you came here to help. I think you guys deserve a little better."

"I know, but what else can we do? We're in no position to be demanding," Temari said in resignation. "We came here to help, not to hog space other people may need."

"Well..." Shikamaru began. He lowered his gaze as he rubbed the back of his neck, looking uncomfortable. "You could... you could stay at my place?"

Temari's eyes were open wide in shock. "Come again?"

"You could stay at my place," Shikamaru repeated, this time sounding more confident. "We have quite a few spare rooms, so not just you, but you could also bring your brothers or whoever you want."

And given that you're helping the village, I don't think my folks will object to it."

Temari stopped what she was doing to place her full attention on her boyfriend. She placed her hands on her hips, as her expression became one of skepticism. "So... you okay with me meeting your parents? Like, really?"

"I'm sure I'm going to regret it later, but better do it now and get it out of my hair," Shikamaru said, rubbing the back of his head again.

The lazy Nara was surprised when she found Temari's arms wrapped around his neck, and her lips pressed against her cheeks.

"Thank you," the Suna kunoichi whispered into his ear.

Shikamaru smiled at her.

...

"Okay, mission completed," Karui said, as she and her two teammates walked through the streets of Konoha. "Good thing the Hokage said he'd go to the summit. Hopefully in no time, the other villages will hunt the Akatsuki down and B-sensei will be avenged."

The other two nodded sadly. While they do wanted justice for their beloved sensei, they knew that no matter how many Akatsuki died, nothing would bring Killer B back. Their absence is something they'll have to get used to.

" *And we aren't the only ones who lost people to the Akatsuki,*" Karui thought, as she looked at the ruined buldingd around her. Though there were ruined and destroyed buildings, they wouldn't stay like that for long, since she also saw plenty of ninja and civilian alike tirelessly working on the reconstruction of their village. If there was something it could be said about Konoha, is that they were dillgent. "So, do you guys want to do anything? We've made a long trip here and I really don't feel like going back home just now."

"Maybe we could see the sights this village has to offer?" Omoi asked. "Those who hadn't been reduced to rubble, I mean. We barely had any time to do that the last time we were here because of the Chunin Exams."

"We could get something to eat first," T mentioned. "I would like to eat something other than ration bars and fish. And Konoha has pretty good restaurants."

"Hmm... guess that's something we could do," Karui replied, nodding as well. "Hopefully a couple restaurants not far away from here may have survived the Akatsuki's attack."

Omoi was also going to agree, until something drew his attention. A pair of stocky ninjas, one old and one young -clearly father and son- were using a jutsu to enlarge their arms in order to move heavy construction supplies such as metal girds or wooden beams around. The Kumo ninja, however, remembered who that ninja was.

"Hey, Karui," Omoi said, as he nodded at the working pair. "Isn't that the guy you write letters to?"

"Where!?" Karui suddenly said, unwittingly shouting but willingly trying to keep her voice down. Nervous, the redheaded kuonichi frantically looked around, until he spotted the young man in question. "Oh... yeah. Well, it's normal that he's here working to rebuild his village, isn't it? And why are you looking at me like that!?"

"Aren't you planning to go and say hi?" T asked in a teasing tone. "I mean, it's a pretty good chance, given that we were given Konoha of all villages to deliver the message to. I'm sure you'd regret if we left without meeting him at least once."

"Don't worry about us," Omoi preemptively said, as he and his other female teammate started to walk away in the opposite direction.

"We'll look for a nice place to eat. Once we found one, we'll tell you!"

"W-Wait! Don't leave me alone!" Karui said, as her eyes frantically shifted back and forth between Choji and her teammates, who were getting further and further away. "Ugh, you guys suck! You're going to regret this!"

Huffing, Karui decided to walk towards Choji. At the very least, the two dumbasses decided to leave her alone. There's no way she could have approached Choji with those two teasing her constantly. As she walked towards the Konoha ninja, who was with a man she presumed was his father, Karui's heart started to beat faster and faster.

"Come on girl, you completed S-Rank missions, you surely can talk to a boy," Karui reminded herself, and once she was close enough, she opened her mouth. "Hello!"

That came way louder than she expected, if the way Choji and his dad were startled was anything to go by. The two of them quickly turned around.

"What the...?" Choji asked, almost defensively, as he turned around. However, the tension of his body disappeared, and his mouth curved into a smile the moment she saw who had called him. "Karui!"

"Hey there," said said, waving weakly at him. "Long time no see, huh?"

"Indeed!" Choji energetically nodded. "It's amazing how much you grew! You look so pretty!"

"Thank you. You grew up a lot as well, as I can see. I mean, you're taller than me," Karui said, as she wiped a strand of hair from her face away. *"Good thing he didn't mention my chest."*

"So, Choji," the larger man with the wild red hair said. "I take this is the girl you've been writing letters to?"

"She is!" Choji happily said. "Dad, this is Karui. Karui, this is my dad Choza Akimichi, leader of the Akimichi Clan."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," Karui said, making a head bow.

"Same here. Though I do remember you from the Chunin Exams," Choza stated. "You gave my son quite the beating, didn't you?"

Karui grew visibly uncomfortable, as she tried to find a way to salvage the situation.

"Uh, I-"

"Hahaha, relax, girl! I'm not going to hold that against you," Choza boomed, giving Karui a mighty slap on her back. So mighty, she almost fell on her face. "We Akimichis find strong women very appealing! Strong women produce and raise strong children! That's how a clan stays in top shape!"

That did nothing but increase Karui's uneasiness, albeit now for completely unrelated reasons. *"If this man pulls out a marriage contract, I'm SO out of here!"*

"Um, dad," Choji pointed out, noticing -and even sharing- some of the Kumo kunoichi's uneasiness. "I think you're going too far. You're making Karui a little uncomfortable."

"I am?" Choza asked, genuinely surprised.

"Way more than 'a little', but thanks! Great timing there, Choji!" Karui mentally thanked him.

"Oh, my apologies then. I didn't want to suggest anything hasty," Choza admitted, before taking a very large crate between his arms. "I better move this box towards the Jonin Station. I'll leave you alone so the two of you can catch up."

"Okay dad. See you later," Choji said.

"See you later, son," Choza said before leaving.

Both Karui and Choji sighed in unison once the Akimichi Clan patriarch was seen turning at a corner, disappearing behind a half destroyed building.

"I'm... I'm sorry for my dad," Choji said, rubbing his neck in embarrassment. "He's... very excited about you."

"I could tell," Karui breathed.

"So... what brings you to the village?" Choji asked, hoping that a change of topic would help push the awkwardness of the situation away.

"My team was sent here by Raikage-sama to deliver a message to your Hokage, in order to set a date for an upcoming Kage Summit," Karui explained. "Hoping all five villages could deal with Akatsuki together."

"Did Akatsuki also attack Kumo?" Choji asked, looking worried.

"Not exactly. My sensei, Killer B, was attacked and kidnapped by the Akatsuki," Karui said, as she cast her eyes down, sadness creeping upon her.

"Oh..." was all the Akimichi could say in return. "I... I'm sorry for your loss, especially since it had to be a huge blow. If it were Asuma-sensei... I don't know what I would have done..."

"It's okay, it's not that it's your fault," Karui replied, before she looked around. "I'm guessing that, after they snatched B-sensei from his hiding place, they came here to get your jinchuriki, right?"

"Yeah," Choji said. "Thankfully they failed. Had they captured Naruto and Fu, they would have all Tailed Beast under their control."

"Did you guys managed to kill some of them?" Karui asked.

"Yeah. The leader is dead. And another one, a woman, surrendered to Konoha after their defeat," Choji explained.

Karui scowled a little. "Dammit. I was hoping that at least Kisame and Deidara would be rotting in hell right now."

"Those were the ones who captured your sensei?" Choji asked.

Karui nodded. "Kisame also helped to capture Yugito-sama, so we have even more reasons to hate him."

"Well... think that you still have the chance to get revenge on them. Though you should be careful, every Akatsuki member is a powerhouse on their own, and those two are no exception," Choji advised her.

"I don't mind if I'm not the one who brings them down, as long as they get their just desserts," Karui told Choji. "If I can help their downfall in any way, I will."

"I'm on the same boat. Akatsuki was already bad before, but look how much they wrecked our home," Choji told her, as he spread his arms around for added effect. "Hopefully this will be the beginning of an alliance between Konoha and Kumo."

"Yeah, let's hope the Kage Summit goes well," Karui agreed.

There was a moment of awkward silence as the two teens stayed there next to each other, doing or saying nothing. Until Choji decided to break the silence.

"So... now that you gave the message, are you planning on leaving?" Choji asked. "Or do you plan to stay a bit?"

"After such a long trek for a mere message, neither me nor my teammates feel like going back home so soon," Karui told him, and the redhead could see the rotund boy growing more excited.

"Though given the state the village is right now, it might not be for the best if we sta-"

"Nonsense! Please stay all the time you need!" Choji insisted, loudly interrupting her. "I mean, we're already housing a lot of ninjas from Suna that came here to help, so we can afford three more people."

Before Karui could reply, they were interrupted by a loud, rumbling noise. Choji would have apologized for such a thing, but the Akimichi knew his stomach too well to know when it was him. Karui seemed to be on the same boat, as the redhead's expression was that of embarrassment.

"Man, T was right. We've been way too much time eating nothing but ration bars and fish," Karui complained.

"If you want to eat, there's this restaurant that serves the best barbecue of the entire village!" Choji enthusiastically said, not missing a chance to share his favorite eating spot with a girl he liked. "My treat!"

"Really? Thanks. I'm not going to say no to free food right now," Karui said. "Lead the way, Choji."

And with a huge smile plastered on his face, Choji walked towards Yakiniku-Q with Karui walking besides him. While the redhead would try to hide it, she was smiling as well.

...

While most of the Suna ninjas were helping with the reconstruction of the village, some of them were proving to be more helpful than others, albeit more due their abilities rather than enthusiasm or intent. And there was a certain somebody whose abilities that he had since he was born made construction work trivially easy.

Using his sand, Gaara was able to do the work of multiple people in far less time, all at once: he could push debris away, move and lift

heavy objects like wooden beams or crates of bricks, place iron girds in the ground, and many more. However, this didn't mean that the effort he was making didn't took its toll on the former jinchuriki, as he was expending chakra as quickly as if he were in a fight to the death.

Beads of sweat started to roll down Gaara's forehead, which he wiped with the sleeve of his shirt from time to time, however, the former jinchuriki didn't complain nor requested a break. Fortunately for him, the other people working alongside the redhead decided that he had deserved a rest for the time being.

"Okay, I think we're done here," a large man wearing stained working clothes and a helmet on his head said, as he walked towards Gaara. "You made quite the quick work, kid."

"I'm here to help as much as I can," Gaara stoically said. "What can I do now?"

"For now, nothing. We've done a good job with the heavy lifiting, but now it's time for the more specialized craftsmen to take the lead," the man said. "Why don't you take a break?"

"I still have energy. I can continue," the former jinchuriki insisted.

"Don't push yourself too hard, kid. You helped us a lot already. Trust me, there will be more work for you when you come back. Now go and relax a little," the man said, as he nodded towards an approaching girl.

Gaara saw that said girl in question was Matsuri, coming at him with a small smile on his face.

"Hey," she said.

"Hello," Gaara replied. "Have you finished your assigned tasks too?"

Matsuri chuckled uneasily. "Not in the slightest. We simply decided to take a break. You know, I thought this would be like a D-Rank

mission, but it's much harder than it looks!"

"I can relate to that," Gaara said, wiping some more sweat from his brow. "I think this used to be easier when I still had Shukaku inside of me."

"Here," Matsuri said, before pulling out a canteen buckled to her belt, and handed it to the redhead."

Gaara took the canteen, which he noted was half full, and downed whatever water was left in one go.

"Thank you," Gaara said, returning the canteen.

"You're welcome," the brown haired girl said, blushing a little, as she returned the canteen to her belt. "So... given that we have some spare time, care to go for a walk with me? This is my first time in Konoha, and I'd like to see it a bit better. You've been here before, maybe you could show me?"

"Sure," Gaara agreed. "Though the village used to be a better sight before all this destruction."

Matsuri merely shrugged. "I can always return another time once the reconstruction is finished."

Besides, it's not that she was THAT interested in seeing the village to begin with, but it was a good excuse as good as any other to spend some relaxing time with her crush.

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West Gate of Konoha, next morning

Not wanting to waste anymore time, Jiraiya decided to head to the Land of Iron as soon as possible, lest the summit would start without him. A crowd had gathered around the Hokage to bid him goodbye, among them being his children, his sensei, and other ninja close to

him and those he was taking as escorts, such as Shizune and the rest of the Uchihas.

Like he had told Naruto, Tsunade and Itachi were the chosen ones. Not just to display Konoha power, but in case that the worst came to happen, those two provided the best combination of abilities. Itachi's ninjutsu and genjutsu could provide good ranged cover, while Tsunade could act as both frontline fighter and heal any injury that may happen to the trio.

The Slug Sannin and the Uchiha were wearing the standard Konoha uniform, blue navy long sleeved shirt, pants, and a green flak jacket, clothes that neither of them used to wear. Though in Tsunade's case, she had to wear the flak jacket unzipped, since her massive chest made it impossible to zip it up.

"So many years later, and there are no jackets for women my size," Tsunade grumbled, recalling the last time she had to wear the official uniform. Interestingly enough, it was also a meeting involving the Raikage.

"Alright, I presume that, at a good pace, it will take us about a week to reach the Land of Iron," Jiraiya stated. "While the summit will be in twelve days. That will allow us some window of time in case an unexpected event happens."

"Have a safe trip, Jiraiya-sama," Shizune told him.

Jiraiya nodded at her, before turning at the previous Hokage. "Once again, sorry for piling my job on you, sensei," Jiraiya told his master. "But I trust no other to run the village in my absence."

"Don't feel guilty, Jiraiya. In my case, I would have done the same," Hiruzen replied with a nod. "I'll make sure the reconstruction goes as smoothly as possible."

"Make sure Naruto and Fu are under constant watch," Jiraiya told him. "I wouldn't put past Akatsuki sneaking an agent to kidnap them

taking advantage of me leaving."

"Come on dad, we aren't helpless," Naruto protested, as he crossed his arms. "Remember that it was me who saved you from Pain, not the other way around."

Jiraiya smiled at him. "I know. But I can't help but worry about you, son. So while I'm out, try not to draw much attention, okay?"

"Okay, dad," Naruto replied.

Jiraiya returned his attention to his former sensei once more. "It's possible that, if things go smoothly in the summit and we all reach an understanding, we might launch a joint offensive against the Akatsuki."

"Then I'll make sure all our ninjas are ready to move once the time is right," Hiruzen replied, before Jiraiya had any chance to issue more orders. "I've lived through all three wars, Jiraiya. I know better than anybody here how this works. Though truth be told, it makes me sad that I'll live to see yet another war."

"If things go good, it will be over before we realize it, and there won't be more wars in a long time," Tsunade spoke up for the first time.

"Let's hope," Hiruzen said. "I'll also make sure our defenses are in top condition in case Akatsuki decides to strike first."

"Good. I'll rest easier knowing that the village will be in good hands in my absence," Jiraiya said with a nod. He then noticed Gaara, who walked towards him.

"Hokage-sama, given that you're going to see my father, please tell him that we arrived here safely, and that we're helping the village as intended."

"Don't worry kid, I will," Jiraiya replied, as he turned around, Itachi and Tsunade doing the same. "Tsunade-hime, Itachi, let's go!"

"Yes!" the two Jonin said in unison, as they followed Jiraiya into the forests of the Land of Fire.

Once the Hokage and his two escorts were no longer visible, everybody else returned to the village, back to their daily tasks.

Author's Note: Now, after the Akatsuki Invasion arc FINALLY came to an end, I think it's about time to let our heroes some time to catch their breath and relax a little, don't they?

And boy, do I appreciate writing something relaxed once in a while. Especially romance. Like, when was the last time we saw Choji and Karui interact? It has to be the Chunin Exams, more than 60 chapters ago. Same goes with Shikamaru and Temari. Temari has appeared in quite a few arcs, but I don't think she and Shikamaru had a conversation since the beginning of the Gaara Rescue arc, almost 40 chapters ago. Wow... when did this story get so crazy long?

And as Jiraiya and his two escorts head to the Land of Iron, the Kage Summit is about to begin. I know a lot of you can't wait to see how my version of the Kage Summit is going to play out. Needless to say, it's going to be much shorter, given the lack of Sasuke to attack it, as well as Danzo being dead already. Still, there are going to be a couple of surprises around the corner. Plus, a few fan favorites from the other villages will make a return during this arc.

Though, the Kage Summit won't start immediately. The next chapter is going to be the Konoha 15 and their friends from the other villages, such as the Sand Siblings or Karui, having a much needed and much deserved fun and relaxing time together. Mostly because, well, I'm sure you know that after this, they won't have anymore time to relax until the end of the story.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, what do you think about this chapter? Did you enjoy the return of the Suna and Kumo ninjas? Leave your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The More the Merrier?

Author's Note: This time, I didn't forget about updating! The wonders of not being as stressed as of lately. Anyway, this is the last chapter of the year, and the decade. So I hope you find it to your liking:

Chapter 92:

The More the Merrier?

or

The Mandatory Hot Springs Chapter

It has been three days since Jiraiya left with Tsunade and Itachi for the Land of Iron, and so far, it seemed that calmness had finally replaced the tension following the devastating Akatsuki attack. People continued working tirelessly on the reconstruction of the village, which went quite fast thanks to the effort of all its ninjas, but among them, those with unique abilities.

In just those three days, Tenzo, Rin and Kaida managed to replace about two thirds of the houses that were completely destroyed by creating new ones with their Wood Release. However, their powers only went so far, and most of those houses still needed glasses, plumbing, electricity and furniture, but they were habitable and definitely beat sleeping in the streets.

Other ninjas that sped up the reconstruction process were Choji and the rest of his clanmates, whose body expansion jutsu made rebuilding houses as easy as if they were toys, while Gaara's control over sand provided similar results. And naturally, Naruto's army of clones provided a massive boost to the workforce, speeding the process even further.

"Heh, at this pace, maybe we'll have most of the village rebuilt by the time dad gets back from the Land of Iron," Naruto said in pride, as he watched his clones work. The summit would be in a week and a half, and Jiraiya would take at least another week to get back to Konoha.

As the clones started to dispel little by little, Naruto's brain received their memories, and with them, a little of their mental fatigue and exhaustion.

"Man, I thought using clones would get me out of the hard work," Naruto complained to no one in particular. His hands went to his right pocket, where it found something. Pulling it out, it was the gift that his father had given him during their last conversation before he had to depart for the Land of Iron. "Maybe it's a good time to put this to use. I could use some relaxing."

"I think I could agree with that, Naruto-kun," a female voice said. Naruto turned around, and saw Hinata standing in front of him.

"Oh, hey, hime," Naruto greeted her with a kiss on the lips. "What's up?"

"I just finished helping with the rebuilding of some houses, and decided to call it a day for now," Hinata replied, sounding a little exhausted. "Do you have any plans?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," the blond replied, as he handed her the item in question.

Wordlessly, Hinata took it and gave it a good look. Her eyes opened up in surprise a little.

"Oh," Hinata said, fighting a blush from developing on her pale face. "You plan to use this today? With... us?"

"I was planning to use it with all of our friends, you know," Naruto told her. "You said it would be nice if we did something together as a

group, and I think this is a pretty good chance."

"I see," Hinata said, before nodding. "Yes, with how much everybody is working, I guess they also deserve a little reward and relaxation."

"Nice! Hopefully nobody will have any plans for this afternoon," Naruto said. "Can you go look for your cousin's team and Shikamaru's team? I'll get Karin's team and Kakashi-sensei's team myself."

"Alright. I'll see you in the place in an hour," Hinata said with a nod, before flying away.

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Hyuga Estate

Hikari was in her study -which used to belong to her husband when he was alive- reading a scroll. It wasn't just any scroll, but one of those the Moon Acolytes had brought with them to Konoha. The former but still acting Clan Head had shown a lot of interest in knowing the true story of her clan, which was mired in mysteries, due the clan's nomadic nature prior joining Konoha.

Most of the historical documents, even if they were well preserved, showed their age. That's why Hikari ordered the clan's scholars to instantly copy them, and translate them to a more modern version of their language in order to make their reading far easier.

Even if the Acolytes themselves, as well as Hinata, already told them the true history of their clan, there were many details that they left out. The history of the Otsutsuki and later the Hyuga spanned for over a thousand years, and thus there was a lot to cover. Hikari believed that, by carefully studying their history, they could uncover more clan secrets. Because who said that the Tenseigan was the only one?

However, there was a part that left her intrigued. One that, no matter how many documents revised, she simply couldn't find a proper answer. So, rolling the scroll, she got up from her chair, and decided to ask somebody for answers.

It didn't take her long to find the person she was looking for. When he wasn't overseeing her daughters' training with the Tenseigan, Takuya was often in the Hyuga Library, alongside other Acolytes and more studious Hyuga members, working on copying said historical documents, reading the books and scrolls they already had, or organizing the library as a whole.

Little by little, Takuya had made that place into his little domain. Not that any of the Hyuga minded, since most saw it as a boring, thankless job, and were grateful to have somebody willing to keep their library organized. Right now, the leader of the Moon Acolytes was putting in the shelves some scrolls that had just been copied. He quickly noticed Hikari's presence.

"Ah, Hikari-sama," the older man said, making a bow. "What can I do for you?"

Hikari nodded back, and walked towards him, handing him the scroll before speaking. "I have decided to educate myself on the history of our clan and our ancestors. Today I have been reading that scroll."

"Ah, the fall of the Main Otsutsuki Clan, and their exile on Earth," the monk said, nodding as he quickly read the unfurled scroll. "A very poignant point of the history of both your clan and my order."

"Indeed. However, there's something I can't understand," Hikari said.

Takuya smiled, and rolled the scroll again. "Well, that's why I'm here. I'm more than happy to explain anything you want to know."

"You see, in all the records I reviewed, they mention a terrible weapon created by the Branch Otsutsuki," Hikari began. "But none

of them specify the nature of that weapon. I thought that maybe you could cast some light upon this mystery?"

Takuya's face darkened a little, as his smile vanished.

"I'm afraid, my dear Hikari-sama, that neither me nor the Acolytes, know about that," Takuya replied. "All we know it's that it was a weapon of terrible power. Unfortunately, the ensuing war and destruction, there was no time nor opportunity to make an extensive record of such weapon. In fact, many of our records were lost to that war; they were either destroyed or remain on the moon."

"I see. The weapon also remains on the moon, correct?" Hikari asked.

"I'm afraid so, Hikari-sama," Takuya replied.

"Then... how can we destroy a weapon that brought down the Otsutsuki Clan when it was in its prime?" Hikari asked. "Because it's said to be a weapon that can match and even surpass the Tenseigan."

"I'm afraid I have no answer for that, Hikari-sama," Takuya gravely said.

...

Training Ground Seven

Kiba, Tamaki and Shino were in the middle of an intense training session, a spar against Kakashi using the Sharingan. The Inuzuka heir and the cat kunoichi were covered in sweat and dirt, breathing heavily, but were smiling confidently. Shino, on the other hand, looked far less exhausted and dirty, though his body language revealed that he hadn't been merely watching while his teammates fought.

"What about that, Kakashi-sensei?" Tamaki asked, eager for praise.

"Okay, I admit it," Kakashi replied. "At first I had my doubts, but both you and Kiba managed to do it."

"Ha, of course we did!" Kiba boasted, with Akamaru vigorously barking in agreement. "Did you have any doubts?"

"I have to admit, it was quite an exercise of creativity and outside the box thinking on your part," Shino chimed in.

"Eh, it wasn't really that hard," Tamaki said, with a dismissive hand wave. "There are countless ways to circumvent a jutsu's weakness. Kiba and I just used one of the most obvious."

"Even then, it's not something I can-"

"Hey!" a new voice said, interrupting Shino.

Everybody turned around to see Naruto happily running towards them. Their stances relaxed, as they came closer and walked towards the blond in order to meet him in the middle.

"Hey, look at that! That's too good to be a coincidence!" Kiba said, grinning wildly. "Hey Naruto, you came here just in time! Fight me! I have a new jutsu that-"

"While I appreciate your passion, I doubt Naruto came here thinking in fighting you, Kiba," Kakashi interrupted him.

"Besides, you should know that, even with our new jutsu, Naruto would still be too much for us," Tamaki reminded him.

Kiba's excitement was so big, he felt he could take on any opponent, Naruto included. And while in another time he would have argued with Tamaki for that, the more rational part of his brain won out, and all he did was cross his arms and huff in annoyance..

"Okay, whaveter," Kiba said in resignation. "But I'm not going to stop training until the gap between us closes!"

"I'll be holding you to that boast, Kiba," Kakashi said in his jovial tone, but everybody could sense a "you're going to regret saying that" there. He then turned towards the blond. "So, what can we do for you, Naruto?"

"I wanted to ask Kiba, Tamaki and Shino something," Naruto began, as he pulled a small, crumpled paper out of his pocket. He straightened the paper as much as he could, and showed it to his friends. "Dad gave me this before he left for the Kage Summit. He thought that we could use some relaxation after the whole debacle with Danzo and the Akatsuki."

Shino held the paper between his hands, as he and his teammates and sensei read it. It was a coupon for one of Konoha's most expensive hot springs, cutting its price per person in more than half. However, the coupon was only valid for large groups, meaning ten people or more. And on top of that, said group would have one of the springs reserved for them, instead of having to share it with others.

"I thought we could spend the afternoon there, and then have a nice dinner together," Naruto said. "I already asked Shikamaru's team, and they said yes. Hinata-hime is asking Karin and Neji's team, respectively, to come."

"Yeah, count me in!" Kiba excitedly said. "After how hard we worked today, we deserve a reward!"

"It's okay if I ask Rin to come with us?" Tamaki asked.

"I also thought that Fu would enjoy some time in the hot springs as well," Shino added.

"Sure, the more the merrier!" Naruto happily agreed.

"Sorry for asking, but it's that invitation just for my students? Or are the sensei invited as well?" Kakashi asked.

"Yeah, you and the other sensei can come if you want too," Naruto said. "The coupon doesn't say anything about how big the group must be. Anyway, it's so great to know that you'll be coming! Meet us at the entrance at five sharp!"

And thus,. Naruto left as quickly as he had come.

"It was so nice that Naruto decided to invite us grownups as well," Kakashi said, sounding pleased. "Don't worry, I'll make sure none of us get in your way or anything. Anyway, how about if we end the training for today?"

"Sure, I want to get ready for the hot springs," Tamaki agreed. Kiba and Shino nodded as well.

And with that, the group dispersed. However, as they returned to their homes, there was a single thought that filled both Kiba, Shino and Tamaki's heads.

"We will be able to see Kakashi-sensei without the mask."

...

Hot Springs, that afternoon

After picking Haku up, Naruto and Hinata arrived at the Hot Springs. They noticed there were already more people there, a pretty large crowd. In fact, they were the last ones to arrive. Teams Gai, Kakashi, Shizune and Asuma. Kurenai was also there, presumably coming with her husband. The Hot Springs were going to be pretty crowded today.

"Hey there!" Naruto greeted the group, as he and his teammates walked closer. "Good to see that you managed to come!"

"We already told you that we would come, didn't we?" Neji asked. "It would be rude if we decided to just leave you hanging after that."

"Hey, Tenten!" Haku happily said, as he walked towards his girlfriend. She greeted him with a kiss. "I'm so glad you could come."

"Yeah, it feels like we haven't been together for months!" Tenten said, just as gleeful. "Though... wouldn't you melt if you go into the Hot Springs? The water is pretty hot."

"I think my ice can manage," Haku said with a chuckle. He found that joke a bit cringey, but decided to humor his girlfriend.

"Thanks a lot for this invitation, Naruto-kun!" Lee excitedly said. "However, now I must think of something to return such generosity! Too bad I can't think of anything yet."

"Eh, it's okay, Lee. It's my dad who-

"And if I can't think anything, I'll climb the Hokage monument with one hand with weights on my belt!" Lee declared, just as excited.

"Well done! There's nothing to stimulate the mind that intense exercise, Lee!" Gai told Lee in a congratulatory manner. Neji merely sighed, while Tenten shook her head.

"I have to agree with Lee on this one, Naruto," Shikamaru said. "Usually all the stuff you organize is about training and the like, but a relaxing day at the hot spring? Heh, that's something I can't miss."

"Yeah, it was a pretty good idea," Choji added, nodding. "By the way, Naruto, you told us that there was no limit to the size of the group, right?"

"Yeah, what about it?" Naruto asked.

"Well, I did ask Karui if she wanted to come," Choji replied.

"I asked the same to Temari," Shikamaru said. "She was so happy to hear that. With some luck, she may forgive all the misgivings from the past months."

" Oh, yes. I remember that those Kumo and Suna ninjas were in the village. Oh shit! I totally forgot to extend an invitation to Gaara! Maybe I can send a clone..." The blond distressingly thought. "Um, yeah," Naruto said, now having doubts about the size of the group. "As long as-"

"I also brought Shisui with me," Shizune chimed in. The blond noticed that the oldest Uchiha was indeed besides Naruto's surrogate sister, who smiled and waved at him happily. "We don't have much of a chance to do something like this together!"

"Yeah, it was such a nice detail on your part, Naruto!" Shisui added.

"I also brought Sai," Ino intervened, pulling the pale brunet closer to her.

"Ino thinks that such gathering will be good for both my rehabilitation and to train my social skills," Sai stated.

"Er, okay," Naruto said. "In that case, we should wait for the rest of the people that the others have told to come before going all in."

"I think we won't have to wait much," Hinata said.

Naruto turned around, and saw the trio of Kumo ninjas that had delivered the Raikage's message walking towards them. Naturally, the three of them looked way happier than they have been in the past days. A smile formed on Choji as he went to greet the girl he had a crush on.

"Oh man, hot springs! I can't wait to get to them! I have never been in one!" Omoi excitedly said.

"Same here," T added. "After all these stressful days, we are in desperate need of relaxation."

"Oh... Karui brought her teammates too," Naruto noticed, as he started to sweat a little. There was no way all of them could fit inside

two hot springs alone.

"Naruto-kun," Hinata said, tapping his shoulder. He turned towards his girlfriend, who wordlessly pointed back.

Naruto turned around, and saw Gaara, Kankuro and Temari. Of course, it was obvious that Temari would ask her brothers to come with her. However, they weren't the only ones; walking besides them was another trio of Suna ninjas: Matsuri, Yukata and Mikoshi.

"Hey, look at that! It seems that everybody is here already," Kankuro observed, before he turned at his sister. "Told you you were spending way too much time getting ready!"

"Hey, I don't get many chances to go to a hot spring, so I wanted to make sure to have everything!" Temari angrily shot back.

As Kankuro and Temari continued to argue, Gaara walked towards Naruto.

"In Suna's name, thank you for your invitation, Naruto," Gaara told the blond in his usual stoic tone. "Once again, you're a credit to Konoha's hospitality."

"Yay, hot springs!" Yukata chimed in.

"Let's hope there are mixed baths..." Matsuri whispered, as she shot a look at Gaara, while blushing a little.

"Sure, you're helping us a lot, so this is the least we could have done for you!" Naruto said, laughing awkwardly. He sighed in relief inwardly. *"Well, that solves one problem. At least I won't come off as rude for forgetting to invite him"*

The blond then looked at the truly massive group that had formed at the entrance of the hot springs, all of them speaking with each other, the sound of their chattering combining into a cacophony of multiple conversations chaotically intermingled with each other.

"Let's get everybody inside before more people decide to show up," Naruto said.

There were three hot springs: one for men, another for women, and another mixed, the three of them sharing the same spring, separated by a divider made of bamboo. Naturally, most couples wanted to be in the mixed one in order to be with their significant other, but there was a problem: just like Naruto had predicted, there were too many of them and they wouldn't fit inside the mixed bath.

The owners of the springs, a couple in their early sixties, not wanting to lose such a large group, devised a solution: they removed the dividers and decided to made the springs into a single, mixed bath. This solution seemed to please everybody, who quickly rushed towards the changing room, so they could enjoy the hot baths.

...

Undisclosed Location

After a rather long trek, Kisame and Deidara finally reached their goal, much to their relief. Deidara was tired of walking and complained about his feet hurting -he wanted to use his clay constructs to just fly there, but Obito had told him that doing so would alert the enemy of their presence-, and was glad that they were done walking.

Kisame was tired of Deidara's constant complains, and was glad that he didn't have to hear the Iwa missing-nin's grouses. Still, the perspective of a good battle was enough to push the frustration he had built over the past few days away.

"So, this is the place," Deidara said, as he eyed the fortress cleverly built into the mountain, which could be easily missed unless you knew what were you looking for. Such a place would be hard to siege or break into, even with a large army. "That's it, if Zetsu's intel is correct."

"Our intel has always been good, Deidara-san," Kisame replied.
"There's no reason to doubt our spymaster."

"I dunno, it looks kind of small," Deidara said, eyeing the place with a critical eye. "Not the place I'll use a hideout."

"Appearances can be deceiving," Kisame observed. "The fortress could extend into the mountain, or even down below. Besides, if I needed to hide, I'd use a small place as not to draw attention."

"Whatever. So, what's the plan?" Deidara asked. "I think I should fly above the place, drop some of my art, force the son of a bitch out, then we crush him between the two of us. Simple, fast and effective."

"While I do agree with your plan, we should make sure there aren't any secret doors or escape routes he can use to evade us," Kisame told Deidara, as he gave him a mocking grin. "We don't want a repeat of what happened our last mission, do we?"

"You were there with me, you asshole! It was as much your fault as it was mine!" the blond heatedly protested.

"I know. That's why I said we should approach this mission with care," Kisame said, grinning at the Iwa missing-nin. "Why did you think I was talking about you alone?"

Deidara just huffed, and crossed his arms. Kisame ignored him, and watched the mountain the fortress was built on more closely.

"Thankfully this mountain isn't too big. Let's circle it while we look for any hidden exit," Kisame proposed. "I take the left, you take the right."

"Understood."

Both Akatsuki split for the time moment, as they prepared the terrain for their impending hunt.

...

Back in Konoha

Inside the hot springs, Naruto and Hinata were resting as the hot water nursed their bodies. The two of them were leaning against one of the walls of the stone, the water reaching to their shoulders. Hinata's head was resting on Naruto's shoulder.

"Ahhhh..." the Hyuga Clan head moaned. "This is so good... I don't know why we didn't do this anytime sooner. Don't you agree, Naruto-kun?"

"Indeed," Naruto said, so relaxed it almost sounded like a purr. "All my worries seem so far away..."

"This is perfect. You, me..."

"And literally dozens of people around us."

Because yes, even if the hot springs were pretty big now that the three pools had been merged into one, it was bursting with people, to the point that the water level had raised considerably. Fortunately, everybody else was quiet, as they also either relaxed, or merely talked with their friends or significant others.

"CANNONBALL!"

That's it, until Fu joined them, and bombed into the spring so hard, she created a large wave of hot water, splashing everybody around her. Fu happily emerged from the water, as several people started to telling her off.

"Goddamit Fu!"

"You can't do that in a hot spring!"

"This is not a kiddie pool!"

"Sheesh, I get it, I get it!" Fu replied, as she held her hands defensively. "You should try to chill out a bit, you know. You'll live

longer."

Soon they quickly forgot about such small incident, and continued to relax, chatter and enjoy the warm and pleasant water. Kurenai was saying something to Asuma, who nodded, before the Genjutsu mistress waddled her way to where Naruto and Hinata were relaxing. She'd wish Haku wasn't so far away from the other two, but it would have to do for now.

"Hey, Naruto, Hinata," Kurenai called them.

"Hello, Kurenai-sensei," Hinata greeted back.

"So, enjoying the baths?" Naruto asked.

"Plenty. It was a very thoughtful gift, Naruto," Kurenai said with a smile. "Anyway, there's something I wanted to talk to you about, and I feel this is a good moment as good as any other."

"Let me guess: you're pregnant again!" Naruto said with a cheeky grin.

Kurenai clicked her tongue in annoyance, but decided to ignore the blond's guess. "Remember Yakumo Kurama? The girl I trained before I was your sensei, and thought she was dead?"

"Who wasn't dead and turned out to be a Root agent," Hinata finished, already imagining what was she going to ask. "What about her?"

Kurenai tensed up a little as she moved to the side. "Well..."

Turns out, Kurenai wasn't alone. Behind her was a girl with pale skin and shoulder-length brown hair. Like most women there, she had a towel wrapped around her body. She was visibly nervous and even a little uncomfortable.

"... this is her," Kurenai finished. "Yakumo, these are two of my new students, Naruto Uzumaki and Hinata Hyuga. Naruto, Hinata, meet

Yakumo."

"Um... hi," Yakumo shyly said.

Naruto and Hinata spend a few long, tense moments staring at her, without saying anything. Until Hinata's natural born politeness won over, and returned the greeting.

"Hello, Yakumo-san. I hope you're having a nice time with us," Hinata said.

"Uh, sorry if I sound rude, but shouldn't she be in jail or something like that?" Naruto bluntly asked, raising an eyebrow.

Kurenai sighed in resignation. Even if the jinchuriki was indeed blunt to the point of being insensitive, he was raising a good point. She hoped they would be willing to give the last member of the Kurama clan another chance.

"Hokage-sama released the most mentally stable Root ex-agents under probation, living in foster homes. Yakumo is living with us in the Sarutobi Clan compound," Kurenai explained. "I thought that Yakumo being with more people her age would be good for her mental development. Sorry for not telling you about this before."

"It's okay, Kurenai-sensei. We understand," Hinata replied, before looking around. "However... there are far too many people here. Such a multitude might not be the best place for somebody in Yakumo's position," Hinata pointed out.

"I know, but I don't have that many options. You guys are my only hope," Kurenai said, in almost pleading tone. "Just like Yakumo was not given the option to refuse Danzo. She really needs friends her age, and I would consider it a huge favor if you agreed."

"Kurenai-sensei, please, I don't want to be a burden-" Yakumo began, but was interrupted by Hinata.

"Nobody considers you a burden, Yakumo-san," Hinata said, before turning her eyes towards the raven haired woman. "I know firsthand how much damage Danzo caused, and that most of his minions were also his victims. If by helping Yakumo-san I can help to undo some of that damage, I'm for it."

"I guess it would be very hypocritical of me to hold against somebody something that's out of their control," Naruto said. "So yeah, you can call me your friend if you wish so."

"I... thank you. Thank you a lot," Yakumo said, bowing her head multiple times.

"Again, I'm sorry for this," Kurenai insisted. "Thankfully, unlike most Root agents, Yakumo hasn't been that long in Root. Undoing Danzo's conditioning shouldn't take that much effort compared to other agents."

"Not that I liked working for him," Yakumo said, shaking her head. "Being a Root ninja was... it was... it was horrible," Yakumo said, sobbing a little.

"Don't worry, I think that the nightmare is already over..." Hinata said sympathetically and placed a comforting hand on the brown-haired girl's shoulder. "Danzo is gone, and he will never be coming back."

"And Konoha will be all the better for it," Kurenai said with a nod. "I'm going back to Asuma and the other adults. I'll leave Yakumo in your care. If you need anything from me, just call. Oh, and introduce her to Haku, will you?"

"Sure, you can leave her in our hands, Kurenai-sensei!" Naruto said with a grin, giving the raven haired woman a thumbs up.

Kurenai smiled and nodded, before turning around and going back where all the adults were gathering.

"So, Yakumo, right?" Naruto said, rubbing the back of his head.
"Sorry for saying that you should be in jail."

"Don't be. I did quite a lot of awful things while working under Danzo. Including helping him escape the first time," the brunette said. She was about to say that she was also instrumental in the Rinnegan theft, which ended up in Akatsuki's hands, but decided against it. At least, for the time being. "A few days ago, we were enemies."

"We weren't enemies because of your choice," Naruto said. "And now we have the chance to choose to be your friends," Naruto said, nodding, before making a grimace. "Okay, I think that sounded a little too cheesy..."

Hinata giggled. "Cheesy or not, I think it was the right thing to say, Naruto-kun."

"It would be nice to have some friends," Yakumo softly said.

"I'm guessing that Danzo didn't allow you to grow attached to any of your fellow agents, did he?" Naruto assumed. "With that guy's stance on 'a ninja should be an emotionless drone'."

"No. He was adamant that there was nothing more important than the mission," Yakumo replied. "And if we had to choose between the mission and the lives of our partners, we couldn't hesitate to choose the former."

"How horrible," Hinata said, scowling a little.

"And it wasn't just that," Yakumo continued. "Everything has to be secondary to the mission, including our own lives. Though thankfully, I was never in a situation that demanded my life. I don't think I'd be able to do it."

"Guess that, since you're the last bearer of a powerful Bloodline Limit, he considered you less expendable than the rest of his goons," Hinata deduced.

"By the way, Yakumo," Naruto interceded. "Do you think that Danzo would have liked seeing you like this? Having fun on a hot springs while chatting with us?"

This made the brown haired girl laugh a little. "Kami, no! We were banned from taking such activities, that he considered 'wasteful'. If we had no missions, we had to train all the time. Danzo would be fuming if we decided to do something purely for our pleasure."

"In that case, think that Danzo is watching you from wherever hellish afterlife he's now, and is completely impotent to do anything about it," Naruto told the brunette with a grin.

"Heh..." she chuckled again. "That's something I'd like to see."

"By the way, Yakumo-san," this time, it was Hinata's turn to intercede. "Kurenai-sensei told us about you. Though she didn't mention other students. How is that you didn't have any teammates? It's custom for rookie ninjas to have teams of three."

"Technically I wasn't a ninja yet. Due my medical condition, I couldn't afford to go to the Academy," Yakumo explained. "Hence why they had Kurenai-sensei teach me how to control my powers while Tsunade-sama worked on a treatment. I guess that, once I had graduated the Academy, I would be assigned to a traditional four man team. Speaking of which... where is your other teammate? Kurenai-sensei told me she was training three people."

"Ah, yes, Haku! He's probably locking lips with Tenten," Naruto said, as he looked around, trying to discern his other teammate among the crowd.

However, Hinata beat him to the punch thanks to her Tenseigan. "Found him. And your prediction was a correct one, Naruto-kun."

"I knew it," Naruto said, shaking his head, but grinning a little. "Come on Yakumo! You need to meet Haku!"

"This Haku guy... what kind of person is he?" Yakumo asked.,

"Well, you can say that he is..." Naruto began, trying to look for the most suitable words to describe his teammate. His lips formed a grin when he found them. "... a pretty *cool* guy."

Hinata merely rolled her eyes.

...

"You know, it's kinda weird seeing you guys like that," Shikamaru said.

Rather than his team, Shikamaru chose to take a spot near the Suna ninjas, clearly to be near his girlfriend. Speaking of which, Temari's hair was no longer styled in four ponytails, but let it fall loose on her back, revealing it to be deceptively long.

"I'm so used seeing you with your ponytails that you almost look like a different person," Shikamaru continued, before his eyes drifted towards Kankuro, who was obviously not wearing any face paint on his face nor a black hood over his head. "And that goes double to you."

"Look who's talking," Kankuro said, with an eye roll. "Guess that your hair isn't permanently stuck in the shape of pineapple after all."

Kankuro's comment made Temari giggle and Shikamaru to scowl a little. Just like Temari, Shikamaru wasn't wearing his hair in a ponytail either, letting it loose.

"Yeah, but in my case the contrast isn't so big," Shikamaru tried to defend himself, though he decided it was probably better to change the topic before his girlfriend and her brother took offense. "Anyway, are you enjoying the baths? I don't think there are any in Suna or the Land of Wind."

"Nope!" it wasn't Kankuro nor Temari who replied, but Matsuri, who was sitting between Gaara and Yukata. "And I'm so glad you guys invited us to this place! Like, we came here on a mission, but being allowed into a hot spring during it... it's so cool!"

"But... water in a hot spring is hot, not cool," Yukata chimed in, looked a bit confused. "I mean, it's like, in the name."

"It was a figure of speech, Yukata-chan," Matsuri replied, sounding a little tired. "We already went through this before."

"We did? Oh, right, yes!" Yukata said, smiling and nodding. "By the way, how many times can we go here?"

"We came here to help Konoha rebuild, Yukata," Gaara called out. "Not to relax. This is a gesture of their gratitude, not something to be done every day."

"Though you can come here every day if you want," Shikamaru added. "Though don't expect to pay as little as you did today. We managed to get such a huge discount thanks to a coupon Naruto had."

"I didn't bring that much money," Yukata said, before an idea dawned upon her. "Oh, I know! Gaara-sama, can we get the hot spring's price discounted from our mission revenue?"

"Like I said before, this is a mission to help an ally village. None of us are getting paid for this," Gaara said.

"We don't!?" Yukata replied, outraged. "Aw, shucks."

"If it makes you feel any better, think that this stay at the hot springs is Konoha's way of repaying us," Gaara told her.

"I'd like to be paid in hot spring tickets rather than money," Yukata said. "It feels nicer."

"Or you can spend the money you earn on missions on hot springs if you wish?" Shikamaru suggested.

"That works too!" Yukata happily agreed.

Shikamaru grimaced, and looked at his girlfriend. "Is this girl for real?" he whispered to her.

Temari sighed and nodded. "She can be kind of... absent minded. But she's a brave and a sweet girl."

"Regardless of her other qualities, I don't think I could stand being near somebody so lacking in the brain department," Shikamaru said in a disapproving tone. "I don't think my sanity could hold for long."

"She isn't so bad once you get used to her," Temari said with a shrug, as she shifted on her seat. "It takes some time, though."

"Hey," Shikamaru said, as she grabbed one of Temari's biceps. "It's my imagination, or did these get even bigger?"

"Why yes, Shikamaru, I've been training a lot, thanks for your compliment," Temari said in an overly sarcastic tone, as she narrowed her eyes dangerously at the Nara.

"Hey, I didn't mean to disparage you," Shikamaru said, holding his hands in defense. "I was simply surprised. It was just a harmless comment. I'm not used to seeing you without clothes, you know. You have a very fit body."

"Maybe not fit enough. After my loss against Akatsuki and Gaara almost dying, we decided to redouble our training. Being so close to death really opens your eyes." Temari told him. She shifted her position again, subtly inching closer to her boyfriend. "What about you? Aren't you training either?"

"Well, as you can see, right now I'm kind of busy picking up the pieces of our wrecked village," Shikamaru dryly said. "But yeah, I

am. Asuma-sensei says that we're ready for a promotion, and both my teammates and I are getting ready for it."

Temari smiled, pleased, and nodded. "Good. You have a lot of talent, Shikamaru, and it would be a pity if you decided to waste it by staying a rank unbecoming to you just because it's too 'troublesome'."

"Hey, I don't say that that often, do I?" Shikamaru protested. "I'm trying to complain less about hard work."

"That's good," Temari said with a grin. "Otherwise, you and I wouldn't last much longer together."

"Though I hope you don't mind if I don't end up as jacked up as you are," Shikamaru said, now his turn to grin.

Temari scowled at him, and slapped his shoulder, while splashing some water. "Oh come on! I'm not THAT jacked up!"

"I thought you'd be happy I have no complex about dating a woman stronger than I am," Shikamaru added, his grin still present.

"People as nonchalant as you rarely have any complex about anything," Temari replied. "Besides, as much as I train, I don't think I'll ever will -or want- to end up as big as her."

Temari pointed to another group near them, and Shikamaru immediately realized who she was pointing out. Fu was talking happily with the Animal Squad, and now that he had set his eyes on her, he realized how muscular the girl was. Temari could be considered skinny by comparison.

"Man, look at that broad back," Shikamaru said. "I didn't even know that we had so many muscles there."

"I feel sorry for Shino if that girl feels like playing rough in the bed," Temari sympathetically said. "Though I'd prefer if your eyes were

only on my body, you know. You won't have a chance like this in some time, so you better take your chance."

Shikamaru smiled. "If you put it that way, how can I say no?"

Meanwhile near Shikamaru and Temari, the Chunin of Kakashi's Animal Squad were rather pissed that something they planned didn't go as expected. They had thought that being at a hot spring would force their sensei to take their mask off but apparently not...

"I can't believe it!" Kiba protested, throwing his hands in the air, making a splash once they came down. "We're at a hot springs, and the asshole still keeps his mask on!"

They were all expectantly waiting for Kakashi to appear unmasked when they heard he was also going to go to the hot springs. But even if he wasn't wearing anything under his neck, the mask remained firmly in place.

"The guy must be suffocating with all this steam," Tamaki said, narrowing her eyes at her sensei.

"He doesn't look like he's suffocating to me," Shino replied, also looking at Kakashi. "Maybe is easier to breathe through that mask than it appears at first sight."

"And what about you?" Kiba asked, as he moved closer towards Shino. "Why are you still wearing those shades?"

"I like wearing them, even in a place like this. Is that a problem to you?" Shino defiantly answered.

"Come on, leave Shino alone," Fu interceded, as she adjusted the towel wrapped around her body. "A man must have some mystery. That makes them more attractive to us," Fu said, as she placed an arm around Shino's shoulders, pulling the Aburame slightly closer to her.

"In Kakashi's case, I don't think it's working, or if that's his intention," Tamaki noted. "I don't think I ever saw Kakashi-sensei with a woman, ever."

"Or a man," Kiba added. "Though he and Guy-sensei tend to hang out a lot..."

"Correction: Guy-sensei is the one who hounds Kakashi-sensei," Tamaki observed.

"Going back to the original topic," Shino interceded, clearly not wanting to discuss his sensei's possible sexuality. "There's somebody who may solve the issue regarding what does Kakashi hides behind his mask," the Aburame heir said, as he nodded towards a girl coming from the female locker room: Rin Nohara. The brown haired girl noticed the trio, and quickly moved towards them.

"Hey guys!" Rin happily greeted them, as she entered the water. "Wow, the water is just perfect! So warm! It was really nice of Naruto to invite us here, wasn't it?"

"Rin, you've known Kakashi since you were a little kid," Kiba impatiently said, ignoring the medic-nin's greeting. "Can you tell us what's under his mask?"

"Huh?" Rin dumbly asked, before her brain actually processed the question. She smiled awkwardly. "Uh... I'm afraid I have no idea."

"WHAT!?" Kiba shouted, startling the medic-nin a little.

"You're telling us that Kakashi-sensei wore that mask since he was five?" Tamaki asked, just as skeptical.

"Pretty much, yeah," Rin said. "There were many people, including Obito and I, who wanted to know what does he look under that mask. None of us succeeded. Whatever secret Kakashi is hiding, he guards it with zeal."

"Maybe a scar, or a birth deformity?" Kiba guessed. "Because I can't think why he's so averse to show his face."

"Maybe he does to create an aura of mystery around him? I admit that's something that I found attractive of him," Rin confessed.

"Heh, that's exactly what Fu said," Tamaki said, turning towards her Takigakure friend. However, the green haired girl wasn't there anymore. "Fu...?"

"Coming~!" Fu chirped, as she forded her way back to the group. However, they noticed that she wasn't alone, as a certain silver haired man followed her.

"Kakashi-sensei?" Tamaki asked.

"Why did you bring him?" Kiba asked.

"Well, Fu told me that you were talking about me, so I thought it would be fitting if I was part of your little chat, given that I'm the topic," Kakashi nonchalantly said, giving them his usual eye-smile. "More specifically, why I hide my face under a mask all the time."

"So I asked him if he could come and show us his face," Fu helpfully added. "And he said yes!"

"Wait... that's it? That's what it takes? Just asking him to unmask?" Kiba asked, his disbelief growing with each passing second-

"There are many people who have tried to see what's underneath my mask. They employed all sorts of ambushes, traps and schemes," Kakashi began, as his visible eye rested on Rin, who laughed awkwardly as a faint blush colored her face. "Though for some reason, nobody ever thought about asking. Until Fu, that's it. Anyway here you go."

Everybody held their breath as Kakashi removed his mask to reveal... an admittedly good looking but still mundane face. The

Jonin smiled in amusement to their disappointment. No birth deformities or hideous scars crossing his face. He had a strong jawline, and a mouth full of pearly white teeth. The closest thing to a facial defect would be a small dot under the left corner of his mouth.

"So, what's with those reactions?" Kakashi asked, using an irritatingly jovial tone that bordered on mocking. "You wanted to see my face, and now you're seeing it."

"But... you're completely normal!" Kiba protested.

"I think I'll take that as a compliment," Kakashi said, before pulling his mask up to his nose once again. "What did you expect to see?"

"Something worth hiding!" Tamaki shouted, as she punched the water with both fists in exasperation, splashing some hot water around. "If you hide your face with such zeal, it has to be because of something meaningful."

"And didn't you think that maybe I wear a mask because I just like it?" Kakashi asked.

"While it's a possibility, any line of logic would say that somebody who wears all the time tries to hide something," Shino intervened.

"If you weren't hiding something, then why is that whenever somebody tries to unmask you, you resisted so much?" Kiba asked.

"If somebody sneaked up on you from behind and tried to pull your pants down, would you let him? Or would you fight him?" Kakashi replied with another question.

"That's not the same thing!" the Inuzuka protested.

"I can't see how they aren't," Kakashi said with a shrug, before turning around, and moving back with the other adults. "If that's everything, I'll leave you guys alone."

The members of the Animal Squad, Rin and Fu shared a moment of very awkward silence, until the Wood Release user opened her mouth.

"So many years wondering what was under Kakashi's face, and all I had to do was ask," Rin said, mostly to herself. She then looked at everybody else. "Do you guys feel stupid, or it's just me?"

"Nope, I don't feel stupid!" Fu brightly replied.

"And in the end, he turned out to look perfectly normal," Kiba added, sighing a little.

You call that normal? Boy, your sensei looks really hot. I don't know why he hides such a handsome face behind that mask all the time," Fu commented before pulling Shino closer to herself. "Of course, he's still nowhere near as cute as my Shino, that's for sure!"

"Sometimes I feel that Kakashi only does the things he does to mess with people," Tamaki reflected. "Because that's how I'm feeling right now."

Everybody, both teens and adults, continued talking and having fun at the hot springs. They would remember that day as one of relaxation and enjoyment, not only because of the good time everybody got, but because it would be the last time they would be able to experience such pleasure for the foreseeable future.

...

Land of Iron, a few days later

After a week of travel, Jiraiya, Tsunade and Itachi managed to reach the capital of the Land of Iron. There were still a few days until the summit began, and Jiraiya wanted to use that time to discuss with his two escorts possible strategies and topics to broach in what was going to be a five way discussion. Hopefully, he could convince

Kumo and Iwa to join Konoha, Kiri and Suna into an unified front against Akatsuki.

The trio of Konoha ninjas crossed the snow covered city until they reached the Three Wolves Mountain. Inside said mountain was the Iron Fortress, seat of power of the Samurai, from where the High Shogun ruled the small but powerful country.

The entrance hall of the Iron Fortress was a huge, cavernous instance, so wide and long an entire army could fill it, and the roof so high it one needed to crank their neck to see it. Said roof was supported by massive pillars, evenly spread around the place. Despite being so big, it was also empty and scarce, with only torches on the walls providing some illumination.

There were several groups of samurai guarding the place. Most of them wearing white full body armors with gas masks that completely hid their faces. Other samurai wore red, bulkier armors, probably to show their higher rank. One of these red-armored samurai, flanked by two regular ones, walked towards the newcomers.

"Hello, and welcome to the Land of Iron, ninjas of Konoha," the samurai officer greeted the Hokage and his escorts, making a polite bow. "You're the first to arrive. Though I must say we weren't expecting any of you to arrive so soon."

"I hope my early arrival is not a problem," Jiraiya said.

"Not in the slightest. We already prepared all the guest rooms ahead of time precisely if something like this happened," the samurai explained. "While we don't mind you being early, you're going to have to wait some days until the others come. Hopefully you'll have a way to pass the time until the summit begins."

"We do have, don't worry," Jiraiya told him. "Now, if you can show us where are we going to stay, we'd appreciate it. It has been a long journey and my escorts and I would wish to rest."

"Sure," the samurai said as he and his two subordinates turned around and started to walk away, the Konoha ninjas following them. "We prepared two rooms, one for you and another for your escorts. We hope you find them to your liking."

"If it's possible, I'd prefer if one of my escorts shared a room with me," Jiraiya said, as he and Tsunade briefly exchanged a look. "I hope that's not a problem."

"Of course, it can be arranged," the samurai said.

The next days would indeed be boring, though Jiraiya and Tsunade knew how to use all that time to their enjoyment.

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed the hot springs chapter. Despite all the people that ended showing up, I was unable to come up with something for all of them to do or talk about, so in the end could only focus on a few groups.

Those of you worried about Yakumo Kurama, I hope that this chapter put your worries to rest. As you can see, she's doing pretty good under Kurenai's tutelage, and she befriended Naruto and Hinata. She still has a long way to go until all Danzo's negative influence is washing away, but hey, it's a good beginning for her, don't you think so?

Also, regarding Kakashi's mask... I saw a couple episodes where Naruto and co. tried to remove his mask to see what his face looks like. However, I don't remember anybody in those episodes simply asking Kakashi to do so. Guess that wacky shenenigans are funnier than taking a reasonable course of action. And of course, Fu was the one behind such genius concept. It's only natural that the most simple minded people are the ones coming up with the simplest solutions.

Though, not everything in this chapter is fun and relaxation: as you can see, Kisame and Deidara are on the hunt once again.

Did they locate Killer B already? You'll see soon enough.

And lastly, as you could see, Jiraiya, Tsunade and Itachi had finally arrived to the Land of Iron. Yep, what you guys have been waiting for is going to happen, the Five Kage Summit! Are you as excited as I am?

Well, that's all, see you next year! Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all my beloved readers! I hoped you liked this little Christmas Present. You can give me a present as well by reviewing this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Five Kage Summit

Auhtor's Note. Heya everyone, I hope you had a great start to the new year and the new decade! I started it by catching a fucking cold and spending several days bedridden, so I hope yours was at least relatively better. Here's the first chapter of 2020, about something you guys have been dying to see for quite some time. Enjoy:

Chapter 93:

The Five Kage Summit

or

International Politics, abridged

Land of Iron, Hokage's Quarters

"It seems that we didn't think this through," Jiraiya said.

Jiraiya had no delusions about the kind of room the samurai had prepared for him. While it was custom for somebody as important as a Kage to be given a comfortable guest room, the Sannin was aware of the kind of lifestyle the samurai led, and thus he was already expecting a rather austere room. Said room was small and narrow, with only a single bed, a small nightstand besides it with an oil lamp, and a wooden wardrobe.

Still, despite years of being used to their comfort of their fancy house, Jiraiya and Tsunade were more than capable of handling some austerity. However, there was a problem that they didn't account for when they requested a single room.

"Well, with this cold, we were going to sleep very close to one another," Tsunade added.

The bed they were sharing was individual, meaning that they had to squeeze themselves into it. And given that Jiraiya was tall and broad shouldered, he sometimes unwillingly threatened to push the shorter and smaller Tsunade out of the bed.

"At first I thought that we could take this as some sort of vacation," Tsunade began. "But I can't wait until this is over and we go back home. I miss our king size bed and Konoha's warm temperatures."

"Then I must be making a lousy job keeping you warm, aren't I?" Jiraiya asked, half jokingly. "But jokes apart, I do agree. I can't understand how so many people are willing to live in such a land."

"Something about living in a harsh place being good to build character, or some other nonsense," Tsunade said, rolling her eyes. The two of them fell into a short, comfortable silence, before Tsunade spoke again, though to change the topic. "So, how are you feeling? You know, at the prospect of having to deal with the other Kages."

"I'd lie if I said that I'm one hundred percent confident," Jiraiya admitted. "Though the fact that two of the other four Kages are already on my side is a good thing. Otherwise this would be much harder."

"Just remember what we've been preparing these past days, and you'll do it fine," Tsunade said, before giving Jiraiya a kiss in the lips. "Besides, the escorts are allowed into the meeting, even if we aren't allowed to intervene in the discussion. I'll be there with you all the time."

"What would I do without you, Hime," Jiraiya said, kissing her again.

"Drink, whore, and overall, lead a destructive and aimless lifestyle?" Tsunade asked.

"Ouch," Jiraiya grimaced. "You don't pull your punches, do you?"

"Never," she said with a cheeky grin. "Though I'm not one to talk, to be honest."

Their conversation was interrupted when somebody knocked the door.

"Hokage-sama, Tsunade-sama, are you presentable?" Itachi's voice asked from the other side of the thick wooden door. He sounded like he had urgent news.

"Come in!" Tsunade said.

Itachi opened the door, and entered the room while averting his gaze. However, once he saw both the Sannin were covered, he dared to look at them. While the two Sannin usually slept in the nude, the unmercifully cold climate from the Land of Iron beat such idea out of their minds, and had to keep some of their clothes when they went to bed, on top of several layers of thick blankets.

"Something wrong, Itachi?" Jiraiya said, as both he and Tsunade pushed the blankets away and got out of the bed.

After being thankful for the Sannin also wearing something from the waist down, he nodded. "The last of the Kages has finally arrived. The samurai decided that now that we're all here, the summit can begin."

"Understood. No time to waste then," Jiraiya said, as he and Tsunade began to dress as quickly as possible.

Once they ready, they exited the room, where a group of samurai were already waiting for them. The samurai lead the trio to the meeting room. On their way, they were joined by the rest of the Kages and their escorts beign led by a group of samurai each. They saw the Raikage, accompanied by his two most trusted men Darui and C, like other occassions; Rasa brought with him Baki and Maki as well. Mei Terumi, whom was no longer sporting a pregnant belly, decided to bring Zabuza and Ameyuri this time. The Tsuchikage was

escorted by a tall, portly man with a round face and a big nose, and a woman with shoulder length brown hair, with a single lock falling over a disproportionately large forehead.

"Odd," Tsunade whispered, as she looked at the Tsuchikage, whose face was hidden by their hat. "That doesn't appear to be Onoki."

After a rather long walk, they reached the meeting room: an open, spacious place with high roofs -it seemed the samurai favored them for some reason-, decorated with banners displaying the kanji of the elements of the nations the Kages served. There were two tables, a small one where a wizened, unarmored samurai with a long gray moustache, a long gray goatee, and bandaged head was sitting, flanked by other two unarmored samurai, the two of them with scars running down their faces. In front of him there was a much bigger table shaped like a horseshoe, presumably where the Kages would sit. Around the table there were five benches.

"Hello, Kages of the elemental nations," the samurai began. "Please take a seat. Your bodyguards can rest in the benches."

Jiraiya traded quick glances with Mei and Rasa, which both nodded. Jiraiya quickly sat at the center of the table, with Mei sitting to his right and Rasa to his left, forcing the Raikage and Tsuchikage to sit at the extremes of the table, meaning that they were not only isolated, but they were separated from each other as well, making them join forces against the other three all the more unlikely.

"My name is Mifune, High Shogun of the Land of Iron, and I shall be the moderator of this meeting," the samurai of the bandaged head, Mifune, introduced himself. "Please, remove your hats and place them on the table."

The Kages did as they were told, and as many people has suspected, the Tsuchikage wasn't Onoki, but a young girl no older than eighteen, with short black hair and black eyes, giving her an odd resemblance to Shizune. Rasa was the first one to comment this.

"Ohoho, look at that. It seems that the Fence Sitter finally decided to retire and pass the hat to somebody else," Rasa commented in his usual snubbish tone. "About time, somebody old enough to remember the First Ninja War isn't suited to rule during modern times."

"Watch out your tongue, Kazekage," the young girl snapped. "I won't tolerate anybody disrespect my grandpa, no matter if it's a Kage or not!"

"Now, now, let's try not to start a heated argument so soon," Mei intervened, trying to calm the Tsuchikage down.

"Nobody asked you to intervene, Mizukage," the Tsuchikage said, glaring at Mei. "Oh, and tell your mother she's still wanted for defecting Iwa."

Mei puckered her lips, pretending to be hurt. "Are you still angry about that? My, my, it's true what they said about Iwa and grudges. Plus, that's not a way to treat your family, is it? We're practically sisters, Kurotsuchi."

The Tsuchikage, Kurotsuchi, narrowed her eyes at the Mizukage. "Second cousins. And even if the blood of the Kinryu Clan may run through our veins, that doesn't make us family."

"You have no idea how much you're breaking my heart," Mei said in a mocking tone. "I always wanted to have a little sister."

In the benches, Tsunade was carefully following the conversation. She was enjoying the revelation of the Tsuchikage and Meizukage being related, reminding her of the usual twists of her soap operas, but she was a bit lost.

"Itachi," Tsunade whispered, leaning close to him. "How are those two related? And why is Mei's mother wanted in Iwa?"

"From what I had gathered, both Mei and Kurotsuchi's respective mothers are cousins belonging to the same clan, the Kinryu. The Kinryu Clan members possess the Lava Release, and they're one of Iwa's three most important clans," Itachi started to explain.

"However, it seems that, while most clans, especially those with Bloodline Limits, tend to be watchful over their members' relationships in order to protect their secrets, the Kinryu... well, to put it lightly, they have a hard time keeping it inside their pants."

Tsunade chortled, covering her mouth with one hand. This was getting better and better. "Really?"

"Yes. They do have a very liberal view towards sex and relationships, plus they tend to fall in love easily. The Tsuchikage and Earth Lord were willing to allow this, as long as they only married people native to the Land of Earth."

"And Mei's mother fell in love with somebody from Kiri, right?"
Tsunade guessed.

"Exactly. It was during the Second Ninja War. Mei's mother defected Iwa and returned to Kiri with her lover, whom she married shortly afterwards," Itachi continued explaining. "As you can imagine, the Terumi Clan was more than happy to welcome her among their ranks. The potential of a generation of ninjas with two Bloodline Limits... it was like a gift from the gods. Even if in the end, only Mei manifested both Bloodlimits."

"No wonder that Kurotsuchi girl isn't that happy to see Mei. Her very existence is a reminder of how Kiri successfully stole a Bloodline Limit," Tsunade stated. Her eyes then moved towards the two Iwa Jonin, who appeared to be ready to fight at any moment. "What can you tell me about those two? Should we worry about them?"

"The big man is Akatsuchi, one of Iwa's top Jonin. No Bloodline Limit, but one of the best Earth Release users there is, if the Bingo Book is to be believed," Itachi explained. "The woman is Suzumebachi Kamizuru, leader of what's left of the Kamizuru Clan, a

clan that uses bees as weapons in a similar fashion to the Aburame's beetles. Though don't tell them I said that, since both clans hate each other to death.

"The Kamizuru clan used to be one of Iwa's three most important clans, but they lost most of their members during the past two wars, as well as most of their secret jutsu. Both she and her two younger brothers were away from Iwa looking for something, some kind of lost family treasure that would return the clan back to its glory days. Given her presence here, I'd say they succeeded."

"Did you know that Onoki had retired, and put that girl in his place?" Tsunade asked.

Itachi shook his head. "Hokage-sama had me watch Akatsuki's movements, so I didn't have the time nor the chance to see how the other villages were doing."

"It seems that she's his granddaughter, according to her," Tsunade mentioned.

"Granddaughter or not, she has to be a formidable kunoichi if she was deemed worthy of the Tsuchikage's hat," Itachi replied.

Before things could escalate even further between the two female Kage, Mifune decided to intervene and put some order.

"I'd appreciate if you solved your personal quarrels once we're done with this meeting," Mifune interrupted the two bickering female Kages. "Raikage-sama has convened this Kage Summit to discuss a matter of utmost importance," Mifune said. The Raikage nodded and grunted something inaudible, inwardly thanking the samurai for bringing the discussion back on track. "Raikage-sama, given that it was you who summoned the Five Kage, you may speak first."

"Thank you, Mifune-san," the Raikage said, as he stood up from his chair. "During the past few years, a mercenary group called Akatsuki made itself known. While at first they appeared to be yet another

mercenary group with excessively low prices in order to compete with our villages, it later became apparent that they had some sort of agenda: the kidnapping of the nine jinchuriki for some nefarious purposes.

"A few months ago, the jinchuriki of the Two Tails, Yugito Nii, was abducted by two Akatsuki identified as Obito Uchiha and Kisame Hoshigaki," the Raikage's tone became harsher when he named the two kidnappers, glancing briefly at the Hokage and Mizukage. "And a few weeks ago, the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails, my own brother Killer B was attacked and abducted. The perpetrators of such attack were once again Kisame, though his accomplice was an Iwa ninja named Deidara," this time, the Raikage glared at Kurotsuchi.

"And what do you expect us to do? Rescue them? Help you deliver swift retribution to the Akatsuki?" Kurotsuchi began, earning a scowl from the Raikage. "Jinchuriki are the responsibility of the village they belong to. To ask other villages to help your problems is really embarrassing."

"If that's the case, you didn't do a good job keeping yours," Jiraiya intervened, shooting a sharp look at Kurotsuchi. "Not only both of your jinchuriki were abducted with you being none the wiser, but when we asked for your help in order to secure the jinchuriki of the Four Tails, Roshi, we got no response."

"And how could we know you were honest, and it wasn't some sort of trap?" Kurotsuchi asked. "Konoha and Iwa aren't allies. We have no responsibility towards you people. What about your allies Suna and Kiri? Didn't you ask them for help?"

"Kiri has been active in the operation to gather the jinchuriki, as so was Suna," Mei intervened. "Though I'm afraid that our results haven't been that good."

Kurotsuchi snorted. "So much for your alliance."

"At least we've been trying to do something!" Rasa exploded, hastily standing up from his chair as well. Kurtosuchi's bodyguards quickly leaped and jumped into the table, standing protectively in front of their Kage. This prompted the rest of the bodyguards to leap into action as well, jumping in front of their respective Kages, some with their weapons drawn, and others with their hands already interlocked to for hand seals.

"Enough!" Mifune shouted. "There won't be any fighting as long as you are our guests. Now please sit down, and return to your seats."

The ninja didn't listen to Mifune, and remained there. But after a few seconds, the Kage told their respective bodyguards to stand down and return to their benches.

"Now that's better," Mifune said, before turning at Rasa. "Now, Kazekage-sama, I believe there was something you wanted to say?"

"Yes. My youngest son is a jinchuriki. He became one before he was even born by my order," the Kazekage began. "We used to keep our Tailed Beast sealed inside a teapot, but Suna was going through hard times, and I thought that a jinchuriki would help us recover. For quite some time, I treated Gaara as nothing but a weapon, and it wasn't until I nearly lost him when I realize how awful of a father I've been.

"And from what I could learn, other jinchuriki got similar treatments too. Expected to be loyal to the village and die for it, but were given little incentive to stay loyal. Hence why many of them abandoned their homes and became vagrants. This made Akatsuki's job all the easier."

"Don't lump Kumo with your lot, Kazekage," the Raikage growled. "Kumo has always treated their jinchuriki with the same respect as any other of our ninjas. In all of Kumo's history, not single jinchuriki has ever thought about betraying the village!"

"Let me repeat my question: what do you expect us to do?"
Kurotsuchi asked. "Iwa doesn't have any responsibility towards-"

"IT DOES!" The Raikage roared, as he brought his fist down the table, opening a hole on it. Even if the bodyguards didn't leap into action, they did get ready in case a fight broke out. "Didn't you hear about the part that one of your ninjas kidnapped my brother!?"

"Deidara is a missing-nin. Whatever he did, he wasn't acting in Iwa's name," Kurotsuchi defensively said.

"Akatsuki is composed of missing-nin from all of your villages," the Raikage said, pointing an accustory finger at the other Kages. "And not just that, but I know that some of you hired their services!"

Rasa seemed to sigh, and cast his gaze down. Kurotsuchi, however, frowned at the larger man.

"Hey, I have no idea of what are you talking about," Kurotsuchi said. "So you better stop making those-"

"You don't? Maybe you should ask your grandfather," the Raikage interrupted. He then turned at the Mizukage. "And we also know that your predecessor, Yagura, was being manipulated by Akatsuki as well!" then, he looked at Jiraiya. "And a Konoha ninja is one of the organization's leaders! All of you have a responsibility regarding Akatsuki! You created this monster that took my brother away!" the Raikage roared.

"Konoha has been dealing with the Akatsuki threat for years, Raikage," Jiraiya told him, sounding exasperated. "We even helped you deal with Obito and his pet Nine Tails when they attacked one of your outposts and a town of the Land of Lightning. Yet, despite the fact that your ninjas saw with their own eyes the level of threat Akatsuki possess, you still refused to do anything other than hiding your brother away."

"Don't go boasting about what your village has done, Hokage! What have you accomplished?" the Raikage fired back, his rage not only unabated, but growing. "Akatsuki possess seven and a half of the Tailed Beasts! I'd say you've been doing a pretty lousy job, if the results are anything to go by!"

"The Akatsuki threat is too big for a single village to handle," Mei interceded. "Just like how Akatsuki had our previous Mizukage under their control, who can't say that something similar happened in your villages?"

"Are you implying that my granpa was also in their grasp!?" Kurotsuchi asked, outraged. "Maybe he is old, but he is no senile fool!"

"Not necessarily that," this time, it was Rasa who spoke. "After my son was abducted by the Akatsuki, I ordered my ANBU to search the village for spies. Turn out they found many moles among our ranks working for Akatsuki. And not just low ranked mooks, but actual Jonin with an impeccable record, that I would have pegged as completely loyal to the village and trust them blindly. The hand of Akatsuki is big and their reach is long.

"Ask this yourself, Raikage: how did Akatsuki find where your brother was being hidden so quickly and easily, if they didn't have spies among your ninja?"

The Raikage gritted his teeth and snarled in anger. He wanted to answer to that so badly, but was unable to. What the Kazekage said made too much sense to dismiss like that. The Raikage always prided in his village's strength, but maybe that pride blinded him to threats he had considered beneath him.

"To answer your previous question, Raikage, Konoha has eliminated several Akatsuki members," Jiraiya began. "Sasori of the Red Sands was killed by a squad composed of both Konoha and Suna ninjas after the Kazekage's son's kidnapping; Hidan and Kakuzu were defeated while we helped the Takigakure ninjas reclaim their village,

Kakuzu being killed by the very jinchuriki he was trying to abduct, while we managed to neutralize and capture Hidan. And lastly, Pain, the leader of the Akatsuki, died while trying to capture the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails, and his partner, Konan, surrendered to Konoha shortly afterwards."

"Not that it matter, given the amount of Tailed Beasts the Akatsuki had gathered," the Raikage growled. "Seven and a half Tailed beasts in exchange of a few members is quite the trade-off."

"If I'm allowed to give my opinion, I believe there are some pieces of information that are missing," Mifune began, drawing the attention of the five Kages. "Akatsuki seems to be collecting the Tailed Beasts. But what we must ask ourselves is, for what purpose? The Beasts have to be the means to their endgame."

"It isn't obvious? They want the Beasts to rule supreme over the Elemental Nations," the Raikage said.

"If that was the case, they would have launched an offensive already," Mei countered. "Seven Tailed Beasts is more than enough to put a whole country to its knees."

"The Raikage is right," Jiraiya said, much to the other's surprise. "However, the sheer scope of their plans is something that escapes him."

"Enlighten us, then," Kurotsuchi said. "I'm sure there's something you're hiding from us, Hokage."

"There is. The Mizukage and the Kazekage know an abridged version, but this is the whole story. Sometime ago, we had a mostly odd mission request to escort a priestess to the Land of Tea. Said priestess specifically requested Hinata Hyuga to be part of the squad assigned to her," Jiraiya began. "Of course, I already knew that there was something more going on involving her..."

Jiraiya told the others about their encounter with the Moon Acolytes, and everything they learned from them: the Sage of the Six Paths and his brother; the Ten Tails, and how it was split into the nine Tailed Beasts, the Rinnegan and the Tenseigan, how the Akatsuki leader possessed the former, while Hinata and Hanabi awakened the latter. And lastly, Akatsuki's plan of reforming the Ten Tails and use its power to conquer the world in the name of "peace".

"Wait a minute," Kurotsuchi said, holding a hand. "The leader of Akatsuki had the Rinnegan. The same leader you said died while trying to invade your village. What happened to the Rinnegan?"

"Unfortunately, one of the Rinnegan was recovered by the Akatsuki," Jiraiya answered.

"And the other?" the Raikage asked, narrowing his eyes at him.

Jiraiya took a few seconds to answer. "The second Rinnegan is in our possession. Currently, one of our ninjas is wielding it."

Jiraiya could feel how his fellow Kages' expressions darkened. While A and Kurotsuchi were the most obvious, not even Mei and Rasa were able to stop some worry to manifest through their faces.

"And what gives you the right to claim that power as your own, Konoha!?" the Raikage bellowed.

"Spoils of war, that's what," Jiraiya fired back. "A man widening those eyes attacked our village. That eye are the just retribution taken from a defeated enemy."

"I believe we're losing sight of what this summit is meant to accomplish, which is the destruction of the Akatsuki threat," Mifune intervened. "Given that the Land of Iron is a neutral nation and has no stakes in the affair of ninjas, allow me to give my opinion: I think we already established that their threat has grown too big for a single village to tackle. Konoha, Suna and Kiri are coordinating their efforts, but that wasn't enough if the results are to be believed. However, if

all five Great Villages join their forces for real, we may have a real chance at stopping them for good."

"You want us to join forces with them?" Kurotsuchi asked, a little disgusted.

"Yes, but not just a mere alliance. Why not all five Great Villages pour their ninjas and their resources into a single, massive army?" Mifune suggested. "A Grand Army would be strong enough to face all the power Akatsuki had gathered."

"I agree with the idea," Jiraiya was quick to say. "This is an international emergency, and drastic measures need to be taken."

"Suna shall stand with this alliance as well," Rasa added.

"And so will Kiri. Between the five of us, we will make Akatsuki pay for their crimes against us," Mei said as well.

The Raikage let out a sigh. "I don't like the idea of allying with you people. But something tells me that refusing to do this is a huge mistake. My mistakes cost my brother and Yugito their lives, so in their memory, I shall do the right thing."

"Listen, I got the hat not even a month ago, and I had a shitload of detractors who said I'm too young for the position," Kurotsuchi continued. "And if my first big act as Tsuchikage is to surrender my entire village to foreign powers, I'll be proving them right!"

"Do you prefer to be remembered as the last Tsuchikage instead?" Mei sharply asked. "The one who let her pride cloud her reason, and thus allowed Akatsuki to crush her village?"

Kurutsuchi snarled at her cousin, trying to come up with a comeback, but finding herself unable to. "Alright. If you want to join forces, guess I have no choice but to comply. But my village won't give up its sovereignty."

"Of course, Tsuchikage-sama. This is just a temporal measure until this threat persists," Mifune said, pleased to make some progress. "Now, we need to establish a chain of command. This Grand Army must be under the control of a Supreme Commander. I believe that one of you should fit that position. The question is: who is the most fitting candidate for this position?"

A deafening silence followed the samurai's question, as all the Kages eyed each other.

...

Orochimaru's Lair, Undisclosed Location

Orochimaru frowned as he read the latest report his agents had brought him. Kabuto's sudden disappearance had him a bit worried for the past couple weeks. Kabuto was Orochimaru's right hand man not because he possessed any kind of Bloodline Limit or other sort of overwhelming power. No, he already had Kimimaro and similar reasons to fulfill that role, among others, even if Kabuto was indeed a very strong ninja.

No, the reason was that Kabuto was a competent and dependable ninja whom one could trust to carry any mission, and also because his loyalty towards his master was unshakeable. Others in the same situation might think that Kabuto had abandoned Orochimaru, but the Sannin knew better. He knew something had happened to the silver haired medic-nin.

"Maybe he found something about that rat Danzo and thus he ordered his death?" Orochimaru wondered.

Despite their alliance, Orochimaru knew better than trust Danzo. The only reason he continued to help the old war hawk was because he still had spies on the village that could be valuable. The Snake Sannin thought that his patience had been rewarded when Pain fell to Konoha, and they harvested his eyes. Danzo would then step in and steal the eyes for Orochimaru. Of course, Orochimaru didn't

trust that Danzo would honor his side of the deal, so he had several contingencies in place for when the inevitable betrayal arrived.

Unfortunately, while Orochimaru was right in not trusting Danzo, it wasn't for the right reasons. Who could have guessed that Danzo was secretly under Obito's control? Orochimaru had to admit that he had underestimated the young Uchiha. His plans to acquire the Rinnegan had been ruined, and now he had to start from square one.

"No, Danzo had no reason to do this. And his agents are like headless chickens now that he's dead. Perhaps Akatsuki?" Orochimaru wondered. Given that Obito could have used Danzo to spy on him, he must have known something. "At this stage they must know about my betrayal. Is this their doing? I wasn't expecting them to hunt me so soon."

Orochimaru's ramblings were answered in the form of a massive explosion coming from above, rocking the entire hideout, and causing large chunks of concrete and metal to fall down. The Sannin expertly dodged the falling pieces of debris, as sunlight poured from the now large hole that had been opened in the roof of his lair. And through that hole, he could see Deidara flying above him on top of a giant clay bird.

"Oi there, Orochimaru!" Deidara said, as he fed his hand mouths some explosive clays. "I hope you don't mind if I do some remodeling on this place. It could use some of my art!"

Deidara cast his hands forward, and his mouth released a swarm of explosive clay bees that flew at the pale skinned man as fast as if they were bullets. Orochimaru expertly dodged them as he moved around the place, using the pieces of fallen debris as temporal cover from the rain of projectiles, which left a trail of blasts behind. The Sannin almost reached a hidden door that would lead to an escape tunnel, when said door opened on its own, and a torrent of water poured in, forcing the Konoha missing-nin to fall back once again.

As the water started to flood the zone, Kisame casually emerged from the secret door, his clothes soaked, but otherwise unperturbed.

"You know, Orochimaru-san, you've missed the past few Akatsuki meetings," Kisame nonchalantly began, as he casually walked towards him, Samehada resting on his shoulder. "Not to mention the attack on Konoha. We were kind of worried for you, so we decided to see if you were okay."

"How touching of you," Orochimaru replied in the same mocking tone. "And now that you see that I'm fine, you'll say something about how your job is to change that for the worse, right?"

"I see you're not in the mood for talking," Kisame said, as he swung Samehada, and his lips formed a bloodthirsty grin. "Fine by me!"

In less than a second, Kisame closed the distance between himself and Orochimaru, and brought his sword down on the Sannin. However, Orochimaru had activated his Sharingan, and thanks to his enhanced reflexes, he was able to jump backwards just in time. Not that Kisame was going to give up his prey so quickly.

"Your Sharingan will be of little help against me, Orochimaru-san," Kisame mocked.

"Then how about this? Sword of Kusanagi!" A snake emerged from Orochimaru's mouth, which in turn regurgitated his legendary blade, which he expertly caught just in time to parry another blow from Kisame.

"Do you expect to counter my Samehada with that little letter opener?" Kisame's mockery continued, as he delivered more brutal swings.

"It's not a matter of size, but how do you use it," Orochimaru replied, tried to counterattack, but Kisame was proving to be the better swordsman. "Sometimes a smaller tool can do a better job than a bigger one."

Then, despite the fact that Kisame was pushing Orochimaru back, the Shark ninja jumped backwards, much to Orochimaru's surprise. He was quick to remember that Kisame wasn't his only opponent. Looking down, he saw something floating around him.

"Boom!" Deidara yelled, as he made a hand seal.

Orochimaru was engulfed by a chain of explosions, raising huge splashes of water and clouds of steam. Kisame and Deidara waited expectantly for the droplets of water in the air and the clouds of vapor would dissipate to see if the Sannin was dead, but they doubted such a basic attack would have brought Orochimaru down. Which was confirmed the next second.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The lair started to shake as multiple green wooden vines emerged from below the water around them. Deidara quickly commanded his clay bird to rise higher in the air in order to avoid the attack, while Kisame savagely cut the vines growing around him with wide swings from Samehada. The vines quickly rotted the moment the living blade touched them.

"So, you managed to acquire Wood Release," Kisame said, as he nonchalantly cut the growing vines down. "Samehada can still absorb the chakra of any trees you summon!"

"Absorb this!" Orochimaru said, leaping into the air, as he made several hand seals. "Lava Release: Burning Catastrophe!"

Orochimaru's cheeks puffed, before releasing a stream of lava in a wide cone, large enough to engulf Kisame. The Shark Ninja, whoever, wasn't fazed, and started to make hand seals of his own.

"Do you forget what I specialize in?" Kisame replied mockingly.
"Water Release: Water Shark Bullet!"

The water around Kisame started to gather around him in the form of a liquid tornado, before lunging at the incoming lava. The water tornado took the shape of a shark, which chomped the molten rock, instantly cooling it off and reducing it to bits.

While Orochimaru was engaging Kisame, Deidara decided it was his chance to strike, and took a dive at the Sannin as he prepared another cluster of explosives to drop.

"Disappear already!" Deidara shouted, as he dropped his clay explosives around the Sannin.

However, Orochimaru wasn't going to let the Iwa ninja catch him off guard twice.

"Dance of the Larch!"

Suddenly, multiple bone spikes grew all around Orochimaru's body, many of them firing into multiple directions. Deidara's explosives were caught by these unorthodox projectiles, which carried enough momentum to push them away. However, Orochimaru didn't stop there, and continued firing bone missiles at Deidara's bird, which due to its size was unable to dodge more than half of them, shredding the artificial creature to shreds, and forcing the Iwa ninja back into the ground.

"I'm tired of you attacking me from above like a coward," Orochimaru hissed.

That moment, Kisame charged at him once again, ready to deliver his most brutal swing. When Orochimaru saw it, it was too late to dodge, so he had to parry the blow with a combination of the Sword of Kusanagi and his Dead Bone Pulse Bloodline Limit. Even if he was able to do it, the blow was so powerful it pushed him backwards, and grievously damaged his arms.

"Wood Release, Lava Release, bone manipulation... you hid quite a lot of secrets from the rest of us, didn't you, Orochimaru-san?"

Kisame asked, as he pushed against the Sannin.

"Please. As if I was the only person in that organization hiding secrets," Orochimaru said, grinning for the first time.

Suddenly, a small snake emerged from under the Konoha missing-nin's clothes, and fast as lightning, bit Kisame in his dominant arm, forcing him to drop Samehada. Orochimaru quickly took advantage of this, and delivered a brutal kick into the blue man's chest, which tossed him back skidding through the water.

"Let's see what you can do without your precious sword as a crutch!" Orochimaru boasted, as his hands weaved hand seals as fast as they could. "Water Release. Water Dragon Jutsu! Lightning Release: Wave of Inspiration!"

The water around them gathered and took the form of a massive serpentine dragon, which quickly lunged at Kisame. Said dragon was then infused with lightning chakra, crackling with electricity. However, Orochimaru was going to learn that thinking that Kisame was nothing without his sword was a bad idea.

"Impressive! A jutsu worthy of this counter!" Kisame said, making hand seals of his own. "Water Release: Great Water Shark Bullet!"

The shark and the electrified dragon clashed, however, instead of the usual struggle of two similarly powered jutsu colliding, Kisame's water shark swallowed the electrified dragon whole. The shark then doubled its size and gained a cloak of electricity before continuing its way towards Orochimaru.

Too surprised to see how easily his combo had been countered, Orochimaru was unable to dodge the incoming attack, resulting in a massive blast of electrified water.

"Did you get him?" Deidara asked, as he landed besides Kisame. "There's no way he could have survived that!"

"You're right, there's no way I could have survived that," Orochimaru's voice said, as the clouds of steam started to dissipate. "At least, not without my Shedded Skin Replacement. Truly a magnificent jutsu, Kisame. You're worthy of the title and reputation you carry."

"I'll be able to add 'the man who killed Orochimaru' to my already excellent resume," Kisame said, grinning at Orochimaru.

"Somehow, I find that unlikely. Not after I use this jutsu with you two," Orochimaru said, as he started to make hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu: Impure World Resurrection!"

The moment he formed the last hand seal, two wooden coffins emerged in front of him. Kisame's grin vanished from his face.

...

Land of Iron

When Mifune asked one of the Kages to take a step and become the Supreme Commander of the Alliance army, he was expecting all five of them to jump and claim the position, as they yelled each time louder over each other. Mifune was aware over the power struggle that could go on inside Ninja Villages, and given that this situation involved five people from different countries, the samurai leader expected a bloodbath.

Instead, he got nothing but silence, and the Kages awkwardly staring at each other. Guess they also had predicted the same thing Mifune had imagined. Or maybe they were expecting the others to talk first in order to prepare an answer.

Mifune was tempted to make a suggestion, but there were two problems with that: one, as the leader of a neutral nation, he wanted to stay neutral and not take any sides. Plus, he believed that, with the exception of Kurotsuchi, who was too young and inexperienced

as a Kage, any of the other four would make a fine Supreme Commander.

And two, if the five Kages couldn't reach an agreement on this topic, then there was no way they would be able to coordinate an army of such magnitude, and Akatsuki would have won already. Still, that didn't mean he couldn't give them a little push.

"Nobody?" he asked. "None of you wants to volunteer for the task? Or at the very least, nominate somebody else for the position?"

This had the intended effect, as Mei Terumi cleared her throat, before she spoke.

"I'd like to nominate Hokage-done for the position of Supreme Commander," Mei began. "As we've been discussing here, Konoha and its Hokage have lead the fight against the Akatsuki, and even took down some of their members. I can't think of anybody else better suited for such task."

Jiraiya nodded at Mei in gratitude. However, the Toad Sannin's nomination wasn't going to pass unchallenged.

"Of course you'll support him," the Raikage growled. "Everybody knows how he helped you snatch that hat from its previous owner. What did you surrender to Konoha in order to carry your coup? Or is being Jiraiya's loyal lapdog enough?"

"Who are you calling a lapdog!?" Zabuza snarled, as his hand reached his sword, while taking a step forward. The Raikage's bodyguards did the same.

Mei raised a hand "Stand down, sweetie, I can take care of this," Mei said, before locking eyes with the Raikage. "I'd advise you to measure your words, especially regarding a village you're no part of nor have any idea about its history or culture. And, even if supposing that what you said is true and I'm merely the Hokage's servant, how does it invalidate anything I said?"

"I agree with the Mizukage," Rasa interjected before the Raikage could reply. "Jiraiya and I rarely saw each other eye to eye. But what the Mizukage said is undeniable. They did more for the jinchuriki as a whole than most of the villages those jinchuriki hailed from. And speaking of which, Konoha so far is the only village left with jinchuriki among its ranks. That should be a deciding factor as well."

Mifune nodded. "A compelling argument, from both the Mizukage and the Kazekage. And, if I assume that Hokage-dono accepts this position, that would make him the Supreme Commander of the Alliance with three votes out of five."

"I'm not that eager to have more responsibility piled on my shoulders, but I know the stakes are too big to reject them," Jiraiya said.

"Still, before we can officially hand Hokage-dono the leadership of this army, I believe that all of us should reach an agreement, for the sake of cooperation," Mifune added, before looking at the Raikage. "Raikage-dono, do you have any reason to believe that the Hokage may be ill-suited for the position, or that there's a better candidate?"

A growled and glared at Jiraiya, but in the end, he sighed in defeat. "I'm afraid not. I may not like Jiraiya, and I would prefer the Alliance to be under my leadership. However I allowed Kumo's two jinchuriki to be snatched by the Akatsuki, while Konoha managed to keep theirs. For the sake of crushing Akatsuki, I'll work under Jiraiya, as long as he doesn't give me a reason not to do so."

"Excellent," Mifune said, happy with the progress they were making. Now only one loose end remained. He looked at Kurotsuchi, and was about to ask her the same question, but he saw she was talking to one of her bodyguards, the woman named Suzumebachi, who was whispering something into the Tsuchikage's ear. Kurotsuchi nodded, and mouthed a "thank you" to her bodyguard, who returned to her position. "What about you, Tsuchikage-dono? Do you agree with the Hokage as the Supreme Commander?"

"Before I do, I'd like to ask him something," Kurotsuchi said, sounding confident. "Word has reached to my ears that the reason Akatsuki had such an easy time capturing so many jinchuriki is because they had help from Konoha. And not from some sort of lowly Chunin, no. The source of those leaks was no other than Danzo Shimura, who, according to our files, is a member of Konoha's Council of Elders. Hokage, if you're given command of such a huge army, how can we know that you won't allow Akatsuki to plant spies and saboteurs? Imagine if Akatsuki knew beforehand about all our troop movements and operations beforehand. It would be a catastrophe!"

Mifune sighed wearily. Even if Kurotsuchi did raise very good points, it wouldn't help if all they accomplished was inaction and pointless arguments.

"I believe you're right," Jiraiya answered. "However, you should know that Danzo has already been dealt with, and all his minions and collaborators have been either killed or captured. Plus, like the Kazekage and the Mizukage said, Akatsuki has spies in every village, including yours. The difference is that we've been actively trying to safekeep the jinchuriki, while your village didn't."

"Tsuchikage-dono, even if your concerns regarding Hokage-dono and Konoha are valid, I'm afraid we can't just disqualify him for the position if another candidate isn't presented," Mifune intervened. "Do you have any other person in mind?"

Kurotsuchi opened her mouth to speak, but no words came from them. She realized that she didn't like any of the other Kages as candidates either. She hated Mei for how she had used Konoha to become Mizukage, on top of the previous bad blood. There's no way she'd support Rasa, the Kage of the weakest Great Village. She thought the Raikage was too anger-prone and emotional. And there's no way the others would support her, being so young and inexperienced as a Kage. In the end, she was forced to relent.

"No, I don't have," she finally conceded with a sigh. "The Hokage has Iwa's support as well."

Mifune nodded and smiled. "In that case, we have a consensus. Hokage-dono will be the Supreme Commander of the very first Army of the Ninja Alliance! Now, let's discuss-"

"Oh, how endearing. The five great villages, joining forces against a common enemy," a new voice said.

"Who said that!?" the Raikage roared, looking around.

Darui's visible eye widened, as a realization dawned upon him. "Wait, I already heard this voice before..."

"This is-" Tsunade said, knowing who was speaking.

Mifune and his two bodyguards jumped back as a spiraling vortex formed behind them. The rest of the Kage's bodyguards jumped forward in front of their leaders, weapons drawn, and ready to strike. From the vortex, Obito Uchiha emerged. His face was unmasked, letting everybody see the Rinnegan in his left socket.

"Hello there, members of the Five Kage," Obito nonchalantly said. His tone was so jovial, it was an obvious provocation. "Given that you've gathered under a single roof, I decided to take this unique chance to discuss a very important matter with you five."

Author's Note: As you could imagine, with Danzo already dead and no evil Sasuke stirring trouble, this Kage Summit was much shorter than the canon one, as we went directly from the summit directly to Obito's irruption, skipping all that was in-between. Some reviewers were expecting that there would be a fight, but no. There will be moments for fights.

Though, there was a fight in this chapter, even if it hasn't ended yet. Most of you thought that Kisame and Deidara were trying

their luck again with Killer B, but nope, Orochimaru. Unlike Pain, Obito really doesn't want this guy free to do what he pleases after he defected Akatsuki, even there are still jinchuriki to capture. Shout out to the reviewer W8W who correctly guessed this.

As you could see, Jiraiya and Rasa weren't the only changes from the original Kage Summit, as Kurotsuchi is now Kage ahead of canon. I not only did this so I could keep at least two female Kages, given that Tsunade isn't Hokage here, but also to have one Kage to be young and inexperienced, given that Gaara isn't Kazekage either, since his old man is still alive at this point. Also, given that the two of them have Lava Release, I decided to make Mei and Kurotsuchi related by being descendants of the same clan. I know that in canon Mei and Kurotsuchi's Lava Releases are different (and theirs aren't the only variants) but I always disliked that, so in this fanfic Lava Release is going to be the same for every user, just like every other Bloodline Limit. And it's going to be actual lava, unlike what Mei uses in canon which looks more like boiling vomit.

Also, the Kinryuu Clan and its backstory is a creation of fellow Naruhina writer DryBonesKing, author of the amazing fanfic "True Potential", who kindly allowed me to use it in my story.

You probably can guess what's coming next chapter, but will only be a small part of it. Remember when you guys asked me about how some elements of the backstory didn't match canon, and I told you that they would be explained in a future chapter? It will be next chapter, titled "Obito Gaiden". You can imagine what's going to be about.

In the meantime, leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Obito Gaiden

Author's Note: So here we are, the second part of the Kage Summit. This chapter is mostly a big info dump that will serve to illustrate the differences between this fanfic and canon, at least when it comes to the side of the villains, which I'm aware I changed a lot, and sometimes come as confusing for some readers. Enjoy:

Chapter 94:

Obito Gaiden

or

The Fall of a Legend

For a few moments, silence reigned supreme as the five Kages, their bodyguards, and the samurai stared at the daring Akatsuki member. All sporting various expressions, ranged from angry, to shocked, to surprised, to even scared. The silence lasted until one ninja decided to make a move.

"YOU!" Darui said, as he unsheathed his cleaver, and dashed towards Obito, fast as lightning.

"Darui, wait!" C called out, trying to reach him.

Darui delivered a horizontal slash at the Akatsuki with his electricity-imbued cleaver, but much to his surprise and frustration, the attack phased through Obito as if he was made of air. His building momentum also caused the Kumo Jonin to stumble forward, phasing through Obito as well. He managed to regain balance just before slamming against the opposing wall.

"As I said just a second ago," an irritated Obito said. "I didn't come here to fight, but to talk."

"We have nothing to talk with you about!" Tsunade yelled, both fists clenched. She felt Jiraiya's hand on her shoulder.

"While I agree with the general sentiment, Hime," the Toad Sage began. "I believe it's unwise to stop an enemy from sharing information with us," Jiraiya's eyes locked into Obito's. "What do you want to tell us, Uchiha? You're talking with the Supreme Commander of the Ninja Allied Forces."

Obito's lips curved into a smile. "Good. I'm going to tell you about Akatsuki, and our goal."

"We do know your goal. You plan to revive the Ten Tails!" Rasa angrily shouted.

Obito's smile widened. "So, all of you know about it. Excellent, that will save me explaining you what it is."

"And what do you pretend to do with such a monster, Uchiha?" Mei asked.

"Ah, now you're asking the important questions," Obito said, pleased.

...

Madara Uchiha's Secret Hideout, many years ago

For many days, Obito had been sitting in front of the cocoon that would hopefully bring Rin back to life stronger than ever. He didn't eat, he didn't drink, he didn't even move. He merely watched. He was unaware of how much time he spent there, given that he had no way to measure the days in a place where the sun didn't shine.

"Hey, you."

Obito stood up and turned around, and saw Zetsu -the original one, not a clone- standing in front of him.

" Madara-sama wants to speak with you."

Obito silently nodded, and followed the artificial human through the hallways of the underground lair, until they reached a chamber Obito had never seen during his stay there. The chamber had a couple shelves with some books and scrolls each, a table with some books on it, and a couple chairs. It appeared to be some sort of improvised library.

" Hey boss, here's the kid, as you requested," the creature said.

Madara, who was taking a look at one of his books, closed it, and nodded at his servant.

" Thank you. Leave us alone, please," the elderly Uchiha commanded.

White Zetsu nodded, and left. Despite the lack of doors, Madara knew that none of his minions would try to defy his will.

" You know, the Zetsu have told me what you've been doing these past days," Madara began. "Just because you stay close to the cocoon it won't make the girl to come out faster. Like I told you, the process may take years."

" Um, sorry..." Obito said almost in a whisper. "So, you called me?"

" Yes. I think it's about time you begin to fulfill your side of our deal, and become my agent," Madara explained.

" Alright. What is my first mission?" Obito asked, his lack of enthusiasm more than evident.

Madara shook his head. "There will be time for that. In any other time, blind obedience is all what I would have wanted. But in the end, even blind obedience is unreliable. That's why, before we begin my

plan, I need you to understand why we're doing this. I need you to be completely committed to my cause."

" I already told you that I was willing to do what you say," Obito began, looking irritated. "Does my word hold so little value to you?"

" Yes," was Madara's blunt answer, taking Obito aback. "And soon you'll see why I think that way. Tell me, Obito, do you have any family? I don't mean the Uchiha Clan, but direct family. Brothers or sisters?"

" I'm an only son," Obito replied.

" Parents?"

Obito shook his head. "They both died on a mission when I was a toddler."

" So, no immediate family. I guess that your teammates and sensei are the closest thing you have to a family, excluding the rest of the Uchiha clan?" Madara asked.

" Yeah, pretty much. The other Uchiha weren't exactly very fond of me." Obito said, glancing at the ground below.

" I see. One may call that unfortunate," Madara said. "You see, I used to have five younger brothers. Four of them died even before I came of age."

" Whoa!" Obito gasped in shock. "I'm... I'm sorry to hear that. But at least one of your brothers survived."

Madara shook his head. "While said brother went to live longer than the others, he joined them in death as well. Killed by Tobirama Senju during our last clash against his and Hashirama's clan, before we ended the hostilities and founded Konoha."

" I'm sorry to hear that," Obito repeated, as he looked around while awkwardly rubbing his arm. "Not to sound rude but... you didn't call

me just to tell me your life, don't you?"

" Knowing the details of my life is important for our cause. Like I said before, you need to understand why we're doing this, and to do so, you need to know the same things I do know now," Madara explained.

" Oh, sorry then... continue."

" Given that you're an Uchiha, you're aware of our history with the Senju Clan," Madara continued. "Nobody knew when our feud began, it simply existed, and we didn't question it. Uchiha fought Senju to avenge our fallen brethren. And then the Senju struck back to avenge their own. Eventually, after the battle where my brother died, Hashirama offered us a chance to end the hostilities, and form together a ninja village where we could live in peace."

" And you said yes," Obito assumed.

" No. Not at first, at least," Madara said, much to the young Uchiha's surprise. "I couldn't agree with such suggestion, even if it was what I desired. Or what I think I desired. Letting go of the past like that would mean spitting on the sacrifice of all the Uchiha who died fighting Senju. My brother among them. They died so we could have a chance at crushing them for good."

" But... that's stupid!" Obito blurted. Upon seeing Madara's unamused stare, Obito covered his mouth with his hand, and tried to hastily apologize. "Well, not stupid, it's just-"

" No, go on. Please, explain me why it's stupid," Madara asked. He sounded like he genuinely wanted to know the boy's opinion.

" Well..." Obito began, as he tried to find the best way to word his ideas, as he nervously rubbed his arm. "While it's true that all the Uchiha dead at the hand of the Senju was a tragedy, continuing the hostilities wouldn't have been of any help, and it would only resulted in more pointless deaths for both sides. You said that the Uchiha and

the Senju had been fighting for generations, and neither clan was even close to destroy the other. By ceasing the hostilities, at least you ensure the next generation of Uchiha wouldn't have to go through the same horrors you did."

Madara rested his chin under his hand, as he weighed down Obito's words. Obito, meanwhile stared nervously at the elder Uchiha, awaiting for his verdict.

" Yes, that's a very good argument," he finally said. "One many of my clansmen shared. They were tired of warring, and wanted to create a better future for their children. Even if that means joining forces with our hated enemies."

Obito smiled, and sighed in relief, knowing he had passed what he believed was a hidden test.

" So, hearing my clansmen's plea, I decided to accept Hashirama's offer. The Uchiha and the Senju ended their legendary feud, and we joined forces to form Konohagakure, the very first of the ninja villages," Madara told Obito. "News of these event spread like wildfire, and soon many clans that made the Land of Fire its home asked to join us. The Sarutobi was the first of such clans, followed by the Shimura, whom they had a feud with. Next came the Hyuga and the Aburame, and later the Yamanaka, Akimichi and Nara, whom already had a history of working together.

" The village grew as more clans joined us, and thus, another problem was presented. When it was just the Senju and us, both Hashirama and I ruled over our respective clans like we did in the past. But now, it was time to decide a new leader who would reign supreme over the village. Hashirama wanted that person to be me, but in the end, the villagers choose him by an overwhelming majority. Even my fellow clansmen preferred Hashirama to me."

" Wow. Were you that bad of a leader?" Obito asked, before once again realized of what he said, and clamping his hand over his mouth. "Sorry! I didn't mean to-"

If Madara took offense to Obito's comment, he didn't show it. "You see, the news of Konoha's birth traveled well beyond the Land of Fire's borders, and other clans started to form villages as well. It was then when I realized the flaw of Hashirama's dream: while we had effectively put an end to the Warring States Period and ushered an era of peace, it wasn't bound to last. Soon, the ninja villages would start to wage wars against each other, and the scale of those wars would dwarf those that came before.

" Hashirama wanted to establish alliances and treaties with other villages, but I knew such idea wouldn't work, and I advocated to subjugate them before they could be a threat. Rather than just the Land of Fire, Konoha should be the only military power of the entire elemental nations, which would keep peace and stability. Neither Hashirama nor the rest of the villagers supported my idea, and after a heated discussion with Hashirama, I realized that there wasn't a place for me anymore in that village. Since I had no children, I passed the clan leadership to Izuna's oldest son, and left the village."

Obito more or less knew that, since he had to study it in history class in the Academy. What he didn't know, however, was what Madara did before he returned to fight Hashirama one last time. And now, he could hear it from the man himself.

" And... what did you do then?" Obito asked, instinctively leaning forward.

" I traveled. Trying to find myself, as it's usually said. I realized that I never felt at home at Konoha, so maybe I could find a place like that," Madara told him. "The Uchiha history was shrouded in mystery due lack of written records, so I decided that I could unearth some of those mysteries. As I traveled, I found many places that the Uchiha used as temporal homes before moving out. Thanks to my search, I found out that neither the Uchiha nor the Senju are natives to this land. They first appeared in a faraway land called the Land of the Ancestors, once a powerful empire, now an uninhabited ruin.

" And in one of those places, inspecting a ruined fortress that had been used by the Uchiha, I found this," Madara said, showing Obito the book he was holding. "The journal of Indra Otsutsuki, the very first ninja to awaken a Sharingan."

" Indra Otsutsuki? I never heard of that name," Obito said, scratching his head.

" I don't blame you, neither did I," Madara admitted. "Tell me, Obito, what do you know about the Sage of the Six Paths?"

" Uh, he's supposed to be the one who invented ninjutsu. A very powerful man," Obito said, before scowling a little. "What has that myth have to do with anything?"

" Oh, plenty. Apparently, this Indra was the Sage's eldest son," Madara casually said.

" Say what?" Obito asked in disbelief. "Come on, there's no way that book is telling the truth!"

This seemed to amuse Madara, whose withered lips formed a smile. "Yes, my reaction was the same. I've never been the one to believe in something without evidence. That's why I decided to do some research of my own to see if the book conformed to reality. And my findings were... troubling to say the least."

" You have proof that the Sage of the Six Paths truly existed?" Obito asked, excited.

" Not exactly. I have proof that many of the things written on that book did indeed happen," Madara replied, before handing Obito the book. "Now, you must read this book. Every page, every paragraph, every word, drink them as if they were a glass of water."

Obito opened the book, and glanced at a random page. He scowled. "Wait, this is nothing but gibberish! How I'm supposed to read it?"

" Use your Sharingan," Madara laconically instructed.

After activating his remaining doujutsu, suddenly everything became clear. "Hey, I can read it now!"

" Of course you can. Those symbols are a special code that can only be deciphered with the Sharingan. While anybody with a Sharingan can read it, unfortunately the knowledge on how to write it was lost centuries ago. Now, enough talking. Read that book. We won't talk again until you finish it."

And thus, Obito read Indra's journal. While the book showed its age - the cover was consumed, the pages were yellowish and the writing half faded- it was still in a pretty good shape, and completely legible, quite the achievement for something that was almost a millennia old.

Despite the archaic wording, Indra's history was a fascinating tale. Apparently, the Sage of the Six Paths, named Hagoromo, had a brother named Hamura, and the two of them were the sons of a very powerful woman named Kaguya, who was said to come from beyond the stars. Kaguya used her vast power to rule the land, until her sons decided to put an end to her reign.

Kaguya then transformed into an horrifying monster called the Ten Tails, which was defeated when Hagoromo drained it of its chakra and sealed it inside his body. Then the two of them used a powerful jutsu to seal the Ten Tails' empty husk inside the Moon, creating the Moon in the process. After that, the younger brother went to the Moon in order to watch over the Ten Tails' body, while Hagoromo stayed on Earth in order to preach peace.

Hagoromo married and had two sons. Indra and Asura -whom later Obito would learn he would be the ancestor of all Senju and Uzumaki-, whom he trained to carry on his legacy. As Hagoromo's life reached its end, the Sage realized he had to name one of his two sons as his heir. In order to determine which one was the most suitable to take his mantle. Hagoromo asked the sons about the best way to bring peace to the world.

Indra advocated for a powerful individual or small group of people to rule over the rest, creating laws that ensured the safety of all, and punished those who broke them. Asura advocated for love and mutual understanding to be paramount for any peace that was bound to last. Hagoromo chose his youngest son over the oldest. Indra, outraged, attacked Asura, ready to kill him, or at the very least, force him to give back what Indra thought was his birthright, but was unable to beat him, and left.

Indra would later learn that, shortly before his death, Hagoromo released the Ten Tails' chakra stored inside his body, split it into nine beings, and gave them their own mind: that's how the nine Tailed Beasts were born.

After Indra's loss to Asura, the book merely described what Indra did after that: he met a woman whom he married and had two kids as well, both of them whom inherited the Sharingan, and trained them as ninjas. Both Indra and his descendants used their power to work as mercenaries and assassins, taking part in many battles and wars, some of them against Asura and his family.

Eventually, Indra died of old age. However, in the very last page he wrote he claimed that his hatred for his father and his brother would never disappear until Asura's line was eradicated and his bloodline reigned supreme over the Elemental Nations.

Once again, Obito hadn't realized how much time had passed until he finished the book. To him it were mere hours, but in reality there were a few days. Once he was done, he returned to Madara, who was waiting for him in the library, as if he had never left the place.

" I finished the book," Obito told him.

" Well? What are your impressions?" Madara eagerly asked.

" It's... fascinating indeed. If what is says it's really true," Obito said, unable to shake off the last remnants of his skepticism.

"It is true, I can assure you that," Madara insisted. "What about the conflict between Asura and Indra? What's your impression on that?"

"I guess both brothers had a point," Obito asked, trying to give a noncommittal answer. However, Madara's unamused glare made it clear such thing wasn't going to fly. "Though in the end, I agreed with Asura more."

"Of course you did," Madara said. While he sounded disappointed, he seemed to expect that answer. "And tell me, kid, do you think Asura's way of doing things fixed anything? You yourself told me you're in the middle of a war. A third one involving Ninja Villages."

Obito didn't say anything, he simply nodded.

"I could have stopped this from happening, if they just listened to me," Madara said, shaking his head. "Anyway, now that you read that book, I can now continue with my tale. After traveling and learning, about both the past of our clan and ninja history in general, I was even more confident in my convictions: Hashirama had the right idea with the ninja villages, but that was only a job half done. In order to achieve true peace, we would need to unify the Elemental Nations under a single village, with an absolute power as its backbone. Said power would be the Tailed Beasts.

"However, upon my return to the Land of Fire, I was shocked to see how much Hashirama had screwed things up: He had hunted nearly every Tailed Beast, but instead of keeping them for Konoha, he idiotically handed them to other villages, apparently in a vain effort to create some sort of 'balance of power' that would ensure peace. Unsurprisingly, it ended up provoking the First Ninja War. Hashirama also had abdicated as Hokage, and passed the hat to his younger brother.

"Fortunately, not everything was lost. Hashirama hadn't captured the Nine Tails yet, meaning that I could put it under my control and use it to defeat him once for all. But even then, it wasn't enough to bridge the gap between us, and as a result, I died."

"Wait," Obito interrupted. "How could you die if you're here before me?"

"Because, fortunately, I had the means to evade death in the form of Izanagi, an Uchiha Forbidden Jutsu that allowed me to rewrite reality, at the cost of one of my Sharingan. Though, even if I had cheated death, the loss of one of my eyes was a big price to pay. With one single Sharingan I could no longer use Susanoo, my most powerful ability. However, I had a way to gain an even greater power: during the battle, I was able to bite some of Hashirama's flesh and store it within my mouth. I used that flesh to cultivate more of his cells, and combined them with my own. Not only I would gain Hashirama's power, but by combining powerful Senju and Uchiha chakra, the result is Six Paths Chakra, the very same chakra the Sage had. And with that chakra... I could awaken the Rinnegan.

"And awaken it did. But it took far longer than I thought. When my eyes turned into Rinnegan, I was already an old and withered man. Still, it was something. I was able to summon the Ten Tails' empty shell, the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, and use it to generate more Hashirama's cells. By doing so, I accidentally created the beings that you see around the lair, Zetsu and his clones. The statue also keeps me alive, as long as I'm directly connected to it," Madara said, as he turned around so Obito could see better the organic cables attached to his back.

"You... didn't tell me what was your plan. What did you plan to do after you defeated Hashirama?" Obito asked.

Madara's lips formed a smile again. "Ah, good, you finally pay attention to the finer details. My original plan was that, once Hashirama was out of the way, I would take over Konoha by force. Then, I would subjugate the other villages one by one, taking back the Tailed Beasts Hashirama foolishly gave them as if they were mere pets. Then, I would have build a single village, with a force of nine jinchuriki as the backbone of said village's might. With the Elemental Nations united under a single government, there wouldn't

be no more wars nor strife. A world where no kids should have to be sent to the battlefields and see their friends die."

That last sentence seemed to especially resonate with Obito.

" However, over the years, especially those after I awakened the Rinnegan, I perfected my plan: nine jinchuriki could still cause problems, since they could fight among each other, or have their own agendas. No, there had to be a single jinchuriki that would enforce the village's power. So far, the only person capable of completing such task would be the Sage of the Six Paths, hence a second Sage needed to be created. In order to do so, the Nine Tailed Beasts need to be gathered and sealed inside the Demonic Statue. Once they're all inside, their chakra will merge into Six Paths chakra, and the Demonic Statue will return to its original form as the Ten Tails, Lastly, I will seal the Ten Tails into my body, becoming an ageless being of unmatched power. Then I shall do what the first Sage should have done to begin with: use my power to usher an eternal era of peace and harmony."

" It's a beautiful dream indeed," Obito agreed, before gazing down. "But it looks kind of impossible to reach."

" Kid, those who achieve greatness are those who try the impossible, and find a way to succeed," Madara said. "So far, people would think that bringing somebody back from the dead it's impossible. Yet we're doing exactly that with that Rin friend of yours."

" Of course," Obito agreed. Then, in a more enthusiastic tone, he asked: "What can I do, Madara-sama?"

Madara smiled. That determination is what he wanted to see. He then started to slowly walk, and Obito followed behind him.

" My time draws near. I shall undergo the same process of rebirth your friend Rin is undergoing in order to recover my former strength," Madara explained. "Such process may take years. In the meantime, you need to put my plan in motion. First, go to Ame and find an

Uzumaki boy named Nagato. I had the Zetsu extract my Rinnegan and secretly implant them into him for safekeeping. Convince the boy to follow our plan. Lie to him if necessary. Tell him he's the reincarnation of the Sage of the Six Paths. You can tell him about me as well, but be mindful what you choose to reveal."

" I believe it won't be very hard to do it," Obito confidently said.

" I have faith in your abilities, kid," Madara said with a nod. Obito could see they were returning to the chamber where Rin's cocoon was. "Then, gather the Tailed Beast, and seal them inside the statue. I presume that by the time you're done, the regeneration process will be finished already. If you haven't completed your task yet, I will finish it myself. With my old power restored, it shouldn't be too hard."

As they entered the chamber, they could see more Zetsu clones on top of those working on Rin's cocoon, as well the original Zetsu. Madara walked towards the latter, and placed his hand on his nonexistent right half of his body, and a black liquid-like substance started to spread around it. As it grew, it formed half a body, making the Zetsu whole, but looking as if they were the halves of two different beings clumsily put together.

" This is Black Zetsu, an extension of my will. He will guide you and follow your orders from now onwards, just like White Zetsu and his clones," Madara said. With a mere hand wave, the idle Zetsu clones formed another circle, and Madara placed himself in the middle. "I believe that's all, Obito. From now onwards, the future we want to build rests on your shoulders. Do not fail me."

" I won't, Madara-sama. This world, Asura's vision, Konoha... all of them allowed Rin to die. I shall fulfill your vision, and create a better world," Obito said, clenching one fist in determination.

" Good," Madara said with a nod, before turning at one of the clones, and nodded. "Begin."

Green vines emerged from the clones' midsection, and crawled towards Madara as they grew. Once they reached him, they started to wrap around his body, covering him in layers upon layers of vines until the elderly Uchiha could no longer be seen. Lastly, all eight of them formed the same chain of hand seals.

" Wood Release: Majestic Cocoon of Divine Rebirth!"

Just like it happened with Rin, the mass of vines not so much glowed with a green light, but that became light, growing and taking an oval shape. When the light faded, there was an indentical cocoon in Madara's place, slowly pulsating like a giant heart.

" Just like Rin, the process has been a success!" one of the Zetsu keeping the cocoon active announced. "Madara is still alive, and it's slowly regenerating."

" For additional security, I believe we should seal this room, boss," Black Zetsu spoke for the first time.

" Yes, I agree," Obito said, as he walked outside the chamber. "You do that while I'm out."

" Hey, wait!" the white half said. "You shouldn't go to fetch Nagato alone! You'll need us to help you."

" I'm not going to Ame," Obito said. "I'm going to Konoha. There are a few things I need to check there before we start with the plan."

" Understood, boss. Try not to take too long," Black Zetsu warned him.

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Undisclosed Location, Orochimaru's Lair

Deidara and Kisame watched for a second the two wooden coffins Orochimaru had summoned. The two of them had the kanji for "two" on them, on top of the kanji of "water" on one and "earth" on the

other. The coffins then opened on their own, their lids falling forward with a thud. Lastly, two men emerged from each coffin: a blond man in a pin-striped, high-collared, long gray kimono with a black sash wrapped around his waist, and a man which was almost entirely covered in bandages, wearing nothing but a pair of black pants.

Kisame and Deidara immediately recognized the men as the second Mizukage and Tsuchikage, who looked disoriented after stepping out of the coffins.

"Where... where I am?" the Tsuchikage asked. "This place..."

"The hell if I know!" the Mizukage replied, looking around as well. It was then when the kage realized who they were talking to.

"YOU!"

The two Kages tried to attack each other, but found that their bodies weren't under their control, and remained firmly in place.

"So, I'm stuck with you and some unseen force stops me from tearing your face from your head..." the second Mizukage said as he rest his chin on his hand. "Yep, this is hell!"

"If you weren't to jump to conclusions so easily, you'll realize this isn't the afterlife, Gengetsu," the Second Tsuchikage said. "We can't control our bodies. And your eyes are black and your skin is cracked. This sounds like Tobirama Senju's jutsu, Impure World Resurrection."

"Exactly, Mu-san," Orochimaru said, making the two Kages to turn around. "I summoned you with this jutsu to do my bidding!"

"And who are you supposed to be?" Gengetsu asked, scowling a little.

"Your master. You can call me Orochimaru, no honorifics needed," the Sannin said in a theatrical way. "Now, those are the targets I

want you to dispose of."

Forced to turn around once again, the two Kages faced the two members of Akatsuki. They quickly noticed their headbands.

"An Iwa ninja working side by side with a Kiri one?" Mu asked. "What kind of world I've been summoned to?"

"That's Samehada! That means you're of the Seven Swordsmen!" Gengetsu said, pointing at Kisame. "What the hell are you doing working with Iwa scum?"

However, Orochimaru's orders quickly kicked in, and Mu started to make hand seals, before clapping his hands together. Pulling his hands apart, he created a translucent white cube with a white glowing ball inside. Deidara paled upon seeing this, and instinctively jumped backwards.

"Kisame, whatever he throws at you, dodge it!" the Iwa missing nin warned.

Kisame, however, merely placed his sword in a defensive position.

"Ha! Whatever ninjutsu he throws at me, Samehada can absorb it!" Kisame confidently said.

"Don't try you idiot! He's going to-"

"Too late. Now die like the fool you are, Kiri ninja," Mu said with contempt, as he threw his hands forward. "Dust Release: Atomic Dismantling Jutsu!"

In a second, the glowing cube flew towards Kisame, and growing large enough to engulf the confused Akatsuki member.

"What the...?"

For a second, the cube glowed with a bright white light, so intense it was like looking into the sun. When the light receded, Kisame wasn't

there anymore.

"Good job, Mu-san," Orochimaru praised his undead puppet. "It's kind of sad how a powerful ninja like Kisame-san went away in such a quick and dull way."

"You... you ASSHOLE!" Gengetsu screamed, though it wasn't clear if he was talking to Orochimaru or Mu -probably both-. "You destroyed Samehada! Kirigakure's greatest weapon! A treasure of untold-WHOA!" He was interrupted when his body started to move on his own.

"I'm sorry, Gegetsu-san, but I need you to get rid of the other for me," Orochimaru said. "After all, we all know how much you love to kill Iwa ninjas, right?"

" *Shit, this is bad!*" Deidara thought, as he fed his mouth hands some explosive clay, while running away. *"With that blue idiot dead, there's no way I can defeat that many enemies on my own! I need to escape NOW!"*

As fast as he could, Deidara created a small clay bird, and with a hand seal, it grew large enough to carry a rider on its back. Not thinking it twice, Deidara jumped onto its back, and commanded it to fly away.

"Sorry, little bird, no running away!" Gengetsu said with a maniac grin, as he pointed at the fleeing Deidara with his finger. "Water Gun Jutsu!"

Gengetsu fired a single water droplet at the escaping clay bird with such force, it caused the artificial construct to blow up in a thousand pieces, making Deidara to fall to the ground, half fascinating at how a water jutsu could damage so badly a jutsu that used earth, and half terrified knowing that this was his end, before hitting the ground with a splash.

"Impressive, Gengetsu-san," Orochimaru praised again. "Now, finish hi-"

Suddenly, something bursted from underground behind Mu, sending rocks and splashing water everywhere, distracting the two zombies and the former Akatsuki. Mu turned around too late to see a very much alive Kisame ready to strike, and with a powerful swing of Samehada, Mu's torso and left arms were separated from the rest of his body, releasing dust and ashes, instead of the blood and gore Kisame was expecting.

"Hey, you survived and saved Samehada! Nice!" Gengetsu said, happy to see Kisame. "Now try to-"

The Mizukage never finished his sentence, as with a powerful vertical strike, Kisame split the undead man in two halves, which fell to a side each. Kisame then turned at Orochimaru, who seemed oddly pleased.

"I knew you wouldn't go down so easily, Kisame-san," Orochimaru said, grinning.

"Do you take me for an idiot?" Kisame asked, his tone being that of mockery, but there was a hint of anger hidden there. "Of I know what Dust Release is! And I know how to counter it. Now, get ready to pay the price for underestimating me, Orochimaru..as well as the interest you've accumulated for betraying Akatsuki!"

"Before you can do that, you need to defeat my reanimated Kages," Orochimaru pointed out.

"What are you talking about? Your living corpses are nothing but-"

Kisame was stunned into silence when he saw ash, dust and paper bits swirling around the deceased Kages, reassembling their bodies back together and repairing any damage they had suffered. In a few seconds, they were completely restored. Kisame gritted his teeth, and bisected them once again with two powerful swings of

Samehada. But the result was still the same. Shocked, the shark ninja took a couple steps back.

"Kukuku. They said that, thanks to your massive chakra reserves and your chakra draining sword, you can defeat any opponent by turning the battle into one of attrition," Orochimaru said, his smile unwavering. "And I'd really like to test who's going to give in first: you, or my reanimations. Don't take it personally if I bet on the latter."

"What... what kind of jutsu is this?" Kisame asked, sounding more angry than afraid.

"Kisame, move!" Deidara yelled from above.

Kisame knew better than asking what was going on, and jumped back just in time multiple clay bombs dropped from above. Said bombs detonated before they could touch the water, raising huge splashes of water and clouds of steam. The blond Iwa ninja, atop another clay bird, swooped down on him. Kisame then jumped onto the birds' back.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Deidara shouted, his body shaking, as he commanded his bird to fly as fast and high as possible. "The second Tsuchikage can fly! If Orochimaru sends him after us, we're fucking done!"

"I'll prepare a jutsu if he gets close to us!" Kisame said, as he started to make hand seals.

Meanwhile, back on the ground, Orochimaru watched as the Kages regenerated once again from the chain of explosions, while seeing how the two Akatsuki members became smaller and smaller as they flew into the horizon.

"Don't you want me to go after them?" Mu asked the Sannin. "I can catch and kill them easily."

Orochimaru shook his head. "Tempting, but for the time being... let them leave. I want them to deliver a message to Obito. Now, return to your slumber, I'll call you back once I need you." Orochimaru said, before making a hand seal.

"Aw shi-" the Mizukage wanted to complain, but he was quickly silenced and shoved into a wooden coffin, before the lid closed it, fate he shared with his deathsworn enemy the Tsuchikage. Both coffins sunk into the ground.

"Not bad for a test run. Definitely not bad," Orochimaru said, sounding satisfied.

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Land of Iron

"Many decades ago, Hashirama Senju and Madara Uchiha founded Konoha. That put an end to the Warring States Period and gave birth to the Ninja Villages Period," Obito began. "However, while well intentioned, all what Hashirama accomplished was escalate the problem. Now we have less wars than in the past, but their scale increased a hundredfold. I plan to put an end to that and bring an era of true peace."

"And you plan to use the Tailed Beasts to do that," Kurotsuchi guessed. "How?"

"Once they're all sealed inside the Demonic Statue, it will return to its original form, the Ten Tails," Obito explained. "Then, I shall seal that monster inside me, becoming its jinchuriki, and attaining a power similar to that of the Sage of the Six Paths. With that power, I shall unify the Elemental Nations under a single banner, with a single Ninja Village that shall act as a peacekeeping force, with me as the backbone of that army. There won't be anymore wars since there won't be any nations that will fight against each other. The new Ninja Village will establish a set of fair and just laws and shall punish those who break them."

"Kaguya Otsutsuki already tried that before, and it failed! You can't force peace like that!" Tsunade protested.

"Indeed. All the clans who joined to form the ninja villages did so under their own volition," Mei interceded. "If there's no agreement, your one nation is doomed to fail from the very beginning."

"And is the alternative any better?" Obito retorted. "Mankind is nothing but unruly children, who can't take care of their own without an authority figure supervising them. A milenium of history backs my claim. In the end, future generations will thank me and Akatsuki for making such a bold move to bring peace to the world."

"It sounds to me like you just want power without limit in order to make the world your own," Rasa snarled at Obito.

"You can think whatever you want. Our mission already had too many setbacks. Hand me the three remaining jinchuriki, or you will spend the what's little left of your life regretting what's going to happen next," Obito threatened.

"Wait a minute, *three* ?" Jiraiya asked. "I thought that you have captured all the jinchuriki minus Naruto and Fu!"

"Yeah, I thought so as well. But the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails managed to trick us and got away," Obito clarified.

The Kumo ninjas were visibly relieved to hear such information, even if the Raikage tried to hide it from the others.

"I knew somebody as strong as B-san couldn't have been captured by Akatsuki," Darui said in satisfaction.

"B... my brother is still alive..." the Raikage said softly, almost in a whisper. Then, his face turned into a mask of pure anger. "GOOD! BECAUSE I WILL BE ABLE TO KILL HIM MYSELF! HOW THAT DUMBASS DARE TO PULL SUCH A STUNT AND MAKE ME BELIEVE HE WAS DEAD!"

"Needless to say, Konoha isn't going to hand you the jinchuriki under our protection," Jiraiya firmly said. "And I can tell the Raikage feels the same towards Kumo's jinchuriki."

"And we will help them to make sure they won't fall into your hands!" Mei stated, saring to speak for both herself, the Kazekage and the Tsuchikage. However, both Rasa and Kurotsuchi nodded energetically.

"You should reconsider. Akatsuki has amassed a lot of power over the last years," Obito insisted. "Other than our official members and six and a half tailed beasts, we have an army of an almost one hundred thousand Zetsu. Even if you joined your armies into a single one, it would still fail to match our numbers."

"I think we made our answer clear," the Raikage growled at him.

"I see. In that case, I hereby declare the beginning of the Fourth Ninja War," Obito said, as he opened a spiraling dimensional portal to leave the place. "The next time we meet, it shall be on the battlefield."

And with that, Obito Uchiha disappeared the same way he appeared before them. His departure was followed by a moment of tense silence.

"Guess that, in the end, the five Great Nija Villages joining forces was inevitable," Mifune said. "Since we have no more options to deal with a threat of this magnitude. Hokage-dono, the Land of Iron will also join the Alliance in order to help you curb this threat."

"Your help will be mostly appreciated, Mifune-dono," Jiraiya said with a nod. "I believe I can also bring some of the minor villages into the army as well, such as Taki or Ame."

"Will they be of any use, Hokage-sama?" Itachi asked. "Ame used to be under Akatsuki's control, and Taki suffered great loses during Hidan and Kakuzu's invasion."

"Fortunately, we still have Konan, who can fill the position of leader of Ame at our behest," Jiraiya began. "And I'm sure that Taki ninjas will be eager to take revenge on the people that destroyed their home."

"Besides, we helped them retake their village and with the reconstruction efforts," Rasa added. "They might as well show some gratitude and help us. If we lose, their village will share our fate."

"Raikage-sama, I believe we should start another search for Killer B-san immediately," Darui advised. "The Akatsuki learned that he didn't return to us, meaning that he's still out there, alone and without reinforcements that may protect him from the Akatsuki."

"Yes. Send a message home to do so immediately," the Raikage agreed.

"Allow us to help on that matter," Itachi said, taking a step forward. "Our summoned animals can make the search for the jinchuriki much easier."

"Any help will be welcomed, regardless of where it comes," the Raikage said with a nod.

"That begets a question," Kurotsuchi spoke up. "What should we do with the jinchuriki? Should we hide them, or should we use them in battle? Personally, I'm partial to the former. We can't risk them being captured by the Akatsuki."

"A cautious approach, yes. But we shouldn't forget that Akatsuki has many Tailed Beasts under their control, and they won't hesitate to unleash them upon us. We will need their power to counter them. Besides, I fought alongside Naruto-kun during the Civil War. Despite his youth, he's a powerful ninja, and can be a strong asset on this war." Mei said.

"Except Akatsuki will be expecting us to do that," Darui intervened. "Akatsuki sent their Nine Tails against Kumo hoping that we would

deploy our jinchuriki to counter it. Unfortunately, we fell for the trap and lost Yugito as a result. I wouldn't put past them to try the same stunt again, only on a greater scale."

The Raikage weighed in Darui's words.

"Darui speaks the truth. But if our combined forces are unable to beat Akatsuki, hiding them will be in vain," the Raikage said, unsure of what to do.

"Hokage-dono," Mifune spoke, looking at the white haired Sannin. "Given that you're the Supreme Commander of the Alliance, and two of the three jinchuriki are under Konoha's protection, I think the decision should be yours."

Jiraiya felt many eyes staring at him as the Hokage pondered over what to do. The father in him screamed to hide Naruto somewhere remote. But the ninja in him told him that no war has even been won by playing it safe. Then again, sending Naruto and Fu into a battlefield like they were now was extremely risky, too much for his taste. That moment, a solution dawned upon him. Something that would solve both their problems at once.

"Raikage," Jiraiya said, looking at his Kumo counterpart. "I believe your brother has perfect control of his Tailed Beast, am I right?"

"Yes, Killer B is a perfect jinchuriki," the Raikage confirmed. "What are you planning, Hokage?"

"Do you think Killer B could teach Naruto and Fu to tame their Tailed Beast as well?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yes, I believe he could," the Raikage said, as he realized what was Jiraiya's plan. "Plus, while he does that, we can send the three of them to a secret location where they will be safe from Akatsuki."

"And once they finish their training, we'll have not just one, but three perfect jinchuriki to aid us with the war effort," Tsunade said in

realization. She smiled at her husband. "Well thought, Jiraiya."

"Though, with some luck, it won't have to come to that, and the war will be won by then," the Raikage said. "Plus we need to find B first. Though I trust he will be fine."

"Now that the alliance is formed, and the Fourth War has been declared, there's also much to do," Mifune began. "You need to contact the rulers of your respective countries and tell them about the impending war. We also need to establish a chain of command, and reorganize the five armies into a single one."

"Agreed with Mifune-dono," Jiraiya said with a nod, before turning at the other four Kages. "Meanwhile, I think we should establish the rest of the Allied Ninja Forces' hierarchy. I may be the Supreme Commander, but I want to hear your input as well."

The other four Kages nodded in agreement, and the five of them plus Mifune continued discussing the chain of leadership of the Allied Forces.

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Outskirts of the Land of Iron

To the south of the capital of the Land of Iron was a thick forest, full of large trees covered in snow. Said trees were the perfect spot to remain hidden, spot that was chosen by Zetsu, who waited patiently for his master's return. The wait finally came to an end when he saw a spiraling portal appearing near him, and his temporary master emerged from it. Obito looked between annoyed and angry.

"I take the Kages didn't surrender the jinchuriki, did they?" the white half guessed.

"It was stupid to hope otherwise," the black half stated. "We know our plans will only come to fruition through force."

"Still, it was worth a shot," Obito replied. "Plus I wanted to see the meeting with my own eyes. I was hoping that there would be no consensus, thus making our job easier. But given that they agreed to an alliance, there was no harm in coming out and make a demand."

"Are you sure we're ready to fight them? The five Great Ninja Villages gathered under a single banner is something that has never happened before," a worried Black Zetsu said. "Their combined power must be terrifying."

"Not terrifying enough to curb the might we had amassed," Obito confidently said. "Still my intrusion wasn't a complete waste of time. Apparently, the Raikage was unaware that the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails escaped from our custody, and is still out there. I want you to track him down before our enemies do."

"Leave that in my hand," the white half said. "What will you do now, boss?"

Obito looked around, and narrowed his eyes when his eyes rested on the Three Wolves Mountain. "There's nothing to do here anymore. I'll head to the meeting point in the Mountain Graveyard. Once you track the Eight Tails and Kisame and Deidara return from killing Orochimaru, all of us will devise the strategy for the war."

"Understood, boss," the black half said.

And both Obito and Zetsu disappeared, leaving the snowy forest devoid of any human presence.

Author's Note: And with this chapter, the Kage Summit comes to an end, and we head into the final part of the story! Yep, we're on the home stretch now! Aren't you guys excited? Though, that doesn't mean that this story is ending anytime soon. According to my estimations, this story will be about 135-140 chapters long. Even if I plan it to be much shorter than it

was in canon, the Fourth Ninja War arc is still going to be pretty long.

Now, a lot to unpack here. First, all the backstory changes I made regarding Madara. In canon, Madara left the village because he was worried for the Uchiha's future, which was a bit OOC and kind of came out of nowhere, so I decided to change that reason to political differences stemming from the "Love vs Power" that SHOULD have been Naruto's central theme. I think it makes much more sense, plus it was something that was in canon yet Kishimoto didn't take advantage of for some reason.

Also, the timeline of that era is a complete mess. According to canon, Hashirama, who was still the Hokage, captured the other Tailed Beasts minus Shukaku AFTER beating Madara and capturing the Nine Tails, and handed them to the other villages during the first Kage Summit... which happened in the middle of the First Ninja War, when Tobirama was Hokage. This left a lot of questions unsolved: when did Hashirama stepped down and passed the Hat to Tobirama? When - and HOW - did Hashirama die? When did the First Ninja War start? When did Madara and Hashirama have their final duel? So, in order to make sense of that, I created my own timeline that goes like this:

1. Hashirama and Madara had their disagreement, making Madara leave the village.
2. Hashirama seeks and captures seven of the nine Tailed Beasts, and hands them to the other Great Villages (and Taki) during the first Kage Summit.
3. Hashirama steps down as Hokage, Tobirama is appointed as the Second Hokage. Shortly after that, the First Ninja War breaks out, with both Hashirama and Tobirama taking part on it.
4. In the middle of the war, Madara makes his return, pulling Hashirama from the war. The two of them fight for the last time.

Madara dies, but later revives using Izanami, and the Nine Tails is sealed inside Mito.

5. Hashirama returns to the battlefield still exhausted and wounded from his fight with Madara, which results in his death. A few years later, towards the end of the war, Tobirama would die, and Hiruzen would be appointed Third Hokage.

With that out of the way, let's talk about Madara. I always thought that what happened with Rin was a dead giveaway of how Madara was going to come back, but nobody seemed to make the connection. Every reviewer that mentioned him thought that he was dead and that he would reappear as an Edo Tensei zombie like in canon. But now, you can imagine what's going to happen. And if the process turned Rin, a rather unremarkable medical ninja, into such a powerhouse, try to imagine how Madara is going to be.

Lastly, the jinchuriki. I hated how everybody always want to keep first Naruto during the Pain arc, and later Naruto and B during the war, away from the action, with only Tsunade arguing that they should be allowed to fight. And io and behold, both times Tsunade is proven right! And I hated so much how they had BREAK OUT of the island, and then face the Raikage. So that's why I came up with what I believe is a more sensible solution: Naruto and Fu will go into hiding alongside B, and begin to train to master their Tailed Beast power, and once they do that, they'll be sent to the frontlines.

Thanks a lot to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

This note is getting too long, so I better end it here. So, what did you think about this chapter, and what was revealed on it? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Decisions and Reencounters

Author's Note: While I did say that we're heading into the final arc of the story, I don't mean that this story is close to its end. I believe it passed the 2/3 mark not long ago. Meaning that, even if we're on the final stretch, there are still plenty of chapters left, and plenty of events to happen. Remember how long the 4th Ninja War was in canon.

Anyway, enjoy the new chapter:

Chapter 95:

Decisions and Reencounters

or

Things are about to get shaky

Training Ground Twenty Five

Naruto watched proudly as his students sparred against each other in Sage Mode. Shizune was sparring against Asuma, Shiusui with Fu, Karin with Rin and Hinata with Hanabi. Even if some of them had a better hang of senjutsu than others, all of them had made remarkable progress in such a short amount of time. Now they'd only need to polish it a little more, and they'll be ready for battle.

While senjutsu had improved their capabilities dramatically, the ones who showed it more were the Hyuga sisters. Both of them had developed an uncanny ability to project large arms of chakra from their palms, in a way similar to the Uchiha's Susanoo. Apparently, according to the Moon Acolytes, Hamura and his daughter Kalika were also Sages, and combining Senjutsu with the Tensiegan could be used to unlock new abilities.

"Learning how to draw nature energy and mixing it with your chakra is one thing," Naruto began, as he walked around the sparring pairs. "But using Sage Mode in combat is a totally different beast. Sage Mode is finite, and you need to make sure it doesn't run out in the middle of a fight. Conserving nature energy inside your bodies is paramount."

"Heh, I don't think I'll ever hear you using words like 'paramount', Naruto-kun," Shizune giggled.

Naruto scowled a little. "Well, if I'm going to be a teacher, I had to sound the part, right?"

"A part you did wonderfully," Shizune praised, before frowning a little, rubbing her head at the returning memory. "That's it, when you weren't breaking our heads open with that staff."

"Hey, it wasn't that-" Naruto said, before interrupting himself. "Oh wait, that reminds me! I need to check on the new students!"

Naruto ignored the sparring sages, and moved towards another part of the training field, where three tall stalagmites had been erected. On top of those stalagmites, Gaara, Kankuro and Temari were sitting on a stone slab each, trying to keep balance while drawing nature energy.

When the Sand Siblings asked Naruto if they could use his help with the rebuilding of a particularly large house, Naruto had to decline since he had to continue his senjutsu class. It was then when the blond realized that the Sand Siblings fit the requirements to learn Senjutsu, large chakra pools and good chakra control, and asked them to join him. Once Naruto explained them what Sage Mode was about, they were immediately on board.

"Hmmm... so far, it seems they're getting the hang out of it as well," Naruto observed. "Good, that means I don't need to use the staff."

Naruto was more careful with the anti-senjutsu staff with Sand Siblings than he had been with his previous batch of students. Mostly because, the first time he used it on Temari, she replied with a scathing "break my head again, and I'll shove that staff where the sun don't shine". Naruto didn't want to see if the blond girl was bluffing or not.

"Hey guys, how are you doing?" Naruto asked.

"I'm doing alright," Gaara said. "I think."

"Me too. The balance was hard at first, but it gets easier once you get the hang of it," Kankuro added.

"How long do we need to stay here?" Temari asked.

"You guys are making good progress as well, but let's not rush things, okay?" Naruto asked. "Better stay there a little longer before we can move onto more advanced exercises."

While Gaara and Kankuro merely nodded, he could hear Temari loudly snorting. The blond jinchuriki decided it was better to return to his other students. He drew their attention by clapping his hands.

"Okay everyone, enough with the individual spars!" Naruto said. The Konoha and one Taki ninja disengaged, and walked towards Naruto. "In order to test your skill with Senjutsu, now we're going to-"

But Naruto didn't finish his sentence, as he suddenly disappeared, leaving a puff of smoke behind. Naturally, the senjutsu trainees were left befuddled.

"Wait... was that a Shadow Clone?" Karin asked.

"I don't think so," Hinata said. "Naruto-kun said that he was leaving some Clones to help with the reconstruction, but I thought that this one was the original."

"So, what do we do now?" Fu asked.

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Mount Myoboku

"... do a one versus all sparring match to see how much you can stand with..." Naruto stopped talking upon realizing that he was no longer in Konoha. "Uh?"

"Hey there, Naruto," a voice greeted him.

Naruto turned around, and saw his parents, Itachi and Fukasaku and Shima. It took him a few more seconds to realize where he had been brought.

"Hey, this is Mount Myoboku!" Naruto said in realization.

"Indeed it is, Naruto-chan," Fukasaku said. "Come on, there's much to discuss regarding your near future, kid. Let's go to see Gamamaru-sama."

Naruto nodded, and joined his parents, the elder toads and the one Uchiha as they walked towards where the great sage was.

"So... how was the summit?" Naruto asked.

"Eh, it had good and bad parts," Tsunade answered. "The good part is that we managed to unite the five Great Villages under a single banner. We're part of the Ninja Alliance now."

"And you're talking with its Supreme Commander!" Jiraiya proudly said.

"Now you're boasting? I thought you said you didn't want more responsibility piled on your back," Tsunade said, with a smug smile.

Jiraiya deflated. "Let me impress kid just once, okay?"

Naruto chuckled at her parents' banter, before realizing something Tsunade had said. "Wait, what about the bad parts?"

"Akatsuki showed up," it was Itachi who spoke. "More specifically, Obito."

Naruto gasped, before scowling as well. "What did he want? Did he try something?"

"Fortunately, he only wanted to talk," Tsunade said. "He asked us to hand him the three remaining jinchuriki so they could finish reviving the Ten Tails. Naturally, we told him to shove it."

"Oh yes, it turns out Akatsuki didn't capture Killer B," Jiraiya added, before Naruto could ask. "He managed to trick them with a decoy, and went away."

"Really? That's awesome!" Naruto said, beaming widely. After such a string of failing to protect his fellow jinchuriki, it was refreshing to hear that Akatsuki failed for a change.

"Unfortunately, the jinchuriki is still out there, alone and vulnerable," Itachi said. "Kumo already deployed many teams to find him, and Hokage-sama, Tsunade-sama and myself offered the help of our summoned animals."

"Let's hope we can find him before Akatsuki does," Naruto said. "Wait, that was the bad part? If all Obito did was ask for the rest of us and then left, that's not quite a big of a deal."

"Due our negative, Obito then declared the Fourth Ninja War," Jiraiya said, his tone being more ominous. "Obito claims that, on top of his surviving Akatsuki members and the Tailed Beasts, he commands an army of Zetsu of one hundred thousand strong."

"Okay, that's a pretty big deal," Naruto grimly agreed. "So, we are going to war, then?"

"No, we are going to war," Tsunade stated. "You are going somewhere else."

"WHAT? Please don't tell me that you plan to ship me away to some underground bunker!" Naruto quickly and loudly protested. "You guys need me! The Akatsuki Invasion would have been much worse if it wasn't for me!"

"Whoa! Calm down, Naruto! We didn't say that," Jiraiya said, raising his hands defensively. "We're going to send you to a special place where you will learn to control the Nine Tails."

"Both you and Fu," Itachi added. "The jinchuriki of the Eight Tails will teach you how."

Naruto's smile returned. "Really? That's awesome!"

"That way, when the time comes, you will be an even greater asset to us than you're now," Jiraiya said. "With three perfect jinchuriki, we'll be able to counter Akatsuki's Tailed Beasts."

"Awesome!" Naruto cheered, before he realized of something. "Wait, what has to do with me being here?"

"You'll see shortly, Naruto-chan. Be patient," Shima told him.

They continued the rest of their short trek in silence, until they were in front of the large elderly toad sage. Gamamaru shifted on his seat, as he noticed the group.

"Ahh... you brought the child... good, good..." Gamamaru said, his voice slow and raspy. "Come closer, Naruto... an important task awaits you."

"Good to see he didn't have one of his episodes of senility," Shima grumbled, making Fukasaku roll his eyes.

Naruto took a few steps forward. "I'm here, venerable sage," Naruto said while making a bow, trying to sound as respectful as possible. Even he knew this toad was somebody important here.

"I had a vision... you and a green beetle will go to an island... a green paradise... then, the two of you will meet an octopus..." Gamamaru began. "Said octopus... will help you tame your... inner beasts. You will meet... lost family... there will be joy... and there will be tears... for you'll reencounter some who was thought to be lost... and will say goodbye to others forever. And finally... a wave of darkness will wash over the world..."

Naruto expected the seer toad to continue, to tell him that he'd win and dispel the darkness, but no such premonition came. Impatient, he decided to speak. "What happens next? Don't we beat the darkness?"

"I... don't know," Gamamaru admitted. "What lies beyond... the darkness... I can't see. Some events... are in place but... the future... always in motion is... always changing... I'm afraid I... can't be... of much more help..."

"Don't worry, Gamamaru-sama, you helped us a lot already!" Fukasaku said, as he turned to the rest of the group. "Your news of the ninja war and plans to teach Naruto how to control the Nine Tails align with Gamamaru-sama's predictions. That's why we decided it's about time to give Naruto the key."

"Uh, key? What key?" Naruto asked, tilting his head.

"The key to your seal," Jiraiya answered. "The seal that holds the Nine Tails has a key that, when in your possession, will allow you to open and close the seal at will."

"You will need to open the seal in order to access the full power of the beast," Tsunade added.

"Okay. Where's that key, then?" Naruto asked.

"Right here!"

Naruto turned around to see a small black and orange toad landing besides him. The blond couldn't help but notice that the toad's stomach was quite strange, as if he was wearing an obi around it, but he could tell those were skin flaps, not cloth.

"Hello there!" the toad said. "My name is Gerotora! Your father trusted the key to me when he sealed the Nine Tails inside you! I've been keeping it here until the moment to hand it to you came! And that moment is now!"

"You have the key? Where?" Naruto asked.

"Again, right here," the toad repeated, this time with less enthusiasm.

Naruto's assessment turned out to be right as the toad's abdomen started to expand in a comical way, until it reached its full length. Then, much to the Uzumaki's surprise, he saw that the toad's abdomen was a very large scroll. Gerotora unfurled his scroll-abdomen to reveal a large and complex sealing pattern.

"This is the key! Once you have it, you'll have control of the seal," Gerotora explained, before furling the scroll again.

"But... what I'm supposed to do with this? Eat it?" Naruto asked, looking at the rest in search for answers.

"Hey, the kid is much brighter than he looks!" Shima happily pointed out.

Naruto's face dropped, as he looked at the smiling scroll-toad with a grimace of disgust.

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Land of Frost

In a town on the southern coast of the Land of Frost, Killer B was sitting on the outside of a cafe, with a bottle of sake on the table, as he eagerly worked on his new rap song. His for the time short

journey was proving to be very productive and inspiring, and had hopes that his new song would be finished before the end of the month.

He looked at the large waves crashing into the empty beach, smiled, and continued writing.

"Aw yeah, the view from here is amazing, I can feel new rhymes rising!" he cheered, as he happily wrote. "I really needed this vacation, so I can visit new locations!"

" **Hey, B,**" his Tailed Beast called.

" *What do you want, Number Eight? I'm busy writing, can't you wait?*" the jinchuriki replied.

" ***B, you know that this is foolish,***" the Eight Tails insisted. ***"The Akatsuki must know about your deception by now, and they will be looking for you. Why don't we go back to Kumo? You already enjoyed quite a few days of vacation."***

" *Fool ya fool! My vacations just started! And you're afraid of Akatsuki, are you so fainhearted?*" Killer B asked. *"Those idiots would never find me if I constantly move, I bet they won't be able to follow my groove!"*

Killer B could hear his Tailed Beast sigh. ***"At the very least, try to keep a low profile. Oh, why I even bother, I'm so dead..."***

" *Come on, don't be so dramatic, don't bring me down, or it will be problematic. I make sure those fools don't get their hands on you, and if I find one of them I'll turn him black and blue!*" Killer B assured him.

Needless to say, the Eight Tails wasn't convinced. Though he decided to gave up, since while Killer B was stubborn on his own, talking to him was an uphill battle when he was so focused on a new song. He would try sometime later.

However, little did the jinchuriki nor his Tailed Beast realize that somebody had noticed their presence, and were going to sent such information to their boss.

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"PUAJJJJ!" Naruto coughed, having just swallowed Gerotora. "I think I'm going to throw up!"

"Come on Naruto, it wasn't that bad," Jiraiya said. "I swallowed toads much larger than that."

Naruto wanted to ask why, but he felt like he wouldn't like the answer. He was about to say something else, but continued coughing violently.

"Wait, isn't going Fu going to need the key to her seal as well?" Tsunade asked. "We need to talk with whoever sealed the Seven Tails inside her."

"No need to," Jiraiya said. "Fu's seal can already be undone by herself. It's not as secure as the Eight Trigrams Seal, but given that Seven Tails is not as powerful, it's not necessary. And thank goodness, since the man who did the sealing is Shibuki's father, who died many years ago."

"Now that you guys have everythig you need, we'll send you back to Konoha," Fukasaku said, as he and Shima made a hand seal.

"Heh, thanks to the toads, we can skip another week-long trip in order to get back home," Tsunade observed, nodding in satisfaction.

"We'll return where Naruto-chan was just before he was summoned here!" Shima added.

And with that, the four Konoha ninjas and the two elder toads disappeared, leaving a cloud of smoke in their wake.

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Trainig Ground Twenty Five

"Hey, look, Naruto is back!" Fu cheerfully said.

All the Sage trainees turned around to see Naruto's return, though they could see he didn't return alone.

"Oh, Hokage-sama, Tsunade-sama and Itachi-kun are also back," Shizune observed.

"Hey, Itachi!" Shisui called out, as he took a step forward. The younger Uchiha could see that his cousin was in Sage Mode, if the wing-shaped black marking around his eyes were any indication. "Check this out!" Shisui then proceeded to create an armored Susanoo around him, armed with a drill-like spear. "Senjutsu Susanoo! Not only is stronger than the normal one, but thanks to Sage Mode, I can counter the eye strain caused by the Mangekyo Sharingan, meaning that I can use it as much as I want despite not having the Eternal version!"

Itachi smiled, genuinely impressed by his cousin's breakthrough. "That's amazing, Shisui. I can't wait to see it in action."

"Wait a minute, if the Mangekyo Sharingan slowly worsens your eyesight until you go blind... how is that Obito isn't blind yet?" Rin asked. "He uses his Mangekyo Sharingan non-stop."

"If I were to make a conjecture, I'd say that the regeneration provided by his Zetsu body is able to nullify the deteriorating eyesight," Itachi guessed. "But I wouldn't know for sure."

"Come on Itachi, fight me! Today, I shall reclaim my rightful place as the greatest of the Uchiha!" Shisui said, as he pointed at Itachi in an overly dramatic manner.

"Sadly, you will have to leave that for later, since we have urgent matters to attend to," Tsunade began. "Shisui, Hinata, given that the two of you are the heads of the Uchiha and Hyuga, you need to

come with us. Naruto, use some clones to tell the rest of the Clan Heads still in the village that they're needed for an urgent meeting at the Hokage Tower."

"Right away, mom," Naruto said, as he did as Tsunade asked.

"Fu, you will have to come with us too," Jiraiya said, much to the green haired girl's surprise. "There has been some developments that concern you."

"Uh... sure, understood, Hokage-sama," Fu said with a nod. Even she could tell that the situation was serious.

"Can you guys tell us what just happened?" Hanabi asked.

"I'll leave a clone here in order to explain," Naruto said. "Sadly, the class will have to end sooner than usual. I'll tell Gaara and his siblings as well."

Meanwhile, Shima noticed that Shisui, who was speaking with Itachi, radiated nature energy.

"Wait, is he a Sage too?" Shima asked in shock.

"Not just him," Fukasaku said. "All the humans here are Sages! Can you feel it, Ma? This place is overflowing with Nature energy!"

"How it is possible?" Shima asked in shock.

"I told you Naruto-chan wanted to teach other people how to use nature energy," Fukasaku explained. "And it seems he was successful."

"Without Myoboku's special oil? How did he do it?" the female toad asked, her shock growing with each second.

"Heh, Naruto-chan surely does the impossible, doesn't he?" Fukasaku asked, sounding proud. "Come, I'll tell you his idea."

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Hokage Tower, Council Room, an hour later

As Jiraiya surveyed the people sitting at both sides of the large table and making sure that nobody was missing, the Hokage realized that he had never seen the Council Room so crowded. At his sides were his four advisors: Tsunade, Hiruzen, Koharu and Homura, and next to them were Naruto and Fu, the jinchuriki.

Then, there were the Clan Heads of the most important and/or populous Konoha clans, such as the Hyuga, Uchiha, Sarutobi or Aburame, as well many other high ranking members of Konoha's ninja corps, such as the Jonin Commander or the Anbu commander. Some of the people there were pulling double duty, such as the aforementioned Jonin Commander, Shikaku Nara, also the head of the Nara Clan.

Hinata wasn't the only young teen representing her clan. Ino Yamanaka was also there, as the Clan Head of hers.

"Is everybody here? Yeah, I think so," the Hokage muttered, mostly to himself. "Hello, and thank you for coming here with such short notice. I'll go to the point: in their bid to claim all Tailed Beasts, Akatsuki has declared a war against the Elemental Nations."

Naturally, the effect was immediate. Many of the present started to murmur among each other, while others started to ask questions to the Hokage, raising their voice over each other in hopes to be heard or answered first.

"Order! Order!" Tsunade shouted, slamming her fist into the table for added effect multiple times. Thankfully, she managed to control her strength enough not to break it. "The Hokage will explain you everything! Now keep quiet and listen, because this shit is important!"

"Thank you, Hime," Jiraiya said. Tsunade smiled in return. "As you probably know, my wife and I have been in the Land of Iron on a summit with the other four Kage, in order to discuss what to do with the Akatsuki threat. In the middle of the meeting, Obito, the new leader of Akatsuki, appeared before us and demanded the three remaining jinchuriki to be handed to him. Naturally, we told him no. In response, he threatened to unleash an army of Zetsu one hundred thousand strong, backed by the Tailed Beasts Akatsuki has captured so far, against Konoha and the rest of the villages.

"If what Obito says is true, then Akatsuki possesses a power that Konoha alone can't hope to defeat. Fortunately, we aren't alone. On top of Kiri and Suna helping us, Kumo and Iwa agreed to join us to form the world's very first Ninja Alliance. We shall-

"You have to be kidding me!" Tsume Inuzuka shouted. "Are you really willing to ally with Iwa scum!?"

"Not to mention Kumo!" Choza added. "Those guys have been trying to kidnap little girls with Bloodline Limits from Konoha multiple times!"

"I think it's obvious the situation at hand is dire enough to merit such measures," Shibi calmly replied, though his tone was firm. "I trust Hokage-sama to do the right thing."

"I agree with Shibi-san," Shikaku said. "Besides, Kiri and Konoha used to be enemies, yet now we're allies."

"Come on Shikaku, you're supposed to take my side!" Choza loudly protested.

"I take the side that makes more sense!" Shikaku argued back, raising his voice to match his large friend's.

Eventually, another argument broke out as everybody tried to yell at each other, trying to assert who was right not by the strength of their

arguments but by the volume of their voices, resulting in a cacophony of shouts and yells.

"SILENCE, YOU FUCKS!" Tsunade bellowed, making everybody to instantly shut up. "The next time you do that, all of you will go out of the window, got it!?"

"Thank you again, Hime. Anyway, as I was saying, the five Great Villages shall join forces as a Ninja Alliance, with me directing it as its Supreme Commander," this new managed to ease some of those present who didn't like the idea of working with villages who had been enemies until now. "Given that we're in a situation of war, no more missions shall be accepted, and all the accepted missions minus the A and S ranked shall be cancelled and their price reimbursed to the customers. We won't fight individually, the plan is for all villages to create a single, massive army composed of every village."

"Even if they don't usually involve themselves in the affair of ninjas, the Samurai of the Land of Iron shall assist us in this war," Tsunade added. "We're also working on bringing Ame and Taki into the Alliance, since we'll need every last man and woman able to fight if we want to win this."

"Hokage-sama," Homura spoke. "What about the jinchuriki? What are we going to do with them?"

"Akatsuki already tried to claim them by force once," Koharu added. "If we keep them here, they will come again. And I don't trust the rest of the villages to move their armies into the Land of Fire to protect us in time before a second attack happens."

"You do rise a good point, and rest assured that such topic had been dealt with," Jiraiya said, before looking into Naruto and Fu's general direction. "Many of you know that Kumo's remaining jinchuriki, the Raikage's younger brother Killer B, has complete control over his Tailed Beast. The Raikage had agreed to allow his brother to train Naruto and Fu so they can master their jinchuriki powers as well.

Said training will take part at a secret location, ensuring the safety of our jinchuriki."

"Once Naruto and Fu finish their training, they shall join the front lines. With their new powers, we should be able to win the war for good," Tsunade added. "Though we do hope that we can win before that happens."

"Indeed," Jiraiya continued. "Now, while we were at the Summit, the other Kages and I created an structure for the army of the Ninja Alliance. It will be split into two groups: the Support Divisions, composed by the medics, sensors and intelligence, and the Battle Regiment, split into five divisions. Each of these divisions will be lead by a field commander. We need to discuss which ninjas shall be deployed in which divisions."

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"Oh, thank the Heavens! Killer B-sensei is still alive!" Karui squealed in joy, after hearing what the Naruto clone had told her.

The Naruto Clone had gathered the Konoha 15 (minus Hinata and Ino, who were busy attending the meeting with the Hokage), Rin, the Sand Siblings, Maki's students and Killer B's students. One of the first thing Naruto had told them was about the ending of the summit, Obito's appearance, the revelation that Killer B had escaped Akatsuki, and the declaration of war.

"But if sensei is alive, why didn't he return to us already?" T asked.

"Maybe he was unable to," Omoi began. "Maybe tried to find a town in order to ask for help, but said town was ran by a criminal gang who wanted to capture sensei in order to cash on his bounty, but then-"

Karui silenced Omoi with a well timed slap to the back.

"Enough with your nonsense! I'm sure sensei had a very good reason to do so," Karui firmly stated. "It's not that he pretended to be dead just so he could go on vacation. I'd cut his balls if he did that."

"While the escape of the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails is indeed a very good new, we should focus on the greater picture," Gaara stated. "There's a war in the horizon. One that will encompass all five Great Villages. A war of this scale is something that has never been seen before."

"Well, I for once am not worried," Kiba interjected. "You should have seen those Akatsuki shits coming here and wreaking havoc. I doubt war will be any different than what we went through already."

"I wouldn't speak so lightly, Kiba," Neji interjected. "While I never experienced the horrors of war, plenty of my clansmen, my own father included, did. And they don't have pleasant memories of such events."

"Yeah, if anything, it's going to be worse," Shikamaru added. "Before we used to have homefield advantage. In an open war, it won't be the case."

"And as much as we enjoyed staying here, that means we will have to head back to Suna and prepare for the war," Temari said, as she and Shikamaru exchanged gloomy stares. "Guess it was fun while it lasted."

"Hey, we will see each other soon," Shikamaru said, trying to be optimistic. "Even if it will be on a battlefield."

"But hopefully, you guys will be on the same side," Matsuri chimed in.

"Yeah, it will be soooooo tragic if you had to be at different sides of a conflict," Yukata said. "Hey, that sounds like a neat idea for a romantic novel, don't you think, Matsuri-chan?"

"Totally! Maybe we can work on it once this war is over?" Matsuri suggested.

"Also, that's not all," the Naruto clone intervened, before Matsuri and Yukata could derail the conversation any further. "Fu and I aren't going to take part in the war. At least, not from the very beginning."

"It's because the two of you are jinchuriki," Shino said. It wasn't a question, but an statement.

"Yeah. The Raikage is going to send us to this super secret place Kumo owns where their jinchuriki trained to master their powers," the clone explained. "Fu and I are going to be sent there to do that as well. Once our training is over, we will join you guys."

"Oh, I think that I know what place you refer to," Karui said. "B-sensei told us about it. It's extremely hard to find, and only the highest ranking Kumo Jonin know how to reach it. You two will be safe as long as you're there."

"What do you know about that place, Karui?" Choji asked the redhead.

"As much as B-sensei told me," Karui replied. She then frowned a little. "Though I'm not going to say anything out loud here in the open. There might be an Akatsuki spy listening to this conversation."

"Oh, right. Sorry I didn't realize of that," Choji sheepishly apologized.

"We might better return as well," T stated. "I think we've been here long enough, and the journey to Kumo is a long one."

With that, the foreign ninjas returned to the places they were staying at while in Konoha in order to pack their things in order to move back to their home villages, leaving the Konoha ninjas alone.

"I can't believe Obito went as far as to declare a war to the entire continent," Rin said, as she wrapped her arms around her body.

"Just... what happened to him after my death to make him fall this low?"

"It might be hard for you to do, but you must understand that the current Obito is not the same boy who used to be your teammate," Shino replied. "I apologize if I sound cold, but as long as he poses a threat of such magnitude, we should focus on bringing him down, not on what caused him to turn to our enemies."

"Yes... I agree," Rin forced herself to say. "You know, I have the feeling that, the next time we see Obito, it will be the last... no matter how things end between us."

"I think your prediction will be accurate," was Shino's reply.

...

Hokage Tower, many hours later

It took them quite a lot of time and many heated discussions, but they were finally able to finish the division designation for every active Konoha ninja. The sun was starting to hide in the horizon, and Jiraiya was reviewing the draft one last time. The rest of the people present in the room had left already once the meeting had been officially concluded, leaving the Hokage to make sure that everything was perfect. Fortunately, his wife was still with him, helping him with such mentally exhausting task.

"I believe this is okay," Jiraiya said, before looking at Tsunade. "Unless you have something to say, that's it."

"No, I think we did a good job with the division assignments," Tsunade said, before letting out a yawn. "So, do we need to send this to anybody or...?"

"I'm the Supreme Commander, remember?" Jiraiya boasted with a confident grin. "In fact, it's the other Kages who should defer to me."

Though once the other Kages have done the division assignment, we will gather at the Allied Forces HQ for the final preparations."

Besides the main chain of command, the Kages also decided to build a new place to serve as the Alliance's headquarters for ease of command, instead of using any of the Ninja Villages. Given that Jiraiya was the Supreme Commander, it would be build in the Land of Fire, around Konoha's vicinity.

"Hopefully the new headquarters will be finished soon," Jiraiya said, before standing up. "And I don't know about you, but I'm so tired I could sleep for a week. And the days to come are going to be even crazier than today, so we better get as much rest as we can."

"I can agree with that," Tsunade replied.

The two Sannin were about to stand up and leave for their home, when somebody else entered the room. It was Hiruzen, their former sensei, who had left the meeting room not that much ago.

"Sensei? What are you doing here?" Tsunade asked. "Shouldn't you be home, resting?"

"Yes, I should," Hiruzen admitted. "However, I forgot about something important, and thank goodness, I have found you two here before you left."

"What is it, sensei?" Jiraiya asked.

"Can you tell me what division I'm supposed to be assigned to?" Hiruzen asked, trying to remember. "Because no matter how much I try, I just can't recall it."

Jiraiya and Tsunade shared a look of worry, before their eyes rested on their aged sensei again.

"Uh, sensei..." Tsunade began, trying to sound gentle. "You... we didn't assign you to any division."

Though much to their surprise, the former Hokage smiled. "Yes, that's what I thought. I would have remembered if you did."

Jiraiya, however, immediately realized where the former Hokage wanted to say. "Whoa there, wait a second, sensei! I hope you're not asking me to send you to the battlefield!"

"And why not? Because I'm old?" Hiruzen replied, indignant. "I may be long past my prime, but I know I can still help our younger ninjas in the battleground."

"Sensei... you've fought in every past Ninja War so far," Tsunade continued. "Don't you think it's about time that you take a rest? You did more than enough for several generations that came after yours."

"Yeah, you should spend the days you have left playing with your grandkids, not fighting another war," Jiraiya added.

"That's no excuse for me not to do more," Hiruzen firmly said, as a frown started to develop on his face. "How can I look at my grandkids in the eyes, knowing that their parents are risking their lives for their future, but their grandfather and clan leader isn't?"

"Listen, sensei, you can't-" Jiraiya was about to say, but was interrupted when Tsunade whispered something into his ear. "You sure?"

Tsunade merely nodded.

"Very well then. Sensei, my wife here has suggested me a position for you where your talents won't be wasted," Jiraiya began.

"Jiraiya, I'm not going to accept any position of 'war advisor' or something equally inane just so you can-"

"It's not that," the Toad Sage said, interrupting him. "I think you can be a pretty good addition to Naruto and Fu's security detail."

"Jiraiya..." Hiruzen grumbled.

"Come on sensei! This is important!" Jiraiya insisted. "Do you think I would send mediocre ninjas to protect my son? The fact that we thought of you for this should speak volumes about how much we trust you and your skills."

Hiruzen wanted to protest, but in the end he resigned to Jiraiya's decision.

"I always preached that the older generations should get more involved in the development of the younger ninjas. It would be very hypocritical of me to turn down such position," Hiruzen said, as he smiled. His eyes rested on Tsunade. "Well played, Tsunade. You always had a cunning mind."

Tsunade merely smirked in return.

"Don't think you're going to be a glorified babysitter, sensei," Jiraiya reassured him. "Everything regarding Naruto and his training is important. If you can keep him safe and help him train with his new powers, your actions will help us more than if we merely send you to a battlefield."

"Naruto, Fu and his bodyguards will depart in a few days for Kumo's secret base, where the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails should be waiting for them," Tsunade added. "Meet them at the West Gate."

"Understood. I'll be heading home now to pack some essentials for the journey," Hiruzen said, finally leaving the two Sannin alone.

"Stubborn old man..." Jiraiya groaned. "Hime, you have permission to kill me if I end up like that in my old age."

"You may end up regretting those words," Tsunade replied with a cheeky grin.

...

Land of Frost, that very moment

Since he left that port town, Killer B has been prey to a feeling of uneasiness, as if an impending danger greater than any other was hanging on his head. That's what made the rogue jinchuriki to leave the town and seek refuge elsewhere.

"I feel like there's somebody out there out to cut my balls," Killer B said, before shivering a little.

"B, don't you think it's a little to dangerous to wander around like this?" the Eight Tails warned. **"You should have waited until next morning to continue your journey."**

"No, you see, it's part of my plan, to hide in the darkness, the idea of a wise man! My enemies won't find me, if I travel during the night, that way I can avoid any fight! Oh yeah!" Killer B rapped, satisfied with his brilliant idea. Brilliant according to him at least.

That moment, Killer B heard something rustling a nearby bush. He turned around, and unsheathed one his swords.

"What? Have I been found? How? I've been silent and sneaky like a foxhound!" Killer B said, frantically looking around.

"Just a second ago you've been loudly rapping," the Eight Tails deadpanned. **"I'm sure everybody in a kilometer radius heard you."**

Once again, B heard another rustle, followed by another one. There were more than just one enemy, and they were getting closer. Yes, he could heard them coming closer and closer. They weren't even bothering with stealth anymore.

"It seems those Akatsuki bores are back, come on Number Eight, let's give them a mighty smack!" Killer B said, unsheathing another sword.

The Eight Tails sighed. **"I knew it was going to end like this one way or another."**

Another rustle, this time much louder. That's where the attack was going to come from.

"I got you now! Prepare to-"

"DROP KICK!"

However, that was merely a distraction. Killer B barely had any time to see a white and brown blur dashing at him, before he was at the receiving end of a brutal flying kick. Said kick sent him flying against a tree, which was instantly brought down by the sheer force of B's momentum. Three more trees suffered the same fate until B finally stopped.

"U... ugh... that was..." a dazed Killer B said.

Looking up, he saw a massive figure angrily towering over him, surrounded by more ninjas. The giant grabbed him by his neck and lifted him to eye level.

"B-brother?" Killer B blabbered.

"YOU FUCKING IDIOT!" the Raikage said, as he started to violently shake Killer B. "MAKING ME BELIEVE YOU WERE DEAD SO COULD GO YOUR MERRY WAY! YOU GODDAMNED DUMBASS, I'M GOING TO PUNCH YOU UNTIL I BEAT THE STUPIDITY OUT OF YOU! YOU HEAR ME!? WHEN I'M DONE WITH YOU... !"

The rest of the Kumo ninjas merely watched the comical display, knowing full well that the Raikage wouldn't carry those threats. At least most of them.

"It's a good thing we found him before the Akatsuki did," C noted. He then turned to a brown haired Kumo kunoichi wearing a short Kumo flak jacket that left her midriff exposed. "Ran, send a message home. Tell them that we finally found Killer B, and we will be sending him back to the village. Tell them to prepare a ship, since we're going to send him to the Island Turtle."

"Understood, C-san," the kunoichi, Ran, said before leaping away.

"Well, it's a good thing that in the end, it was all a scare," C said, sighing.

"... THAT YOUR GREAT-GRANDKIDS ARE GOING TO FEEL IT! THAT'S IT, IF YOU LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO FATHER THEM!"

...

Konoha's West Gate, a few days later

Naruto, Fu, and their escorts were ready to depart Konoha for Kumo's mysterious island. Their escort team was composed by Genma, Raido, Choza Akimichi, Yugao, Hayate, Hiruzen Sarutobi, and lastly Tenzo, who was there just in case things would go out of control regarding the Nine Tails. Jiraiya, Tsunade, their younger children, Naruto's teammates, and Team Kakashi were there to bid the two jinchuriki a safe journey.

"Once you arrive the island, send me a toad so I know that the journey went well," Jiraiya told his son. "Since it's one of the few ways to deliver a message Akatsuki has no way of intercepting."

"Don't worry dad, I'm sure Akatsuki doesn't even know where are we going," Naruto reassured him.

"Still, it's better to be too cautious than to be careless," Tsunade agreed with her husband.

Fu walked towards Shino, wrapped her arms around his neck, and gave him a kiss on the lips.

"Guess we won't see each other in some time," Fu said, sounding a little melancholic. "I'll keep you in my mind to inspire me if this training proves to be too much."

"I know that whatever trials you have to face, you will overcome them without trouble," Shino reassured her. And in a rare display for the

Aburame, he smiled. "Because you're one of the strongest and most skilled kunoichi I've ever met."

Fu didn't say anything, she merely rested her head on Shino's shoulder.

Hinata, naturally, also wanted to give her boyfriend a special goodbye.

"Good luck during your training, Naruto-kun," Hinata said. "Hopefully the war will be over before we need you to intervene."

"Yeah, let's hope," Naruto said.

The two of them kissed. However, during the kiss, a jolt of electricity shocked the blond. Naruto yelped and jumped back, holding his mouth in pain.

"Ouch! What the...? you shocked me!" Naruto protested.

"Hehe, sorry..." Hinata sheepishly said. "Takuya-san said that my powers have been growing lately. It seems I have some trouble keeping them under control. Guess you're not the only one who needs some training, are you?"

"Sorry to cut this moment short, but Naruto and Fu need to head to the port as soon as possible," Jiraiya said. "Sensei, given that you're the most veteran ninja of the group, you'll be the captain of this mission. Good luck."

"Don't worry, Jiraiya, Tsunade. Your son and Fu-san will be safe under my watch," Hiruzen promised then. "Everybody, let's go!"

The elderly Hokage leaped towards the trees, with the rest of the Konoha ninjas following him. Jiraiya and the others turned back and returned to the village, given that they soon would leave their home for a dangerous mission.

...

Mountain Graveyard

Given that Akatsuki was heading into the final phase of their plans, Obito had decided to make his secret base, formerly belonging to Madara, into his base of operations and headquarters for the war. Obito was now inside a cave that connected his lair to the exterior, in the middle of a mountain. Deidara, Kisame, Toneri and Black Zetsu were standing around him.

"Look at that. When we started, we were ten, and now only half of us remain," Kisame said, looking at the small group, before his gaze rested upon Obito again. "So, what's the plan, boss?"

"Despite our failure at invading Konoha, we still have the superior numbers. Ninety five thousand Zetsu clones, plus about two thousand puppets Toneri still has in the Moon," Obito looked at Toneri, who nodded in return. "According to the information provided by Zetsu, the Ninja Alliance managed to marshal a force of eighty thousand strong. They may bump those numbers to eighty five thousand if they manage to convince some of the minor villages to lend their forces."

"Still, numbers aren't everything," Toneri reminded. "Konoha has ninjas powerful enough to be worth dozens of your Zetsu clones, and it would be unwise not to assume the same of the other villages. We need to be cautious."

"Cautious? What we need to do is attack now! In war, whoever strikes first, strikes twice!" Deidara loudly interjected. "We should strike now while they're getting ready for us!"

"And I agree with you, Deidara," Obito said, much to the blond's satisfaction. "We shall start moving our troops as soon as possible. My plan is to focus our force on Konoha and Kumo. Given that the remaining jinchuriki are under their care, that's where they will be hiding. By concentrating our forces on those two villages, we will force them to come out and join the fight. Once in the open, catching them should be much easier."

"A bold plan, Obito-kun. Somebody would say it's a little too bold," a new voice said.

The five Akatsuki turned around, and saw Orochimaru casually strolling into the cave. Kimimaro and Tayuya were flanking him, acting as bodyguards. While every other Akatsuki got on guard - especially Kisame and Deidara-, Obito smiled, strangely enough.

"Orochimaru! So nice to see you drop by!" Obito said in a mock happy tone, spreading his arms around. "I was quite disappointed when Deidara and Kisame failed to kill you, but it was so *selfless* of you saving me the trouble of tracking you down again," Obito's smile disappeared, replaced by a scowl of anger. "Kill him."

The four other Akatsuki moved forward ready to attack. Kimimaro and Tayuya quickly placed themselves in front of their master, acting as human shields, while Orochimaru jumped backwards and made several hand seals. Hand seals both Deidara and Kisame recognized.

"Oh shit! Don't let him finish-" Deidara said, as he rushed to prepare an explosive.

Too late.

"Summoning Jutsu: Impure World Resurrection!"

Orochimaru slammed his hands into the ground, and five coffins emerged. Said coffins were marked with the kanji of each of the five elemental nations, and a number under them. Three twos, and two threes. The lids of the coffins fell forward, revealing the reanimated corpses of the second Tsuchikage and Second Mizukage that nearly killed Kisame and Deidara during their previous fight, plus the Third Kazekage, Third Raikage, and Second Hokage.

"Are you sure you wish to fight me?" Orochimaru asked, almost in a taunting tone. "Obito, you have nothing to win and *much* to lose."

"So, that's why he let Kisame and Deidara live despite having the chance to kill them. Either he or a spy working for him must have followed them to this place," Obito thought.

There was a moment of tense silence, as Obito weighed the question. Kisame and Deidara already told Obito about Orochimaru's reanimated puppets, and how it was impossible to kill them. He didn't know what the Sannin wanted, but given that he already declared the war, he couldn't afford to focus on him any longer. He knew for a fact that even if Orochimaru wasn't a friend, he would never help the Ninja Alliance.

Given that Truth Seeking Balls could nullify ninjutsu, he was confident Toneri could permanently kill those reanimations. Still, a fight right here could end with one or two Akatsuki dead, and he couldn't afford to lose more people before the war ever began. Still, before making his decision, there were a couple questions that needed answers.

"What do you want, traitor?" Obito asked. "You defected the organization, and now you come back to us. What the hell do you want?"

"Why don't we talk somewhere more private?" Orochimaru asked. "That pocket dimension of yours, perhaps?"

"So, you know of Kamui," Obito said. "Very well."

Obito closed the distance between him and his fellow Konoha traitor, grabbed Orochimaru, and teleported the two of them away.

...

The next second, both Obito and Orochimaru reappeared inside the Kamui dimension. Orochimaru took a few seconds to inspect it.

"So, this is it?" Orochimaru asked. "I must say, it's far more... underwhelming than I expected."

"Why did you ask me to bring you here?" Obito asked. "You know I could teleport back to the real world and leave you here to rot forever?"

Orochimaru merely chuckled. "Do you really think I'd ask you to bring me here if I didn't have a way out? I'm sure you know about how Reverse Summoning works."

"Of course," Obito said, rolling his eyes. "Come on, I have a war to win. Make your demands already."

"While I have no intention of returning to Akatsuki as a permanent member," Orochimaru began. "There's something I want. Something both sides of this conflict have. Something I need to possess in order to achieve my goal."

"The Rinnegan," Obito guessed. "Do you expect me to give you my Rinnegan? Really, Orochimaru?"

"Of course not. But it's not the only Rinnegan out there, is it?" Orochimaru asked. "Konoha managed to keep the other. According to my spies, Tsunade-hime wields it now."

"I'm aware of that as well. So, you want Tsunade's Rinnegan. But you can't take it on your own," Obito continued to guess. "Not even with your army of immortal zombies?"

"My plan was for Danzo to get the Rinnegan for me. I'll keep one, he would keep the other," Orochimaru said. "Imagine my surprise when I found that Danzo was, and has always been, a puppet of yours all these years. A masterful move indeed, Obito-kun. I admit I underestimated you."

"So, that's why you defected the organization. Once you got what you wanted, we were of no more use to you anymore," Obito said in disgust. "Still, you haven't answered my question."

"Regrettably, no, I can't do it alone. I already tried it before in the past, yet Konoha somehow found a way to neutralize my reanimations," Orochimaru said, his eyes narrowing, angered by the memory. "But if we join our forces, both our chances will be better. Let's join forces, Obito-kun. With my army of undead supporting your White Zetsu army, the Ninja Alliance will be crushed. I will get Tsunade's Rinnegan, and you'll get the last three Tailed Beasts."

"Do you think I'm going to trust you with a Rinnegan?" Obito asked.

"Why not? Once you form the Ten Tails and absorb it inside your body, I shouldn't be a threat to you anymore, Rinnegan or not," Orochimaru said with a shrug. "You can then create that new world without war and conflict you wish so much. I will simply spend the rest of my years in quiet solitude, continuing my research. Both of us win."

Regardless of how much he despised the Sannin, he had to admit it was an enticing offer. An immortal army composed of the strongest ninjas that ever lived... yes, that would give him the additional push he needed to crush his enemies.

"I already saw those five Kages. What else do you have?" Obito asked.

"Heads of the strongest clans of all the Elemental Nations. Legendary ninjas. Former jinchuriki," Orochimaru began. "And if you bring me new samples of DNA, I can create more."

"Sounds promising," Obito said with a nod. "One last thing. Do you have anybody disposable? Somebody you resurrected by accident, or who didn't meet your expectations?"

"Quite a lot. Why?" Orochimaru asked. He didn't know why Obito was interested in his failed reanimations, something that made him uneasy.

"Summon one of those now, please," Obito asked.

Not sure why, Orochimaru complied. Even if he was worried, he was also curious as to what Obito wanted to do. Another coffin appeared between the two of them, revealed a young Iwa ninja.

"Huh? Where am I? What is this place?" the disoriented ninja asked.

Wordlessly, Obito placed a hand on the reanimation's head.

"Ningendo!"

Then, much to Orochimaru's shock, Obito ripped the soul out of the zombie's body. The soul quickly vanished, returning to the afterlife, while the body left behind crumbled into dust and ashes covering the sacrifice used to create it.

"It doesn't regenerate. Good," Obito said, smirking at Orochimaru, who didn't smile back. "Glad to see that, if you try to do something funny, I have the means to stop your army. Also, given that Tsunade has the same power as I do now, I'd avoid sending your reanimations against her, or their fate will be the same."

"Hn, guess my position isn't as strong as I initially believed," Orochimaru was forced to admit. "So, now that you proved you have nothing to fear from me, do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal," Obito confirmed. "However, there's one more thing I want from you."

...

A few minutes later, in the real world, both Orochimaru and Obito returned from Obito's Kamui dimension through a spiraling portal. The two of them appeared satisfied.

"Guys, I know that Orochimaru abandoned us in the past, but we're going to let him help us in this endeavor," Obito announced.

Kisame chuckled, while Toneri raised an eyebrow. Deidara, however, was louder than the other two.

"Did you lose your fucking mind!?" Deidara shouted. "So, this guy leaves-"

"Silence!" Obito shouted back, forcing the Iwa ninja to keep quiet. "There are circumstances that forced me to accept this kind of agreement. Also, before we begin the war, one more thing: we are going to seal our half of the Nine Tails."

"What?" Zetsu asked, perpelexed. "Aren't we going to use it?"

"I thought that we have to have the other eight Beasts first before we could seal that one," Toneri said.

"If it's just half, then there's no danger," Obito told them. "Now enough blabbering. It's time to get to work!"

Author's Note: We add the Sand Siblings to the list of Senjutsu users because like I said before, all three of them fit the requirements. And because they're fucking awesome and deserve better than what they got in canon.

And as I'm sure a lot of you expected, Orochimaru rejoins Akatsuki, even if it's more an alliance of convenience than proper membership as it has been before. I'm sorry for those of you who expected him to remain independent, but I can't have a Ninja War with White Zetsu clones alone. Without the Edo Tensei zombies, it would be unbelievably dull. And speaking of which, I do plan to take advantage of this jutsu more than Kishimoto did. There are quite a few deceased ninjas that Kishimoto never thought about brining back, despite having a lot of potential for epic and emotional fights, like Sakumo Hatake, Mito Uzumaki or Fugaku Uchiha.

Also, why did Obito want to seal their half of the Nine Tails, instead of using it like he has been done so far? Don't worry, you'll see why in due time.

Next chapter, Naruto and Fu will arrive at the Turtle Island to begin their training under Killer B. I have something special prepared that I'm sure all of you are going to enjoy. And thankfully, this time around the Kumo ninjas didn't have to save B from an Akatsuki about to capture him. And once the hard part of the training is done, the proper war will finally commence.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, what did you think about this chapter? Did you enjoy it? Hated it? Neither? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Genbu the Turtle Island

Author's Note: Okay, a lot of people have been asking for quite a long time, so here it is. With this chapter, Naruto's training to master Kurama's power finally begins. I know a lot of you wanted this to happen much sooner, but I don't want to make Naruto so powerful I have trouble coming up with conflicts he can't solve instantly. I already regretted giving him Sage Mode so soon, and I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

Enjoy:

Chapter 96:

Genbu the Turtle Island

or

Not really a vacation

Hyuga Estate

"Okay, here we go. You ready?"

"Yeah, let's get on with it."

"I should warn you that this might hurt. Like... a lot."

"I know, I know! Come on, let's start already."

"If the pain becomes too much, tell me and I-"

"Goddamit girl, do you ever shut up!?"

"R-Right, sorry. I'll get started immediately. Truth Seeking Ball!"

Inside a room of the Hyuga Compound were two women: Anko Mitarashi, lying on her belly on a bed, wearing nothing from her waist up, and Hinata Hyuga, sitting besides her, having just created a Truth Seeking Ball.

After word that Hinata had used her new powers to remove the what most people thought unremovable Caged Bird Seal, the Hyuga Clan head got a visit from Anko, who asked if she could do whatever she did to the Branch House members in order to remove the cursed seal Orochimaru marked her with so many years ago. While Hinata was a busy woman, she was able to make some time for such an important request.

"Okay, here we go," Hinata said.

The blue haired girl slowly lowered the Truth Seeking Ball towards the cursed seal on the base of Anko's neck. Even if it was in a less dangerous zone than the Caged Bird Seal, and it wasn't linked to the brain, the neck was a delicate zone as well. Finally, the Truth Seeking Ball made contact with Anko's skin, and the orb started to erase the seal. There was a hissing sound that was quickly silenced by Anko's screams.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHHHHH!"

On top of the screams, Anko started to trash wildly in place. Hinata was startled, almost fell from her chair as she quickly removed the black orb from Anko's body.

"Sorry, sorry!" Hinata quickly apologized.

"Why... why did you stop, girl?" Anko asked, as she tried to regain her bearings.

"You... you looked to be in a lot of pain... and you started to move a lot..." Hinata replied.

"Yes, I admit it hurt like hell," Anko said, rubbing the marked spot. "Did it hurt that much with the other seal?"

"A little, but not as much as you say," Hinata said. "Though, I can see that this seal is different. The Caged Bird Seal felt inert, and this one... it feels like it's alive. Like it was trying to fight me, and wanted to preserve its existence at all costs. Like a cornered animal."

"Yeah, that's because this seal has a portion of Orochimaru's chakra and will," Anko explained. "As long as this seal exists, I'm linked to him. It has a mind of its own, and if I drop my guard, it will try to take over me."

"That's... horrible," Hinata said, covering her mouth with her hands. "Why didn't you come to me sooner, so I could take it away?"

"I DID come sooner!" Anko replied. "But you were always busy! Enough talking, come on, let's do it again!"

"Alright. But first, let me take some precautions. Lay still," Hinata said. When Anko was completely immobile, Hinata delivered a series of finger strikes at several points of Anko's body, near the arms and the legs.

"OW! What the hell was that for!?" an indignant Anko asked. "Hey, what the fuck? I can't move!"

"Sorry, but I needed to make sure you don't trash again like before. Not even unwittingly," Hinata then placed a pillow under Anko's head. "If the pain becomes too unbearable, bite this."

Once again, Hinata lowered the Truth Seeking Ball, and the moment it touched the seal, it began all over again. Anko started to scream, though this time she bit into the pillow. Hinata continued to work on the seal, who was fighting to stay alive. Black markings started to spread around Anko as it tried to use her own chakra to sustain itself. However, the speed Hinata erased it was faster than the speed

it regenerated itself. Eventually, the original mark disappeared, and with it, the black markings around Anko's body.

Despite only taking a couple minutes, it felt like much longer, especially for Anko, who in her twenty seven years of life never underwent such an intense physical pain. Not even when she was training for Torture & Interrogation. There was a reddened spot of burnt skin where the seal once was, a spot that Hinata quickly healed with the Mystic Palm Jutsu. She also removed the pillow from under Anko's face, which had been tattered to shreds. Lastly, Anko felt four more quick stabs of pain, before she regained the mobility on her arms and legs.

"It is done," Hinata announced. "How do you feel?"

"Oh my god, it's gone... it's really gone!" Anko said, as she sat up, and instinctively touched her neck. "I can't sense his presence anymore!"

"I'm glad I could be of help- EEP!"

"You're my hero, girl!" Anko shouted, as she pulled Hinata into a bone crushing hug. "Whatever you want in return, you only need to ask!"

That moment, the door of the room opened, revealing a Hyuga man with a look between worried and ready to fight.

"I heard screams! Hinata-sama, are you-WHOA!" the Hyuga said, blushing furiously.

Because when Anko hugged Hinata, she was still naked from the waist up, making the scene look far more suggestive than it was in reality.

"Get lost, dumbass! Don't you guys ever knock!?" the snake mistress hissed.

The Hyuga silently left before closing the door, while Hinata, still blushing, wordlessly handed Anko her mesh shirt, which the Snake Mistress took and put it on, much to the bluenette's relief.

"It was a pleasure helping you, Anko. I wish I could have done it earlier," Hinata said again. "If you want anything else, you only need to ask."

Anko was about to say that it's okay and what she did was more than enough for a single lifetime, but that was before an idea dawned upon her.

"Um, I feel kind of bad asking you something so soon, but you could also help me with something else," Anko said, sounding a little unease.

"If it's within my power, I shall do my best," Hinata said, smiling reassuringly.

"Well, you see..."

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Sea to the west of the Continent

"Land ho!" one of the ninjas yelled.

Naruto and Fu, who were casually chatting with each other at the ship's deck, quickly rushed to the handrail at the edge of the ship in order to check if it was true. And, indeed, they could see the small shape of an island in the horizon, slowly growing as the ship approached.

"Man, finally!" Naruto said in exasperation. "We've been on this ship for weeks! I want to start my training already!"

"Yeah, me too!" Fu agreed. "Especially since they didn't even let us train in the ship. What a bunch of party poopers."

"We didn't let you train in the ship, because if you did there would be no ship," a third voice said. Naruto and Fu turned their heads towards the newcomer, the Third Hokage, who walked towards them. Hiruzen was wearing a black and grey battle gear, helmet included. It was quite an odd sight, given that, like most people, Naruto and Fu were used seeing him wearing his usual loose white robes. "And weeks? We've only been at sea for three days."

"Just three? They felt like months to me," Naruto groaned. However, he smiled once the island started to become more visible.

Even if the journey wasn't that long, there wasn't many things to do aboard. The only training they could do was Senjutsu, and even that became old really fast. And even if they did have each other to make themselves company, they did miss their other friends and significant others.

Fu deployed her wings as she hopped onto the railway. "I want to see the island now!"

However, Hiruzen grabbed her by the arm, and forced her to step down -the old Hokage also thanked the gods above for not making the girl fly with him grabbing her-. "Don't get separated from the group, young Fu. Stay with each other at all times."

This time, it was Fu who groaned and rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, gramps. Of the bunch we got saddled with, you're the least fun of all."

Hiruzen sighed in return. *"So I wouldn't be a glorified babysitter, would I, Jiraiya?"* the old Hokage thought in exasperation. *"Might as well stayed of Konoha. If I had to take care of a couple of impatient kids, at least they could be my grandkids. And my grandkids don't have the power of a Kage."*

Hiruzen gathered the rest of the escort team, Yugao, Hayate, Choza and Tenzo, just as the ship docked at a small port, where they were greeted by a group of Kumo ninjas. Their apparent leader was a man

with spiky brown hair, small eyes, and a green mark running down the bridge of his nose.

"Welcome, Konoha ninjas, to Genbu island!" the Kumo ninja said. "My name is Motoi, and I'm in charge of the ninjas that protect and take care of this place."

Being the group leader, Sarutobi took a step forward. "Greeting, Motoi-san. My name is Hiruzen Sarutobi. My companions are Hayate Gekko, Yugao Uzuki, Choza Akimichi, and Tenzo," he then motioned to Naruto and Fu. "And these two youngsters are Naruto Uzumaki and Fu. They're the jinchuriki that came here for training."

"I see. Yeah, we received a message from Raikage-sama. Fortunately, Killer B-san arrived the day before you did, meaning that you can start your training immediately."

"Awesome!" both Naruto and Fu cheered in unison, as they shared a high five (which caused Naruto to nurse his hand in pain, since Fu didn't measure her strength).

"This island is the home to many large and potentially dangerous animals. But if you follow the established paths and don't bother them, they should leave you in peace," Motoi warned them.

The next moment, Fu felt a lot of eyes staring at her. "What? Why are you looking at me? It's not that-" Fu was interrupted when several massive butterflies flew above her. "OH MY GOD, LOOK AT THE SIZE OF THOSE BUTTERFLIES! I have to see them closer!"

Even if she had deployed her wings, both Choza and Hayate grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to remain groundbound.

"Come on girl! What did Hokage-sama told you about not flying on your own?" Choza asked, as he struggled against the muscular girl.

Eventually, Fu gave up, and crossed her arms in annoyance. "Party pooper..."

"That girl is quite an excitable one, isn't she?" Motoi said with a chuckle.

"You have no idea," Tenzo said, letting out a weary sigh.

"I think she drove the ship's entire crew crazy.," Yugao added.

"Don't worry. She will put all that young energy to good use once the training begins. Anyway, let's get going, time is of essence, or so I was told," Motoi said, as he turned around, and started to walk into the jungle. The Konoha and Kumo ninjas started to follow his lead as well. "Killer B-san is now resting at his house on the island. We'll take you to him."

The large group trekked through the lush jungle that covered most of the island. Fortunately, there were clear pathways that could be use for easy traversing, no doubt man made. On top of the large trees and mushrooms -that reminded Naruto of Mount Myoboku- there were also extremely large animals. The butterflies that they saw before it was only a prelude of what they would see, as there were many giant lizards, frogs, parrots, toucans, sloths, and even tigers and gorillas.

"Wth animals of that size, at least we won't risk dying of starvation if we have to stay here for long, hehe," Choza quipped.

However, the fact that none of the animals seemed perturbed by the newcomers must mean that they must be used to the humans' presence.

"So," Tenzo began, as he walked besides Motoi. "Is this place safe for Naruto and Fu? I'm talking about external threats."

"Trust me, there's no way Akatsuki will find this place," Motoi confidently assured the Wood Release user. "This is Kumo's safest place so far."

"How can you be so sure?" Hiruzen interjected, catching wind of the conversation. "Akatsuki has proved in the past to be extremely effective at finding jinchuriki."

"Because Genbu isn't a normal island, but a massive turtle," Motoi said, much to the two Konoha ninjas' shock. "Every day we move Genbu to a different location to avoid detection. And that before considering that the enemy doesn't even know such creature exists."

"If you guys had such a safe place from the very beginning, why didn't you send your jinchuriki here?" Hiruzen asked.

"Well, Killer B doesn't take kindly to being confined to a single place, so we need to watch him constantly," Motoi explained. "This place has plenty of spots that Killer B could use to fool us, and then escape into the mainland. That's why the Valley of Cloud and Lightning was deemed a better place to keep B there."

"And aren't you afraid that B might try to leave again?" Hiruzen asked.

"I find that unlikely, not after the massive dressing down Raikage-sama gave him," Motou said, chuckling a little. "Ah, I wish I was there to see it."

As the Third Hokage and Tenzo talked with Motoi, Naruto and Fu admired the massive and untamed fauna and flora surrounding them. More specifically, Fu was watching the gigantic ladybugs, beetles, dragonflies and other large insects that flew around them.

"Boy, Shino would love this place," Fu stated, as he tried to imagine her boyfriend's reaction to seeing such huge insects. "When this is over, I think I'm going to bring him here."

"I don't think they'll let you," Hayate interceded, before coughing a couple times. "From what we've been told, this is some sort of super secret base, and the fact that they let us in is due exceptional circumstances."

"Aw, poop. Why is that when I find such an amazing place, I won't be able to return or show it to my friends?" Fu childishly whined.

"We do have places like this in Konoha," Yugao, who had been listening to the conversation, decided to chime in. "The Forest of Death, for example."

"The Forest of Death?" Naruto asked, joining the conversation as well. "Where is that?"

"You've never been in the Forest of Death?" Hayate asked. "Not even during the Chunin Exams?"

"Honey, they didn't use the Forest of Death for the exams the year Haku-kun's team took the exam here, remember?" Yugao reminded her husband. "Since Zabuza was the proctor, he choose the Ship Graveyard for the second task."

"Ah, yes, I do remember now. It was quite the deviation from the usual," Hayate said, before coughing again. He then turned at Naruto and Fu. "Anyway, to answer your question, the Forest of Death is Konoha's most dangerous training ground. Is a large and lush forest isolated by metallic fences. The forest's fauna include many giant animals, such as insects, leeches, bears, wolves, snakes, and other predatory beasts," Hayate had to stop due another coughing fit.

Her wife noticed that, while he listed the animals living there, Naruto seemed to grow more and more uneasy, while Fu's eyes and smile grew each second. The purplette decided to continue the explanation. "It's only safe haven is a single stone tower in the middle. Usually, ANBU and Jonin use that place to train for dangerous missions and hone their survivalist skills, though there are many times when it's used as the staging grounds of the second stage of the Chunin Exams."

"Now I wish our Chunin Exams took place there," Fu said, as she beamed when an idea dawned upon her. "Oh! Oh! I know where I'm

going to take Shino for our next date!"

"The Chunin Exams? Isn't that too dangerous for mere Genin?" Naruto asked. "I mean, you yourself said it's a training ground for ANBU and Jonin."

"Perhaps, but it's a good way to show who's ready for the rank and who isn't," Yugao replied. "The fact that there are Genin able to overcome the trials the forest throws at them is enough proof of it."

"And even then, we have many experienced ninjas watching the zone when there are Genin to make sure that none of them die to the training ground," Hayate assured Naruto. "The only deaths are those caused by ninjas fighting each other."

Naruto felt thankful that, as far as he knew, nobody died during his Chunin Exams. He was aware that being a ninja meant killing and seeing your friends die -and while Naruto hadn't killed anybody yet, he had seen quite some people dying, or being sent to their deaths-, but felt that that was going to far for a mere exam. Still, his thoughts were snapped when he heard Motoi say something that drew his interest.

"Oh, look at that, we're almost there," the Kumo jonin stated.

The large group found themselves in front of a very strange looking house. It was made of what appeared to be dark red dried mud, and was split in three sections, the middle one being half as tall as the two towers to the sides. On top of the front door was the head of an ox with one of its horns severed.

Motoi took step forward, and knocked the door a few times.

"Killer B-san, come out! The other jinchuriki are here!" Motoi said.

They didn't have to wait much before the door opened, revealed the famed jinchuriki of the Eight Tails, Killer B himself. The moment he

did, Naruto and Fu felt something inside them shift. The kind of feeling they experienced when another jinchuriki was near them.

Needless to say, Killer B also sensed the other two Tailed Beasts inside the two youths. Without needing to ask, the Kumo jinchuriki walked towards the blond and the green haired girl, and scanned them with a critical eye. Or they thought it was critical, it was hard to tell with him wearing those shades all the time.

"So, you guys are the last two jinchuriki? Can't say I'm impressed. I don't think you can withstand the training, you might end up stressed," Killer B rapped, even if his tone was surprisingly solemn. "Now, you know you're in front of the great Killer B, but I don't know who you are, so start with introductions, don't you agree?"

"Uh yeah," Naruto uneasily said. "I'm Naruto Uzumaki, and I'd be honored if you trained me, oh great Killer B-sensei?"

Killer B looked at Naruto with a disapproving look, shaking his head. "Wow kid, that was so boring! It's a miracle I'm not snoring! I liked the flattering, you know, but that's not good enough, you're too slow!"

"W... what?" Naruto asked, flabbergasted. "What the hell was that? Are you going to train me or-"

"Quiet!" the eccentric Kumo ninja said, before turning at Fu. It was weird for the Taki ninja to be near somebody she didn't tower over. "Now let's hear you, girly, let's hope you don't make me anymore surly."

Fu cleared her throat, before adopting what appeared to be a dancing stance. "My name is Fu, old man, try to keep up with me if you can! Taki was my home, but it got wrecked, yet I have many friends I seek to protect! So you better teach me how to tame my beast, or next time instead of my mouth I'll convince you with my fists!"

There was a moment of deafening silence after she finished her impromptu rap session. Naruto leaned towards her.

"What the hell are you doing?" he whispered into her ear.

"I'm trying to communicate in his native dialect," Fu whispered back. "It's a bit hard to understand him, but I believe this is some kind of test."

Then, much to everybody's surprise, Killer B nodded and smiled. "You get it, girl, you're on a roll! Your rhymes may need some work, but they do have soul!"

"Yay!" Fu cheered, pumping her fist.

"However, you also need to learn how to properly greet. Extend your fist, let our thoughts meet," Killer B said, extending his fist at Fu.

Fu did so, and suddenly, a wave of foreign emotions washed upon her, as if their chakra had been connected. She deduced the link of the Tailed Beasts had to do with it.

"Just like I guessed, you're a pretty swell girl, your chakra and your heart shine like pearls!" B finally broke contact, and extended his fist at Naruto. "Now you, boy."

Unsure, Naruto did so, and once again, he experienced a brief but intense connection to the bizarre jinchuriki, and for that moment, he didn't look so bizarre anymore. Unlike the previous assessment, Killer B nodded and smiled. "Alright boy, your greetings may suck, but your heart doesn't lie! You will reach high, today's your day of luck!"

"So... does that mean that you'll train us?" Naruto asked.

"Indeed. Alright, enough chitchat, time to train, let's head to the waterfalls, don't make me say it again!"

Meanwhile, the stunned Konoha ninjas watched the display, not understanding what was going on.

"Uh... what did just happen?" Hayate asked.

"Don't worry, Killer B-san has agreed to train the jinchuriki," Motoi reassured them. "Now, we need to go where all jinchuriki begin their training: at the Waterfall of Truth."

...

Konoha

Meanwhile, back at the village, while the Hokage and the rest of the higher echelons prepared for war, the lower ranked ninjas decided to spend the few days they would have before all hell let loose and the Fourth Ninja War began. Some of those ninjas were the kunoichi of the group unofficially known as the "Konoha 15", formed by the teams that graduated from Naruto and Hinata's class, plus Gai's Close Combat Squad. Later additions to that group were Rin Nohara and Fu, though the latter wasn't there at the moment. And then, another addition in the form of Yakumo Kurama, whom, per Kurenai's request, was introduced to the group by Hinata.

Yakumo already got used to Hinata during the time they spent in the hot springs -Hinata was a very approachable person after all-, but it would take some time for the rest of the girls to warm up to her. Rin and Ino were the most receptive -especially the latter, given that she's also close to an ex-Root agent- though sadly the same couldn't be said of Sakura, Karin, Tenten and Tamaki.

So far, seven of the eight kunoichi had been gathered, with only one missing.

"Where is Hinata?" Sakura asked, looking around. "She's usually the first one to arrive."

"Yeah, it's not normal for her to be late," Karin agreed.

"Hey, cut her some slack," Ino defended her absent friend. "Maybe she got caught up with some clan stuff. I became Clan Head myself recently, and trust me, you have no idea of how much extra work you need to do in order to manage the clan."

"You don't need to rub in our faces how important you and Hinata are now, Ino," Tenten said, rolling her eyes. "Should we be thankful that you find time to spend with us lowly clanless girls?"

"Come on, don't twist my words like that," Ino protested. "You know I don't mean-"

"Hey, look, Hinata is here," Rin said, interrupting the nascent discussion before it could become more heated. "And she isn't alone?"

"What?" Sakura asked. "Did she bring somebody else?"

The "so soon after Yakumo" was left unsaid, but everybody could hear it.

And, indeed, Hinata wasn't alone. Walking besides her was a pale skinned girl with long black hair, tied at the end with a pink ribbon, wearing a dark green tanktop and loose blue cargo pants.

"Who's that girl?" Sakura asked, narrowing her eyes in order to see the approaching figure better.

"Hey, I think I know her," Tamaki said. "Isn't she part of Anko-sensei's squad? You know, the one made by former Otogakure ninjas? They were with us at the hot springs."

"Really? I didn't notice them?" Tenten pointed out.

"Maybe because there were so much people, and they didn't stand out much," Tamaki said with a shrug. "But that's definitely her."

"I believe so," Karin said. And frowned. "And why did Hinata is bringing her here? Without asking us first?"

"These Clan Heads think they can do whatever they want..." Tenten said.

"Don't begin again!" Ino protested. "Maybe she wants her to have some friends. Honestly, I find that commendable. Besides, from what I heard, they've been helping a lot with the Akatsuki threat, so the least we could do is giving them a chance, don't you think?"

"Heh, that means I'm no longer the only new one to this group. Nice," Yakumo said, smiling a little.

Just that moment, Hinata arrived.

"Hello, girls," Hinata greeted. She decided it was better to address the elephant in the room as far as possible. "I'm sure you know her already, but this is Kin Tsuchi, one of Anko-sensei's students."

"Hi," the former Oto kunoichi said, not daring to make eye contact with any of the Konoha girls.

"I ran into her on my way here, and asked her to join us," Hinata explained, even if she knew it was a lie. It would be too humiliating for the black haired girl to learn that her sensei arranged such a meeting for her to have more friends. With Yakumo it was different, given her trauma, but in Kin's case, it would feel like too much. "I'm sorry for not telling you before, but I thought it would be a good experience for both her and us."

"No worries. Guess that what's done is done," Sakura said, as she and the rest of the girls started to walk towards the village downtown. "Anyway, today's Karin's choice of restaurant, meaning that we'll be eating at that Okonomiyaki place again, right?"

"You got a problem with that?" Karin defensively fired back. "At least it's more refined than your dumplings!"

"Ugh, no more dumplings!" Kin suddenly said.

Karin looked at her a little startled, before she smiled.

"See? She knows what I'm talking about," Karin said with a nod.

"You don't like dumplings, Kin-san?" Hinata asked.

"I used to, but after Anko-sensei took us to eat dumplings so many times..." Kin said, shuddering a little. "In the end we got sick of them. Of course, none of us had the courage to tell her, so we have to endure and pretend it's our favorite food as well."

"Anko-san sounds like a tough teacher," Rin said. "Then again, it shouldn't be surprising. That girl always had a lot of energy and spunk."

"Eh, I'm sure that, regardless of her reputation, she can't be any worse than Gai-sensei," Tenten interjected. "If you knew the kind of insane training exercises he makes us to do..."

"Does he send giant snakes after you?" Kin asked, narrowing her eyes at the brown haired girl, who flinched. "Yeah, I thought so."

"Giant snakes? Like, seriously?" Tamaki asked, just as surprised.

"And the Forest of Death is her favorite training ground," Kin continued. "A month before the Chunin Exams at Suna, she dropped us in the middle of the Forest of Death, and told us that we needed to survive for two weeks there, and that if we did, we would be ready for the exams."

"Yikes," Ino replied. "I don't think I'm going to complain about Asuma-sensei's training again..."

"I can relate to that," Yakumo intervened. "Danzo's training was also brutal. Though even if he helped me control my Bloodline Limit, I can tell he wasn't doing it out of the goodness of his heart."

"Danzo... I remember that name mentioned quite a few times when I was in Oto," Kin said, recalling past events. "So, he was your

sensei?"

"I wouldn't call him that," Yakumo corrected. "Let's say he was a man who wanted to have his own army of drones loyal to him rather than to the Hokage"

"He couldn't be a decent person if Orochimaru was allied with him," Kin concluded.

"And what happened then? Did you pass the Chunin Exams?" Rin asked, putting the conversation back in track.

"... yes," Kin admitted, almost reluctant to give her sadistic teacher credit. "We had such a hard time there, that the exam in comparison felt easy. We breezed through all the tests like they were nothing, and the three of us got a promotion."

"Anko-sensei might be a harsh teacher, but given your testimony, it's obvious that her methods do work," Hinata conceded. "I remember that you used to work under Mizuki when you were Oto ninjas. Is Anko-sensei better than him?"

"As rare as it sounds... she is," Kin admitted once again. "Anko-sensei is like, super-sadistic. She will sic several giant snakes at us while laughing and cracking jokes about how we're going to be eaten... yet at the same time she seems to care about us. Every day we always learn something new with her, and over the months her training didn't feel so rough."

"Because you got used to it," Tenten pointed out. "It was the same with Gai-sensei. Running several laps around the village with weights was like torture at first," Sakura and Hinata, going through the same training even if only temporarily, nodded empathically. "Yet it becomes a little easier every day, and in the end you're surprised that you used to struggle to begin with."

"That signifies that you're getting stronger," Ino added.

"Exactly," Kin admitted once again. "Mizuki was nowhere near as harsh as Anko yet... I don't think we got very strong under him. I didn't see it at the time, but now I realize that he treated us more like his minions rather than his students."

"Had he given you proper training, I wouldn't have been able to beat all three of you by myself," Hinata added.

"Lee told me about how he defeated Mizuki," Tenten stated. "He confessed that the reason behind his defection from Konoha and theft of the Forbidden Scroll was that he felt that he wasn't becoming as strong as he wished and blamed the village for keeping him down. Given his ego, I believe the guy was afraid that you would end up surpassing him."

"There's one thing clear: the fact that Mizuki got beaten by a Genin that couldn't even use ninjutsu shows that he didn't become much stronger under Orochimaru either, even with a cursed seal," Kin said, before looking at Tenten. "No offense to your teammate."

"None taken. And to be fair, Mizuki wouldn't be the first one to underestimate Lee," Tenten replied. "It's amazing how far one can go with taijutsu alone."

The conversation continued until they reached the restaurant in question. Karin's favorite, where she and Neji had their first date.

"Hey, I was thinking," Ino began, as she looked at Kin. "Given that Yakumo and Kin are new, they should treat all of us today. You know, as her 'initiation' into the group."

"WHAT?" Kin asked, outraged. "You're only going to let me hang out with you if I pay for your food!?"

"Uh..." Yakumo uneasily checked her coin purse. "I don't think I have enough money to-"

"Come on Ino, don't be so cruel!" Sakura shouted, interrupting Yakumo, who was a little startled.

"Yes, that's not a very nice thing to do," Hinata added, nodding as well.

"Plus, we didn't even make anybody else do that either!" Tamaki said.

"Kidding, kidding!" Ino said, raising her hands defensively. "It was just a joke, don't kill me! I know we're a lot of people for just two girls to treat all of us. In fact, I was thinking that we could be the ones treating Kin and Yakumo to something nice. You know, as a way to welcome them into the group?"

"That sounds like a better idea," Rin agreed.

"Plus with how many of us are, we won't have to pay much each!" Ino happily chimed, which earned her a few unamused glares, but nobody said anything.

Eventually, the girls sat on a large table, ordered their food, and started to eat. In silence at first, but it didn't take long until somebody struck up a conversation.

"Say, Hinata, Ino," Sakura began. "You were in that meeting with the Hokage and the other Clan Heads. What did you talk about?"

"Or is it something you can't tell us without killing us later?" Karin added.

"Oh, it's nothing you should be too worried about," Ino told them. "Hokage-sama told us about the agreement with the other villages, the war, and preparations."

"The army is going to be split on multiple divisions, some of support and the others being battalions. We spent most of the meeting discussing which ninjas should be on which divisions," Hinata

explained. Her eyes rested on Sakura and Karin. "For example, you two, as well as Rin-san, will be in the Support Medical Division."

"Kind of expected," Sakura admitted.

"Though, you might be temporarily assigned to one of the five battalions if need arises," Hinata punctualized. "Hokage-sama needs to discuss with the other Kages who are going to be the commanders of each division, but the Medical Division will more than likely be under Tsunade-sama's lead."

"What about the rest of us?" Tamaki asked, visibly interested.

"You and the rest of your team have been placed on the Fifth Division," Hinata told the cat kunoichi. She then looked at Tenten. "And your team is on the Second Division."

"Hinata will be in the Third Division, while I'll be in the First," Ino continued. "Yakumo is going to be part of the Fourth Division."

"Wait, Yakumo is going to fight as well?" Karin asked, before looking at the brown haired girl. "No offense. It's not that I think you're weak or anything. But after the whole ordeal with Danzo..."

"That's precisely why I need to fight this war," Yakumo interceded. "If it wasn't for me, Danzo would have never been able to steal the Rinnegan. And if that didn't happen, Obito wouldn't have gotten his hands on it. I can't just stay here and not help fix a mess I helped to create."

"Nobody blames you for that, Yakumo-san," Hinata replied. "We're aware you didn't have a choice in your role as Danzo's agent."

"Even if that wasn't the case, the stakes are way too high for me not to help in any way I can," Yakumo insisted.

"What about me?" Kin asked. "Where I'm going to be assigned?"

"Ah, yeah. Sorry, I forgot about you," Ino said, half apologizing. "I don't remember your name-"

"Kin," the former Oto kunoichi said, almost in a growl.

"-but I do remember Anko being assigned to the Third Division, so you and your teammates will accompany her."

"That means that we'll fight together, Kin-san," Hinata said with a friendly smile.

"If anything, I know I'll be safe as long as I stick close to you," Kin deadpanned, as she continued eating her food.

"Man, I'm the only one here on the Fifth Division," Tamaki complained, as she chew her food slowly. "I wish I got to be with any of you guys."

"Sorry. The consensus between the Kages was to make all divisions as balanced as possible, so all of them could stand on their feet," Hinata explained Tamaki. "At the very least, you will be with your sensei and teammates."

"Where is Sasuke-kun assigned?" Sakura asked. She noticed that she and Karin were on the Medical Division, but there was no mention of the Medical Squad's only male member.

"Sasuke-san is on the Second Division, alongside his older brother," Hinata answered.

Sakura looked visibly dejected. "Guess we'll have to trust ninjas from foreign villages to cover our backs. We're allies with Suna and Kiri, but even if I have worked with Kumo ninjas, I still can't bring myself to trust them immediately. And that goes double for Iwa ninjas."

The rest of the girls agreed energetically. The rest except Kin.

"Well, now you'll understand a little of what I felt during my first months in Konoha," Kin interjected.

Six pair of eyes turned at her, with varying shades of incredulity.

"Sure, I know getting used to another village is a bit hard at first, but it couldn't be that bad, right?" Ino asked, a bit incredulous. "Konoha is a very welcoming place."

"Eventually, I did learn to see it that way," Kin said, as a scowl developed on her face. "But it took me some time to reach there."

"Come on, it couldn't have been THAT bad," Tamaki interceded. "Fu also came to live here from Taki, and while she misses her home, she adapted to us almost perfectly."

"In that case, let me share with you something about myself so you can understand my point of view better," Kin began, her tone cold as ice. "Imagine that you're a girl who is born in the slums of the capital of the Land of Fire. Your family doesn't earn much, but you get by. Then, one day your father gets murdered on his way back home from work for a few bills. This forces your mom to take a second job, since her actual job just doesn't cut it, and she has a little girl to feed. Then, your mom is so overworked, she literally dies of exhaustion, leaving you alone."

The mood turned much darker. Nobody dared to say a word. Some of the girls, like Ino or Rin, placed their hands over their mouths in horror. Still, nobody dares to interrupt the story.

"For many months, you're forced to steal and dig in the trash just to have something to eat," Kin continued. "But you aren't a very good thief, so you're caught many times, and find yourself at the receiving end of many beatings from uncaring adults. You even start to wonder doing prostitution for a living."

This drew a collective gasp from the rest of the group. Still, Kin wasn't done.

"Then, one day, after stealing a loaf of bread and evading pursuers, you're found by a man. A creepy looking man with unnerving eyes,

but he doesn't look at you as if you were the scum of the earth. 'You have a lot of talent, girl. Have you ever thought in being a ninja? Join me, and I'll train you to bring out your potential. All I ask is for your loyalty', he says.

"With nothing to lose, you follow that man, and your training begins. It's rough and harsh, and the drill sergeant is merciless and prone to use physical violence, but you eat three times a day and sleep on a bed. During your stay there, you also learn who are your enemies you must beat. You heard a name more than any others: 'Konoha'. This is the place where the enemy lives. If a ninja from Konoha sees you, they will try to kill you without question. Konoha is an elitist village ruled by old aristocratic clans that don't give a damn about the common man, and want to expand their wealth and power at the expense of everybody else."

"Hey, that's not true!" Ino protested. "I know Konoha isn't perfect, but-"

"I know that," Kin replied, glaring at the blonde. "Now I know that Orochimaru didn't care about me in the slightest and would discard me and the others the moment I was no longer useful. But Orochimaru gave me a chance when nobody else did. He saved me from a fate worse than death. And then, after failing him, I'm captured, brought to the village I was taught was the enemy, and told me that I either join their ranks or rot in a cell. Dosu convinced us to take the Hokage's offer, and I'll always thank him for doing so."

"But just for a moment, try to imagine being kidnapped by a foreign enemy village, and forced to work there. Would you feel safe there, being surrounded by people you were told wanted nothing but kill you? *People you actually fought against ?*"

"Yikes..." Tamaki winced. "I'm... I'm sorry to hear that. I had no idea your life had been so rough..."

"Not even my time at Root was so bad," Yakumo admitted.

"Anko-sensei hates when we speak of Orochimaru with reverence. She even forced us to stop addressing him as 'Orochimaru-sama'. And given what he did to her, I can understand why," Kin began. "But she has never been in our place, so she can't understand why deep down, we will be grateful to Orochimaru for rescuing us from the streets, even if he did so for his own interests."

There was a moment of deafening silence, as everybody processed Kin's words. Until that point, many of them saw the world in black and white, Konoha, and its enemies who wanted to see it destroyed, like Orochimaru. But while Orochimaru's evil was undeniable, it made them question about the ninjas that served him. Did they have an awful life, and joined the Sannin in order to escape that living hell? In that case, they found themselves unable to blame them for taking such decision.

"Well, I want you to know, that you're among friends here," Hinata said, as she subtly and quickly shot a glare at the girls who were clearly unhappy with her bringing new girls. "If you ever need something, we will help you without question, and without asking you anything back."

"Yeah, we people of Konoha take care of each other," Ino added.

Then, for the first time in the afternoon, Kin cracked a smile.

"I... thank you," she said, before blushing a little and averting her gaze.

...

"Well, this is it. What do you think?"

Far from where the girls were having lunch, the entire Uchiha Clan, Shizune included, were standing in front of a large cluster of buildings, a compound, mostly made of wood, but with some stone and concrete on it as well. The windows lacked any glass, and it

didn't have any plumbing or electricity yet, but it looked both solid and cozy.

"It looks pretty nice," Shizune said. "When will we be able to move in?"

"The additional reforms may take from a few weeks to a few months, but it should be habitable before that," Shisui explained.

"Good, because that apartment isn't big enough for that many people," Sasuke complained, as he crossed his arms.

Unfortunately for Shisui and Shizune, their apartment had been destroyed during the battle against Akatsuki. And thus, they were forced to move back to Itachi and Sasuke's place. And while it was big enough for three and even four people, it was too small for four adults and two babies, and they were in need of a new place.

Though, rather than moving to another house, Shisui decided that it was time for the Uchiha Clan to live together again under the same roof, like they had been in the past. All of them were eager to do so, but it would take some time before they could move for good.

"But once the war ends, this will be our home," Shisui announced, as he placed an arm around Shizune's shoulders. "Together, we will bring the Uchiha Clan to new heights!"

...

That Night, somewhere dark

Hinata opened her eyes, and found herself inside a vast, open palace of dark lavender stone. It was a familiar place, as she had been there once, even if not physically. Besides her was the figure of an old man, somebody she already met before. She realized that this had to be some kind of dream, yet she didn't wake up.

"Hamura-sama," Hinata greeted the Otsutsuki elder.

"Hello, Byakugan Princess," the man replied. His voice lacked the warm it had the last time they spoke. "As you can imagine, this is not a visit of courtesy."

"Yes, I know," Hinata said. "Is this because of the war?"

"In a way, yes," Hamura said. "Though you won't be part of it. At least not now. There's another place that requires your presence."

"What? But I can't do that," Hinata said, shaking her head. "It's not right for me to say it but... but I'm among the strongest Konoha ninja. Both my and Hanabi-chan's power will be needed to end this as fast as possible."

"Your power is needed, indeed. But in order to save this world, you need to travel somewhere else," Hamura explained. "To the Moon."

"... what?"

"Do you remember the Otsutsuki civil war, and how the Branch House won it, driving the Main House close to extinction?" Hamura asked.

"They... they built a weapon of untold power," Hinata said, trying to remember. "Is that weapon in the Moon?"

Hamura nodded. "Yes. And Toneri plans to use it for this war. You need to travel to the Moon, and destroy it before he gets the chance. Only one that carries my chakra will be able to destroy it for good."

"But... how I'm going to go to the Moon?" Hinata asked. She doubted her flight would cut it.

"The same way I went there for the first time, and how Toneri travels between the Moon and the Earth: through a portal," Hamura explained. "Talk with the Moon Acolytes, they should have the same portal I created to travel to the Moon."

Hinata nodded. "It shall be done, Hamura-sama."

And everything turned to black.

...

Next Day, Hokage's Office

Jiraiya and Tsunade were working tirelessly in order to make sure that the village would be in top condition before most of the ninjas left. Missions already approved needed to be complete as far as possible, and they had to organize a defense force with the ninjas that would stay in the village in order to defend it before the bulk of the army would leave.

"This is the list of the Suna ninjas and the division they have been assigned to," Tsunade said, as he placed a folder with many files inside in front of Jiraiya.

"Rasa worked fast," Jiraiya said, as he began to glance at the list. "What about the others?"

"We can expect Mei's list to be here soon. I can't tell about Kumo and Iwa, though," Tsunade said. "Though for everybody's sake, I hope they don't take much time with them. Akatsuki could strike at any moment."

"Still, we didn't have any news of their movements. If they make a move, we will know in no time" Jiraiya reassured Tsunade.

"I wouldn't be so sure. During their last attack, they moved a force of thousand Zetsus and Moon Puppets through the Land of Fire, and we were none the wiser until they attacked. We can't let that happen again."

"This time they won't attack the villages," Jiraiya replied. "First, they need to locate the jinchuriki, and I doubt they will-"

There was a knock in the door. Weird, since Jiraiya wasn't expecting any visits today. Still, if somebody required his attention, then it must

be important.

"Come in!"

The door opened, and much to their surprise, Hinata entered the office. The Sannin could tell that she was very worried. Whatever she was going to tell them, they had a feeling they wouldn't like it.

"Hokage-sama, Tsunade-sama," Hinata said, making a polite bow to both of them. "I have something to tell you. Yesternight, Hamura-sama appeared to me in a dream, and tasked me with a mission of utmost importance. I'm afraid I won't be able to take part in the war."

Their feeling turned out to be accurate. The war hadn't started yet, and they had lost one of their most valuable assets.

...

Turtle Island

The day before Hinata had that fateful dream, Naruto and Fu were about to begin their training in order to master their jinchuriki powers. Killer B and Motio led the group of Konoha and Kumo ninjas towards an impressive waterfall that poured water into a lake.

"Here we are," Motoi announced. "The Falls of Truth. On this place, you will take your first step of your training."

"I can't wait to begin. What are we supposed to do?" Naruto asked.

"In order to tame the beasts inside, you must purify your heart," Killer B began to rap. "If you fail to do so, they will tear you apart. Sit in front of the falls and close your eyes. You will find yourselves in a strange place, your inner darkness will be waiting for you to face. But power won't suffice, you will need to be wise. Understood, ya fools?"

"Sit down and meditate, the waterfall will take us to another world," Fu began.

"There, our dark selves will be waiting for us. Beat them down, and return. Is that it?" Naruto finished.

Killer B gave them a thumbs up. "You got it, pals, you're pretty quick! Now let's begin, and try to be slick!"

Naruto and Fu nodded. Wordlessly, they walked towards a small isle in the middle of the lake. The two jinchuriki sat down, adopted the lotus position, and crossed their eyes. After a few seconds, the small island they were sitting on disappeared, and they plummeted down to the abyss that appeared below them.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!" Naruto screamed. Opening his eyes, he realized he was no longer on Turtle Island, but on some sort of endless black void. Fu was nowhere to be seen, but he couldn't care about the whereabouts of his fellow jinchuriki.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH... !"

"Naruto, wake up!" a frantic female voice shouted. A voice he knew really well.

Suddenly, Naruto was no longer falling down an endless abyss, but back in his home. More specifically, on his bed. He felt both tired and disoriented.

"What the...?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto, it's okay!" Tsunade's voice said in a reassuring tone. "It was just a nightmare!"

"A nightmare...?" Naruto repeated, as his eyes rested on Tsunade. For some reason, his adoptive mother felt alien, strange. There was something about her that unnerved him, something that wasn't right. Once he calmed down, he was able to see where the problem.

"Mom! Why are your breasts so small? And why are you wearing glasses?"

Because this Tsunade wasn't the busty woman Naruto was used to see. She had a much smaller bust, and for some reason she was wearing glasses. Said woman frowned, and crossed her arms.

"First of all, they aren't small, they're average! And your dad loves them!" not-Tsunade protested. "And I always wore glasses! Just what's wrong with you?" she shook her head. "This is the last time I let you eat that much ramen for dinner. You have nightmares that mess with your head. Anyway, now that you're awake, come down and have some breakfast. You don't want to be late for your team meeting, don't you?"

And not-Tsunade turned around and left the room.

"Just... what the hell is this place?" Naruto asked.

Author's Note: So, amny things to unpack.

Yeah, that was alternate Tsunade from the Road to Ninja movie. And yes, Naruto is now trapped in a version of that world. You see, at first I was planning to have the confrontation with Dark Naruto the same as in canon (but very summarized for obvious reasons), until one day I decided to watch the Road to Ninja movie out of curiosity. The movie itself was pretty mediocre, but boy, I LOVED the alternate version of the Konoha 11 (well, most of them), and think the movie would have been much better if they were given more focus. It was then when I had the idea of using that movie's initial premise and adapt it for the confrontation with Dark Naruto, instead of having Naruto beat an evil version of himself through self reflection like in canon.

I'm really hoping you'll find my version of Road to Ninja more enjoyable than the mess that it was that movie. Though, if you're afraid that this chapter and the next are going to be filler, fear not. It's certainly going to be a little more relaxed than usual, but there are going to be cool action scenes and Naruto

is going to learn a few valuable lessons that are going to be very important down the road.

Though, you **DON'T NEED TO WATCH THE MOVIE** to understand the next arc. The arc itself will provide all the information you need in order to get everything

So, all in all, the "main" training is going to last until chapter 99. The war will begin on chapter 100. Unlike canon, which only lasted a day and a half, this War Arc will have its battles spread over a period of several weeks, instead of happening all at once. That way, I can give Naruto enough time to train and master his new powers.

And as you can see, not only Naruto is going to be absent, as Hinata is leaving for the Moon. It is time for her to end Toneri's threat for good, though that confrontation won't happen until much later. So yeah, I'm going to warn you now, while Naruto and Hinata may continue to appear, their presence is going to be very diminished once the war begins. That's because I want to give the other characters some focus as well, and once Naruto and Hinata make their grand return, they will grab the spotlight with both arms and legs and won't let it go.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, how did you find this chapter? And what do you think about me making a hopefully better version of Road to Ninja? Leave your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Road to Ninja, Part I

Author's Note: Okay, I got some people wondering how Orochimaru was able to revive Tobirama again since Itachi sealed him. The answer is that, after the invasion was over, Itachi released Tobirama's spirit again so it could return to the afterlife. Which sadly allowed Orochimaru to revive him again.

Though, Orochimaru won't be able to revive Minato and Kushina. I've been wondering if a reanimation that's undone because of finding closure can be revived again, something canon has no answer to. In the end, I decided that the answer is "no", because if that was the case, then Kabuto could have revived Sasori or Shin again after they reached closure.

Anyway, with that out of the way, enjoy my take on Road to Ninja:

Chapter 97:

Road to Ninja, Part I

or

Yep, we're adapting a non-canon movie

"Just... what the hell is this place?" Naruto asked.

Because it did feel like his home back in Konoha. It was his room, just like he remembered. But like with Tsunade, there was something... off. An ever present feeling that there was something wrong. Naruto's thoughts, however, were interrupted when his stomach growled.

"Better listen to mom, or whoever that is, and have some breakfast first," Naruto decided, as he got up from the bed, removed his

pajamas, put on his usual clothes, and exited his room.

As he walked through the familiar yet strange house, Naruto noticed the pictures decorating the walls. Jiraiya, Tsunade, Shizune, Hagane, Kaida, him... everything seemed to be in order. Though it didn't take him long to notice that Shizune wasn't like he remembered her: It seemed that Tsunade's lost bust ended up on Shizune instead. Plus her lips were of a brighter shade of red. Weird, given that other than special dates with Shisui, Shizune never uses lipstick.

For a brief moment, Naruto hoped Hinata's breasts didn't end up on Sakura's body.

Upon reaching the kitchen, he saw Tsunade once again, finishing her own breakfast.

"Where are dad and the twins?" Naruto asked.

"Your father left early for the Tower, as usual," Tsunade said.

"Hagane and Kaida have been out for a mission for a couple days, don't you remember that?"

"Ah, yeah..." Naruto pretended to remember. "For some reason I forgot."

"Like I said, you ate too much ramen last night," Tsunade said, shaking her head, before placing a bowl of cereals with sliced fruits in front of Naruto. "Now eat something healthy for a change!"

...

After bidding his not-mother goodbye, Naruto exited the house and walked into the village. At first glance, everything seemed to be normal -he was half expecting the Hokage Monument to be different, but the faces of the five Hokages remained the same-, yet the feeling of uneasiness persisted. On top of that, he felt a strange pull towards one of the training grounds.

"Should I go there...?" the blond wondered, before shaking his head. "No, I should try to investigate this place first, gather some intel, the usual ninja stuff. Also, I need to know if Fu is still here, or if she ended somewhere else. Given that she's from Taki, she might be there right now."

He decided to walk towards his team's usual training ground. Hopefully he would find some answers from his sensei and teammates. Leaping from one roof to another, Naruto reached his team's training ground in no time. And fortunately for him, Hinata, Haku and Kurenai were already there.

"Look, Naruto's finally here. Now we can begin our morning training," the raven haired woman said. Unlike Tsunade and Shizune, she looked exactly as he remembered her.

Something he couldn't say about this fellow teammates. It took Naruto a while to realize that the other boy of the group was indeed Haku. Because he had his hair cut very short, and instead of his usual green and yellow haori with a grass green sash, Haku was wearing dark blue pants and a sleeveless jacket over pretty much nothing. The jacket was open, leaving his bare chest visible for all.

Then there was Hinata. What Naruto first noticed were her eyes: they were still Byakugan instead of Tenseigan. But her eyes were quickly forgotten when Naruto saw the rest of her attire: while she was wearing her usual long lavender and purple jacket, she wore it unzipped. Under said jacket she was wearing nothing but a mesh top that barely covered her large breasts, leaving a good chunk of her midriff bare. Her usual knee long pants were nowhere to be seen, replaced by extremely short shorts. Lastly, rather than her sandals, she was wearing knee-high boots that left her toes and heels exposed.

Yep, wherever he was, this wasn't Konoha. Or at least, the Konoha he was familiar with.

Hinata walked towards Naruto with a confident smile, placed her arms around his neck, and planted a kiss on him. "Hey there, handsome," Hinata said in a very seductive and sultry tone, one the real Hinata would never use. "I was afraid you wouldn't come. What took you so long?"

"Well, you see-"

"You weren't seeing another girl, were you!?" she yelled, as she increased her pressure of her arms around his neck, while her Byakugan flared to life. "Because if you let any bitch near you, I'm going to kill you both and-!"

"Now, now, let's not get carried away," Kurenai said in a conciliatory tone, as she helped separate the crazy Hyuga from the scared blond. "Let's use that energy to train, okay?"

"I'm keeping my eyes on you too, you hag," Hinata told Kurenai, as she narrowed her eyes at her. "I do know what people say about how little your husband satisfies you, and you aren't going to go all cougar on my man!"

"Geez, this girl is so fucking crazy! I'm so glad my Hinata isn't jealous at all," Naruto thought, as he rubbed his pained neck. He then took another look at her very revealing yet alluring attire. *"But damn, her choice of clothes is something I can't complain about!"*

"Heh, you're truly a brave one for daring to date that girl," Haku said, as he walked towards him. "Not that I wouldn't dare to date her either! There's no woman I'm afraid of! Otherwise, I wouldn't be the epitome of masculinity I am!"

Naruto looked at Haku as if the Ice Ninja had grown a second head. The look was already throwing him off, but that was easy to ignore compared to the personality switch. "Epitome of masculinity...?" Naruto dumbly repeated.

Haku's previous confidence crumbled like a castle made of paper, replaced by sheer terror and insecurity.

"What? Why did you say that? Don't you think I'm manly!?" the Ice Ninja panicked. "Is my hair getting too long again? It's my clothes!? I know I'm a bit too scrawny, but muscle takes some time to build!"

"Whoa, calm down, pal!" Naruto said, placing his hands on his panicking teammate's shoulders, as he tried to think something reassuring. "You look very manly indeed! In fact if you looked like a girl, eh... uh... Hinata wouldn't allow you to be part of the team because she'd be jealous I'll leave her for you!"

Haku looked at Naruto into the eyes, before he finally relaxed. "Of course, you're right. How can anybody mistake me for a girl? HGHN!" Haku grunted, as he flexed his non-existent biceps.

"Okay, enough chattering, let's get to training already. If we keep wasting time, we won't train until the sun sets," Kurenai said, clapping her hands twice to draw attention.

" *At the very least Kurenai-sensei still looks normal,*" Naruto thought, knowing that he was tempting fate.

The training turned out to be normal enough. At least, normal compared to what was fearing it would be. Hinata and Haku, beffting their new personalities, employed a fighting style far more aggressive than their real life counterparts. Still, they also proved to be comparatively weaker than the real ones. The fact that Hinata didn't have a Tenseigan was rather noticeable when they clashed against each other.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto cast an horizontal tornado that swallowed both Hinata and Haku, before violently expelling them against the ground.

"Ouch... that hurt so much..." Hinata complained, as she struggled to get back, before a creepy wide smile formed in his face. "Oh Naruto-kun, you're soooooooooo strong! That's why I like you so much!"

"I'm pretty strong too!" Haku quickly protested, as he got back on his feet as well. He started to make hand seals. "Let's see what you think about this jutsu I developed! Ice Release: Testosterone Blizzard!"

The temperature dropped suddenly, as a cold breeze started to blow. Snowflakes started to form in the air, as they formed a whirlwind around Naruto. In a few seconds, the blond was trapped inside a freezing tornado, that covered the grassy ground around it in frost and snow.

"Let the manly embrace of my ice ninjutsu freeze you!" Haku boasted, before his brain registered what he just say. "Wait, manly embrace? No, that doesn't sound-"

"Wind Release: Cyclone Shockwave!"

Another tornado emerged from inside the first tornado Haku had summoned, undoing it and dispelling all the frost and snow. The tornado quickly expanded outwards in every direction, forcing Hinata and Haku to jump back.

"Look at the power of that wind jutsu," Hinata swooned. "That's my Naruto!"

"Okay, I've seen enough," Kurenai said, interrupting the match, as she walked between her students. "I don't remember you being that strong, Naruto. It seems that you've been training a lot on your own."

"Hehe, yeah, you know me. I love to train," Naruto said, chuckling awkwardly as he rubbed the back of his head.

Kurenai then turned at the other two members of her team. "That means that you two should step up your training as well so you can shorten the gap a little. It's not good for a team if there's a big disparity between the members' skill and power."

"Yes, Kurenai-sensei," Hinata and Haku replied.

"Meet me after lunch, and we'll go and see if there's a mission suited for us today," Kurenai said, before leaping away, leaving the trio of teens alone.

...

Not far away from there

While Naruto had decided to check this weird version of Konoha first, the blond was somebody who could be on multiple places at once, so once he finished his training session with his not-teammates, he created a Shadow Clone and sent it to follow that pulling feeling while the real one went to have lunch. After a few minutes of jumping from one roof to another, and some running through the grass of a few training grounds, he reached the place.

In front of Naruto was a massive forest, walled by several fences, and a rather ominous warning sign. It said:

TRAINING GROUND 44

THE FOREST OF DEATH

ACCESS TO THIS TRAINING GROUND IS FORBIDDEN UNLESS
EXPLICITLY ALLOWED BY THE HOKAGE

"Geez, I know Hayate and Yugao said that this place is dangerous, but come on, it is that bad?" Naruto wondered aloud. "Anyway, I better go and check what's so important-YIKES!"

Naruto jumped back startled, as a couple kunai landed besides his feet. Shortly after that, a pair of Konoha ninjas Naruto didn't know

landed in front of him.

"I'm sorry, Naruto-san, but access to this training ground is strictly forbidden," the first ninja said, as he pointed to the warning sign.

"I'm not even Naruto, but a Shadow Clone," Naruto said.

"Regardless of how dangerous that forest is, nothing of value will be lost if I get killed."

"I'm sorry, but our orders are strict. Nobody, clone or not, is allowed to enter," the other ninja said. "I'm sure you won't have any trouble getting the Hokage's permission to send a clone there."

While the Naruto clone was sure he could beat those ninjas -they didn't look to be higher than Chunin- he decided it was probably better not to do something so drastic so soon. So he instead opted to turn around and walk away.

"I'll be back," the clone said.

"HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEY!"

The clone didn't get too far before somebody called him. They weren't those obstructive guards, but a girl, and the shout came from above. Looking up, the blond smiled upon seeing Fu flying down towards him. She landed in front of him with a thud, raising a small cloud of dust when her feet hit the ground.

"Hey, Fu!" Naruto greeted her, smiling widely. "You're the real Fu, right?"

"Technically, I'm a Shadow Clone, but yeah, I'm the same Fu from our world," the green haired girl explained. "The real one is with Shino and the others. Or weird people who look like them. This Shino speaks non-stop! He never shuts up! He talks constantly, never letting others speak! He goes on and on and on... and he will sometimes change topic mid-conversation, to top it off! By the way, on my way here, I saw an AMAZING pair of white boots that were

not too expensive. Do you think there will be in the same store in the real Konoha when we return? I'm not a boot person, but-"

"I can imagine how horrible being near this Shino can be," Naruto deadpanned, but let out a lighthearted chuckle. "But I feel you. If you only met Hinata and Haku."

"One of the things I liked about Shino is that he was somebody who knew how to listen, you know? Now I can never talk," Fu complained, as her posture became slumped. "It totally messes our dynamic! Man, this waterfall of truth has one mean sense of humor."

"Anyway, I guess you send a clone here because of a sensation that pulled you constantly?" Naruto guessed. Fu nodded vigorously. "I guess that, whatever we need to face, it's hiding inside the Forest of Death. However, it's guarded and the sentries won't allow us to pass unless we have permission from my dad."

"Guess we'll have to meet him," Fu concluded. "Though not now. The real me is going to eat with Shino and the others."

"I believe the real me will eat with this team as well, as I often do after normal trainings," Naruto asked. "Say, where are you going?"

"Yakiniku-Q."

"Alright, I'll convince my teammates to go there, so we can stay in touch," Naruto decided.

Fu nodded in agreement. "Alright. See you soon."

Both clones disappeared, transferring their memories to the originals.

...

Yakiniku-Q

Both Naruto and Fu's teams were the first ones to arrive at the restaurant. Once there, Naruto could also appreciate the differences

between Kakashi's Animal Squad from this bizarre reality and the real world.

"... before Kiba was slammed against a tree. Our training has been pretty good. Kiba and Tamaki didn't fight as much as they usually do, and guess what? When Kiba smashed his face against that tree, it broke its bark, and I managed to find several green beetles lurking underneath. Did you know that green beetles are extremely rare in the Land of Fire? And speaking of rare, I hope that this time they don't burn my order, since I only like medium..."

Just like Fu said, Shino would never shut up. Both his teammates and girlfriend tried to ignore him as he droned on various topics, but he didn't get the hint.

"GOADDMIT, SHUT UP ALREADY!" Hinata screamed, much to everybody's shock. Not that the aggressive Hyuga cared. "Next time you open your mouth and it's not because somebody talked to you first, I'll rip your vocal chords and shove them where the sun don't shine! YOU GOT THAT, BUG BOY!?"

Shino whimpered something inaudible, as he nodded energetically. Despite the display, Naruto could tell by their body language that the rest were thankful for Hinata's intervention. Naruto included, even if he felt kind of bad for Shino.

"I don't know why you wanted us to eat with our former classmates," Hinata said. She then leaned against Naruto, and cooed: "Next time, let's eat the two of us alone. It will be more romantic!"

"*Damn, her personality is scary, but how she goes from murderous rage to romantic mood is even more unnerving,*" Naruto said, trying to suppress a shiver.

"Well, I do think that multiple dates can be romantic, don't you think, my little kitty?" Tamaki asked Kiba in a sickeningly sweet tone.

"Of course, my love. After all, all of us here has a mate, so nobody will left out," Kiba replied in the same overly mushy tone.

While they talked and waited for the others to arrive, Naruto could also tell that Kiba and Tamaki weren't the same people he once knew. The fastest way to put it was that they have switched personalities, or more specifically, tastes when it comes to animals. It seemed that Kiba hated dogs and was a cat lover -evidenced by his forehead protector, which he added a pair of fake cat ears-, while Tamaki hated cats and loved dogs. In fact, Kiba had given Akamaru to Tamaki when they were in the Academy, and Tamaki in return allowed Kiba to sign her family's Cat Summoning Contract.

All this led them to become a loving couple, as opposed to the real Kiba and Tamaki's constant bickering fueled by a feeling of unresolved sexual tension that was funny at first but ended up being kind of annoying over time.

The door of the restaurant opened, and a new trio of teens entered. It was Shizune's Medical Squad, and just like with his teammates and Team Kakashi, they were also changed. While Sasuke and Sakura were wearing different clothes -Sasuke's style was far more casual and relaxed, which didn't fit him in the slightest- Karin was the one sporting the biggest change: she was wearing a black leather jacket over a black shirt, a black skirt, a black atudded belt, and black knee high boots. Her hair had several dark purple streaks.

"Hello there, ladies, your man Sasuke is here!" Sasuke said, winking at Hinata, Tamaki and Fu in a very un-Sasuke-y way. "You don't need to fight for me, there's enough Sasuke for everybody."

" *Okay, that has to be the weirdest shit I've seen so far,*" Naruto through, cringing at the Uchiha's ladies' man act.

"Don't begin!" Sakura chastised. "You know, if you dedicated half the time you spend trying to get on every girl's pants to become a better ninja, you would be Jonin already!"

"Come on, you need to relax a little, and enjoy the finer pleasures of life," Sasuke said, as he tried to put an arm around Sakura, which she quickly pushed away. "If you weren't so obsessed with training and being a better ninja so much, people would like you better."

"Ugh, you're... listen, just drop it already, and let's try to eat in peace," Sakura said.

"There's no peace in such a place of death and blood like this one," Karin firmly said.

"A ninja village?" Naruto asked, a bit uneasy.

"A restaurant that serves processed meat," Karin explained. "Do you know that cows and pigs are force fed untold amount of food laced with chemicals in order to fatten them, before being sent to a slaughterhouse, when they're not just killed, but dismembered, their parts being scattered around the world so we humans can consume them. Their life is suffering, we feed of their suffering, and they're denied the rest of a peaceful death. And this place... this place is filled with the souls of the slaughtered pigs and calves, that have to watch how we eat their corpses in horror. If you listen closely, you can hear their anguished cries of agony."

"So... I take that you aren't going to order any meat?" Naruto guessed.

"Hell no! I love meat!" Karin replied back, sounding more energetic.

As the three members of the Medical Squad took their seats and engaged in some light conversation with those already there, they were followed by another team: Asuma's Tactical Squad. And like the previous teams, one could tell these were different versions of the Ino-Shika-Chō Naruto and Fu knew. While Shikamaru looked the same, Chōji was far more fit and muscular, and his eyes reflected iron hard determination, a far cry from the carefree and easygoing junk food lover.

Meanwhile. Ino dressed in a more conservative fashion than her real world counterpart, and while she kept her iconic ponytail, she tied it at the bottom of her hair, as opposed to the top. Her body language and the way she carried herself, her posture was droopy, she was folding her arms and was averting eye contact, suggested a meek and shy personality

"Why did you drag me to this place?" Choji complained. "You know I hate the food that serve here."

"It's not just for the food, but all our friends are here," Shikamaru said. "Why do you have to act as if you're better than everybody else?"

"I'm not acting like I'm better than anybody else, I just expressed my dislike of this restaurant," Choji insisted. "You know, your inferiority complex can be quite grating at times."

"Who are you calling inferior-"

"Now, now, let's not fight, okay?" Ino softly asked, placing a hand on each of the boys' shoulder. "All of our friends are here, let's try to have a good time."

This seemed to have a calming effect on her two male teammates. Still, that display told Naruto and Fu everything they needed to know about Asuma's students from this weird reality.

At the point, Sasuke appeared before Ino almost as if he had used the Body Flicker. A rose appeared in his hand as he presented it to the blond girl as a gift.

"Ah, my dear Ino, you always know what to say to difuse a problem," Sasuke said, trying to sound as seductive as possible. "I know tha behind such shy personality lies a woman of iron."

"Uh... eh... t-thank you, Sasuke-kun..." Ino muttered, as she backed from the Uchiha invading her personal space.

"Hey, back off, buddy, don't you see you're making her uncomfortable?" Shikamaru said, forcibly pushing Sasuke away from her. "You think that just because you're an Uchiha everybody should worship and fawn you? I can't stand you geniuses!"

"Come on, I wasn't-" Sasuke tried to protest, but he was interrupted.

"Sasuke, stop embarrassing yourself -and by extension, Karin and I- and get back on your goddamned seat," Sakura threatened, her voice hard as steel.

"And then they'll ask me why I hate coming here," Choji grumbled under his breath, as he and his team took a seat.

A few minutes later, the last team of the Konoha 15 arrived, Gai's Close Combat Squad. While Neji and Lee looked like their normal selves, Tenten was wearing white and blue robes that gave her a somewhat saintly appearance, and her body language gave Naruto and Fu the impression of somebody that had reached some sort of spiritual enlightenment.

Even if on the outside they did look like usual, the finer details also revealed changes on Neji and Rock Lee. Neji's expression was... unnerving, almost perverse, predatory. Meanwhile, Rock Lee displayed none of his usual youthful energy, and he moved as if the very act of walking required a massive effort. Which kinda reminded Naruto of Shikamaru.

"Tenten-chan!" Haku jumped upon seeing his girlfriend, rushed towards her, and gave her a very passionate kiss. "Hey everybody, my girlfriend is here! Yeah, I have a girlfriend! And I wouldn't if I wasn't so manly!"

"Now, now, Haku-kun, we talked about this, didn't we?" Tenten said in a mildly chastising but very gentle tone. "If you let your insecurities rule your life, you shall never be happy. You need to learn to look inside, and find your inner beauty and strength. Which is what I did."

"Y-yeah, sorry, Tenten-chan," Haku replied, rubbing the back of his head. His enthusiasm didn't disappear, though. "Come on sit besides me!"

While Tenten sat besides Haku as the latter requested, Lee and Neji sat besides her as well. Naruto wondered why Neji didn't sit alongside Karin, as he often did. Maybe they weren't a couple in this bizarre reality.

"So, tell me, how was your day? You've been training, yes?" Haku asked.

"I've been training in my medical arts. Because why harm, when you can heal? It's much more rewarding," Tenten replied. Naruto raised an eyebrow. It's not that the real Tenten loved to bath in the blood of her enemies, but she was no stranger to violence, given her passion for weapons. Tenten continued: "My teammates haven't trained either. Lee has been all the time sleeping under a tree, and I bet Neji has been using his Byakugan to watch other girls' underwear."

"*Yep, that explains why Neji and Karin aren't together,*" Naruto thought.

"Tenten, you goddamn tattletale! Why do you have to tell them that?" Neji protested, before realizing what he just said. "Er, I mean... how do you know I was peeping on girls? You were focused on your book all the time, you couldn't tell what I was doing!"

"You were standing in the same spot for two hours straight, and you chuckled perversely from time to time," Tenten replied. "One doesn't need to be a genius to know what you were doing."

"She's right, Neji," Lee added.

"Shut up! You were asleep the whole time! How can you tell if she's right or not?" Neji protested again.

"How can you waste the time sleeping like that, Lee?" Shikamaru intervened. "You should use that time to train so you can soar to new heights! Man, if I only had a quarter of the talent you possess, with my hard work I'll be Konoha's top ninja!"

"Eh, it's too tiresome. Why train when you're as strong as I am?" Lee said with a shrug. Though Naruto could tell he wasn't really boasting, his laziness was really irritating Shikamaru. "Besides, we're living in a age of peace. It's not like we're going to be needed for any future conflict."

"That's irrelevant! Hard work is a reward on itself! The satisfaction of achieving something with the sweat of your brow! Of moving forward! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Man, it's like they switched personalities," Naruto thought.

"I have to agree with Shikamaru," Sakura said. "As ninjas, is our duty to be as strong as possible and fulfill all our latent potential. Not just for the village, but for ourselves as well. Otherwise, we wouldn't have any self worth. Everything else is secondary."

"That attitude of yours is why you don't have a boyfriend," Sasuke said with a mocking smirk.

"Didn't you think that maybe I don't want a boyfriend, you sorry excuse of a pick-up artist?" Sakura fired at the Uchiha.

"Being single, being in a relationship... why does it matter?" Karin gloomily asked. "Since all of us will perish sooner or later. It's pointless to care about such trivialities in the face of our impending doom."

"Come on guys, not again," Ino softly interceded. "Let's not ruin this gathering between friends with a fight-"

"Given that everybody is talking, can I talk too as well?" Shino asked Hinata, breaking his silence. "Because I kind of feel a bit left out, and

I have plenty of topics to discuss with you guys, as well as many anecdotes to share, such how coming here I saw this guy who..."

But Hinata wasn't listening to the bug user, since she was currently hotly screaming at her cousin

"... and I'm so fucking sick of you right now! You're a goddamn embarrassment to our clan! All you do is prove all that people talking dirty of us right!" the angry bluenette shouted.

"Come on, I've been a good guy! You can't believe what my lying teammate is saying!" Neji replied.

Eventually, the only thing that could be heard in the restaurant was the loud cacophony of the many arguments and discussions happening simultaneously. The only ones not part of the madness were Kiba and Tamaki, who were trading exceedingly sweet and corny compliments, and Ino, who tried, and failed, to stop the chaos.

"Guys, please, stop!" she begged, but was unable to raise her voice any further. "Naruto-kun, please, do something!"

However, when her visible eye drifted towards the spot the blond jinchuriki was in, she found it empty. Fu wasn't there either.

...

Taking advantage of the chaos, Naruto and Fu had slipped out of the restaurant unnoticed. The two of them were enjoyed the relative peace and calm of the streets of Konoha, far away from the insanity of their not-friends. The two of them were now walking towards the Hokage Tower.

"Do you think we did wrong leaving like that?" Fu asked Naruto.

"Yeah," Naruto replied. "I think we should have waited for the food to arrive first. I'm kind of hungry."

"Well, that too, but I was wondering if it was right to leave our friends behind," Fu specified. "They aren't going to be happy when they find out. Hell, Hinata might think you're cheating on her with me."

"Those aren't our real friends, and that girl wasn't my girlfriend," Naruto stated, shivering a little. "Listen, we both know that whatever's inside the Forest of Death is the 'Inner Darkness' we have to defeat. We meet dad, ask him to grant us permission to enter the Forest of Death, kick the ass of whatever's lurking there, and return to the real world to continue with our training."

Her second thoughts dispelled, Fu nodded enthusiastically. "Right!"

...

Hokage's Office

"Hey, dad!" Naruto greeted Jiraiya as the two jinchuriki entered the office.

"Hello, there Naruto, Fu," Jiraiya greeted them back. "Well, what can I do for-WHA!" the Sannin screamed, as his jaw dropped, while his eyes grew wide, and stared at Fu. "Wha... what..."

"Is something wrong, Hokage-sama?" Fu asked, as she scratched her temple.

"What the hell are you wearing!? Don't you have any shame!?" Jiraiya screamed, as he pulled a blanket out of nowhere, and wrapped it around Fu's body. "That's a direct violation of the official Konoha dress code! And don't tell me that you aren't a Konoha ninja! As long as you live here, you'll follow our rules!"

"Dad, have you lost your mind?" Naruto asked, but deep down he knew the answer.

"No, SHE lost her mind, dressing in a such provokatively manner!" Jiraiya continued shouting. "First you allow a laxer dressing code,

which leads to making out, and then to premarital sex, and then to teen pregnancy, and I'm not going to stand for any of that!"

"Of course dad's version of this world would be a total prude,"

Naruto sourly thought. Better deal with this as soon as possible.

"Anyway, we came here because we want you to ask something."

"Okay, I'm all ears," Jiraiya replied.

"We'd like permission to go to the Forest of Death," it was Fu who answered. "We want to test our abilities and strength against the toughest training ground Konoha has to offer."

"I'm afraid I can't let you go there," Jiraiya replied.

"What? Come on dad, we're pretty strong!" Naruto protested.

"Not strong enough for whatever the evil that lurks there," Jiraiya sternly replied. "Not even I'm sure I can deal with what lives there. That's what the best thing I can do is to quarantine the area and pray that whatever's there decides to stay there. So far, it has worked."

"And on top of that, he's a fucking coward. Yep, definitely not my dad," Naruto said, repressing the need to shake his head in disappointment.

"I don't know what made you two think you can take on whatever's there, but I don't want to hear you got even close to that training ground, got it?" Jiraiya warned them.

"Sure thing dad," Naruto said with a weary sigh. "Come on Fu."

"Wait, that's it?" Fu asked. "Aren't you going to-"

"Dad has been pretty clear on the issue. Let's go," Naruto insited, pulling the muscular girl by the arm. Fu complied and let herself be dragged out of the office.

Naruto quickly dragged Fu out of the tower, the green haired girl pulling her arm away until Naruto finally released it.

"It's not like you to give up so easily," Fu pointed out, as the two jinchuriki exited the tower, and walked back into the streets of Konoha. "What do we do now?"

"Who said that I was giving up?" Naruto replied with a cheeky grin. "We're going to go into the Forest of Death, with or without his permission."

"But how? That place is closely guarded," Fu replied.

"Well, thankfully, one of us can grow wings on her back and is strong enough to carry at least one person while flying," Naruto explained.

"Really? You learned to fly to? How?" Fu excitedly asked. Upon seeing Naruto's unamused stare, she realized of something. "Ohhhhhhh, you were talking about me. I see. Still, even if I smuggle us into the forest through air, the guards are going to see us and warn the Hokage."

"Not if we infiltrate at night," Naruto said. "The visibility will be much lower by then. In fact, Mei used this strategy to infiltrate the Crimson Citadel during the Kirigakure Civil War. It worked back then, and it will work now."

"If you say so."

...

Forest of Death, that night

Just like Naruto said, their infiltration went without a hitch. Under the shadows of the night, none of the guards placed around the training ground could see or even heard Fu as she entered into the forbidden forest.

"So, this is the place. The Forest of Death," Naruto said, looking around. He couldn't see anything but the massive trees surrounding him, since the dim light provided by the half Moon wasn't enough to see their surroundings with clarity. "Man, I wish Hinata-hime was here. She could guide us with her Tenseigan."

"Shino's bugs are pretty good for exploring as well as locating foes," Fu said, looking around, narrowing his eyes as he tried to discern her surroundings. "I can hear many creatures lurking around, but I can't tell what they are. Other than that they're big. And hungry."

"We won't have to worry about those," Naruto reassured her. "With our power, wild beasts are no longer a threat, no matter how big they are. All we need to do is find whatever's the representation of our darkness, and beat them."

"And I guess that's something we have to do on our own," Fu concluded. She pointed in a seemingly random direction. "That way?"

"Yeah, I felt being pulled towards there as well," Naruto confirmed with a nod. "Let's go."

Naruto leaped to a nearby tree branch, and started to head into said direction jumping from one branch to another. Fu was following him from behind, flying. While they saw some giant animals on their way, such as giant bears, snakes, or insects, it seemed they didn't feel like starting a fight with them.

"I see some light coming head on," Fu observed.

"Me too. Guess that must be the place we need to reach," Naruto said.

The two jinchuriki reached a very large clearing surrounded by lit torches, which provided some nice illumination to the otherwise extremely dark forest. Naruto and Fu landed in the middle of the

clearing. The moment their feet touched the ground, a voice was heard.

"So, you finally came," a male voice said, which was deep and unsettling.

"We were getting tired of waiting," a female voice said. This one was also deep, but also snide.

"Who's there? Show yourselves!" Naruto demanded.

"Seems that he's a impatient one, isn't he?" the male voice asked.

"Yes. One might think he was the one doing all the waiting," the female voice said. "But we better do what he says. There's no need of delaying this any longer."

Two more figures landed in front of Naruto and Fu. The first one was wearing a mask resembling a fox that obscured his face -though his spiky black hair was visible-, his body was covered by a long, dark blue robe with a faded gray fur collar.

The second figure was also wearing a mask, this one modeled after an insect. Naruto and Fu could tell it was a woman given her body shape. She was wearing a black sleeveless top, short black pants, shoulder length black gloves, knee length black leather boots, and a tattered cape that reached her rear. She was tall and had a muscular built, not unlike Fu.

"So, if I'm to guess... you're our respective inner darkness, right?" Naruto asked.

The two figures removed their masks, revealing their faces, which were identical to Naruto and Fu, except that their hair was black and their eyes were glowing red.

"Not quite," Dark Naruto explained. "We're your true selves."

"What you think it's your identity, is nothing but a mask, no different from this," Dark Fu said, holding her mask for added emphasis, before lazily tossing it away. "We're you, free of the layers of lies you created around yourselves."

"Whatever you say, guys," Naruto said, as he pulled out and activated his Wind Sword, producing a blade of white wind chakra.

"Quite an impatient one indeed," Dark Naruto said, mimicking the real one's actions, except his Wind Sword was dark purple instead of white. "Fine by me. I'm ready for some action!"

Naruto and Dark Naruto charged at each other, their Wind Swords clashing when they met in the middle, producing a small shower of sparks.

"Let me guess," Naruto said, grinning confidently. "You're going to tell me how I can't defeat you since you're as strong as I am."

"No. I'm MUCH stronger than you," Dark Naruto said, before pushing Naruto's Wind Sword aside and delivering a brutal kick to his chest, sending the blond flying. "Though you got the part about losing right."

"Naruto!" Fu shouted, as she flew to aid her fellow jinchuriki.

However, Dark Fu got in the way, forcing the green haired girl to stop.

"Let the boys have their fun," Dark Fu casually said. "Besides, you can't afford to worry about others given the current situation."

"You asked for it!" Fu angrily said.

The Taki jinchuriki and her dark side engaged in a fast paced exchange of punches and kicks. Each hit that connected produced a thunderclap followed by a shockwave. The two girls started to gain altitude as their brutal duel became fiercer. Their physical clash

came to an end when their fist connected with each others' in a particularly brutal way, pushing them backwards. Both Fu and her dark analogue weaved the same sequence of seals.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

The two of them blew a powerful gust of wind at each other. However, both opposing gales carried the same power, and neither was able to overpower the other. Fu tried a different jutsu, but Dark Fu copied it as if she had a Sharingan.

"Water Release: Water Wall"

Both of them expelled a massive torrent of water from their mouths, but just like their previous attacks, it failed to win the other. Fu gritted her teeth in anger, while Dark Fu smiled smugly.

"Like I said before, I'm your true self," Dark Fu began. "That means that not only do I know all your fighting moves, tactics, jutsu and the like, but I know exactly what you're going to do, and prepare accordingly."

"If that's true, then this won't surprise you," Fu said, as she unslung her red backpack, and opened it, revealing a rather large storage scroll. Unsealing its contents, a gigantic oak log emerged from the scroll. The green haired kunoichi grabbed it with one hand, and rested it on her shoulder. "I don't see you carrying a similar scroll, so I guess you can't match this, can't you?"

Dark Fu sneered. "A brutish weapon for a brutish girl. I don't need such primitive weapon to match you, false me."

While Fu and Dark Fu traded blows above the forest, Naruto and Dark Naruto did the same with Wind Sword swipes. And just like Fu found, Naruto realized that his evil twin was just as skilled as he was, and could counter every move the blond made flawlessly. Still, Naruto didn't get so far by giving up.

"Wind Release: Decapitating Wheel!"

Naruto swung his Wind Sword in a wide arc multiple times, releasing multiple crescent blades of wind in every direction. However, Dark Naruto was able to either parry or dodge them expertly. All what Naruto's attack accomplished was cutting some tree branches.

"Pathetic," Dark Naruto sneered, as he regaining his footing and charged forward. "With such pitiful display, no wonder you failed to save Ukatata and Roshi!"

"SHUT UP!" Naruto shouted, delivering a series of brutal swings at his dark counterpart.

Dark Naruto, however, laughed as he parried or dodged all of them expertly. "What's wrong, did I hit a nerve?" the black haired young man smirked at Naruto, making the jinchuriki even angrier. "Look at that, letting yourself getting carried away by your emotions. You won't beat me like that!"

"How about this, then!" Naruto said, as he jumped backwards while pulling a kunai. "Shadow Clone Kunai Jutsu!"

Naruto tossed a kunai at his evil doppelganger, before making a hand seal, turning the lone weapon into almost a hundred. This time, Dark Naruto didn't make any kind cutting remark, but several hand seals, in order to answer the rain of razor steel.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Shockwave!"

A tornado formed around dark Naruto, and started to expand outwards, pushing the incoming storm of kunai away in every direction. When the tornado ceased, there were a multitude of kunai scattered around the red-eyed copy, while their intended target was unharmed.

"Such a basic attack. How long are you going to keep this charade up, and accept reality?" Dark Naruto mocked.

Naruto didn't acknowledge his evil counterpart's words. He merely smirked and made a hand seal. "Sealing Art: Cursed Binding Circle!"

Some of the kunai spread around Dark Naruto started to glow with a blue light, and from said kunai a chain of seals started to form, advancing towards the surprised doppelganger. The chain of seals formed a circle, which started to glow with even more intensity.

"Ha! You fell in my trap!" Naruto boasted. "Now you can't move! You lost!"

"A fairly decent trap, I will concede that," Dark Naruto calmly said. "Though I wouldn't be so sure of your victory yet."

"What are you-"

Naruto was interrupted by a scythe blade coming for his neck, which he dodged in the last second. The blond jinchuriki saw a strange figure wearing a priestly black robe, and its face obscured by a white skull mask with red marking and fox ears. There was a large scythe on its hands, whose blade glowed with chakra.

"What the hell...? Who are you?" Naruto asked.

But the only response he got was another charge, followed by vicious scythe swings. As Naruto defended from this newcomer, he felt the ground under his feet tremble. Years of experience and dealing with Earth Release users made him know instantly the ground wasn't safe anymore. And true to his instincts, something burst from underground seconds after jumping, a giant snake, also wearing a white and red mask.

"What the hell are these things?" Naruto said, as he landed on a nearby branch. From his vantage point, he could see that Dark Naruto was still immobilized, but he knew those seals wouldn't last forever. He needed to get rid of these creatures as soon as possible.

However, before he could formulate a plan, he was alerted by a low pitched growl. Turning around, he saw a masked tiger leaping at him. Naruto had no time to react, and the tiger's rush knocked him out of the branch, and fell to the ground with a loud thud.

"Shit... !" He cursed, as he tried to get back on his feet, before those three creatures would attack him again.

Meanwhile, several meters above them, Fu continued fighting her doppleganger. She tried to smash her with her giant oak log, but Dark Fu proved to be exceptionally fast and nimble, dodging all of Fu's swings with insulting ease.

"Seriously, girl, you need to stop," Dark Fu stated. "You're embarrassing both of us with this display. You can't hit me with that, and even if you did, you lack the strength to cause me any sort of damage."

"Interesting theory. Let's put it to test then!" Fu said, as she brought down her mighty oak log onto Dark Fu. However, much to her surprise, Dark Fu managed to catch the log on the other end with her bare hands. Surprise that only grew when the log was pulled out of her hands, and casually tossed away.

"You were saying?" Dark Fu boasted. "Honestly, it's amazing that you managed to last as long as you did. Jinchuriki stronger and more skilled than you fell to the Akatsuki. Do you think that's fair?"

"No, it's not," Fu replied, as she charged forward. "But it's not my fault that they were captured! Hurricane Punch!"

Fu delivered a wind-enhanced punch that released a violent burst of air, but Dark Fu managed to dodge it expertly.

"I'm not blaming you. But you have to admit that you're very lucky indeed. You had the entirety of Konoha covering your back. How many Konoha ninjas did die protecting your sorry existence? How

many more died while trying to reconquer the pitiful attempt at a ninja village you call a home?"

"Don't you dare to badmouth Taki!" Fu hollered, as she delivered a roundhouse kick.

Kick that Dark Fu easily blocked. "Why? I'm only telling the truth. You've been in both Taki and Konoha. Deep down, you know how a true village must be. Besides, why do you defend Taki so much? It's not that you have people there that like you, other than Shibuki. Your friends and boyfriend are all from Konoha."

"Just because I haven't made friends in Taki doesn't mean I won't ever will!" Fu replied, delivering a combo of fast punches and kicks.

Combo that once again, was also blocked by her dark counterpart. "Keep telling yourself that. After all, you aren't even sure if those Konoha brats are your friends, or they merely hang out with you out of something else. Maybe they just pity you, and deep down they want nothing to do with you."

"Shut up!" Fu shouted, as she made a hand seal, while exhaling a cloud of glittering scales. "Hiding in Scale Powder Jutsu!"

Fu clapped her hands once, and the dark forest was filled with a bright, blinding light. Taking advantage of the sudden light, Fu charged forward, ready to deliver a punch to the head. However, said punch was easily caught by the hand of her enemy.

"Seriously? Are you trying to use such a childish tactic against me?" Dark Fu chided. She shook her head. "If your so-called friends could watch you now... what would they say?"

"They would cheer me on!" Fu replied, tried tom punch with her evil twin with her other hand, but the result was the same.

"Please, don't make me laugh. You met this world's version of Shino. Somebody who speaks non stop and never shuts up. Didn't you find

him annoying? Boring? Now think that's how people feel when they have to suffer your presence!"

Dark Fu started to spin her good counterpart in a circle, before violently tossing her down. Fu fell like a meteor, crashing against the ground with a loud crash, raising a cloud of dirt and dust, and opening a large crater. However, the dust cloud was immediately dispelled as Fu shot upwards almost as fast as she fell down. Fu's eyes glinted with a golden light, and they were surrounded by green marks in the shape of butterfly wings.

"Naruto had such a good idea of leaving Shadow Clones gathering nature energy. With Sage Mode, these guys stand no chance against us!" Fu thought, as she delivered yet another punch at her foe's face.

Once again, Dark Fu caught her good counterpart's fist with her hand. Fu expected the hand to be blown up from the rest of the arm due the sheer force, but such thing didn't happen. Dark Fu's hand gripped Fu's fist firmly.

"What!? How can you...?" Fu asked in shock.

"Aw, Sage Mode didn't work?" Dark Fu teased, much to the green haired girl's surprise. "Look closely."

Fu did so, and much to her horror, realized that Dark Fu's eyes were no longer red, but golden, and had green marks around the eyes shaped like butterfly wings.

"You have Sage Mode too!?" Fu asked in shock.

"Weren't you listening to me at the beginning of the fight? I'm the real you. Everything you do, I can do better. Sage Mode included," Dark Fu boasted, as her grip around Fu's fist tightened. "It would do you some good if you listened once in a while instead of talking all the time!"

Dark Fu then grabbed Fu's wrist with her other hand, pulled her violently, and tossed her against a nearby tree. The impact was so brutal, it blew a hole on the tree, caused its upper part to topple down.

Meanwhile, Naruto, already in Sage Mode as well, was fending off Dark Naruto's masked beasts, when he saw Fu being brutally tossed against a tree. He didn't see where she landed, though she could sense she was still alive.

"FU!" Naruto yelled, while kicking the masked tiger, hurling it against a tree.

"Spiraling Ring of Terror!"

Naruto saw a dark purple sphere of chakra with pure white rings circling around it flying against him. Pumping chakra into his feet, the blond jumped just in time before the attack connected, creating a big explosion that carved a large crater into the ground, while obliterating the trees, rocks and bushes around the blast zone.

"Wow... such power..." Naruto said in awe, before landing on the grass.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Dark Naruto proudly said. "And that's nothing but a smidge of my actual power. Though I must thank you for using Sage Mode. With it, my jutsu can reach an even greater level."

"What the...?" Naruto asked, upon noticing Dark Naruto's golden eyes and orange marks around them. "You can use Sage Mode too!?"

"I believe we already went through this," the evil doppelganger said. He made a hand seal. "Time to end this nonsense!"

The three masked creatures from before landed behind Naruto, while six more landed around him. Some of them were more animals, like one who looked like a bird and another that resembled

a mix between a dragon and a seahorse, though the others appeared to be human.

"If you think numbers are on your side, then think again! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto made his favorite hand seal, and a hundred clones appeared besides him. Albeit none of them had Sage Mode like the original.

"You must think I'm impressed," Dark Naruto deadpanned, as he mimicked Naruto, and created another hundred clones of his own. "Everybody, attack!"

Both armies of clones and the nine masked creatures charged forwards, clashing in the middle, resulting in a brutal melee battle. The air was filled by a cacophony of shouts, yells, and steel clashing against steel as both armies fought relentlessly.

" *This is just a distraction. If I can reach the real one, it will be over,*" Naruto thought, before making several hand seals. "Wind Release: Riding the Hurricane!"

A tornado formed around Naruto's legs as he started to elevate above the crowd. However, before he could gain more altitude, a white translucent ribbon wrapped around his body, pinning his arms to it.

"What the...?" Naruto asked, looking at the source of the deceptively strong bind, and saw it was one of the masked creatures. This one, another humanoid dressed like a priestess. He tried to struggle, but was unable to. "Hey, a little help over here!"

Some of the clones heard Naruto's plea and tried to get closer in order to release him, but sadly they were cut down by the Dark Naruto clones and some of the remaining masked creatures. To add to his distress, he saw Fu's battered body crashing into the ground near the battlefield, with her evil counterpart happily landing besides her. Then, she grabbed the green haired girl's neck, and in one swift motion, she snapped it.

"NO!" Naruto screamed.

Fu's dropped with a thud, and it instantly turned into a cloud of glowing white dust that dispelled in a few seconds.

"Guess that this one couldn't defeat the darkness within her," Dark Fu said in a mocking tone. She then looked at the ongoing battle. "So, are you going to finish him already, or what?"

"Yeah, just give me a second," Dark Naruto said, as he walked towards the immobile Naruto. "This one can't beat his darkness either."

"Shut up! This is nothing! I can still beat you!" Naruto shouted as he futilely tried to break free of his bindings.

"Because you're so good, right? Because you think you're the hero that will save your village," Dark Naruto sneered. "You abandoned your friends when you found them annoying. And ignored your father when he warned you that you'll only find death coming here."

"Those weren't the real versions of my friends or my dad! I would never do that to them!" Naruto protested.

"They're as real as I am," the black haired young man said, as he extended a hand. Another purple sphere with white rings formed around his fingers. "Sorry Naruto, but you can't defeat me. Now perish. Spiraling Ring of Terror!"

In a split second, Dark Naruto crossed the distance that separated them and smashed his jutsu into Naruto's chest, resulting in a massive explosion. And after that... nothing.

...

Real World

"Wha!"

"Aaaaaah!"

Naruto and Fu screamed, before scanning their surroundings, and realized that they were no longer in the Forest of Death. Instead, they were back on the small island in the lake of the Falls of Truth. Naruto instinctively reached his hand to his chest, and Fu to her neck. Both of them found much to their relief that they were okay.

"Hey!" Motoi's voice called, as he ran towards them. "You okay?"

"Y-Yeah," Naruto replied, still processing what happened.

"Hey, how is that it suddenly became daytime?" Fu asked, looking at the bright sky.

Motoi couldn't help but chuckle. "Because in the mental world you've been in, time passes differently. I take you've been a whole day inside the mental world, right? However, from our point of view, only a couple minutes passed."

"I see," Naruto replied.

"Don't worry if you didn't got it on your first try, your inner darkness is no small fry!" Killer B rapped as he joined them.

"How did you know we failed?" Fu asked.

"You sour faces are easy to read, it's easy to tell that you didn't do the deed," Killer B replied. "But you don't have to worry, you can try again, there's no reason to be sorry!"

"But first you should try to rest a bit," Motoi helpfully offered. "The experience must have been draining. Trying immediately won't net you better results."

"Sure thing, Motoi-san," Naruto said, as he got up and started to walk away. "Fu, you coming?"

"Yeah," Fu said, her voice lacking her usual enthusiasm.

As the Konoha and Taki jinchuriki walked away, the two Kumo ninja watched them. They could see their body language was nothing like how they were before taking the trial. The energy they carried themselves with was nowhere to be found. Whatever happened in that mental world had crushed them.

"Facing their inner darkness nearly broke them," Motoi observed. "Let's hope they can succeed with time. I don't think we can win this war without their power."

The normally talkative Kumo ninja remained silent, merely observing his fellow jinchuriki walking away.

Author's Note: And thus, Naruto and Fu failed at their first attempt at defeating their inner darkness. You didn't expect to succeed at their first try, did you? That's not something it can be beat with brute force alone. Though, the key to beat them isn't the same as in canon (I wanted to be a little original), and I dropped a few hints over what they need to do to win.

So, what do you think about my take on the alternate Konoha 15? Some of them were the same as in the movie because I loved them (Hinata and Sasuke were my favorites), others were changed because I didn't like much (like Lee or Shino), and others, like Sakura or Haku, had to create from the ground up since they didn't exist. Don't worry, if you want to see more of them, they will be back the next chapter.

Originally, I had the idea of featuring an alive Minato and Kushina like in the movie (though Minato would still be the Hokage), but given that this Naruto hasn't meet his biological parents in person yet, meeting a pair of fakes first would cheapen the moment. Plus that allowed me to use an alternate Jiraiya, and I loved to write a Jiraiya that's a super prude when it comes to women XD

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Anyway, how do you like the first half of my version of Road to Ninja? How about the alternate Konoha 15, do you like them? Which one is your favorite? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Road to Ninja, Part II

Author's Note: Man, this Coronavirus thing turned out to be far more serious business than what most of us believed. My country is pretty much in state of alert, a lot of businesses have been forced to close their doors for the time being, and you can even get fined if you're on the street without a good reason. Plenty of events have been cancelled or delayed because of this pandemic.

But do you know what HASN'T been cancelled or postponed? This fanfic! Yeah, I know is not a lot, but hope that, at least, it will keep you entertained and distracted from the flow of bad news for some time. Enjoy the second part of my Road to Ninja Adaptation:

Chapter 98:

Road to Ninja, Part II

or

Battle of the Fake Doubles

Konoha, Hyuga Estate

Jiraiya watched how the Moon Acolytes unfurled a massive scroll onto the estate's main yard. On the scroll was an equally large sealing array arranged in circular patterns, which formed a portal gate that would teleport whoever stepped on it to another portal, allegedly in the Moon. So far, very few people knew about its existence until now, Jiraiya being among the privileged few.

"I had my best seal masters study this scroll, but they were barely able to decipher it," Jiraiya inwardly lamented, as he saw the scroll

completely unfurl. *"The secrets of teleportation, right into our very hands..."*

Everything was ready for her departure. The team that would escort Hinata to the Moon would be led by Shisui Uchiha, since Jiraiya felt they would need another Sage (the fact that they had to send two Sages so far away from the front lines hurt immensely), Sai, since his jutsu could provide easy aerial transportation (fortunately, they weren't as lacking in that department, as they had many ninjas that could summon flying animals), several Hyugas that volunteered for the job, such as Tokuma, and several Moon Acolytes, Nori among them.

Naturally, most of the Hyuga Clan was there, ready to bid Hinata good luck on her mission.

"The Moon Portal is ready, Hinata-sama," Takuya told the Hyuga Clan Head. "Step into the circle of seals, and we'll activate it."

"How safe it is?" Hikari asked. "I would hate if my daughter and her companions ended up floating in the outer space or something like that."

"Worry not, Hikari-sama, we have tested this portal multiple times," Nori assured her. "We wouldn't risk any life, much less Hinata-sama's, on such venture if there were risks like that."

"Good luck up there, nee-chan," Hanabi said, as she walked towards her sister and gave her a hug.

"I'm sorry I have to leave on such a critical moment, Hanabi-chan," Hinata said, hugging her sister back. "I'll try to get back as soon as I can, so we can fight in this war together."

"Don't worry about me, I have a Tenseigan too, I can take care of myself," Hanabi replied. "If that creep shows up, I'll give him a beating on your behalf. Now that I have Sage Mode, that guy won't be able to even touch me."

Hinata smiled at her. "I'm sure he won't."

They broke the hug, and Hinata walked towards the rest of her group, who were already standing inside the circle of seals.

"Begin the teleportation process!" Takuya commanded.

The Hyugas and Moon Acolytes placed around the circle of seals brought their hands together, and started to channel chakra into the circle. The seals started to glow with a white and blue light, and in a bright flash, they were gone.

"The teleportation has been a success," Takuya announced. "Now, all we can do is pray that they succeed in their endeavor."

"Good to hear that," Jiraiya said with a nod. "Now that that's out of the way, we can focus on the war here. I think it's about time for the army of the Ninja Alliance to gather."

...

Turtle Island

After a night of sleep followed by some light sparring with Killer B, Naruto and Fu were in front of the Falls of Truth once again. They weren't sitting on the lake's small island, though. After the experience in the mental world, the sight of the waterfall induced them a sense of respect that they lacked before. While Naruto paced around, trying to think in strategies that would help him deal with his dark half, Fu was sitting at the edge of the lake, skipping stones across it.

"So, if we go beforehand and boobytrap the arena..." Naruto wondered aloud, even if he was talking to himself. "No, they would see through that. For some reason, they know what we're going to do before we even do it."

"How about switching opponents?" Fu suggested, as she tossed another stone across the lake's surface, bouncing many times until it sank with a splash. "Your evil twin won't know what I will do or how to counter it."

"I don't think they'll let us," Naruto said, shaking his head. "Besides, wouldn't be that like cheating?"

"How so?" Fu asked, turning her head at the blond.

"Well, we're supposed to fight them ourselves," Naruto said. "Imagine if we had to do this alone. We wouldn't be able to rely on the other for help. Meaning that, even if we fight together, we'll have to beat our respective dark sides ourselves."

"Yeah, guess that makes sense," Fu admitted, as she dejectedly tossed another stone. This one bounced fewer times before it sank. "Should we ask B for tips?"

"I already did," Naruto replied. "He said it's different for everybody, and that we need to figure it out ourselves."

"Poop," Fu childishly said, before tossing yet another stone.

"I think we aren't taking the right approach," Naruto pondered, as he rested his chin under his hand. "These guys are the embodiment of our inner darkness. They can't be beaten through brute strength alone. The question is: how do we beat our inner darkness?"

"By... being kind?" Fu offered, though she sounded unsure. "Because that's all what I have."

Suddenly, a realization dawned upon Naruto. "Wait, that's it! Of course we've been doing this all wrong!" the blond said, excited. "We can't beat our inner darkness with violence, but with kindness! We need to show them that we're stronger than them not because of our fists or jutsu, but because they have no power over us."

"That... makes a lot of sense," Fu agreed. A grin developed on her lips. "Come on, let's do it!"

"Yeah!"

Both Naruto and Fu sat once again on the small island, adopted the lotus position, and closed their eyes. Soon, their minds were no longer inside their bodies, but on another plane of reality.

...

A few minutes later

"Turn out that wasn't the way to beat them," Naruto said, tiredly lying on the grass.

"Yeah. We should have guessed that being our dark sides and all that, they would use our kindness to backstab us," Fu lamented, also lying down on the grass. "You know, at least it's a good thing that our friends from the mental world didn't remember the previous day. Or else they'd be mad at us for walking on them the first time at the restaurant..."

"Guess that, since they don't really exist, they don't have long term memory," Naruto concluded, before letting out a sigh. "Back to square one."

"You know, I have the feeling that we're missing something..." Fu said, standing up and walking towards the edge of the lake.

"Yeah, I have that feeling too," Naruto replied. "And I've never been one to solve mysteries. Hinata-hime and Haku always got that part covered."

"Same with me and my Shino. He's so smart... I'm sure that he could figure this out in an instant," Fu said, kicking the water lazily. "Maybe we could ask his other counterpart? But given how much he talks I don't think he'll even let me do the question to begin with."

"Well, we could try-" Naruto began, before suddenly going silent. His eyes grew big as a smile developed on his face as a realization dawned upon him. "Hey, that's it! If we can't do it alone, then we can ask others for help!"

"Wait, I thought you said that was cheating," Fu replied.

"It may be, but I think it's the key to everything," Naruto said, his excitement growing by the moment. "Suddenly I remembered something the evil me said. Come on!"

Naruto then pulled Fu by the wrist and dragged her towards the island in the middle.

"Whoa! Calm down! I can walk on my own!" Fu protested, shaking her wrist free. "Okay, so what are we supposed to do?"

"Let's do the same thing we did during the first time, but when we're at the restaurant, follow my lead, okay?" Naruto asked.

"You got it," Fu said with a nod.

Naruto and Fu sat besides each other in the lotus position on the small island, and closed their eyes. Soon, their minds abandoned their bodies and traveled to a different world.

...

Mental World

Once again, Naruto woke up in his bedroom, or the equivalent of his bedroom, inside the mental world. This time, he merely bid his mother a quick "good morning", had a nice breakfast, and headed outside. After creating a clone and send it to look for Fu, Naruto headed towards his team's training grounds. Just like he expected, the rest of his teammates were there.

"Hey there, handsome," Hinata said, using the same seductive tone as in the same time. Naruto, however, knew that that sweetness was

actually a honey trap. "I was afraid you wouldn't come. What took you so long?"

"Sorry babe, I had a dream with you and I didn't want to wake up," Naruto said, giving her a peck on the lips. "But then I thought that having the real one between my arms would be better."

Hinata's face turned beet red, as she averted her eyes and her lips formed a wide smile. "Oh, Naruto-kun, you always know what to say to make me feel special."

" *Well, that reaction is more Hinata-like,*" Naruto thought. He then looked at Haku, who was impatiently waiting for the two lovebirds to stop greeting each other and get on with the training. "Hey Haku, looking good! Have you been working out on your own?"

The Ice Ninja beamed upon hearing the compliment. He then suppressed the smile, and tried to turn it into a smug grin. "Yeah, I did! Of course you noticed, didn't you?"

"Hehe, it's hard not to!" Naruto chuckled. "Say, how about a one on one? I want to test how strong you've become!"

"You're on!" Haku eagerly said.

Kurenai shook her head, but chuckled in mild amusement. "Well, it seems that the boys are fired up today. Do you want to spar against me, Hinata?"

"I guess I have no other choice," the Hyuga said with a shrug.

And thus, the training began. While Hinata fought against Kurenai, Naruto faced Haku. Naruto made sure to compliment the Ice Ninja and to measure his own attacks, careful not to hurt the poor guy's fragile ego. After an hour or so, Hinata requested a change, and Naruto went to spar with her. This time, however, he decided that the aggressive Hyuga wouldn't appreciate if he held back against her. Which wasn't a very good idea either, since whenever Naruto landed

a solid hit, Hinata would moan and gush about how strong Naruto was.

" *Geez, let's hope the real Hinata isn't a masochist deep down,*" Naruto thought, cringing a little.

After the second sparring matches, Kurenai decided it was time for some teamwork exercises. Something Naruto was extra careful with, and made sure they went down without a hitch. When the sun was at its highest, Kurenai decided to stop.

"Today has been a pretty productive training. You guys appear to be extra motivated. Good work, you three," the raven haired woman praised. Her three students nodded and smiled proudly. "Say, how about we meet again after lunch? In the meantime, I'll see if there are any missions for us to do."

"As you say, Kurenai-sensei," Naruto nodded, as he saw his sensei walking away. "So, you guys want to eat? Because I'm starving!"

"Yeah, me too," Haku agreed. "Icharaku's?"

"Sounds good, but... I feel like eating with more people, you know? It's been a while since we did that," Naruto suggested. "I could send a clones to our former classmates, and have all of them meet us at Yakiniku-Q. The place's pretty big."

"We almost never eat with our former classmates," Hinata pointed out. "What's the occasion?"

" *Yeah, I can see why,*" Naruto inwardly deadpanned. "I dunno. I feel like having a big meal with everybody else."

"You seem to be in a very good mood today, Naruto," Haku pointed out. "Did something good happen to you today?"

"What, can't I just happen to be in a good mood?" Naruto replied, though trying not to sound too defensive.

Hinata wrapped her arms around the blond. "If you're so happy today, I won't be the one to sour your mood. We'll eat with the others if that's what you want."

"Heh, I knew I could count on you, Hime," Naruto replied, smiling.

...

An hour later, Yakiniku-Q

Just like the time before, the first team to arrive was Team Kakashi, with Fu in tow. And like the last time, Shino was telling his day to Fu.

"... before Kiba was slammed against a tree. Our training has been pretty good. Kiba and Tamaki didn't fight as much as they usually do, and guess what? When Kiba smashed his face against that tree, it broke its bark, and I managed to found several green beetles lurking underneath. Did you know that green beetles are extremely rare in the Land of Fire? And speaking of rare, I hope that this time they don't burn my order, since I only like medium..."

Naruto, sitting between Hinata and Fu, could see how both ladies were starting to grow exasperated, and just like before, Hinata was ready to tear the Aburame's head apart with her bare hands. However, before that could happen, he leaned onto Fu, and whispered into her ear.

"Hey, I know that you prefer to be the one to talks rather than the one who listens, but... could you try to humor Shino just this time?" Naruto told Fu.

"What? Are you kidding me?" Fu whispered back in shock.

"I know, but this is part of my plan. Trust me, if everything goes well, this will be of a huge help later," Naruto reassured her.

"Hey, what the hell are you two whsipering!" Hinata screeched.

"If you say so," Fu said, unsure of what her fellow jinchuriki was planning, but decided to play along. She turned at her not-boyfriend, and smiled. "That sounds mostly interesting, Shino. Can you tell me more about those new beetles you found?"

A huge smile developed on Shino's face. Seeing the normally stoic Aburame (the real one at least) making such a display was unsettling to the point of creepyness.

"Really? Wow, nobody really ever told me that!" Shino excitedly said. He gathered his thoughts, and started his explanation. "You see these kind of beetles usually leave in areas with a very specific climatological contidionts, which happen mostly in the are between the Land of Waterfall and..."

Shino continued to talk nonstop, though he seemed to address solely Fu rather than everybody else, much to their collective relief. Still, Naruto knew that he wasn't out of hot water yet, since he had to address his temperamental and jealousy-prone not-girlfriend.

"I was telling Fu that he should try to listen to her boyfriend a little more," Naruto said in a reassuring tone. "Sorry if I made it look like something different."

Hinata glared at him, but her scowl disappeared. It seemed she accepted the explanation. "Well, given that she'st his girlfriend, it should be her job to listen to that chatterbox of a boyfriend, and let he rest of us in peace."

The door of the restaurant opened again, and like it happened before, Shizune's Medical Squad entered.

"Hello there, ladies, your man Sasuke is here!" Sasuke said, winking at Hinata, Tamaki and Fu just like he did before. And seeing it again didn't make it any less jarring. "You don't need to fight for me, there's enough Sasuke for everybody."

"Don't begin!" Sakura chastised. "You know, if you dedicated half the time you spend trying to get on every girl's pants to become a better ninja, you would be Jonin already!"

"Come on, you need to relax a little, and enjoy the finer pleasures of life," Sasuke said, as he tried to put an arm around Sakura, which she quickly pushed away. "If you weren't so obsessed with training and being a better ninja so much, people would like you better."

"Sasuke, I think Sakura is right," Naruto interceded. "Plus your constant flirting makes many of the girls here uncomfortable. Try to rein your impulses in."

"Ha!" Sakura laughed, emboldened by the blond's support. "I told you I wasn't the only one to think like that. Thanks for agreeing with me, Naruto. I knew a ninja of your skill would see that I'm the one in the right."

"Though, even if I find admirable how much time and effort you put into being a better ninja, nobody is forced to follow your pace," Naruto added. "There are other things in life besides training and missions. Like friends and having fun."

"Heh, I knew my man Naruto wouldn't let me down!" Sasuke replied, now being the one emboldened. Naruto cringed upon hearing the Uchiha calling him 'his man'. "You had to, otherwise you wouldn't be dating that blue haired wild beast."

"Wanna see how much of a 'wild beast' I am, Uchiha?" Hinata seethed, as she activated her Byakugan for added emphasis.

Naruto merely grabbed Hinata's hand, and the temperamental Hyuga quickly calmed down.

"Please, let's try to eat in peace," Fu intervened, briefly pausing his conversation with Shino.

"There's no peace in such a place of death and blood like this one," Karin firmly said.

"Come on Karin, I'm sure that there are places far worse than a mere barbecue restaurant," Fu said, before the redhead could go on a gloomy and long winded rant. "Plus, we all know you love meat."

Karin wanted to say something in response, but she merely shrugged and sat down. "Alas, disarmed before I could even begin an argument. Like a little chick tragically killed before it can grow up into an eagle and learn to fly."

That seemed to be the end of it. Though Naruto knew that his job was only halfway done. And the next challenge appeared when Asuma's Tactical Squad entered the restaurant, with Choji and Shikamaru arguing about something, and Ino trying and failing to play the peacekeeper.

"Why did you drag me to this place?" Choji complained. "You know I hate the food they serve here."

"It's not just for the food, but all our friends are here," Shikamaru said. "Why do you have to act as if you're better than everybody else?"

"I'm not acting like I'm better than anybody else, I just expressed my dislike of this restaurant," Choji insisted. "You know, your inferiority complex can be quite grating at times."

"Who are you calling inferior-"

"Now, now, let's not fight, okay?" Ino softly asked, placing a hand on each of the boys' shoulder. "All of our friends are here, let's try to have a good time."

"Come on guys, Ino is right," Naruto interceded, much to the Yamanaka's gratitude. "You just entered here. You can't have such a shitty attitude."

"Easy for you to say. Nobody is forcing you to go to a restaurant specialized in food you don't like," Choji replied, crossing his arms indignantly.

"That's because nobody feeds exclusively on salad and egg yolk like you do, Choji," Shikamaru said, rolling his eyes.

"You know, Choji, while this is a barbecue restaurant, they do have salads and other kind of dishes low on fat or with no meat," Naruto pointed out.

The fit Akimichi was taken aback. "They do?"

"You can check the menu if you don't believe me," Naruto said, handing it to Choji.

"Come on man, you aren't going to die if you don't eat salad one day," Shikamaru protested.

"Hey, let Choji eat what he wants," Fu interceded. "In what way does whatever he eats affects you?"

"I just wanted to enjoy himself once in a while, that's it," Shikamaru said defensively.

"Maybe he enjoys eating healthier food. Haven't you think of that?" Naruto asked.

"Thank you," Choji said, giving Shikamaru a dirty eye.

"Now, now, let's stop arguing. People here seems to be in a good mood today. Let's relax and have some fun, okay?" Ino asked.

Both Shikamaru and Choji wordlessly nodded, and the three of them sat alongside the rest of their former classmates. Naruto couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief.

" *Well, one more team to go. Fortunately, this one shouldn't be too hard,*" the blond thought, just moments before the restaurant door

opened once again, and the last members of the not-Konoha 15, Gai's Close Combat Squad, made their presence known.

"Tenten-chan!" Haku jumped upon seeing his girlfriend, rushed towards her, and gave her a very passionate kiss. "Hey everybody, my girlfriend is here! Yeah, I have a girlfriend! And I wouldn't if I wasn't so manly!"

"Now, now, Haku-kun, we talked about this, didn't we?" Tenten said in a mildly chastising but very gentle tone. "If you let your insecurities rule your life, you shall never be happy. You need to learn to look inside, and find your inner beauty and strength. Which is what I did."

"You should listen to your girlfriend, Haku," Fu chimed in. "She likes you for what you are, not for what you're pretending to be."

"See? Everybody else also thinks I'm right," Tenten said, before turning her head at Fu and nodding in gratitude.

"I guess so. Sorry, I kind of forget about that," Haku replied, rubbing the back of his head. His enthusiasm didn't disappear, though.

"Come on sit besides me! So, tell me, how was your day? You've been training, yes?" Haku asked.

"I've been training in my medical arts. Because why harm, when you can heal? It's much more rewarding," Tenten replied. Despite not being the first time he heard it, it was still weird for Naruto to reconcile the real Tenten with this one. "My teammates haven't trained either. Lee has been all the time sleeping under a tree, and I bet Neji has been using his Byakugan to watch other girls' underwear."

"Tenten, you goddamn tattletale! Why do you have to tell them that?" Neji protested, before realizing what he just said. "Er, I mean... how do you know I was peeping on girls? You were focused on your book all the time, you couldn't tell what I was doing!"

"You were standing in the same spot for two hours straight, and you chuckled perversely from time to time," Tenten replied. "One doesn't need to be a genius to know what you were doing."

"She's right, Neji," Lee added.

"Shut up! You were asleep the whole time! How can you tell if she's right or not?" Neji protested again.

"How can you waste the time sleeping like that, Lee?" Shikamaru intervened. "You should use that time to train so you can soar to new heights! Man, if I only had a quarter of the talent you possess, with my hard work I'll be Konoha's top ninja!"

"Eh, it's too tiresome. Why train when you're as strong as I am?" Lee said with a shrug. Though Naruto could tell he wasn't really boasting, his laziness was really irritating Shikamaru. "Besides, we're living in an age of peace. It's not like we're going to be needed for any future conflict."

"That's irrelevant! Hard work is a reward on itself! The satisfaction of achieving something with the sweat of your brow! Of moving forward! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"ENOUGH!" Naruto yelled, raising his voice above everybody else. A deafening silence fell upon them, as they stared at the blond in both fear and awe. His eyes rested on Neji first. "Neji, your behavior has no excuse."

"Ha! You tell him, Naruto-kun!" Hinata boasted, though Naruto ignored her.

"And Lee, no matter how strong you think you are, training, even just a little, is a must for a ninja," Naruto told him. "You don't have to train your body to death, but enough to keep yourself in shape. Remember that we don't work alone, the lives of our comrades depend on us."

"Oh... I haven't realized that," Lee said, sounding a little ashamed.

"Thanks for agreeing with me, Naruto. I knew you would," Shikamaru said with a nod.

"Don't think you're in the right here, Shikamaru," Naruto said, as he turned towards the Nara heir. "I find your dedication to training and being a better ninja encomiable, but like I said before, not everybody needs to spend every second they have training. Let everybody spend their free time as they see fit. Don't go imposing on others."

"I..." Shikamaru wanted to protest, but found himself disarmed of any argument. "Yeah, you're right. That wasn't very nice of me, was it?"

"Hey, it's okay, just don't do it again," Naruto replied, smiling reassuringly. "Now come on, let's sit, eat, talk, and have a good time!"

Unlike the first time they were there, the meeting didn't devolve into a cacophony of screaming contests. And whenever it threatened to, Naruto and sometimes Fu were quick to play the peacekeeper role before things could escalate. But overall, everybody ate in peace and had a very good time. Now that Naruto had finally set the proper mood, it was about time to set his plan in motion. He hoped that it would work.

"Hey everybody, may I have your attention?" Naruto asked, as he stood up. Everybody dropped what they were doing, and looked at him. "Let's say, Fu and I had a little jinchuriki problem, and we were hoping that you could help us with it..."

...

Forest of Death, that night

Just like they did the previous times, Naruto and Fu landed on the arena marked by a circle of lit torches. Unlike the other times,

thought, their dark counterparts were already there, rather than waiting to make a dramatic entrance.

"Hey look, they came back for more," Dark Naruto chuckled. "You guys think third time's the charm?"

"So, what's going to be this time?" Dark Fu jeered. "Because boy, trying to befriend us the last time was so fucking gold! That's going to be hard to top!"

"You know Naruto, he thinks he can talk his enemies into surrendering and being friends," Dark Naruto said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, that was dumb on my part, trying to be kind to the literal embodiment of my evil," Naruto admitted. "That's why we decided to go back to the first idea and give you a good ass whooping."

Their dark counterparts merely chuckled.

"Well, it works for us," said Dark Fu said with an evil grin, as she cracked her knuckles.

Dark Naruto, meanwhile, made the tiger seal. "Though this time, let's skip the warm up and jump directly into the fun. Nine Masked Beasts!"

A massive mandala appeared behind Dark Naruto, with nine kanjis inside nine rings, arrayed in a cross pattern. The circled kanjis started to glow, turning into portals that summoned the creatures that Dark Naruto had used during their previous fight.

"Come on, I'd love to see what kind of strategy you guys came up with in order to desperately close the gigantic gap between you and us," Dark Naruto chuckled. "Attack!"

The nine masked monsters all lunged at Naruto and Fu, who made no effort to dodge or defend, much to their dark counterparts

bemusement. Not just that, but they looked fairly confident in their chances. That moment, Naruto quickly made an arm wave.

"Vacuum Palm Wall!"

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Ice Release: Testosterone Blizzard!"

The nine charging monsters were hit by a destructive wave of fire, ice and vacuum that resulted in multiple blasts that knocked them backwards. It wasn't enough to put them down for good, but the attack did some serious harm to them.

"What?" Dark Naruto asked in shock. "Just how...?"

"You can come out, guys!" Fu called, clapping her hands twice.

That moment, the rest of the alternate Konoha 15 left their hiding spots, and landed besides Naruto and Fu. All of them were in fighting stances, ready to battle.

"What? You brought those guys into the battle?" Dark Fu asked in shock. "But... but... you can't do that! That's cheating!"

"Says who?" the green haired girl challenged. "The fact that they can stay here and that their attacks can harm you tells me that we can use their help to take you down. Otherwise, the Waterfall wouldn't allow it."

"What was that thing you told me during our first encounter? That they were as real as you are?" Naruto asked in a mocking tone.

"Thanks for the advice, by the way."

Dark Naruto didn't say anything in response. He merely gritted his teeth and growled something inaudible.

"So... this are the guys you told us about?" Hinata asked. "Your dark sides?"

"Yep, that's them," Naruto confirmed.

"That raises a lot of questions," Shino began. "Like how they came to exist, for starters. Were they always living inside you, or did they exist as separate entities? Do we need to kill them, or should we keep them alive in order to seal them back into the originals? The metaphysical implications to such-"

Fu stopped Shino's rambling by placing a finger on his lips. "Shino, honey, forget about irrelevant questions. Just help us beat them. That's all we need to do."

"Okay. But I want an explanation after this is over," Shino demanded.

"So, Hinata, ready to take down the evil me?" Naruto asked his not-girlfriend.

"Aw, but he just looks like you. Such a handsome face. I don't think I can't bring myself to hurt him when he looks so much like you," Hinata said with a somewhat dramatic pout.

"In that case, try to imagine he did something that infuriated you," Naruto said. "Maybe a version of me who cheated on you with Sakura."

Hinata didn't have to picture such scenario in her mind in order to make her blood boil.

"YOU'RE SO FUCKING DEAD!" Hinata bellowed, as she activated her Byakugan and leaped at the black haired Naruto.

"Hinata, wait- oh shit, she's going to get herself killed," Naruto said, shaking his head. "Everybody else, attack!"

The rest of the alternate Konoha 15 members leaped into the nascent battle. The nine masked beast had completely recovered, and rushed to aid their masters. However, Both Dark Naruto and

Dark Fu knew that they no longer held the advantage in this battle. Naruto and Fu had found the key to victory.

"Shit, there's no way we can beat so many people!" Dark Fu said in panick. She turned at her partner in crime. "What are we going to do?"

"For the time being, fight! These guys don't matter! If we can kill Naruto and Fu, victory will be ours!" Dark Naruto said, as he charged forwards while creating an army of Shadow Clones, with Dark Fu reluctantly following him.

"Try to focus on those creatures while we take care of our evil selves!" Naruto told the alternate version of his friends.

"Though if you can lend us a hand against them, we would appreciate it a lot!" Fu added.

And thus, the huge battle began. Fu deployed her wings in an attempt to fly above the incoming army and reach her evil counterpart, but was stopped when a piece of cloth tightly wrapped against her legs, and pulled her down. It was one of those masked beings, the one who looked like a priestess. That's it, until a swarm of angry beetles descended and bit the cloth until it was cut, releasing the green haired girl.

"Thank you, Shino!" Fu said, giving her not-boyfriend a thumbs up.

"Anything for you. Now go and kick that fake's ass!" Shino encouraged her. "Though, if you're as strong as she is, how are you-"

Shino was interrupted when one of the masked creatures, shaped like a strange bird, swooped at him. The Aburame was forced to jump back. Waving his arms, he commanded his swarm to attack the incoming bird. However, it flapped its wings at a fast pace, creating a powerful gale that blew most of Shino's insects away.

"My beetles are of no use here!" Shino say no one in particular, as he took a step back while pulling a kunai. "What should I do, to defend myself from this nefarious beast? Alas, I must think how-"

Before the bird could skewer him with its talons, it was sent back flying by a powerful punch coming from a giant fist. The next second, Choji landed besides Shino.

"You know, you could have asked for help instead of going into an aimless ramble," Choji told Shino, before going after another enemy.

At another side of the battleground, two of Dark Naruto's masked creatures, who looked like monks wielding fox-shaped staves, had trapped Ino, Neji and Kiba inside a purple chakra barrier powered by seals. Kiba and Neji tried to break it by slashing it and hitting it with Gentle Fist strikes, but to no avail.

"What the hell this barrier is made of?" Kiba angrily cursed, as he continued delivering swipes.

"Guys, watch out!" Ino warned, pointing to one side.

The three ninja could see the scythe-wielding being leaped at them, and reared its scythe back, which started to glow with chakra.

"Can its attacks bypass the barrier?" Kiba asked incredulously.

"So it seems!" Neji said, as he prepared to take the hit.

However, just before the creature could attack, several chains wrapped around its body, immobilizing it completely, before he was violently launched against a tree. The chains then retracted back into their caster, Karin. Following that moment, Tamaki rushed towards them, followed by Akamaru.

"Come on Akamaru, let's save my boyfriend!" Tamaki happily shouted. "And Ino and Neji, I guess. Fang Passing Fang!"

Tamaki and Akamaru turned into living drills and lunged at the two staff wielding masked men, who were forced to jump back, undoing the barrier in the process.

"Thank you, Tamaki, I got them now!" Ino said, pointing her hands at them. "Mind Disturbance Jutsu!"

The masked creatures were paralyzed on the spot. They struggled to break free, but they were unable to overcome Ino's mind control.

"Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Plams!" Neji dashed towards the twin enemies, ready to unleash his most powerful combo. "Two strikes! Four strikes! Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! Thrity Two Strikes! SIXTY FOUR STRIKES!"

He finished the combo with a double palm hit in opposite directions, sending the two creatures flying away, until they crashed against a tree each.

"Three down," Ino said, pleased, before turning at Karin. "Thanks for your help, Karin-san. Your timing was impeccable."

"Whatever," the goth redhead said.

"Oh Kiba-kun, I was so worried when those meanies got you!" Tamaki said, as she rushed towards her beloved.

"Don't worry my love. Not even death itself can keep us apart for long!" Kiba replied.

"Of course, because I love you so much!" Tamaki replied.

"No, I love you more!"

"No, I love you more!"

"No, I love you more!"

"No, I love you more!"

The two of them started to passionately kiss each other, only stopping to breathe and exchange even more compliments, and to claim who loved the other more.

"Though in hindsight, I should have let that creature kill Kiba at the very least," Karin deadpanned.

Neither Neji nor Ino could disagree with her. Neji, however, perked up when his Byakugan picked up something.

"Over there! Watch out!" Neji warned.

Suddenly, a group of a dozen Dark Naruto clones leaped at them, each wielding different weapons, ready to strike. However, before they could a green blur intercepted them.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

The green blur, who was Rock Lee, delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to the clones. Even if he really didn't hit any, the kick carried so much force, it created a powerful shockwave that instantly dispelled the clones. The shockwave expanded into every direction, shattering nearby tree branches, and leaving deep gashes on the surrounding trees, resulting in a rain of shards of bark and sliced leaves, before landing in front of Neji, Ino, Kiba and Tamaki -the latter two were oblivious to what happened, as they continued with their make out session-.

"Wow, that was... amazing," Ino said in awe.

Suddenly, Lee dashed towards Ino and reared his fist back, ready to punch the surprised blond. However, rather than her face, his fist passed her left ear. Even if he did punch thin air, the punch carried so much force it created another shockwave, which blasted another of Dark Naruto's masked creatures, this one looking like a cross between a dragon and a seahorse, the force of the shockwave violently lunging it against a tree, which was snapped in two.

"Uh... t-thank you, Lee-kun," the shocked blond stammered.

"There, I did it, I contributed to the fight," Lee wearily said. "Can I go home now? I'm tired."

"Not now, Lee," another voice said, as Tenten clamly walked to the group. She made several hand seals, before slamming her hand into the ground. "Sealing Art: Safe Zone!"

A circle of seals formed around the group, as they started to glow with a green light. All the Konoha ninjas inside the circle were surrounded by a green healing aura that started to restore their forces.

"While I abhor fighting, I can still help you with my jutsu. If you're tired or injured, you can rest inside my Safe Zone," Tenten helpfully explained.

Meanwhile, Dark Fu was in the middle of fighting her good counterpart, Sasuke and Shikamaru.

"Shadow Binding Jutsu!" Shikamaru made a hand seal, as he send his shadow in the form of multiple tendrils to catch Dark Fu. "If this enemy is as strong as Fu, then it's going to be a fight worth remembering! I'm so pumped right now!"

Shikamaru's excitement caused his shadow tendrils to grow larger and travel faster, making Dark Fu's attempt to dodge them all the harder.

"Goddamit, I prefered you when you were a lazy ass!" the black haired girl complained. She was then alerted by the sound of a thousand birds chirping. Looking around, she saw Sasuke diving at her with his hand coated in electricity.

"Chidori!"

Before she could be impaled, Dark Fu managed to grab his wrist and using his own momentum, tossing him against a tree. However, Sasuke was able to land on his feet.

"The hell? How do you know how to use Kakashi's jutsu?" Dark Fu asked, incredulous.

"Interested? How about if I let me treat you to dinner tonight at a fancy place, and I tell you?" Sasuke asked, as he winked at her in a suggestive fashion.

"Goddamit Uchiha, that's the embodiment of my inner darkness you're trying to flirt with!" the real Fu protested.

Sasuke merely shrugged. "Hey, I don't judge anybody. Especially not pretty girls. And given that you have rejected all my advances for Shino's sake of all people, you can't blame me for trying my luck with your lovely doppelganger. The black hair and red eyes combo makes a nice contrast. Very Uchiha-like. That's a sign meaning that we belong with each other!"

"Fu is right, you can continue your inane flirting once we're done with this!" Shikamaru hotly shouted, as he changed his hand seal. "Shadow Sewing Jutsu!"

The shadow threads emerged from the ground, forming sharp edges, as they tried to impale the evil jinchuriki. She deployed her wings and tried to evade them by gaining some altitude, but that's what Sasuke was expecting. The moment Dark Fu took off, he leaped at her from his standing point, ready to impale her with another Chidori.

"Sorry beautiful, but no pretty girl escapes the Uchiha sex god," Sasuke cooed, winking at her again.

Dark Fu managed to spin around herself and successfully avoid the electrical attack aimed at her gut. But by doing so, she left her wings

exposed, which took the brunt of Sasuke's jutsu, and were instantly shattered. As a result, Dark Fu pummeled to the ground.

"My wings! No!" she cried, before crashing down with a thud. She rubbed the spot where her wings used to be. "Ow... this is going to hurt tomorrow..."

"It ain't going to hurt more than THIS, I can assure you as much!" Fu shouted from above.

Dark Fu looked up, and saw Fu diving at her, the giant oak log between her hands, like a meteor made of wood. Given her speed, dodging was impossible. "Oh shi-"

The giant log slammed into Dark Fu, resulting in an explosion of earth and dirt, opening up a massive crater, and most importantly, ending Dark Fu's existence.

Meanwhile, Dark Naruto was trying to evade Hinata's aggressive assault. He tried to put some distance and counterattack, but the angry Hyuga wouldn't let him any time to breathe. She was relentless in her attack, each blow carrying loads of anger.

"What the hell, is this Hinata's dark side or what? How is she so goddamn brutal?" Dark Naruto said, as he tried to evade her blows.

"Heh, I doubt the real Hinata is that vicious," Naruto chuckled, mostly to himself.

"Minions, to me!" Dark Naruto called.

However, no help came. Half of his masked creatures have already been destroyed, and the remaining few were busy fighting against the alternate Konoha 15. Dark Naruto noticed this, much to his desparations.

"Minions, come to me this instant!" he yelled.

"Shut up already!" a new female voice said.

Between dodging Hinata and trying to locate his minions, Dark Naruto didn't notice Sakura getting closer. When he turned around, he saw the pinkette's fist a few centimeters from his face, before it impacted, sending the black haired jinchuriki flying, and crashed against a tree.

"Urk," the evil doppelganger said, coughing some blood, while trying to stand up. "That was... uh?"

"Ice Release: Iceberg of Manliness!"

Just as he was standing up, ice and frost started to quickly gather around the evil jinchuriki, encasing him inside a block of ice, leaving only his head exposed.

"What the hell!?" Dark Naruto yelled.

"You have been trapped inside my Iceberg of Manliness! Do you know why I call it that? Because you need to be manlier than I am to break out of it!" Haku boasted, waving his arms in a taunting fashion. "And since you can't break it, that means I'm manlier than you are! How does that feel, huh? Huh? HUH?"

But Dark Naruto had no time to address Haku's boasts, as he heard an horrible, whirring noise. Looking in the direction of the noise, Dark Naruto saw his good counterpart, in Sage Mode, flanked by a couple of clones and a Rasenshuriken above his head.

"Good job guys, I'll deal the finishing blow!" Naruto told the others.

"No, no, NO! This can't be happening! You can't beat me! YOU CAN'T!" Naruto's evil counterpart yelled.

"You're right. I can't beat you. Not alone, at the very least," Naruto admitted. "But guess what? I don't need to beat you alone. I don't need to beat any of my enemies alone. I used to think that I had to protect everyone, all by myself. And that it was my fault if things went wrong and people I cared for died. But guess what? I can let others

protect me as well. As long as I have them, I won't have to face my darkness alone."

"So that's it, huh? You're going to let others do the heavy lifting. You're an useless brat that can never succeed on his own, so he needs to go crying to others for help! You can't win unless somebody else helps you!" Dark Naruto screeched, both out of anger, but also in an attempt to escape his predicament.

"That's the beauty of it. Alone, we are weak, but together, we're strong," Naruto replied. "Power might give you strength to do things on your own, but love allows you to join your strength with those of others, and form part of something greater than you are. Not that I expect you to understand it. Now die already! Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

The chakra shuriken flew at the trapped evil clone, resulting in an explosion of razor sharp wind gusts that destroyed him almost instantly. When the dome was finally dispelled, there was nothing left but a crater. Dark Naruto was no more.

"Naruto!" Fu shouted, as she landed besides him. "Hey, you did it! You also destroyed your evil side!"

"So, does that mean that you also won?" Naruto asked. Fu nodded vigorously. "Awesome!"

"So, what do we do now?" Fu asked. "Should we-"

There was a bright flash of white light that blinded the two jinchuriki, and made them feel dizzy. When the light banished, they were back in front of the Falls of Truth. Upon realizing that they had passed the test, the two jinchuriki got up on their feet, cheered hugged each other. Somethign Naruto regretted since Fu was hugging way too hard.

They stopped hugging upon noticing that they weren't alone. Killer B was watching them from the edge of the lake, arms crossed, and a

smile of satisfaction on his face.

"Congratulations, you two, I knew there was some spunk in you," Killer B told them. "To fight the beasts you're now ready, for your soul and mind are steady. Though, I feel I need to ask, are you ready for the coming task?"

"Yeah!" Naruto cheered. "Bring it on, Octo-pops!"

"Me too! I feel like I can do anything!" Fu agreed.

Killer B merely nodded. Though, even if they passed the first test, he couldn't help but wonder if these kids had what it takes to tame a Tailed Beast. Especially one as vicious as the Nine Tails. He'd find the answer soon.

"In that case... follow me."

Author's Note: Okay, why was the bottom's author's note cut? Well, guess that I have to write it again.

So, I hope you guys enjoyed my version of RtN, and hopefully, liked it better than the original. I already said that I hated how criminally underutilized the alt!Konoha 11 were, especially lacking a cool fight scene. Nothing against the heroic Akatsuki of that version, but I think the alt!Konoha11 deserved it better. And as a nod to canon, Sasuke has the Chidori here.

As for Naruto and Fu's dark counterparts being beaten: I know that in the original, Naruto wasn't supposed to physically beat him, but accept his inner darkness as part of him. However, if I went to do something different, the conclusion had to be different as well. So here, they defeated their inner darkness by learning that they didn't have to do it alone, but let others help them if they find problems too big for them alone.

Next chapter, the moment you've been waiting for: Naruto will finally face the Nine Tails!

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

**So, what were your thoughts on my version of Road to Ninja?
Are you excited to see Naruto finally taking on the Nine Tails?
Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really,
really, really happy!**

Overcoming Hatred

Author's Note: Before the idea crosses your mind, no, this isn't an April's Fools Day prank, but a genuine chapter.

And now, the moment all of you have been waiting for so long, Naruto finally faces the Nine Tails! I tried to make it a little different from canon, hope you enjoy it:

Chapter 99:

Overcoming Hatred

or

What does the Fox say?

Before Killer B would bring Naruto and Fu towards the place where they would tame their Tailed Beasts, Naruto decided to bring Tenzo and the Third Hokage, given that they had the means to stop them if they lost control of their Tailed Beasts in the process and the worst came to happen (Wood Release and Tailed Beast Chakra Suppressing seals, respectively). The rest of their escort team would watch the entrance just to be sure.

Said entrance happened to be behind the waterfall. When they crossed the water curtain, the Konoha ninjas and one Taki kunoichi all gasped upon seeing what was behind the water. Instead of a small cave leading to some kind of sealed room, there was a massive chamber, its roof being dozens of meters high. It was so big, it could probably house a small village. There was a large temple with five tall towers at the end of the gigantic chamber, and a painting of the Eight Tails and the Two Tails firing a Tailed Beast Ball against each other. There were two rows of beheaded statues that formed a hallway towards the temple's entrance.

"Here we are, the Tailed Beast Temple, a very special place, it will be here where the Tailed Beasts you two will face," Killer B started to rap.

"What's so special about this place? Can't Naruto-kun and Fu-san attempt to control their Tailed Beasts anywhere else?" the Third Hokage asked.

"The temple is special, yes, it's a security measure, if the jinchuriki falls," Killer B explained. "If the beasts attempt to escape they will be held inside these walls."

"Of course. With a place like this, a jinchuriki can train without endangering other lives and let the Tailed Beast out," Tenzo agreed. "If only we had a place like this in Konoha."

"Maybe with some time, and enough fuinjutsu, dad and I can cook up something," Naruto offered. "Though sadly it will have to wait until the war is over."

"We're here," Killer B announced. They reached to the entrance of the temple, a very large gate with an sculpture of the Two Tails' head with its jaws opened. The Kumo jinchuriki introduced his arm into the mouth, and activated a hidden switch inside. The gates slowly slid open.

"Whoa..." Naruto said, looking at the room.

"What is this place?" Fu asked.

Because the room that had been opened didn't look like a room at all. It was more like... like a vast, endless space that spread in every direction. There was no floor or walls just... a sky of multiple colors.

"Come on, no time to waste, get into the chamber, make haste," Killer B urged them as he entered the room. Apparently, there was a solid floor, even if it couldn't be seen. The three Konoha ninjas and

one Taki kunoichi followed the rapper inside. "It's time to begin. Who's going to be the first to go in?"

Naruto looked at Fu, and smiled at her weakly. "Ladies first?"

"Actually..." Fu began, rubbing her arm, uneasy. "I feel a little nervous. Would you mind going first? I'd be more at ease after seeing you doing it."

"I'm scared as hell too," Naruto admitted. "But guess we're not going anywhere unless one of us take the first step. Okay, I'll do it."

A sigh of relief escaped Fu. Killer B nodded in approval. He made a hand seal, and the gate closed with a loud boom, leaving all of them trapped inside the room.

"Now there's no danger to the outside world if the Nine Tails breaks free. Of course we would die, but it's the better option, don't you agree?" Killer B rapped, as he sat down, action which was mimicked by Naruto. The two of them bumped fists, and closed their eyes. "Okay, this is the plan, let's face the Nine Tails, I'll guide you as best as I can."

"Understood," Naruto said with a nod.

...

Nine Tails Seal

When Naruto opened his eyes, he was no longer inside the Tailed Beast Temple, but in front of the massive gates that held the giant fox. It seemed the beast hadn't noticed Naruto's presence yet.

" So, you're already in, that's swell," Naruto heard Killer B's voice rap. *"The first step is to remove the seal. But be careful, the fox won't be ain't quell."*

"Got it," Naruto replied with a nod. "Though before I do, let's do some preparations."

The blond sat cross legged, and closed his eyes. Despite the fact that he was inside a mental world, Naruto could still feel nature energy around him. He gathered as much as he could, before deciding it was enough. He also left a clone back continuing gathering nature energy, just in case. Then, he walked towards the gate, and when he reached it, the water around his feet formed a spiraling tower that pushed him upwards, so he could reach the paper seal holding the door easily.

" **Hm? Who's there?**" the Nine Tails grumbled, as Naruto heard his body shift. He sounded like if he just woke up from a nap.

"Who's there? Really?" Naruto asked, a bit incredulous. "Does somebody besides me pays you any visit without my knowledge, furball?"

" **You?**" the fox asked, sounding surprised. "**But you feel... different. Wait... what happened to your true self?**"

"You mean the guy with the pitch black hair and glowing red eyes? That's more the edgy me, to be honest," Naruto casually answered, as he removed the seal protecting the gate, revealing its intricate lock. "Though to answer your question, I gave him quite the ass beating. You should have seen it."

" *The Nine Tails can't feel your darkness, that's great, but don't get confident, he has more weapons than your hate,*" Killer B said.

Naruto then removed both his jacked and mesh shirt, tossing them away. The Double Tetragram Seal appeared on his gut, while the key to the seal appeared on his hand. Naruto placed the key on the seal, and turned it like it was a doorknob.

" **What are you doing?**" the Nine Tails asked, irritated.

The lock on the cage started to undo itself, first slowly, but progressively faster, ending with a final loud "click". The moment

Naruto heard that, the Nine Tails slammed the gates open, hurling the blond backwards, landing on the wet floor on his back.

"Ouch..."

" I don't know what you're pretending to do," the Nine Tails growled, as he exited his cell. **"But this is the last mistake you'll ever make in your short and inane life."**

" Naruto, get up, no time to sleep, if you fail now, you'll make all of us weep!" Killer B urged.

Naruto jumped back on his feet, just to see the behemoth of a fox angrily charging at him. However, before he could get any closer, multiple maroon colored tentacles broke the ground below him, and wrapped themselves around the giant fox, leaving him completely immobilized.

" Don't worry, Naruto, I can give you a hand, I'll make sure no attack of the Nine Tails ever lands!" Killer B rapped.

" Gyuki... you goddamned traitor... !" the Nine Tails growled, as he struggled against the tentacles.

" Now, Naruto, pull his chakra into your body, but be quick, these tentacles are a bit shoddy, and the Nine Tails may escape my grip, and that won't be very hip!" Killer B advised. *"Though when your chakras are in contact, the Nine Tails will pull yours too! He will use his hatred to corrupt you, so make sure you break through!"*

Naruto walked towards the downed Nine Tails, and grabbed the tip of one of his tails. He could feel the chakra of the beast coursing through the furry flesh. Naruto coayed his hands in chakra, and pulled. This didn't go unnoticed by the struggling fox, who glared at his jailed with eyes full of hate.

" Oh, so that's your plan! You want to take my chakra for you, huh? Well, IT'S NOT HAPPENING!" the Kyubi roared.

Suddenly, the Nine Tails' body released a powerful blast of chakra, one that destroyed Killer B's tentacles, and once again violently hurled Naruto backwards.

...

Real World

Naruto wasn't the only one pushed backwards, as the same thing happened to Killer B in the outside world.

"B!" Fu called, as she went to check on her fellow jinchuriki. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"The Nine Tails is much stronger than I thought. I can no longer help Naruto, he isn't in a tight spot," Killer be told the others.

Four pair of eyes turned at the immobile blonde, hoping that he would be able to defeat the Nine Tails without any help. And then, much to their shock, Naruto burst into flames.

...

Nine Tails Seal

" No playing around! I'm going to make sure there's not enough to bury left of your body!" the Nine Tails boasted, as he opened his jaws, and started to gather chakra. Blue and Red energy particles started to gather, forming a dark purple sphere that was quickly growing. **"Tailed Beast Wave!"**

The Nine Tails swallowed the ball, before opening its jaws again, releasing a powerful wave of chakra at the hapless blond. It would have been his end if it wasn't for a barrier of purple flames that formed between the human and the Tailed Beast, succesfully dispersing the attack into multiple directions.

" WHAT!?" the Nine Tails roared in indignation.

"Wait a minute... these flames... this chakra! It can't be!" Naruto said in realization, full of joy.

The purple flames formed a tornado of fire that quickly began to shrink and compress, until it took an humanoid shape, surrounded by a cloak of purple flames. It was somebody Naruto knew too well.

"Hello, Naruto-kun. I hope my intervention was timely."

"Hinata-hime!" Naruto said, pulling his girlfriend into a hug. "Oh boy, I'm so happy to see you! What are you doing here? How are you here, by the way?"

"Actually, I'm not the real Hinata, but a piece of her chakra she sealed into you before you departed Konoha," Hinata explained.

"When did she...?" Naruto tried to remember, until the realization hit him. "The kiss! That's why she jolted me!"

"Yes. I knew I had to help you tame the Nine Tails somehow. This was the only thing I could think of," Hinata told him.

"Heh, don't worry, hime. Now that you're here, that furry asshole has no chances to win!" Naruto proudly declared.

"Indeed," Hinata smiled, and nodded. "What is the plan, Naruto-kun?"

"You cover me from above. I'll give this overgrown furball a beating he won't forget," Naruto said, grinning confidently.

"You got it!" Hinata agreed, as she elevated above Naruto.

The Nine Tails angrily eyed the two youths, and snarled. **"No matter how much help you get, you won't make my power yours! I won't be a slave to the humans anymore!"**

High into the air, Hinata pulled her collapsible chakra bow. Pulling the chakra string, she generated an arrow made of pure electricity.

Though than aiming at the fox, she aimed at a spot above him.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Arrow Volley!"

Hinata released the arrow, which flew above the Nine Tails in an arc. However, when it was above his head, it exploded into a multitude of smaller lightning arrows that rained upon the giant fox like the lightning storm. He wrapped his tails around him like a dome for protection.

"Naruto-kun, now!" Hinata shouted.

The Nine Tails heard a loud whirring sound, and saw that Naruto had just thrown a Rasenshuriken at him. Still, the beast proved to be faster than he appeared, as he moved his tails just in time to intercept the chakra shuriken. There was a massive explosion of chakra and wind that pushed the fox backwards and all of his tails in different directions. However, he did manage to avoid the worst part of the explosion.

" Heh, not bad, brat, but you can't hope to-"

The Nine Tails was interrupted by another whirring sound, and from the dome of chakra and wind, a second Rasenshuriken emerged.

" *Accursed brat! He used the first Rasenshuriken to leave me wide open and to hide the second one!*" the Nine Tails thought in realization, though too late.

The attack connected, resulting in a second explosive sphere of chakra and razor-blade wings. The giant fox roared in pain as the force of the blast tossed him against the soaked floor on his back.

"Hinata-hime, use your black ball thingies to immobilize him!" Naruto told his girlfriend.

"Right! Truth Seeking Balls!" After making the necessary hand seals, Hinata generated four Truth Seeking Balls. With two arm motions,

she threw the orbs at each of the Nine Tails' limbs. They took the shape of horseshoes before they embedded themselves into the ground, pinning his arms and legs down.

" You think you can keep me contained!?" The Nine Tails roared, as he began to push the Truth Seeking Orbs. **"Just because you have a Tenseigan you think that makes you Hamura? You're barely a shadow compared to him!"**

"Hinata-hime was chosen by Hamura to carry his legacy," Naruto said, as he made several Shadow Clones, which positioned themselves around the fox in a circle. "And she isn't the only one who's going to contain you! Sealing Art: Cursed Binding Circle!"

The Naruto clones stabbed a kunai with a sealing tag on them into the ground. The seals were activated immediately, generating more chains of seals that formed multiple concentric circles. Once said circles were complete, the Nine Tails felt his body go completely rigid.

" I... can't move..." the fox grunted. Between the binding seals and the Truth Seeking Balls, he couldn't barely speak.

"Now that the Nine Tails has been subdued, try to take his chakra, Naruto-kun!" Hinata told him.

"You don't have to tell me twice," the real Naruto said, as he walked towards the central tail, and grabbed its tip. "Alright, here we go!"

Naruto started to pull the Nine Tails' chakra out, which took the shape of a blue energy current, and pushed it into himself.

" You... you bastard..." the Nine Tails grumbled. Anger started to well up inside him as he felt Naruto slowly draining his chakra.

"You... you humans are... all the same..."

Fueled by his rage, the fox started to fight both Naruto and Hinata's bindings, and began to recover some mobility, even if it wasn't much.

Still, with some time, he could break free. The Tenseigan wielder noticed this.

"Naruto-kun, hurry! He might break free any moment!" Hinata urged him.

"I'm... I'm trying!" Naruto replied, struggling to pull and absorb the chakra.

"Alright, I'll see if I can buy you some more ti- eh?" Hinata interrupted herself when she noticed something. The chakra current that was being absorbed into Naruto, was starting to change from blue to very dark red. Hinata had a very bad feeling about it.

" You... you think you can take my power... AND MAKE IT YOUR OWN!?" The Nine Tails roared with such power, Hinata was forced to cover her ears. The chakra current changed color completely, and worse, it started to spread into Naruto. The clones keeping the binding circle active dispelled, allowing the Kyubi more freedom. **"You have no idea who you're fighting against! What I am, and what my power represents! But you'll learn it soon! Now, TASTE MY ANGER! TASTE MY HATRED, AND BE CONSUMED BY IT!"**

The dark red chakra started to spread around Naruto's body, engulfing it completely. First, Naruto was hit by a wave of pain unlike any other he felt before. He fell to his knees, and tried to cut the connection between him and the beast, but the Nine Tails wouldn't allow any of that.

"AAAAAA AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" Naruto screamed, as he clutched his body.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata said, as she quickly flew at her boyfriend's side, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Naruto-kun, are you- OW!"

Touching Naruto felt like touching a burning iron. If that was how it felt on the outside, she couldn't imagine what the blond was feeling on the inside. Panicked, Hinata started to look around, trying to find

a way to help her beloved. It didn't take her long to see that the root of the problem was the chakra linking human and beast.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine in an instant," Hinata said, as she started to make hand seals. "Truth-seeking-"

" LIKE HELL YOU WILL!" The Nine Tails roared before smacking Hinata with one of his tails. The Hyuga Clan Head was so focused on Naruto and his suffering, that she didn't notice the fox until it was too late, and the poor girl was hurled away.

"AAAAAaaaahhhh... !" she screamed, before falling into the nearby water with a splash.

Such a violent act against Hinata would enrage Naruto beyond reason. But the jinchuriki was in so much pain, he didn't even notice what was happening around him. The pain was too great. Being tightly chained to a giant rock, with spikes piercing your limbs and chest... it was too much.

Then it came the anger. Rage so pure and undiluted, it felt unreal. Not even when Pain almost killed Hinata and Haku, nor when Akatsuki abducted several jinchuriki under his nose did Naruto feel such fury. Anger at all the people responsible for this. That despicable Madara Uchiha. The loathsome First Hokage and his equally worthless wife, Mito. Kushina Uzumaki. And lastly, Kushina's spawn, and current jailer, Naruto Uzumaki.

"Wait, there's... something wrong..." Naruto said, in a moment of clarity. He quickly realized that the pain and anger he was feeling wasn't his, but the Nine Tails'. Not that this helped him in any way, as he was soon overwhelmed by the inhumane pain and anger, while desperately clinging to his last bits of sanity.

" For sixteen years I've been languishing inside your body. And now... you will be the one inside me, Naruto! Goodbye!" The Kyubi shouted, as he proceeded to absorb Naruto once and for all.

"H-help..." Naruto said, his voice being a whisper, before the fox consumed him.

...

Back in the real world, people were worried. When Naruto burst into purple flames, Fu instantly recognized them as Hinata's Tenseigan Chakra Cloak -not to mention that thanks to her connection to Naruto, she could sense that chakra as if it was hers-, meaning that Hinata must have transferred some of her chakra to Naruto. However, another kind of chakra, this time dark red, put the purple flames out as it started to slowly spread around Naruto.

"This is bad, the beast is winning! The Nine Tails' chakra grows while Naruto's is thinning!" a worried Killer B panicked.

Fu had to admit that Killer B's dedication to rapping was worth respecting, given not even such a dire situation forced him to drop it.

"What do we do?" Fu asked, looking at Tenzo and the Third Hokage.

"Hokage-sama, I think we should put an end to this," Tenzo told the old man. "Naruto can always try later."

"Agreed," the Third Hokage said with a nod, as he pulled out a few sealing tags Jiraiya had given him. "Now, Tenzo, use your-"

"Wait a second!" Fu called, as through her connection to Naruto, she started to feel something. "Look!"

...

Back inside the seal, the pain and the anger finally overwhelmed the blond, and in his wish to be released from such torture, allowed the Nine Tails to win, and let the beast absorb his chakra.

SNAP!

And lastly, the pain and the hatred vanished, being replaced by a warm, comforting feeling. Was he finally dead? No, he wasn't dead, he could still feel his body, his feet standing on that soaked floor.

" **The connection broke!**" the Nine Tails said in alarm. He could no longer feel his connection to Naruto. It was as if something was filtering his chakra from corrupting the blond any further. **"My hatred was pushed back! What... what is this feeling?"**

"Tell me, Nine Tails," a new male voice Naruto never heard before began. "Have you ever loved somebody so much, that you would give your life for their happiness and well being? Because this is what you're feeling right now. Two parents' love for the son they barely got to meet."

" **YOU!**" the Nine Tails roared.

"Yeah," the man said, as he turned at the beast. "Me."

Slowly, Naruto's eyesight returned, and he realized he was still inside the Nine Tails' seal. But there was another person he hasn't seen before. A blond man wearing a white cloak adorned with flames. Said man had a hand on the chakra link that was binding the Nine Tails to Naruto, and with a quick hand motion, snapped it in two.

Naruto then felt a comforting hand placed on his shoulder. "Naruto, are you okay?" a female voice asked. Yet that voice didn't belong to Hinata. Naruto realized there was a red haired woman standing besides him, her lips curved into a welcoming smile. As his mind started to recover, he put two and two together. "Wait... you two... you guys are..."

"The Fourth Hokage?" Naruto heard Hinata's voice. He turned around, and saw that the Hyuga was slowly floating back to him.

"What... what are you guys doing here?" Naruto asked.

The Fourth Hokage merely smiled at him. "Don't worry. I know you must be confused, and have plenty of questions. There will be time for that."

"Let us help you put that oversized furball in his place. You don't have to do this alone, ya know!" the woman added.

" **Minato... Kushina...**" the Nine Tails growled, as he glared at the two newcomers. **"First the Hyuga girl, and now you two... I don't know why or how are you here, but this changes nothing! No amount of humans will stop me from claiming my freedom!"**

"We'll see about that," Minato confidently replied. His eyes moved towards Hinata. "Your name is Hinata, right?"

"Y-Yes, Hokage-sama," the shocked Hyuga replied. Talking with a past Hokage felt unreal. Not even talking with Hamura Otsutsuki felt so overwhelming.

"We saw that the Nine Tails got you good before. You think you can continue fighting?" Minato asked.

"Of course!" Hinata said, trying to put on a brave face. "I promised Naruto-kun I'll help him no matter what, and I won't go back on my word!"

"Good," Minato said with a nod. "Naruto and I will fight the fox head on. Kushina will bind it with her chakra chains. You will provide some support from above."

"Understood," Hinata replied, as she started to gain attitude. "You can count on me, Naruto-kun, Hokage-sama... eh, your name was Kushina?"

Kushina nodded. "Don't worry about introductions now. We can do that later. It's time to fight, ya know!"

Back on his feet, or better said, paws, the Nine Tails stomped towards the four humans.

" I'm so going to enjoy killing you a second time, Minato, Kushina," the Nine Tails threatened, as he gritted his fangs.
"Though I don't know if I should kill you first so your son can see you die this time, or if I should kill the brat first in front of your eyes!"

"We'll see about that!" Kushina said, as a chain shot from her body. However, it wasn't aimed at the beast, but at Hinata hovering above them. "Hinata, catch! Hold it tightly!"

The Hyuga Clan head caught the chain, and wrapped it around her wrist for good measure.

"What do you want me to do, Kushina-san?" Hinata asked.

"When I tell you, launch me at the Nine Tails with all your strength, ya know?" Kushina asked. Hinata merely nodded. "For the time being, let the boys go first!"

"You heard your mother, Naruto, let's go!" Minato said, as he rushed forward. "Prepare a Rasenshuriken!"

"You got it!" Naruto replied, while summoning a

Minato pulled out multiple tri-pronged kunai with seals on their handle, and tossed them all around the place.

"Let's see if you can keep up with me!" Minato said, as he charged towards the Nine Tails, Rasengan in hand.

" You stupid, insignificant human! You weren't able to beat me back then! What are you going to do? Seal me again?" The Nine Tails said in a mocking tone, as he brought down his paw down.

Minato, however, quickly teleported to a nearby kunai. The Kyubi attempted to crush him with his other arm, but Minato was faster.

Eventually, the fox was forced to play a very frustrating game of whack-a-mole with the teleporting Minato.

" **Stay still, dammit!**" The Nine Tails roared.

Upon seeing that Naruto was ready, Minato tossed one of his special kunai at the Nine Tails' face, and in less than a second, he teleported back to Naruto, touched him, and teleported again to the kunai flying towards the Nine Tails' face.

"Naruto, now!" Minato shouted.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

The younger blond tossed the shuriken of wind chakra at the giant fox. However, the Nine Tails was already expecting this, and opened his jaws.

"You won't be able to charge a Tailed Beast Ball fast enough!"
Naruto claimed.

But the Nine Tails had more weapons than the Tailed Beast Ball. His throat glowed with an orange light, and a torrent of flames poured from his jaws, intercepting the Rasenshuriken. Naruto's jutsu detonated prematurely, exploding in a dome of razor sharp winds, and upon absorbing the fox's fire attack, a massive ball of fire that quickly expanded.

"Whoops!" Minato said, before teleporting both himself and Naruto to the farthest tri-pronged kunai in order to escape the expanding inferno.

" **You think you're so smart, don't you, Minato?**" The Nine Tails growled, still behind the flames. "**But you have no idea what you're fighting against-**"

"Hinata, now!" Kushina shouted.

Suddenly, the expanding ball of flames split in two -mostly the result of Hinata's kinetic ability- and launched Kushina against the giant fox.

"Adamantine Wrecking Ball!"

Kushina shot multiple chakra chains from her body that wrapped around herself, forming multiple layers, until they resembled a metal ball, at the same time Hinata let go of the chain she was holding. The Nine Tails was unable to dodge, and the wrecking ball hit him with such force, it knocked the fox on his back.

" Urk... you... you cursed-"

The Nine Tails was interrupted when Minato and Naruto suddenly appeared besides Kushina, who was quickly pulled away by Hinata's kinetic power. The two blonds were holding a truly massive sphere of chakra.

"Parent and Child Rasengan!"

Minato and Naruto slammed the gigantic sphere of destruction onto the fox' belly. The nine tailed beats roared in agony, still reeling from the pain in his jaws caused by Kushina.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

"Truth Seeking Balls!"

Once again, multiple chains shot from Kushina's body, and wrapped against the Nine Tails' body, arms, legs and tails.. Meanwhile, Hinata summoned four Truth Seeking Balls, changed their shape into horseshoes, and used them to pin the fox's arms and legs to the ground like she did before.

"Naruto, now!" Kushina called.

Naruto created an army of clones, who split into nine groups, each group grabbing one of the Nine Tails' chakra, who futilely tried to

break from Kushina and Hinata's bindings. The army of clones started to pull, and with their combined strength, a gigantic mass of orange chakra was ripped away from the Nine Tails. Naruto quickly absorbed that chakra into his body, resulting in a burst of golden light.

"Naruto-kun, you just... wow!" Hinata said in awe.

The absorbed Tailed Beast chakra manifested as a golden chakra cloak that covered Naruto completely. It was similar to Hinata's Tenseigan Chakra Cloak, but while Hinata's made her look like she was surrounded by flames, in Naruto's case it was as if he was *made* of them. The Double Tetragram Seal was visible on his stomach.

"You did it!" Minato cheered.

"Of course he did! He's our son, ya know!" Kushina added, just as excited.

" **Naruto...**" the Nine Tails growled, drawing the four humans' attention to him. The Nine Tails now looked extremely emaciated, like an animal who had been starved for months. Even if he struggled to do so, he managed to get back to his feet. **"You... you think you can take my power like that!?"**

"Amazing... after all the chakra I took from him, he still has enough strength to continue," Naruto said in awe. "Tailed Beasts are truly amazing."

" **YOU WILL DIE THE SAME WAY YOUR PARENTS DID!**" The Nine Tails roared, as he charged towards the group of four.

While the other three tensed up and prepared to continue the fight, Naruto merely shook his head. He placed his hand on the seal on his stomach, and just like he did before, turned it as if it was a doorknob. Suddenly, torii started to fall from the sky, pinning the fox's tails to the ground, then his body, and finally his neck, immobilizing it

completely. The Nine Tails struggled to break free, but it was useless. Finally, a pair of gates appeared and closed with a loud clang, forming a new jail for the Tailed Beast.

"I'm, sorry, Nine Tails," Naruto said, sounding regretful. "I promise you that this isn't the end."

"It's okay, son," Minato said, placing a comforting hand on Naruto's shoulder. "You did a good job."

"I'm sure you'll have lots of questions to ask us," Kushina added. She then looked at the Nine Tails, still trashing and cursing loudly. "But let's move this conversation somewhere a bit nicer, shall we?"

Suddenly, they were no longer inside the Nine Tails' seal, but in some sort of shapeless space of bright swirling colors and shooting stars, in a way similar to the room where the real Naruto was.

"Yes, this is much better," Minato said with a nod, before facing Naruto. "Hello, Naruto. It's been a while since the last time we saw you."

"You surely grew a lot!" Kushina added. "You know who we are, right?"

"Yes," Naruto hesitantly replied. "My... mother and father. But, how can you be here? I thought you were..." Naruto's eyes drifted towards Hinata, and a realization dawned upon him. "Wait, you're a fragment of their chakra, right? I've been carrying a piece of your chakra this whole time!"

"Exactly," Kushina confirmed. "Before our tragic demise, Minato sealed the last remnants of our chakra inside you. He knew you'd need help when the time to tame the Nine Tails came."

"Plus, it would give us the chance of seeing you all grown up, Naruto," Minato said.

"Though, it seems we aren't the only foreign chakra you've been carrying," Kushina said, as she glanced at Hinata, and smiled at her. "Who are you, girl? You said your name is Hinata, right? You have the Hyuga looks, but those eyes aren't the Byakugan."

"Your presence was a surprise, but not an unwelcome one," Minato added. "It seems that you and Naruto are pretty close."

"We are," Hinata replied. "And yes, I'm a Hyuga. These eyes are called Tenseigan, and they're an evolution of the Byakugan. My name is Hinata Hyuga, current Clan Head of the Hyuga Clan. Naruto-kun and I are in a relationship."

"Clan Head?" Kushina asked, a bit incredulous. "But you're so young... hey, wait a moment, you are Hikari-chan's daughter, are you?" Kushina asked. Hinata nodded. "Heh, no wonder you looked so familiar!"

"Look at that. Our son and Hikari's daughter ending up together. Who would have guessed it," Minato said, chuckling.

"I was expecting for you to hook up with Mikoto-chan's baby, but he turned out to be a boy," Kushina said, laughing a bit. "Anyway, how are the two of them doing?"

"Uh, mom..." Naruto began. "Mikoto Uchiha is dead. And so is almost all of the Uchihas."

Both Minato and Kushina were frozen in shock.

"What? No!" Kushina cried in horror.

"Just... what happened after we died?" Minato asked.

"It's a pretty long story. So I better start from the beginning..." Naruto said.

And thus, Naruto began narrating as well as he remembered the events after his birth. How Jiraiya and Tsunade returned to take care

of him. Their marriage, and the birth of Kaida and Hagane -Naruto used two transformed clones to show Minato and Kushina how they looked, Kushina couldn't stop gushing for whole five minutes.

The gushing stopped when Naruto reached the part of the Uchiha Insurrection, which ended with most of the Uchiha Clan dead, as well as many Konoha ninjas, among them Hinata's father, Hiashi Hyuga.

"To think Mikoto-chan would be willing to go along with such insanity..." Kushina began.

"I can't believe that Fugaku would do that either," Minato added. "I knew the man. He was serious and practical, and above all else, always looked for the best for his clan. To send his clan into such a suicidal folly..."

Naruto continued his story. Jiraiya's ascension to Hokage after Hiruzen couldn't continue anymore. How Naruto graduated the Academy and was assigned to a team with Hinata, and Haku as his teammates and Kurernai Yuhi as his sensei. The mission to the Land of the Rice Fields, now the Land of Sound. The Chunin Exams, Orochimaru's invasion, and Kaida and Hagane's kidnapping attempt. And finally, the revelation that the masked Akatsuki member, who claimed to be responsible of the Nine Tails attack and the Uchiha Insurrection, was no other than Obito Uchiha.

Both Minato and Kushina felt like they've been hit in the gut by a sledgehammer.

"Obito? No... no! It can't be him! Even if he somehow survived the Battle of Kanabi Bridge, there's no way that he could have committed such atrocities!" Minato said, shaking his head, clearly disbelieving what he was hearing.

"First Mikoto-chan and now Obito! Did the world turn crazy!?" Kushina screamed.

"Hokage-sama, Kushina-san," Hinata spoke, drawing their attention. "I know it must be hard to believe, but that man is indeed Obito Uchiha. Kakashi-sensei and Rin-san confirmed his identity multiple times."

"Wait a minute... Rin?" Minato asked, his confusion growing. "Is she alive too?"

"Well... no, but actually yes," Naruto replied. "Rin died the same way you remember, but Obito brought her back to life. Somehow. And probably with lots of the First Hokage's cells."

"Good to hear that something nice came out from so many catastrophes, ya know," Kushina said, letting out a heavy sigh. "Her death broke my heart."

"Still... if I knew that the man who attacked us the day of your birth was Obito..." Minato began, clenching his fist in anger. "Maybe I would have been able to stop him in time. I just... I just can't imagine what moved Obito to attack us so coldly. He was like family to us!"

"Nobody knows what happened to Obito after his disappearance during the Third Ninja War," Hinata said. "Who knows who he could have met."

"Speaking of which... what happened that day?" Naruto asked. "I tried to ask Old Man Hokage and all the people who were present the day of the attack, but they knew very little."

Minato and Kushina proceeded to tell the couple about how the happiest day in their lives turned out to be one of Konoha's biggest tragedies. How Obito infiltrated the secret location where Kushina was giving birth, using newborn Naruto as a distraction so he could get away with Kushina. Then, Kushina told them how Obito extracted the Nine Tails from her body, bound him to his will through his Mangekyo Sharingan, and teleported him to Konoha, where he summoned him in order to cause mass destruction.

Minato moved Naruto and Kushina to one of his several safe houses in the outskirts of Konoha while he went to deal with the Nine Tails. However, he was unable to do it, given that Obito forced him away from Konoha and into a battle. Minato managed to win, but while he was busy, the fox continued his rampage, killing dozens of people. Eventually, Minato teleported the beast to Naruto and Kushina's location, both to move the fox out of the village, and to seal it again.

Kushina wanted to seal the Nine Tails within herself again, even if she was about to die. Minato, however, decided that Konoha needed the Fox's power, and that Naruto should be the one to inherit it. Since the whole Nine Tails would be too much for a baby, he sealed half of his chakra with the Reaper Death Seal, while sealing the other half inside Naruto. The Nine Tails attempted to kill Naruto before he could be sealed again, but his parents blocked the attack with their own bodies, and with his last breath, Minato sealed the Nine Tails inside Naruto, alongside what remained of their chakra.

There was a moment of silence, as Naruto and Hinata processed the story they just heard.

"What a tale," Naruto finally said. "I'm sure mom and dad- uh, Tsunade and Jiraiya will want to know what happened. Jiraiya in particular might find some closure."

"You can call them 'mom' and 'dad', Naruto," Kushina said, smiling reassuringly. "They were the ones who raised you, after all."

"Yeah. That's why we appointed Jiraiya-sensei as your godfather. Though Tsunade-sama wanting to take care of you was quite a surprise," Minato said, chuckling a little.

"And they did a really great job, ya know!" Kushina said. "I mean, look at you! You're a Jonin at sixteen, who just tamed the most powerful Tailed Beast in existence, and most importantly, you have a cute girlfriend!"

Both Naruto and Hinata blushed, and averted their gazes.

"Uh, drop it, mom," Naruto whined. "You're making Hinata feel embarrassed."

"Just Hinata?" Kushina said, raising an eyebrow in a taunting manner.

"Naruto, I need to ask you something," Minato said. "I sealed the Nine Tails into you because I knew that his power would be needed when the masked man, Obito, returned. The fact that you were trying to control his power now means that that time has come already. Am I wrong?"

"Unfortunately not," Naruto said. "Obito recruited multiple S-Class criminals and formed a terrorist group named Akatsuki, with the goal of capturing all nine Tailed Beasts. We managed to kill or capture several of them, but we couldn't stop them from claiming no less than six Tailed Beasts."

"On top of the captured Tailed Beasts and his Akatsuki allies, Obito has revealed to have an army of artificial humans called 'Zetsu' at his disposal, and declared war on the entire Elemental Nations unless he is in possession of the remaining three."

"Those are... terrible news," Minato said. "Not even in my worst nightmares I'd imagine that Obito could start a war of such magnitude."

"So far, the five Great Villages, and a few minor ones, plus the Land of Iron Samurai, have joined forces in order to face Akatsuki. I'm on a secret island alongside the other two remaining jinchuriki. One of them can already control his Tailed Beast's power, and he'll teach us to do the same. The other one will try to subdue hers once I'm done."

"Who are these two jinchuriki, Naruto?" Kushina asked.

"Fu, from Takigakure, and Killer B, from Kumogakure," Naruto told his parents.

"I'm afraid I don't know who this Fu is, but I'm familiar with Killer B," Minato said, nodding. "I fought both him and his brother A during the Third Ninja War. B might be an unorthodox person, but he's a powerful and skilled ninja. With him as your teacher, you will learn to control your newfound power in no time."

"Let's hope I do, because I have the feeling we'll need the Tailed Beasts' power in order to end this war."

That moment, white sparkles started to form around Minato and Kushina's bodies, which started to be consumed by a white light.

"It seems our chakra is starting to break down and disappear, Naruto," Minato said. "We only have a few more seconds, in case you want to tell us something."

"I do," Naruto began. "After everything I heard, how you guys sacrificed yourselves not just to save me, but to save Konoha as a whole... I want to tell you guys that I'm going to make sure your sacrifice won't be in vain. Konoha shall thrive, and I'll become the kind of son you'll feel proud of."

"Oh, Naruto..." Kushina said, as her body started to break apart. "We are already very proud of you. Despite how little we could see you, we can tell what a fine young man you've grown into."

"Tell Jiraiya-sensei and Tsunade-sama that we're very thankful for raising you into such a great man and ninja," Minato said, as he started to disappear as well. "And that they shouldn't be in a hurry to meet us again."

"Don't worry, mom, dad... I will," Naruto replied.

And just like they did the first time, Minato and Kushina disappeared with a smile in their lips.

"Goodbye, mom, dad," Naruto said to no one in particular. "Even if it was for a short time, I was glad to meet you... as well as fighting

alongside you."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata called him. Naruto turned around, and saw that his girlfriend was starting to break down into white sparkles as well. "It seems my time here is over as well."

"It's okay, at the very least, I know I'll get to see you again," Naruto said with a sad chuckle. "Thanks a lot for your help. I'm glad you were at my side at such moment in my life, Hime."

Hinata smiled at him. "Don't sweat it. Now make sure we both make to the end of this war alive. See you soon!"

With that, Hinata disappeared as well. Now that Naruto was alone, there was no more reason to be inside the Nine Tails' seal at all. The others might get worried, given that the Nine Tails had been close to winning a couple times.

...

Real World

Naruto opened his eyes, and saw that Tenzo, Hiruzen, Killer B and Fu were staring at him with various expressions. Tenzo and the the Third Hokage were looking at him in shock, Killer B was happy, and Fu had her eyes very open and her jaw dropped, completely in awe. It took Naruto a couple seconds to realize that he was also wearing the golden chakra cloak.

"So hey, what do you think?" Naruto said, as he got back to his feet. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"It's... amazing..." Fu said, almost in a whisper. "I'm not even a sensor, yet I can feel the sheer power you're radiating! It's like being close to the sun, except... the heat feels pretty nice!"

"Yes. The air even feels cleaner the moment you activated that cloak," Tenzo pointed out. "So, this is the power of Tailed Beast's

chakra free of the beasts' corrupting will?"

"So it seems," Naruto said.

"Tailed Beast's raw power is primal essence, and with your chakra it formed a coalescence!" Killer B enthusiastically rapped.

"Oh, oh! Me next, me next!" Fu excitedly exclaiming, bouncing up and down like a little girl about to receive her birthday present. "I was scared at first, but I want to do it now!"

"Sure," Naruto said, moving aside, so Fu could take his place, which quickly did so.

"You seems to be full of enthusiasm, and that's good! But be careful, taming a Tailed Beast is no small task, don't be a fool," Killer B warned, as he sat besides her.

The two of them bumped fists, and closed their eyes.

"By the way, excuse me for a second, I need to do a little something," Naruto said, as he exited the room, leaving Tenzo and the Third Hokage alone with the entranced jinchuriki.

Just like his fellow jinchuriki, Naruto sat down cross legged, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he found himself inside the seal. Behind the red colored prison gates was the Nine Tails, still immobilized by the torii,

"Hey there, Nine Tails!" Naruto called.

" **Hm?**" the giant fox grumbled, not noticing Naruto's presence at first. He narrowed his eyes at the blond. **"What are you doing here so soon? Did you come here to gloat your victory over me?"**

Naruto then switched his seal once again, and much to the Nine Tails' confusion -but happiness- the torii pinning his body against the ground disappeared, and the gates of his cell opened again.

"What... what are you doing?" the confused Fox asked again.
"What's the meaning of this?"

"Don't you feel better now?" Naruto asked. "Because you appeared to be very uncomfortable before."

"You know exactly what I mean. Stop playing games with me, human," the Nine Tails growled, as he stretched his very sore limbs.

"I see you're in no mood for small talk. Guess it can't be helped," Naruto said, as he sat down. "I want to talk with you. And make you a proposition."

"You know that I could attack you now," the Nine Tails threatened. **"Your girlfriend and birth parents are no longer here to help you. What you're doing is extremely foolish."**

Naruto chuckled. "Well, you aren't the first one to tell me that. And I bet you won't be the last either," Naruto then grew more serious. "Do you want to listen to what I have to say, or do you prefer to go back to your jail? Because I can send you back just as easily as I released you."

The Nine Tails narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth at Naruto once again. While Naruto wasn't the first human who spoke to him in such haughty tone, it was something that drove him mad. Still, the cunning part of his mind told him to wait and see what happens. Naruto was holding all the cards right now, so he needed to approach this patiently.

"I could have run away the moment Obito's mind control over me was broken, but I decided to stay and vent my rage on those Konoha ninja. And thus I ended up sealed again. I cannot waste anymore chances," the Nine Tails reflected. **"Talk, brat. I'm listening."**

"I'm sure you heard already, but I will tell you again just in case: there's going to be an all out war against the Akatsuki. Many people

will die. Hell, we might not even win," Naruto began, his tone being solemn and urgent. "I want your help to win this war."

" You already have complete control over my power, brat," the Nine Tails replied, even if he knew that wasn't true. **"Why do you need, or want, my cooperation? What do you expect to get?"**

"... your cooperation?" Naruto repeated.

The Nine Tails narrowed his eyes at Naruto again.

" What are you planning, brat? Why do you want me to work with you willingly instead of directly taking my power?" The fox asked again.

"Well... when I was trying to steal your chakra, and you were trying to overwhelm me with it... a connection between us was formed. And I could feel all your rage and your hate... and all your suffering," Naruto began. The Nine Tails seemed to pay more attention, but he didn't say anything. "I experienced the long years of captivity you spent inside Mito, then Kushina, and lastly me. The former two were especially bad. And I... I don't want you to suffer that badly. That's why, even if I can't afford to release you, I want to make your stay here better."

Then, much to Naruto's shock, the Nine Tails started to roar with laughter.

" Oh, that's a good one, human! Caring about me! As if humans could care about our kind!" The giant fox said, as he continued laughing uproarously. That's it, until he noticed that Naruto was looking at him with dead serious eyes. **"You... you can't be serious!"**

"Why not?" Naruto asked. "Is that incredible that, after I experienced firsthand how do you feel, I want to make your life better?"

" But... I killed countless Konoha humans! Your birth parents among them!" the Nine Tails reminded him, sounding incredulous. **"Are you telling me you're willing to ignore all of that?"**

"A certain somebody I met once told me that you can't understand somebody else unless you experience their pain," Naruto began. "And, even if you do, you might not agree with them, or you may not want to forgive them for their actions against you. That no human can do that. But in the end, if we don't do that, all what we'll accomplish is to perpetuate the circle of hatred that keeps us embroiled in wars. And Tailed Beasts are no different to us on that regard. Sure, I could make your life a living hell while you're sealed inside me, but what good would be? Someday, I'll die, and you might break free, your hatred for humans stronger than ever. If I had any hopes of curving that hatred, I need to forgive you. I need to show you that there are humans you can trust. And even call your friends."

" You want to be friends... with me?" The Nine Tails asked, before letting out a mirthless laugh. **"Heh, now that's a good one!"**

"We don't have to be friends right now," Naruto replied. "All I ask is for you to work with me in good faith. But mom and dad say that I have a knack for making friends, so I expect that in the end you'll also fall to my irresistible charm." The blond said, half joking.

The Nine Tails stared at Naruto with a critical eye. At first he thought that maybe it was some sort of trick to make him lower his guard, but to what end? The human already had complete control over his chakra. Could this blond moron mean his words? The Nine Tails had a hard time trusting humans, given his experiences with them:

You Tailed Beasts are simply servants of those with the Blessed Eyes! Now obey me, you filthy animal!

Your power is too great. Regrettably, I can't let you run loose.

When you exert your power, you draw hatred towards you, please stay quiet inside me.

You might be here to keep the world in check, but I'm here to watch you.

Yet here was this brat, talking nonsense about forgiveness and friendship. Almost treating the Nine Tails like a living being rather than a mindless weapon. Could this boy be different? The Fox hated the fact that he was even entertaining the idea. But then again, he had made the seal far more tolerable, and he wasn't planning on giving up that. For the time being, it would be best to play nice, and see what happens next.

" It seems I don't have much of a choice. But a choice nonetheless," the Nine Tails said in defeat, much to Naruto's joy.
"You have a deal."

"Excellent!" Naruto happily cheered, as he jumped to his feet. "If you want anything tell me. Now I need to go with Fu, she's about to face her Tailed Beast. See you later, Nine Tails!"

" Naruto," the Nine Tails called before the blond could leave. **"Don't call me Nine Tails. I have a name. It's Kurama."**

"You have a name?" Naruto asked, looking surprised. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

" Only those who I deem worthy may use my name. So far, only my father and my idiotic siblings know my name, so consider yourself fortunate," the Nine Tails said with a huff of self importance.

A wide, taunting grin formed on Naruto's face. "So, I'm worthy in your eyes? Heh, I knew you'd warm up to me."

" Don't push your luck, human. Now go already, your unbound, youthful energy is like a plunging a searing dagger into my eyes," the Kurama said.

...

Naruto opened his eyes, and found himself back in the real world. Despite he had spent a few minutes talking with the Nine Tails, only a second passed in real time. He stood up, and walked back into the special room, when Fu was about to begin her greatest challenge.

"Hey guys, did she-"

Suddenly, there was a huge burst of chakra coming from Fu. The green haired girl opened her eyes, and smiled.

"And done!" she cheered.

"What? So soon?" Naruto asked in shock. "How could you beat a Tailed Beast so easily?"

"Oh, I didn't beat Chomei -by the way, the Seven Tails has a name, and it's Chomei, isn't it cool?- we just sat down and have a nice talk. We have a lot of things in common! For example, we both have the same favorite genre of music! We also hate the same genres of music!" Fu excitedly explained. "And since then, we decided is for the best to work together. She helps me, and I'll try to make her stay inside me as pleasant as possible."

Naruto looked defeated. "Man, I had to fight a goddamn deathmatch against the fox, and needed the help from three people to win... and you only had to talk to your Tailed Beast? Speak about fair."

"Don't fret about it, boy," Hiruzen told him. "The important part is, the two of you have successfully tamed your Tailed Beasts, and their power is at your disposal."

"Speaking of which, check this out!" Fu said, as she started to build chakra around her. Soon, a dark teal armor formed around her body, leaving only her eyes visible. The armor appeared to be organic rather than made of any kind of metal, and reminded of an insect's carapace. "And that's not all!" she said, and suddenly, spikes started to grow all around the armor, a huge Y-shaped horn grew on her helmet, blades that looked like the jaws of a stag beetle grew from

her wrists, and lastly, six wings sprouted from her back. "The Chomei Chakra Armor! I bet you haven't seen anything cooler in your life!"

Naruto crossed his arms, and averted his gaze in a somewhat disdainful manner. "I think my Chakra Cloak is much cooler..."

"So, now that their training is over, I guess that we can send them to the battle, right?" Tenzo asked.

"Sorry pal, I'm afraid it won't be the case, if you send them as they're now, it will be a disgrace. First thing they need, is to train a lot, master their new powers, if they want to have a shot!" Killer B told the Konoha ninjas.

"Guess it can't be helped," Naruto said, a little dejected.

"How long do you think the training will take, Killer B-san?" Hiruzen asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know, it could be a lot of time, but these two are fast learners, so it will be sublime!" Killer B replied.

"I think we should start our training right now," Naruto suggested.

"Seconded!" Fu chimed in. "I want to know what I can do now that Chomei and I are synced."

"Alright then, let's head outside, show me what you can do, and fight with pride!" Killer B replied.

Their job done, the group headed outside of the temple, where Naruto and Fu would begin their Tailed Beast control training. While Naruto and Fu hoped that the training would end before the war, Hiruzen and Tenzo hoped that Akatsuki's power won't be so great as to need three perfect jinchuriki to counter it.

Author's Note: And there you have it, Naruto finally got his Kurama Chakra Cloak. Yes, I know he got it the same moment as in canon, but like I said before, I wasn't going to make the same mistake I did with Sage Mode.

As for Fu... yeah, sorry if you were expecting another epic fight of human versus giant beast. I have Fu befriend Chomei for several reasons: I thought that another fight would just drag on after Naruto's, plus I think it fits Fu's character, who wants to make a lot of friends and be on good terms with everybody, even if she previously had some issues with Chomei. BTW, I've been referring to Chomei as female for the whole story, and my betareader pointed out Chomei is male. However, given that it's a bit too late to correct that, I'm going to keep Chomei as female for what's left of the story.

What do you think about the Chomei Chakra Armor? Like with the Kurama Chakra Cloak, I wanted to give Fu an unique transformation, and given that Chomei is a beetle, I thought in giving her a carapace-like armor rather than a chakra cloak like Naruto's.

And special mention to W8W who correctly guessed that there was something more to Hinata accidentally jolting Naruto with that kiss. Did you expect her to show up?. I hope you enjoy her guest appearance here. She is going to be absent for quite a few chapters, given that she's on the Moon, so thought in giving her one last epic fight alongside Naruto before her confrontation with Toneri arrives.

And given that Minato didn't appear before, he obviously can assist his son here in subduing the fox alongside Kushina. Though, before you ask, no, Minato and Kushina aren't going to show up again. They already fulfilled their purposes, and have nothing else left to do.

Naruto learned Kurama's name earlier than in canon. That's because I hated how in the manga Naruto learned his name

through a third party, and felt it would be a more powerful moment if the Fox himself revealed it to him as a sign of their budding respect, and I felt that this was the best moment for such a thing to happen. Another thing I disliked was how Kurama only started to help Naruto because between him and Madara, he hated the latter more, and then it was treated as a genuine friendship.

Thanks to Ookami88 for beta-reading this chapter.

Well, the preparations for the war are already done, the pieces are in place, the game can now begin. Next chapter will mark the beginning of this fanfic's very last arc, which I hope it will be memorable. In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Prelude to the War

Author's Note: Man, look at that. One hundred chapters. I never imagined, not in a million years, that I would write so many chapters for a single story. So, upon reaching such a meaningful milestone, this story has:

1648502 views

3549 favorites

3903 alerts

and 3580 reviews!

Thank you to everybody who read, favorites, follows and, of course, reviews this story. It's thanks to you that we reached this far. Now, enjoy the beginning of the very last arc of Son of the Sannin:

Chapter 100:

Prelude to the War

or

The Begining of the End

Island Turtle

Fu was admiring her new chakra armor in the reflection of the lake of the Falls of Truth, making several poses and shifting her position so she could see all of it. She changed poses with increased frequency, and the more he did it, the more upset she grew, something her Tailed Beast noticed.

"Fu? Something wrong?" Chomei asked.

"It's the armor..." she began, as she kept changing her pose.

"Don't you like it?" the giant beetle asked, sounding disheartened.
"You think it's ugly?"

"Oh no, nothing like that, the armor is awesome!" she reassured, before growing a little more uneasy. "It's just... I don't know, it messes with my style. It kinda lacks something, and I can't put my finger what is it..."

"Oh, oh! I think I know what you're talking about!" the beetle said, excited. **"Let me do a little adjustments..."**

As soon as Chomei said that, the plates covering her midsection retracted, leaving her abs bare for all to see. Fu beamed upon seeing this.

"YES! Now it's perfect! Thank you, Chomei!" Fu cheered.

"Anytime, girl," Chomei replied, glad to make her host happy.

"You know, Fu, I think you're missing the point of an armor," Naruto said, as he walked towards her. "Your armor isn't going to protect you much if you have such a gap there. That's like wearing a sign that says 'please eviscerate me'." Naruto deadpanned.

Fu turned at him, frowned, and placed her hands on her hips.

"Sorry, but a Fu that doesn't bare her midriff is like a Naruto that doesn't wear orange. It's an immutable part of who I am," the green haired girl said. "But if you're so worried about me, go ahead and punch me in my gut."

"I'm not going to do that," Naruto replied, crossing his arms.

"You need an incentive, then? Fine," Fu said. "Punch me, and if you make me bend down, I'll treat you to ramen for a whole month."

This seemed to change Naruto's disposition, who clenched his hand into a fist. "Well, I don't like punching my friends, but who can resist such an offer?"

And with a loud crack, Naruto's fist hit Fu's stomach...

"YEOWWWWWWWWWW!"

... and not only Fu barely budged, Naruto felt as if every finger in his hand broke at once.

"Hehe, told you," Fu chuckled. "You need to pack far more power to make me feel pain!"

"Just... what the hell do they feed you!?" Naruto cried, as he nursed his injured hand, which was starting to turn red. "It's like punching a wall of bricks!"

"I know right? I was super strong before, but after having access to all of Chomei's power, my strength and endurance are even higher!" she boasted, while flexing her biceps. "Now try stabbing my stomach with a kunai!"

"Hey you two, no more fooling around, let's start the training, or I'm going to beat you down!" Killer B called his two younger counterparts.

"Coming~!" Fu chirped, as she and Naruto walked towards the senior jinchuriki.

"You now can use your beasts' whole power, and that's great, but now you need to learn how to use it, you agree, mate?" Killer B began. "In order to master your power, you must first get used to it, so let's start little by little, learn to use only a whit."

"As you say, sensei!" Naruto replied.

"Sensei?" Killer B asked, as he rested his chin over his hand. "I would have preferred if you called me Killer B-sama, but guess that

sensei would do. Okay, let's start already, let's see what you can push through!"

And thus, Naruto and Fu began their training under Killer B's eccentric yet surprisingly effective teaching method, while Hiruzen, Tenzo and the rest of the escort team watched them master their powers.

...

Allied Ninja Forces Main HQ, Land of Fire

The new headquarters building had been built in record time, mostly thanks to Rin and Kaida's Wood Release speeding the process -and it would have been done much sooner if their third Wood Release user, Tenzo, wasn't away-. From this building, the higher echelons of the Allied Ninja Forces would be able to coordinate the war effort. It was also where the Intelligence Division and most of the Sensor Division were located as well.

At the top floor of the building was the War Room. Like many of its kind, this War Room had a huge table with a detailed map of the Elemental Nations on it, that the Five Kages and their advisors would use to monitor their progress and plan strategy.

Around the table, some sitting, and some standing, were the Five Kages, Mifune, and some of their advisors, such as Shikaku Nara, Ebizo, Chiyo, Ao, or Onoki. Konan was also present as well, given her past ties with Akatsuki.

"Our spies already warned us of Akatsuki's mobilization," Mei began. "Turns out Obito wasn't bluffing when he claimed he had a massive army. My spies counted almost one hundred thousand effectives, split among smaller divisions."

"So, they outnumber us," Kurotsuchi gravely said. "Any suggestion on how are we going to deal with such a problem?"

"With strategy, granddaughter," Onoki intervened. "Numbers don't win war. We can beat Akatsuki if we are able to outsmart them."

"Numbers might not win wars, but they surely help," Rasa intervened, sending Onoki a challenging glare. "Plus, Akatsuki not only has quantity on their side, but quality as well. Reports also said that the battalions of Zetsu clones are accompanied by undead ninjas reanimated through Impure World Resurrection. We have many tough battles ahead."

"How did Akatsuki managed to get their hands on that jutsu? I find unlikely that Orochimaru decided to share his knowledge with them," Jiraiya pondered.

"You told us that he had defected them, given his absence during the invasion of Konoha. Do you think there's a chance Orochimaru might have rejoined their ranks?" Mei asked.

It was Konan who answered. "I find that very unlikely. Our policy was zero tolerance for traitors and deserters. We were planning to send a team to kill Orochimaru for good, but our failure in capturing the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails forced us to drop such course of action."

A growled upon hearing Konan talking about his brother's capture in such a casual manner. Still, he decided it was for the best to keep his temper in check, and bit his tongue. Konan was a valuable asset, and they couldn't afford losing her. Once the war was over, though...

"But that was when your friend was the leader," the Raikage spoke. "Maybe Obito decided to be more lenient. Especially since he's going to need any asset he can get his hands onto if he wants to win the war."

"It's a possibility, yes," Konan agreed. "Orochimaru might have been able to buy his return into the organization in exchange of an army of undead, unkillable ninjas."

"Not as unkillable. While they're few, we have some ninjas able to destroy reanimations permanently," Jiraiya helpfully said.

"Still, this begets a question," Shikaku spoke. "Why did Orochimaru want to rejoin Akatsuki? What's in for him?"

"We don't even know why he left to begin with," Jiraiya said, looking at Konan.

"This merely conjecture, but if I had to guess, I'd say the promise of the Rinnegan," Konan said. "Orochimaru and Danzo worked together, and Danzo attempted to steal a Rinnegan from Konoha after Nagato's death. However, Obito managed to intercept it before Orochimaru could get it. It is possible that Obito promised Orochimaru a Rinnegan in exchange of his help."

"And... do you think Obito would honor that promise?" Jiraiya asked. The idea of a Rinnegan-wielding Orochimaru wasn't something he liked to entertain. It would be like a nightmare come to life.

"I find it unlikely," Konan said, as she crossed her arms. "The Rinnegan, even just one, is an incredibly powerful tool. If I were Obito, I wouldn't honor that promise. Plus, given that Orochimaru already betrayed Akatsuki once, Obito might have him killed once his usefulness reaches its end."

"Still, we can't afford to just wait for the best," Kurotsuchi intervened. "We need to know where is Akatsuki's main base. Orochimaru will be directing his zombie puppets from there. We send a team to kill him and one less problem to worry about."

"It's not that easy. We don't know where such base is located," A stated. "The White Zetsu clones come from different directions, suggesting multiple bases."

"Actually, the Zetsu Clones are able to travel underground. They probably dispersed and reemerged at different points in order to confuse us," Konan told the Raikage.

"That leaves us very little options," Kurotsuchi said, as she looked at the map intently. "Based on their movements, it appears that some battalions are moving towards the Land of Fire, while others are heading to the north, towards the Land of Lightning."

"The last three jinchuriki are under Konoha and Kumo's care, so such course of action is a sensible one," Onoki commented.

"For the time being, given our current situation, I think we should fight defensively," Kurotsuchi suggested. "Reinforce our positions, let Akatsuki come at us, and stall them in a war of attrition until their resources bleed dry."

"A good idea on paper, but I'm seeing some holes," Mei interjected. "We don't know how fast the Akatsuki can produce their Zetsu clones. If we aren't careful, it may be Akatsuki the ones bleeding our resources."

"The fact that they didn't use them until now suggests that they do take some time to be produced," Rasa deduced. "Which would make Kurotsuchi's strategy the more viable course of action."

"Still, this doesn't mean we can't change our strategy next," Jiraiya said. "Though focusing on defense might give us an opportunity to analyze the enemy better, and if possible, prepare a counterattack."

"Given our lack on detailed intel on the enemy, I also support Tsuchikage-dono's plan as well," Shikaku said.

"Then, there's nothing more to discuss," A said. "As we speak, hordes of enemies are invading our lands. It's about time to mobilize our troops and meet the enemy in the battlefield."

"First, let's address the army. They should be gathered just outside," Mei suggested.

"Given that I'm the Supreme Commander, I should be the one to address the troops," Jiraiya suggested. The others nodded in return.

As Jiraiya headed to the balcony, Onoki walked towards his granddaughter. It seemed she imagined what he wanted to tell her, and decided to ask him first.

"So, how was that?" Kurotsuchi asked, looking a little nervous.

"Very good. You did a fine job. A very sensible suggestion," Onoki praised her.

"Thanks," the black haired girl said, smiling a little. "I'm trying my best. I may not show it, but I feel a little overwhelmed. The other Kages have far more experience than I do, and I'm not as versed in playing politics as they are."

"Patience. That's a skill you will develop over time," Onoki reassured. "Besides, it's not that necessary now. Even if some of these people have been our historical enemies, we're on the same side now."

Onoki remember very well the day after Kurotsuchi's appointment. Deciding he was too old to continue as the reigning Kage, he decided to pass the hat to his granddaughter, so he could retire and a new generation could bring Iwa to the future. Everything went fine at first, with Kurotsuchi slowly but surely growing into the position.

Then those kumo ninjas arrived, with their letter requesting the Tsuchikage attend a Kage Summit to deal with the Akatsuki menace. Their timing couldn't have been any worse. Even if Kurotsuchi was a powerful kunoichi, one needed more than mere power to be a Kage, and his granddaughter was still too green to deal with the other Kages. But he couldn't retake the position so a more experienced ninja could tackle this crisis, not without destroying her granddaughter's reputation and credibility in the process. If Kurotsuchi was a Kage, she had to deal with this kind of things, experienced or not.

Upon returning from the meeting with the other Kages, the poor girl was on the verge of crying. During the creation of the Ninja Alliance, she was basically forced to handle all of Iwa's military might to

Konoha, their greatest enemy. Despite her best efforts, she was bested by an alliance between the Hokage, Mizukage and Kazekage. Onoki had told her that it was okay, and that Iwa would remain independent once the war was over.

Even if it might make her look like he was holding her hand, Kurotsuchi decided to bring her grandpa to following meetings, under the pretense of being a very experienced man when it comes to warfare. Fortunately, other Kages also brought more people as advisors as well, so her excuse was easily bought. Still, Onoki wanted to make sure his granddaughter would grow more confident as a Kage.

"Plus, I think you earned their respect when you took the initiative and suggested a course of action that was reasonable and sensible," Onoki said. "If there's a bright side to this awful war is that you'll come out as a much better Kage once it ends."

"Thank you, grandpa," Kurotsuchi said with a smile.

...

Outside HQ

Almost the whole army of the Ninja Allied Forces had been assembled outside of its main HQ. More than eighty thousand ninjas, coming from multiple different villages, spread in front of the HQ building, like a colossal mosaic of multiple colors. One of the largest armies ever gathered. And it was hard to believe that the enemy's army was even greater in number. Still, seeing such a multitude together inspired courage in each of its members.

The army was split into five shapeless masses of people, one for each division, which would be commanded by one of the Five Kage minus Jiraiya, and Mifune. Though technically speaking, there were more than five divisions, but those were dedicated to logistical roles, and were much smaller in number.

Given the size of the groups, it was only logical that many people who were close or at least have some friendship with each other ended up in the same division together,

"Choji!"

"Karui!"

The Konoha ninja and the Kumo kunoichi quickly went to greet each other, and shared a loving embrace, as Omoi and the rest of the Tactical Squad walked towards them.

"Heh, it's so good that we ended up in the same division!" Choji cheered. "Now we can fight side by side!"

"Indeed!" Karui agreed, but her expression then became deadly serious. "Though, given that we're going to fight a war of such scale, you better don't let me down! If your performance in battle is poor, I'll break up with you!"

Choji's face paled upon hearing it. "W-What!?"

"Ignore her," Omoi stated, as he walked towards them. "It's a coping mechanism. She tends to get like that when she's nervous or scared."

"S-Shut up, you dummy!" Karui lamely told her male teammate.

"No, I mean... if you threatened to break up with me... does that mean that we're a couple?" Choji asked.

Omoi chuckled as Karui's hands flew to her mouth, upon realizing what she just said.

"I mean... well, it's that... I guess not, given that we haven't gone on any formal dates yet, you know?" the redhead nervously explained.

"You two went to eat together a couple times when we were in Konoha," Ino pointed out. "And I don't mean going out with other

people. The two of you alone."

"That sounds like a date to me," Omoi agreed with a nod.

Karui let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay, fine we've been going on dates! And yes, that means we're a couple! Will you dumbass shut up now and stop meddling in my private life?"

"Was it that hard to admit?" Omoi said with a smirk, as he and he left his teammate alone with Choji and his team.

"It's finally official, I have a girlfriend! Wohoo!" Choji cheered, as he pumped his fist into the air. "If we weren't about to fight a war, I'd be so excited!"

"Well, congratulations, Choji," Shikamaru said, as he, Asuma and Ino walked to the newlyform couple once Omoi was out of sight. "It's good to see something happy before heading into a war."

"Plus, Shika and I aren't that lucky," Ino said, shaking her head. "Temari is the Fourth Division with her dad and brothers. And Sai was sent to the goddamn Moon with Hinata."

"My wife is on the Fourth Division too," Asuma lamented, as he let out a sigh. "Then again, try to be positive about it. Absence makes the heart to grow fonder."

"At the very least, our teams weren't split," Ino said.

"By the way, where is your other teammate, Karui?" Choji asked.

"T is part of the Medical Division. She will be assigned to one of the main divisions as need arises," the redhead explained. "Though, I hope she doesn't end up with us. I already have to deal with Omoi's nonsense, and his teasing is going to be even worse now that we're a couple."

"Do they think I'm not boyfriend material?" Choji asked, sounding a little self conscious.

"Nah, there's nothing wrong with you," Karui said nonchalantly. "Let's say that I'm not exactly popular with boys. They say I have 'too much of a temper'. HA! What I don't have is patience for bullshit. And those two always have fun at my expense trying to hook me up with whatever boy shows any interest in me just to see me explode."

"Well, you do have a little of a temper," Ino said. Karui glared at her, but the blond didn't flinch. "And I know a few things about temper."

"Just ignore them, and they'll stop," Shikamaru said. "Or even better, show them how happy you're with Choji. That's bound to shut them up."

"I don't have much faith in that plan, but I'll keep it in mind."

...

Unlike Team Asuma, not all teams were lucky enough to stay whole. Sasuke was separated from the rest of the Medical Squad, given that his two other teammates and sensei were part of the Medical Division, and Sasuke wasn't made part of the ninjas that would escort them. Given his skill, power and record, they decided he would make better use of his talents in the front lines, a logic the younger Uchiha couldn't disagree with. The Uchiha found ironic that he actually missed them, given that a few years ago, he would have paid to get rid of them, if only temporarily, and have some peace.

Though, at the very least, there were some people Sasuke was close to, or at the very least, was on good terms with.

"YOSH! All the waiting is killing me! Hopefully our commanders will give us the order to go to the front soon!" Lee energetically shouted.

"I admire your enthusiasm, Lee, but this is a war we're talking about!" Gai replied, just as energetic, but sounding a little chiding. "Don't get over your head, or you will get killed!"

"Don't worry, Gai-sensei! My performance in the battlefield shall be second to no one! You won't have to worry about me!" Lee replied.

Sasuke rolled his eyes. Of all the people from Konoha he knew to be grouped up with, Team Gai wasn't his preferred choice. Oh well, at the very least, Itachi was also in the same division as him. He looked to the side, and saw his older brother, a couple meters away from him. Talking to somebody. *Her* .

"I'm so nervous... I wish I had your temperance, Itachi-kun."

"I'm not as calm as you think, Natsu-san," Itachi replied. "I've been in a war before, and knowing what I'm going to face doesn't make it any easier. Quite the contrary."

This caught the Hyuga's attention. "But... how old are you? You can't be older than twenty five, and the last big war ended when we were children."

"I know. I was four when the Third War was going on. Sometimes, my father would take me to the battlefield, so I could see firsthand what it means to be a ninja," Itachi explained.

Natsu took her hands to her mouth in horror. "But that's... that's terrible! What kind of person would take a small child to a battlefield of all places?"

"Father would sometimes complain about people who become ninjas, but were unaware of the reality of the world we live in. Given that I was supposed to be the next Clan Head, Father wanted me to know that," Itachi said. "And... he succeeded. Probably far better than he expected."

"What do you mean?" Natsu asked.

"The night of the Uchiha Insurrection... do you know why I did what I did? Not only why I sided with Konoha over the clan despite my father leading the coup, but the fact that I decided to kill half the

Uchiha ninjas myself?" Itachi asked. Natsu's face was starting lose what little color had, but nodded at him to continue. "Because they didn't think long-term. Even if they were succesful, an Uchiha-ruled Konoha was doomed to fail. Many people wouldn't accept their rule, and would start a civil war. That would weaken Konoha from the inside, and encourage other villages to invade us. It would be the beginning of the Fourth Ninja War.

"With every clan member I felled... I felt like a civil war and potential war was pushed further and further away... I didn't see them as family members, not even humans beings, just... obstacles to peace I needed to remove."

Once Itachi finished, neither of them didn't say anything for a few minutes. Natsu stared at Itachi, while Itachi merely stared at his feet. Then, after a bit of hesitation, the Hyuga woman placed a comforting hand on the Uchiha's shoulder.

"I... you must feel pretty awful when you think about that," she began. "But I don't want you to think you're a bad person. You did what it thought it was the best. Fighting against your family is never easy. They may hurt you, you hate them in return, but deep down, you know that it's your own flesh and blood, and wish things weren't the way they are. It's normal that you feel guilty for what you did, but it was also for the best."

"You speak as if you knew what I'm talking about," Itachi replied. "I'm really hoping you weren't forced to kill a family member."

"Fortunately, it never got that bad, but sometimes the thought crossed my mind," Natsu replied, as she removed her forehead protector. "My forehead hasn't been as it is now. Not even a couple months ago, it sported the Caged Bird Cursed Seal, which allowed the Main Family members to cause me unbearable pain with a mere hand gesture if I ever stepped out of line."

"At the very least, you got rid of it," Itachi pointed out.

"Thankfully, yes. Thanks to Hinata-sama," Natsu replied, as she put the protector back on. "It's ironic that a person I used to hate ended up being the one to release me from my yoke."

"You hated Hinata? From what I heard, she's a very kind girl. Everybody that knows her likes to some degree," Itachi said, a bit surprised.

"Not that I hated her personally," Natsu replied. "I hated the whole Main House. How I was forced into servitude, how I had to be Hanabi-sama's babysitter instead of improving my ninja career, like the Main House members did. Only the best of the Branch Members, like Neji, were allowed such privilege. I knew Hinata was kind and all the things they said about her, but despite her good intentions, I doubted she would change the status quo. Any other Clan Head with such power would have used it to consolidate their grip on the Clan."

"Right now, I'd love nothing more than swapping my place with a babysitter," Itachi noted, chuckling a little.

"It might sound stupid and naive, but I don't. I want to make a difference in a way that involves my ninja training," Natsu said, as she looked at her Konoha Chunin uniform. "Though I do feel a little odd right now. I'm so used to the maid uniform, these clothes feel strange on me."

"I think your maid uniform also looked better on you," Itachi said, smirking a little.

Natsu smiled back at him. "Why do I have the feeling that there's a hidden meaning to those words, Itachi-kun?"

Once again, Sasuke rolled his eyes. Of course it was his luck that the Hyuga that had been hanging out with his brother a lot for the past few weeks would be assigned to the same division as them. Itachi might deny it now, but it was obvious that Natsu was interested in something more than a friendship, and so was his brother. Guess neither of them wanted to rush things.

Sasuke knew his jealousy was unjustified. He might not express it as outwardly as Sasuke did, but the weight of Itachi's decisions wore him down little by little. Itachi deserved to find love, just like Sasuke did.

"I can't get mad at her for taking Itachi's attention. I'm not a little kid anymore. Plus, they seem to click quite nicely," Sasuke inwardly berated himself. *"I guess I took Itachi for granted, and expected him to be there for me whenever I wanted. Or maybe I'm missing Sakura, and Itachi and his Hyuga are reminding me of her."*

Sasuke discreetly activated his Sharingan, and scanned the crowd, hoping to see more people he knew. Given that the commander of the Second Division was the Tsuchikage, about half the ninjas hailed from Iwa. In the sea of red uniforms, Sasuke also saw some white and navy from Kumo, and tan and white from Suna, but very little green and navy from Konoha. Oh well. The less people he knew, the less friends he had to see die in front of his eyes.

Speaking of Suna, there was also a certain girl that was also lamenting the fact that she wasn't grouped with the person she was hoping for.

"Man, I can't believe we were placed in a different team from Gaara-sama's," Matsuri whined. "Now I won't be able to protect him."

"I doubt he needs your protection," Mikoshi said, rolling his eyes. "Plus, it was inevitable. Chances were that most of us we will end up in another division."

"Yeah! Let's be happy that our team remains whole!" Yukata cheered.

"You're right. Complaining like this is not befitting a ninja of my rank," Matsuri conceded, as she looked at her Chunin vest. "Now, let's do our best so we can end this war as soon as possible!"

"Yes!"

...

"Do you see anybody from Konoha? Anybody we may know," Zaku asked, as she looked at Dosu. "Or hear, in your case."

"With such massive crowd, all my ears pick is a nonsensical cacophony of voices and murmurs. I can't really tell one voice from the other," Dosu complained.

"I already told you guys that none of those guys were in the same division as us," Kin said, crossing her arms. "There's barely any Konoha ninjas here. All what I see are mostly Kiri ninjas."

"Natural, given that this is the division commanded by the Mizukage," Anko chimed in, joining the conversation. "Though, you should be glad that we got assigned to this division, given that we missed our chance to take part in the Kirigakure Civil War!"

"Are you sad you weren't sent to fight in a war, sensei?" Kin asked, raising an eyebrow. When she heard what had happened in their absence, she was glad that they were away on a C-Rank mission protecting a merchant caravan that was heading to the Land of Wind.

"I would have agreed with you if it was any other war but... it was the Kirigakure Civil War! We could have fought both side by side and against the Seven Ninja Swordsmen of the Mist!" Anko said, gushing like a schoolgirl talking about her favorite idol. "One of the most efficient, brutal and with the highest confirmed kill count squads in all of history! You have no idea how jealous I was when Shizune told me that she and her team got to kill Jinpachi Munashi, and Asuma and his team got to kill Kushimaru Kuriare! Not to mention fighting alongside the new wielders of the Thunderfangs and Hiramekarei! Fortunately, fate seems kind enough to give us another chance."

"I don't think if that's something worth celebrating either," Dosu said. "A division with the Seven Swordsmen will be assigned the fiercest battles."

"So? The better! That way we can show off our abilities and when the war is over, getting a promotion" Zaku confidently shouted.

"You're talking my language as well, kid!" Anko nodded in agreement.

Meanwhile, the Seven, or better said, Six Swordsmen of the Mist, were also talking among each other while they were waiting the Kages to end their meeting and give them the order to advance.

"I was kind of surprised that they allowed to keep the squad whole," Suigetsu commented. "I was expecting that they would split us to the other four divisions, so each division could have one of us at least."

"Mizukage-sama must have told them that our unit works better as a team," Miyako said. "Plus, seeing six of the seven Swordsmen of the Mist fighting together after so long will be quite the morale booster. At least for our fellow Kirigakure ninja."

"Yeah, whatever, just try not to get in my way when I'm cutting down those White Zetsu thing to tiny bits!" Ameyuri said, making a couple swings with the Thunderfangs for added emphasis, nearly cutting Chojuro, who jumped back with a yelp. "See? This is why you guys need to keep your distance."

"Don't try to play lone wolf, girl," Zabuza chastised, glaring at the redhead. "Wars aren't won by individually. No matter how strong you are, you will end up facing an opponent you can't beat on your own. And then, you'll find you have no backup to rely on."

"I thought you'd be on my side, Zabuza-taicho," Ameyuri said, sheathing her swords before crossing her arms. "You're somebody who tends to fight alone as well."

"While that's true, I fight alone because my sword has a long range and I can hurt my allies if I'm not careful, so my concentration isn't split," Zabuza explained. "That doesn't mean that I don't disregard my allies, given that I may need them at any moment. Go and fight

alone if that's how you think you're more effective, but keep also in mind that all of us are part of a much bigger division, and we're expected to fight as one."

Ameyuri let out a snort. "Whatever keeps you from nagging me constantly."

"It's not the captain you'll have to be worried about, Ameyuri-san," Miyako told her. "Mizukage-sama herself will be leading this division, and we shall fight alongside her. We can't disappoint her."

"We already fought alongside Mizukage-sama during the Civil War, this is nothing new," Ameyuri countered, rolling her eyes.

"That's true, but this time, we'll be fighting alongside plenty of other villages, not just a handful of Konoha ninjas," Chojuro interceded. "If we did a bad job, it would not only bring shame upon us, but upon Kiri as well."

"Like how the previous generation got their asses handed by a Konoha Genin!" Suigetsu said, chuckling. "Though, with a bar so low, it's impossible to fall even lower!"

"None of you will bring shame to Kiri nor the swords you carry, because I'll make sure you put your best performance," Zabuza said in a commanding tone. "And remember, besides those White Zetsu clones, intelligence reported many Impure World Resurrection zombies. No matter how skilled we are, those things can't be killed with brute force alone."

"Don't worry, we have never brought shame to our blades or our village, and we never will," Suigetsu reassured.

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Meanwhile, in another group, half of the members of the Assault Squad were talking with each other, while waiting for the others from the higher ups. On top of Kurenai and Haku, Yakumo Kurama had

joined them as well, given that she was still under Kurenai's custody. The two youths looked a bit uneasy, Haku constantly looking at the division besides them, and Yakumo constaly shifting her position.

"Are you guys okay?" Kurenai asked.

"A little nervous, but otherwise I'm fine," the Ice Ninja replied, without looking at her.

"Me too. One good thing about being trained by Root is that I'm completely capable of controlling my emotions. Fear included," Yakumo stated.

"Controlling? Or supressing?" Kurenai prodded, raising an eyebrow.

"In this case, controlling," Yakumo assured her. "Trust me, sensei, I've done quite the share of dangerous missions while working under Danzo. I know the scale of a war is something I've never seen before, but I'm ready for anything."

"Remember, if you want to talk about anything, I'm here for you," Kurenai said, placing a hand on the girl's shoulder. Then, she turned at Haku. "The same goes for you. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You've been looking at that other division for quite some time, " Kurenai pointed out.

"From what I heard, that's where Zabuza-sama and the rest of the Sworsmen have been assigned," Haku told her. "It's a pity we weren't assigned to that division. I would have liked to fight at Zabuza-sama's side once again. Or at the very least, being able to talk with him before heading to the front lines. It's been a while since the last time we met."

"It's understandable. But don't despair," Kurenai told him, as he placed a hand on his shoulder. "You'll be able to talk to him again. Zabuza is a strong ninja, and he won't die that easily. And you won't die either as long as I'm here."

Haku acknowledged Kurenai's encouragement with a smile. Then, he asked: "This isn't your first war, is it, sensei?"

Kurenai nodded in affirmation. "Correct. I took part in the Third Ninja War, about eighteen years ago. I remember I was only twelve, not even Chunin yet. As a general norm, Genin aren't send send to the frontlines, and they're usually keep as a reserve force, or for logistic tasks, but back in the day Konoha suffered from low numbers. So lucky me, I got a taste of what war is like when I was barely a teenager."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I had to be a crushing experience," Haku told her.

"It was. Though I doubt it was any worse than your childhood in the Land of Water. Or your years in Root," Kurenai sympathetically told her students. "Though, on the bright side, the next Chunin Exams became a joke in comparison, and I was able to nail a promotion easily."

"Still, I hope-"

"Haku-san!" a new female voice shouted. "Hey, Haku-san!"

Both genjutsu mistress and Land of Water native turned towards the direction of the voice, and they saw a girl with dark blond hair decked in a Kirigakure uniform running towards them, waving both arms wildly. While Kurenai didn't know who was this girl -she didn't remember seeing her during the Kirigakure Civil War- Haku immediately recognized her.

"Hotaru-san!" Haku said, smiling widely.

"Hey, Haku-san! It's so great to see you again!" Hotaru said, panting a little after stopping her run. "It's amazing we were assigned to the same division!"

"Indeed it is," Haku said. "By the way, let me introduce you to my sensei, Kurenai Yuhi, and Yakumo Kurama, a friend and fellow Konoha ninja. Kurenai-sensei, Yaku-san, this is Hotaru, a girl we met during our mission to protect Utakata."

"Nice to meet you, Kurenai-san!" Hotaru said, shaking her hand. "Haku-san and his teammates told me quite a lot about you."

"Yes, I do remember that they also mentioned you when they told me about their mission on Nagi Island," Kurenai replied.

"And nice to meet you too, Yakumo-san!" Hotaru greeting, shaking her hand as well. "Though I'm afraid I haven't heard of you until now."

"That's understandable. Most people thought I was dead until recently," Yakumo told her. Upon seeing Hotaru's confused face, the last Kurama clan member added: "It's a long story. I'll tell you another time."

"So, you finally became a Kirigakure ninja?" Haku asked.

"Yes! And I secured a promotion during the latest Chunin Exams!" Hotaru said, proudly displaying her Kirigakure flak jacket.

"Congratulations. Utakata-san would have been very proud of you," Haku told her.

"Yeah, I like to think that," Hotaru said, as her gaze drifted down. "His memory is what keeps me going. And now, I'll try my hardest to stop Akatsuki and bring his killers to justice. Though, from what I heard, the leader of Akatsuki had already met his just desserts."

"You heard right. Pain died during the Akatsuki Invasion of Konoha," Kurenai told her. "It was Naruto who defeated him for good."

"Oh, speaking of which, what about him? And Hinata-san?" Hotaru asked. "I thought they'd be in the same division as you two."

"Naruto is on a secret location, training to master his jinchuriki powers under the tutelage of another jinchuriki," Kurenai explained. "And Hinata has been assigned a special mission far away from here."

"Oh. I see. Let's hope that they return from their training soon, because I remember that they were very powerful ninja," Hotaru said. "We might need their help if we want to end this as soon as possible."

"Yeah, let's hope," Haku agreed.

Not far away from there, in the same group, the Sand Siblings were also talking among each other, passing the time until the Kages finished their initial strategy and issued the orders. Gaara looked as stoic as ever, though Temari looked mildly upset, something Kankuro noticed.

"What's with that face, sis?" Kankuro asked. "Disappointed that you weren't put in the same division as pineapple head?"

Temari glared at her younger brother. "First of all, don't call him that. Only I get to insult him," Temari said. "And yes, I admit I was hoping we could fight together. Though that's not the only thing in my mind."

"Whatever troubles you, you can share it with us," Gaara said. "And you better do, it's not wise to go to the battlefield with a troubled mind."

"You probably heard about those reanimated ninjas that the enemy is using..." Temari began. "Do you think we might have to fight against somebody we used to know?"

"Like... mom?" Kankuro suggested. "I don't think so. Mom was a ninja but not a very strong one. If they resurrect anybody from Suna to fight us, it will be our strongest ninjas who died during the past years."

"Like the previous Kazekages. Or Pakura of the Scorched Earth," Gaara suggested. "She was powerful enough to be taken into account for the position of Fourth Kazekage, before father was appointed."

"Naruto and Hinata told me that when Orochimaru first used the jutsu, he resurrected the First, Second, and Fourth Hokages, as well as the latter's wife in order to destroy Konoha."

"Whoa, really?" Kankuro asked, surprised. "And how did Konoha managed to survive? Because from what I heard, the First Hokage was immensely powerful. No Konoha ninja would have been able to even make him fight seriously."

"Naruto and Hinata didn't fight any of the reanimations, but from what I heard, they only had a fraction of the original's power. That's how they beat them," Temari explained. "The Hokage revised the notes they had on the jutsu, and if you try to revive a very powerful ninja, the caster must reduce their power, or else they risk losing control."

"Oh, then that jutsu isn't so great!" Kankuro said, visibly relieved. "Even if they send the past Kazekages against us, they will be shadows of their former selves. Even if they can't be killed by normal means, sealing them will be child's play."

"You have an awful habit of underestimating your opponent, Kankuro," Gaara chided the puppeteer.

"Hey, I'm just trying to see the bright side of a situation. But you don't have to worry, I'm not planning to drop my guard at any point," Kankuro assured him. "Though, I wonder if they will reanimate

Sasori. I'd like to have a second round against him for that time he nearly killed us."

"You already had your second round," Temari reminded him. "You fought against him alongside Maki-sensei, Hinata and Kurenai,"

"Yeah, but I felt I didn't contribute that much to the fight, plus Hinata ended up dealing the killing blow," Kankuro replied. "Plus this time I have new and better puppets to fight with."

"While I try to be above such things, I admit I'd like a rematch against Deidara," Gaara confessed. "Now that I know the way he fights, I'm confident I'd be able to bring him down."

"Now that I think about it, if Akatsuki didn't take your Tailed Beast, you wouldn't be here with us, but training with Naruto and that Taki girl on a secret island," Kankuro said in realization. "I can't imagine how freakishly strong you would be if you had the whole power of Shukaku at your command."

"It's something I prefer not to dwell on," Gaara replied. "Even if they're a distant memory now, I still remember Shukaku's maddening whispers in my head, telling me to kill others. It's a power I wouldn't want unless I was able to silence that voice forever."

"So I'm guessing you don't want to become Shukaku's vessel again once we get the One Tail back," Temari said. "Understandable."

"I wouldn't mind to bear that burden again, given that I'm experienced with it. But this time, I'd prefer if Jiraiya-sama was the one doing the sealing," Gaara replied, crossing his arms. "No disrespect to Chiyo-baasama, but sealing wasn't her forte."

"Speaking of her, I heard that she wanted to rejoin active duty," Temari said.

"She wanted to, but father didn't want somebody so past her prime in the front lines," Gaara told the other two. "He allowed her to have a

voice in the strategic and tactical meetings, given her experience in previous wars."

"It's probably for the better," Temari said with a nod. "This war has to be won by the current generation, and not let our forefathers do our jobs for us."

...

"Kakashi-sensei, are you okay?" Tamaki asked, looking at the silver haired Jonin a bit worried.

While most people have been doing some small talk among each other before the Kages would address them and issue their first orders, Kakashi had been staring into the horizon, his one visible eye not focused on anything in particular. Tamaki's voice, however, seemed to snap him from the trance he got caught in.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Kakashi replied. "I was just thinking... well, many things. Like how soon we've been embroiled in another war. The Third Ninja War ended before you guys were even born, yet it felt like it was yesterday."

"The time between two wars is always too short, regardless of how many years pass between them," Shino sagely noted.

"My mom used to tell me about the Third Ninja War when I wanted to hear her past exploits. Though rather than combat, she did mostly scouting and tracking jobs," Kiba interceded. He then paused and crossed his arms, before adding: "I'm afraid this war will be even bloodier."

"Unfortunately yes, it appears to be the case," Tamaki sadly agreed.

"Hey, hey, don't be so glum, okay?" Kakashi told them, raising his voice a little. "If we stick together, we will all go home in one piece. As long as I'm alive, I'll make sure none of you will die."

"As much as we appreciate the thought, Kakashi-sensei, that doesn't depend on you," Shino said, as he adjusted his shades. "During war, chaos and disorder reign supreme, which makes an ideal scenario for sudden and unexpected deaths."

"Yeah. Not to rub salt on the wound, but you end up losing two of your teammates during the past war," Kiba reminded Kakashi. "Even if the two of them turned out to be alive."

"Though, that doesn't mean that we think we're doomed to die," Tamaki added. "We will do our best to stay alive. But if we don't... well, we don't want you to think it was your fault."

"Except if you die, it is my fault. A subordinate's death is always the leader's fault," Kakashi stated. "I think both Rin and I told you the story of how we thought Obito died, and how I acquired my Sharingan, right?"

The three of them nodded.

"The reason the mission went the way it did was that neither of us three were ready to take missions in the middle of a war without sensei's supervision," Kakashi stated. "A leader must know their subordinates' capabilities, and what jobs are they fit to do, and which ones are too much."

"So... you think it was the Fourth's fault that Obito ended up the way he did," Shino guessed.

"Yes, and no. He's partly to blame, but there were other factors that weren't his fault," Kakashi added, then he let out a weary sigh. "You know, this is the reason I didn't want to be a Jonin-sensei to begin with."

"You were afraid to lose your students the same way you lost your teammates and sensei," Kiba replied. It wasn't a guess but a statement.

"Correct," Kakashi said. "When I was doing solo missions, or working with people of similar skill to mine at ANBU... I was at peace, knowing that everybody knew how to take care of themselves and that if the worst came to happen, it wouldn't be my fault. But if I had to take three Genin fresh out of the Academy under my care, I'll have to be much more careful. Even if they mostly do D-Ranks and the occasional C-Rank, Genin deaths are far more common than you think. You'd be surprised how often a C-Rank turns out to be much more dangerous than initially assessed thanks to faulty intel.

"So forgive me if I sound too overprotective, or like I'm underestimating your skill, but as long as this war lasts, I'm not taking any risks. This squad will act, move and fight as one, unless we have no other option but split."

Contrary to what he was expecting, his three students nodded in agreement.

"I think is the wisest decision. We might have grown stronger during the past years, but we are a tracking squad, not a combat one," Tamaki acknowledged.

"Even if we fought against Akatsuki before," Shino said. "They proved to be formidable enemies, and we were unable to win without external help."

The Aburame recalled how Hidan and Kakuzu dominated the battle - and almost lost Kakashi-sensei- even with Fu and Shibuki's help, and it wasn't until Naruto and his teammates appeared that the battle took a turn in their favor. And to say nothing of Obito summoning the Nine Tails in front of them.

"And hey, we don't want to worry you," Kiba added. "There will be time to show you our full potential once the war is over."

"Hey, that's very mature of you, Kiba," Tamaki complimented. "I was expecting you to protest and complain that you're ready to kick ass on your own."

"My thoughts exactly," Shino added, crossing his arms.

Kiba stared at his two teammates with eyes full annoyance.

"Sometimes I feel you guys don't give me enough credit. Listen, we already fought against Akatsuki a couple times, and those guys are some tough nuts to crack. If they're going all out, we better be careful."

There was a moment of silence following Kiba's statement. However, before any of them could continue their conversation, the cacophony of murmurs around them grew much louder all of sudden. Kakashi looked up, and saw the source of the commotion.

"Oh look. There he is," the masked Jonin said in a bored tone.

Because on the highest balcony of the Alliance HQ, Jiraiya, the other four Kages, and Mizune were standing right now. Jiraiya took a step forward.

"EVERYBODY, BE QUIET!" the Raikage roared, and the chatter stated to die down almost instantly. "The Supreme Commander is going to speak!"

"Thank you, Raikage," Jiraiya told the temperamental man, before turning at the massive crowd below. "Greetings everybody. People of Konoha, Kumo, Suna, Kiri, Iwa, Ame and Taki, as well as the Samurai from the Land of Iron. You know, if somebody told me a mere year ago that all Great Villages and some of the minor ones would put their differences aside and join their forces to fight a common foe, I would have laughed at them in their face. But alas, there is an enemy powerful enough to merit such alliance. Said enemy is Akatsuki.

"As somebody who has been researching and fighting Akatsuki for years, I couldn't even imagine the true extent of their resources, and the way they infiltrated our nations, and how far are they willing to go to make sure their goals are fulfilled. They're an enemy unlike any

other, and thus they must be fought in a way not seen before. Together. As one.

"In the past, we've been enemies. All of us have fought pretty much each other in every past war, even if many of us weren't even born when some of those wars begun. But now, seeing all of you gathered here before my eyes... I like to think of this not of just a crisis to avert, but an opportunity to take. Akatsuki believes the world is hopeless as it is, that it will be doomed to a state of constant warfare between ninja villages. That only they have the means to achieve peace, but their peace will come at the cost of thousands of lives, not to mention our freedom.

"However, we shall prove Akatsuki wrong! From this point onwards, we aren't ninjas fighting on behalf of our villages or our nations, but our own future! From this point onwards, we become comrades, brethren, fighting for what we know is right! Because once this war is won, we won't return to the status quo, we will create a better world and a better tomorrow for all of us to live!"

Jiraiya's speech was met with a roaring ovation. The white haired Sannin smirked. He always took pride in his ability to write inspiring speeches.

"You guys must feel antsy. I'm a veteran of two wars, so I can tell that the wait before the first battle is even worse than the battle itself. But fret no more! Multiple armies of White Zetsu Clones, Moon Puppets and Impure World Resurrection zombies are coming from the west towards the Lands of Fire and Lightning as we speak. Now, we shall go to the front, and protect our lands from these invaders!"

Once again, the crowd erupted into cheers and shouts declaring their imminent victory. Yes, their morale was now at their peak. Nodding and satisfied at a job well done, Jiraiya turned towards the other Kages and Mifune.

"Alright, time to move out. You know your orders, so you know what to do," the Toad Sage said. "Now go, and return victorious. And try to

come back alive as well."

"You won't have to worry about us, Hokage-sama. I mean, Supreme Commander," Mei corrected herself.

"I still have a settle to score with those bastards for nearly killing my children," Rasa seethed, clenching his hand into a fist.

"I'll make sure that they get their just retribution for Yugito and Killer B as well!" the Raikage added.

"I may be the youngest Kage, but I'll show you guys that I'm your equal once you see my results!" Kurotsuchi proudly declared.

"You can leave it to us, Supreme Commander," Mifune replied.

...

A few minutes later, the five Division Commanders joined their divisions, and all of them headed towards five different directions. Jiraiya, still in the balcony, watched them go. His head was now filled with one thought, the same thought he had just before he took part in the Second and Third Ninja Wars, as well as their participation in the Kirigakure Civil War.

How many of them would return home alive.

Author's Note: And thus begins Son of the Sannin's version of the Fourth Ninja War. I'm very much aware that this is easily one of the least liked arcs of the entire series, so I know I have the work cut out for me. Still, I'm going to work hard to make sure the chapters to come are as enjoyable as possible.

Many characters made their return. Some like Karui or the Sand Siblings weren't away that long, but how many of you did expect to see Hotaru again?

And I know that the middle of a war might not be the best moment, but I will try to develop some of the couples that need more screentime, like Choji/Karui or Itachi/Natsu. There's little wonder as why I put them together. I would have liked to have more couples together in the same division (like Gaara/Matsuri) but alas, it couldn't be.

Thanks a lot to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

The war will begin next chapter. Which Division will get to fight? And what zombies will Orochimaru choose for the opening battle? In the meantime, leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The First Blood

Author's Note: So, how are you guys doing? I hope you're staying safe. I also hope that this new chapter makes dealing with the lockdown a little better. Enjoy:

Chapter 101:

The First Blood

or

Blast from the past, literally

Land of Fire

Despite the size of the Akatsuki's army, it seemed that they were afraid of going all out. They sent White Zetsu clones in relatively small squads, sometimes supported by one or two reanimations. The Alliance's initial guess was that Akatsuki was "testing the waters", so the speak, before sending a larger attack force.

And said larger attack force came sooner than they expected, and definitely not in the way they imagined. The Sensor Division detected a large mass of chakra traveling underground, and immediately realized that an army of Zetsu wanted to go under them unnoticed. Unfortunately for them, such thing wouldn't happen.

Kurotsuchi managed to move her Second Division en route to intercept this large attack force. It would be the first true battle of the Fourth Ninja War.

"Everybody, stand back, and prepare to attack when I force them out!" the young Tsuchikage commanded, as she took a step forward, and made several hand seals, before slamming both hands into the ground. "Earth Release: Opening Earth Rising Excavation!"

The effect was immediate. The ground in front of Kurotsuchi started to violently shake, as cracks started to form, with large chunks of earth being violently displaced. From said cracks, hundreds upon hundreds of White Zetsu clones were hurled into the air, much to their shock and confusion.

"Everybody, attack now!" Kurotsuchi ordered, before clapping her hands together. "I'll oversee the battle from above, and provide aerial support! Earth Release: Lightweight Boulder Jutsu!"

Kurotsuchi's feet stopped touching the ground as she elevated into the air, slowly at first, faster later, and in a few seconds, she was a good twenty meters above the battleground, which provided her with perfect view of the battle to happen. This was one of the two jutsu she had now that identified as the Tsuchikage, since only those who wore that hat were made privy of their secrets.

The Lightweight Boulder Jutsu was created by the First Tsuchikage, and only passed it down to his eventual successor, Mu, which in turn passed it down to Onoki, and Onoki down to her. Some ninjas asked why isn't the jutsu taught to every Iwa ninja. With an air force, Iwa would reign supreme over the rest of the ninja villages.

However, the Tsuchikages pointed out that making such thing would risk the jutsu to fall into the hands of foreign ninjas, which in turn would create an air force of their own. Hence why it was decided that only the Tsuchikages would be the ones to have this jutsu.

"And from here, I can attack without fear of retaliation," Kurotsuchi said to no one in particular, as her gloved hands weaved hand seals. "Fire Release: Blazing Meteors!"

The young Tsuchikage breathed a volley of massive fireballs at the White Zetsu clones, some of them who had just gotten up and prepared to attack, resulting in a chain of explosions that engulfed them in domes of fire, making the ground shake even further. Seconds after this, the Second Division engaged the Zetsu army in close combat.

...

Mountain Graveyard

So far, there were only two people left on the unofficial Akatsuki Headquarters: Orochimaru, who was directing and coordinating all the zombies on the different battlegrounds, and Obito, who was keeping an eye on the unreliable Sannin. That moment, a White Zetsu clone emerged from one of the walls next to Obito.

"Boss, I have bad news," the clone began. "The division that was traveling underground towards Konoha has been busted. They're engaged with the enemy as we speak, and are in need of reinforcements."

"A pity. Though it was a result I was expecting," Obito said, shaking his head. "Tell the special divisions to move towards the battleground."

"Understood, boss," the clone said, as he vanished into the wall.

"Orochimaru," Obito told the Sannin, who made no effort to acknowledge the Uchiha. "You should send several of your reanimations there if you have some nearby."

"Of course, Obito-kun. I have this group stationed near their position that will be of great help," Orochimaru gushed, as he made a hand seal. "Bloodline Limit Squad, proceed to the designated coordinates."

...

Land of Fire

"Eight Trigrams, Sixty Four Palms!" Neji prepared the Hyuga Clan's signature combo as several White Zetsu Clones converged upon him. "Two strikes! Four strikes! Eight strikes! Sixteen strikes! Thirty two strikes! Sixty four strikes!"

Each Zetsu didn't take more than a two or three well placed strikes to go down. They wouldn't die, but they would be knocked out for quite some time, allowing the Alliance some time to breathe. And Neji didn't seem to be the only one having an easy time with them.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

With a roundhouse kick so powerful it raised a gust of wind in every direction, Lee beheaded several Zetsu clones ganging up on him.

"It seems that Akatsuki plans to beat us with quantity rather than quality," Lee commented. "These creatures don't put much of a fight, not even in large numbers!"

"Yeah!" Tenten agreed, as he impaled an attacking Zetsu with a naginata. "I remember fighting them along with Haku-kun and Karin when we rescued Rin. They weren't very strong back then, and they didn't get any stronger in the meantime."

"Still, you better not drop your guard!" Gai warned them, as he also clobbered two Zetsu clones. "This might be an enemy ploy to make us confident, and strike us down with greater force!"

Suddenly, Neji's Byakugan picked up something. A mass of chakra coming from below. The earth suddenly started to rumble.

"Uh? What's going on? An earth jutsu?" Lee asked.

"No! Something's coming from underground! Something big!" Neji warned.

The ground burst open across the battlefield, and more Zetsu joined the battle. However, these Zetsu were not like the ones they've been fighting until now. They were twice as tall, had an extremely muscular upper body, and had four massive arms sprouting from their shoulders. There was a moment of shock that spread among the whole battlefield, as the Allied ninja tried to process what was this new enemy.

"Just... what the hell are those?" Tenten asked, clutching her naginata.

"I don't know. But I saw similar beings during the Akatsuki invasion of Konoha," Neji told her. "Be careful, their chakra levels are much higher than the normal clones!"

"Alright, let's test then if they're as strong as they really look!" Lee excitedly said, wasting no time and dashing towards the closest of the larger Zetsu clones.

"Lee, wait! Don't go on your own!" Tenten cried, as she and Neji went after him.

"Konoha Drop!"

Lee leaped forward, spinning vertically mid air, and delivered a falling kick to the big Zetsu's head. Despite the power behind the attack, the Zetsu barely reacted to the kick, and smiled evilly at Lee. Gritting his teeth, Lee tried to punch him in the face, but his much larger enemy caught the green clad ninja's fist in his massive hand, and squeezed it hard.

"Does it hurt, Konoha scum?" the giant Zetsu taunted, his smile unwavering. "Not as much as THIS!"

Lee let out a short squeak as the giant Zetsu hurled him upwards with his immense strength, ready to smash Lee against the ground and turn him to pulp.

"Konoha Strong Hurricane!"

Suddenly, there was a green blur, and the arm the giant Zetsu was using to grab Lee was severed from the rest of his body, allowing Lee to land on the ground safely.

"Thank you, Gai-sensei!" Lee energetically said.

"This is why I told you to keep your guard up," Gai said in a mostly chastising tone. "It's obvious that the enemy has more assets under their sleeve than mere numbers!"

"It might be the case, as I'm picking four more chakra signatures," Neji warned his teammates.

"More mutated Zetsu clones?" Tenten guessed.

Neji shook his head. "No, these appear to be humans. Reanimations, if I were to make a guess. Just four, but each of them has an exceptionally powerful chakra."

"Alright, whatever comes, we'll deal with it as a team! Keep your guard up, and cover each other's back!" Gai told his students, who nodded in return.

...

On another part of the battlefield, Sasuke and Itachi were fighting together against the coming horde of White Zetsu clones, and as anybody would expect, they weren't having any trouble dealing with them, numbers be damned. Even the larger variants only proved to be a slightly bigger challenge to the unstoppable Uchiha duo.

"How are you going, Sasuke?" Itachi asked, as he tossed a bunch of shuriken in an arc. Each of the steel stars embedded themselves inside a Zetsu clone's forehead, ending their lives instantly.

"Good, good!" Sasuke replied, as he dodged a mighty blow from a mutant Zetsu, packing so much power it opened a small crater on the ground. "These things provide a better challenge than the normal ones!"

"Challenge this, Uchiha!" the huge Zetsu growled, his voice low and guttural. "Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

Sharp, thick roots emerged from underground, and lunged at Sasuke, trying to impale the youngest Uchiha. Sasuke merely jumped back while making several hand seals, and then pulled several shuriken from his ninja tool pouch. He infused the shuriken with fire chakra before tossing them forward.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Flower Scarlet Claw!"

The burning shuriken flew forward, easily cutting through the growing roots, leaving a trail of burning wood behind, before stabbing themselves into the mutant Zetsu's skin.

"GRAAAHHH!" the abomination screamed as the burning metal stars cut his flesh open.

"I take that back, this guy isn't much of a challenge either," Sasuke cockily said, as he made more hand seals. "Let's finish-"

"Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

Suddenly, the mutant Zetsu's upper body blew up like a bomb, his burning flesh splattering around him, as an orange chakra beam pierced through him. However, said beam didn't stop there, as it continued its way towards a dumbfounded Sasuke.

"What the-?"

"SASUKE!" Itachi yelled, as he rushed towards him.

Almost instinctively, Sasuke activated Susanoo, and purple ghostly ribcage formed around the younger Uchiha, enveloping him like a protective barrier, just in time before the beam could reach him. The beam produced a huge explosion upon hitting its mark that engulfed the Uchiha, before the shockwave violently hurled his body backwards, landing on his back with a couple of thuds.

"Sasuke!" Itachi repeated, struck by panic, as he rushed to assist his younger brother. The explosion left multiple burns across his body

and clothes, but given that he was trying to get back on his feet, the harm wasn't as bad as the older brother feared. "Sasuke! Are you okay!?"

"I've been better," the younger brother sourly replied. "Where did that- ITACHI, WATCH OUT!"

"Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

As Itachi turned around, he started to make hand seals as fast as his hand allowed him.

"Water Release: Water Bullet Jutsu!"

Just like Itachi expected the moment he heard Sasuke's warning, another orange chakra beam was coming at them. This time, however, Itachi managed to form a jutsu to counter it in time. Exhaling a stream of water from his mouth, Itachi's jutsu met the destructive beam before it could strike either of the Uchiha. However, the beam proved to be the stronger attack, as it pushed Itachi's water jutsu backwards, generating clouds of steam as a side effect.

"What? I could swear that that jutsu has a fire component, yet my water attack is failing to stop it!" Itachi thought in distress as he poured even more chakra into his jutsu.

Itachi's salvation, however, came in the form of Sasuke, who joined his brother as he made more hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

A mass of lightning bolts flew from Sasuke's hand, combining with Itachi's water stream. The electrified water was able to push the orange beam back, which quickly lost its momentum, and disappeared.

"Thank you, Sasuke," Itachi replied, panting a little. "How did you know that lightning could stop that jutsu? It didn't look like an Earth

jutsu. Though that would explain why water was ineffective."

"It wasn't. That's Plasma Release, a combination between fire and lightning. You had the right idea with the water jutsu, but the lightning component of the combination needed to be neutralized in some way as well," Sasuke explained.

"Wait, Plasma Release? Wasn't the clan that had that Bloodlimit wiped out during the Warring States Period?" Itachi asked.

"That's right, Uchiha scum!" a new voice said. "But the gods were kind enough to return me to the land of the living so I could avenge my fallen clan!"

Itachi and Sasuke turned around to see a man in his late thirties, wearing dark red clothes under a black antiquated armor. He had pale skin, black hair tied into a slipknot, and the cracked skin and black eyes common in reanimations.

"Let me guess... you're a member of the Sutoku clan, aren't you?" Sasuke guessed.

The man smirked. "It's good to see that we haven't been forgotten. Yes, my name is Akashi Sutoku, last head of the Sutoku Clan!"

"So, Orochimaru got his hands on DNA from somebody who died before the ninja villages even existed," Itachi said in realization. "I have to admit that the man is quite methodical."

"Right now, I wish he wasn't," Sasuke dryly replied.

Akashi started to make hand seals. He held two fingers in front of his eyes, which started to crackle with orange sparks. "Now turn to ashes! Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

Akashi jabbed his two fingers forward, releasing another orange beam of destruction. Sasuke and Itachi decided that it was best to dodge this time, and jumped in opposite directions. Akashi's beam

carved a furrow on the ground as it moved while creating a wall of fire, and killing several White Zetsu clones and Alliance ninjas that were accidentally caught in its wake.

"Such destructive jutsu..." Itachi said in awe.

"Plasma is the combination of Fire and Lightning," Sasuke explained. "The two most destructive basic elements form the most destructive bloodline. Fighting this guy isn't going to be easy."

"If I can get close to him, I can seal him with the Sword of Totsuka," Itachi replied. "Sasuke, you should fall back and see a medic-nin to treat those wounds."

"There's no way I'm going to leave you alone against this guy," Sasuke insisted. "Besides, my wounds aren't that bad. They sting a little, but I can continue."

"You cannot beat me, Uchiha! I have returned from the grave to punish your kind for your sins! I'm the demon of the Sutoku clan!" Akashi boasted, as he prepared to attack once again.

...

Meanwhile, at another part of the battleground, Maki's team was fighting alongside other ninjas against the hordes of White Zetsu. While the strongest ninjas could dispatch them with ease, in large numbers they proved to be a formidable challenge. And a particularly large number of them were heading towards the Suna ninjas.

"Alright Yukata-chan, time for our combo!" Matsuri said, as she took a step forward, as she started to make hand seals.

"Right behind you, Matsuri-chan!" the bubbly Suna kunoichi replied, mimicking Matsuri. "Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Yukata exhaled a stream of flames from her mouth, while Matsuri exhaled a powerful gale of wind from her. Both attacks merged, the wind fanning the flames, resulting in a massive wall of fire that caught the incoming White Zetsu clones. Some of them were able to jump back, and others were smart enough to hide underground, but those closest to the fire were engulfed by it, their bodies quickly reduced to ashes.

"Good job girl! That will give us some room to breathe!" Maki praised her two students.

Indeed, the girls' combination attack broke the Zetsu's charge and sent them into a disarray, which was taken advantage by their fellow Allied ninja.

"Everybody, move! We need to push these creatures back!" an Iwa ninja said, as he led a charge towards the dazed White Zetsu clones. "Let's-"

But his words died on his throat as a round, orange fireball landed upon him, resulting in a huge explosion that engulfed both him and a few ninjas close to him. When the explosion ceased, they could see that the bodies weren't charred or carbonized but... mummified. As if the water inside their bodies had been instantly boiled.

"What... what was that?" Yukata asked.

"Where did that attack come from?" Mikoshi asked.

Maki, however, already saw the effect of such attack before, and much to her worry, had a pretty good idea of what they were going against.

"Everybody, behind me!" Maki ordered, and paled upon seeing more of those weird fireballs were about to fall on a group of ninjas in front of her. Maki, however, could only save a couple of them,. "Clothing Binding Jutsu!"

Maki shot two bands of clothes from inside her sleeves, wrapped themlseves around the waists of two kunoichi, one from Kiri and another from Kumo, if their uniforms were any indication, and yanked them backwards a second before another explosion could claim their lives.

"Thanks, nice save," the Kiri kunoichi replied, panting a little.

"It was a close one indeed. You have nice reflexes," the Kumo kunoichi praised. "I'm Ran, by the way."

"Ruka," the Kiri kunoichi said.

"Maki," Maki replied. "And these are my students. Unfortunately, we'll have to leave the introductions for later. We're not out of danger yet."

Maki looked at a figure that walked through the cloud of smoke raised by the explosions. Once she was visible, they could see it was another woman. Pretty tall, with green hair styled in a bun, two bangs framing each side of her face, said bangs colored orange. She was wearing a sleeveless black top, a white obi tied around her waist, and short black pants.

"You were lucky to escape my wrath, Kiri scum. But luck won't smile upon you a second time," the woman said, as she formed a couple of those fireballs on each hand. As she walked towards the group, her eyes rested on Maki, and stopped on her tracks. "Wait a minute, those purple marks... Maki, is that you?"

"Indeed I am, Pakura-sensei," Maki replied. "After your death, I always wished to be able to see you one last time. Needless to say, I'm regretting that wish."

"Pakura-sensei?" Maki's three students shouted in unison, before Mikoshi asked: "The legendary Pakura of the Scorch Release was your sensei?"

"How is that you never told us about that?" Matsuri asked, sounding almost indignant.

"I had my reasons. I promise I'll explain you later." Maki said, her eyes never leaving Pakura. "However, you need to go away. Face an easier opponent, leave her to me. She's an extremely dangerous foe."

"What!?" Yukata asked, indignant. "You can't ask us to leave you alone against her, sensei!"

"I'm not asking, I'm *commanding* you to. Don't forget that you're my subordinates," the Suna Jonin said in a scathing tone. "Now stay away from Pakura and the other reanimated enemies. Let the more experienced ninjas handle them."

"We better listen to Maki-sensei," Mikoshi said, thought there was some resignation on his voice. "Come on, girls. Maki-sensei will be okay."

Now that they didn't have an unified front, Matsuri and Yukata were forced to give up, and she and Mikoshi leaped away, leaving Maki and the other two kunoichi alone against the Scorch Release user.

"You did the right thing sending your students away, Maki. They looked a bit too young and green, and I'd hate killing fellow Suna ninjas," Pakura said, as her eyes drifted towards Ruka. "That Kiri scum, on the other hand, I'll be more than happy to send her to the afterlife!"

Displaying astounding speed, Pakura dashed towards the dumbstruck Ruka with a fireball on each hand, who yelped in shock, before once again being yanked away by a strap of cloth, removing her from the jutsu's way. Pakura saw in surprise and anger that Maki and Ran had jumped in the opposite direction, while the former wrapped a strap of cloth around Ruka's waist.

"Whoa! Thanks again!" Ruka said. "Second time you save me in less than five minutes!"

"Why did you save her!?" Pakura angrily demanded. "She's a Kiri ninja! I died to Kiri ninja! Your father died to Kiri ninja too! Hell, that was the reason you wanted to be a ninja to begin with!"

"Times have changed, sensei," Maki solemnly said. "In case you didn't realize, the Five Great Villages are fighting together under a single banner against an enemy that threatens the whole world. The same enemy that took you from your rest in the afterlife and turned you into their slave. We can't allow old grudges to get in the way."

"Yeah, and they will stab you in the back once they no longer need you!" Pakura hotly repeated, as she started to make hand seals. "Scorch Release: Blazing Heatwave!"

Pakura started to glow with a golden orange light, before said light burst into a wave of intense heat that exploded upwards, burning the grassy ground as it expanded. The trio of kunoichi found themselves forced to jump backwards in order to avoid the lethal attack, but Ruka made several hand seals as well.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Ruka expelled a torrent of water from her mouth, but much to her shock, the water evaporated instantly, turning into a cloud of steam, while barely stopping Pakura's attack.

"A water jutsu. You must think you're so clever, you Kiri bitch," Pakura seethed. "No wonder you chose to stab me in the back when you fooled me into dropping my guard. You scum can't beat me in a fair fight!"

This time, it was Ran who decided to attack. She quickly made a couple of hand seals, before pulling out several shuriken.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Shuriken!"

The Kumo kunoichi tossed a handful of steel stars at Pakura, which crackled with electricity as they flew towards its target, making whirring noises. Pakura, however, was going to respond in kind, her hands flying through hand seals.

"Wind Release: Breakthrough!"

Pakura exhaled a powerful wind current that not only stopped the shuriken with ease, but pushed them backwards.

"And you aren't that much better," Pakura said, looking at Ran with disdain. "You should know that Scorch combines Fire and Wind, and Wind beats Lightning."

"Dammit..." Ran gritted her teeth, before looking at Maki. "Maki-san, how do we beat her then, if our elemental ninjutsu is useless against her?"

"Scorch release is a combination of fire and wind, but what most people don't realize is that it's not fire, but extremely hot air," Maki explained. "That's why water on its own is useless against it. In order to beat heat, you need cold."

"So... Ice Release?" Ran asked.

Ruka's face lit up. "The Konoha-Kiri ambassador, Haku Yuki, has Ice Release!" she said in realization. However, all enthusiasm left her just as quickly when she realized of something else. "... but he's been assigned to another division."

"Fortunately, we won't need Haku-kun to win this battle for us," Maki confidently said. "Next time Pakura-sensei attacks, prepare another Water jutsu. Ran, you get ready to attack."

"But the last time I did that, it didn't work!" Ruka protested.

"Don't argue, just do as I say! Nobody knows Pakura-sensei better than I!" Maki firmly stated. "Here she comes!"

"Scorch Release: Extremely Steaming Murder!"

Pakura dashed towards the trio of kunoichi, holding a sun-like orb on each hand, and thrusting them forward. The Allied kunoichi jumped back, while Ruka and Mai started to make hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

"Wind Release: Gale Palm!"

Ruka exhaled another torrent of water towards the incoming golden orbs, while Maki clapped her hands before thrusting them forward, releasing a powerful gale. Maki's wind fanned Ruka's water stream, turning it into a tornado of water that filled the air with thousands of tiny droplets. And much to Pakura's surprise, her orbs of heated air quickly shrunk until they finally vanished, leaving nothing but a cloud of steam behind.

"What...?" Pakura asked.

"Ran, now!" Maki urged.

The Kumo kunouchi quickly rushed towards the momentarily shocked Pakura as she made hand seals as fast as her dexterity allowed her, before unsheathing her tanto, which began to crackle with electricity.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

In two swing motions, Ran's electrified blade slashed Pakura's forearms, producing two small bursts of ash and paper bits. Ruka then pulled out a kunai with an explosive note attached, and threw it at Pakura's feet. The explosive tag detonated instantly, blowing up Pakura's legs and hurling her backwards.

"YES! We did it!" Ruka cheered, pumping her fists into the air. "We took down such a legendary kunoichi!"

"I'll go and seal her right now with my jutsu," Maki said. "You two stay close and cover me."

"You got it!"

"As you say."

The trio of kunoichi walked towards Pakura, who was lying on the ground, motionless. As expected, her arms and legs were slowly regenerating. But they wouldn't regenerate in time for her to continue the fight.

"Sorry, Pakura-sensei. It pains me seeing how you weren't even allowed to rest in peace. But don't worry, this will be over-"

"MAKI, WATCH OUT!"

"Explosion Release: Landmine Fist!"

The trio of Allied kunoichi jumped back in time just before another reanimated ninja landed between them fistfirst. When his fist touched the ground, it produced a huge explosion that would have obliterated them hadn't been for Pakura's warning. When the cloud of the explosion dispelled, they could see it was a man with long spiky brown hair and a square jaw. His uniform and forehead protector tied on his arm identified him as an Iwa ninja.

"Damn, Pakura, why did you have to warn them?" the new ninja said, clicking his tongue. "You just robbed me of a three for one."

"You almost killed my apprentice, Gari, you piece of shit!" Pakura said, as she finished her regeneration. "If you weren't dead already and I had control over my actions... !"

"But our situation is nothing like that, so your threats are empty," Gari nonchalantly said, before turning at the trio of Allied kunoichi. "You should do like me and try to make the best of a bad situation. Since we are forced to fight, why not have some fun?"

"Are all Explosion Release users this deranged, or it's just you?" Pakura angrily asked.

"Did she said Explosion Release?" Ran asked.

"I don't like the sound of that," Ruka whimpered.

"Pakura alone proved to be a formidable opponent. There's no way we can match two immortal ninjas with Bloodline Limits," Maki assessed. "Let's fall back and see if we can join forces with other ninja! We will engage them when our odds of victory are better."

Ruka and Ran nodded in agreement, and the trio of Allied kunoichi leaped back in order to rejoin with their comrades, followed by the two reanimated ninjas.

...

As the other battles raged on, Gai's squad continued to fight against the White Zetsu clones. On top of the larger variants, a new kind of Zetsu had appeared: this kind of Zetsu had their right arms replaced by a mass of interwoven wooden vines, cropped by a flower. Their backs had sacs of an unknown substance connected by more vines to the arm. Their method of attack involves firing yellow projectiles of what appeared to be corrosive spores compressed into small bullets.

"Here comes another volley!" Neji warned. "Everybody, watch out!"

And as the Hyuga said, a rain of corrosive bullets fell upon the Allied ninja. Many were able to dodge the deadly projectiles, while others weren't so lucky, and the spores ate through their skin.

"Neji, do you locate the snipers?" Tenten asked, trying to look around while fending off incoming normal White Zetsu clones. "We can't fight like this!"

"I just found some of them hidden among the trees!" Neji said, fighting as well.

"In that case, guide us to them so we can stop them from harassing us from afar!" Lee shouted, as he delivered a roundhouse kick to a group of clones.

"Sure, follow -WHOA!" Neji said, as he jumped back, barely avoiding a lightning bolt from striking him. "I'm picking up a new chakra signature! Very powerful! Everybody, stay on guard!"

Wind started to blow, as more lightning bolts came somewhere behind the trees. Between the Zetsu snipers and this new enemy, the Allied forces were on a pinch. However, Neji wasn't going to let the enemy control the pace of the combat.

"Lee, Tenten, Gai-sensei, I'm going to make this new enemy to come out!" Neji called, as his body shimmered with chakra. "Gate of Opening, open! Multiple Vacuum Palms!"

Thrusting his arms back and forth, Neji shot a barrage of vacuum shells at the point where the Lightning Release user was hidden. And just like Neji expected, he, or better said, she, was forced to come out from her hiding spot into the open. A woman with dark skin and long white hair, wearing a Kumogakure flak jacket under a long and elegant light blue battle kimono.

Gai and Lee prepared to attack, their bodies also glowing with chakra as they started to open Celestial Gates.

"Lee, now!" Gai said, as he and his protege leaped at her. "Double Konoha-"

"Tempest Release: Blades of Light!"

The Kumo ranimation generated two swords which appeared to be made of light, and swung them at the green clad ninjas. Even if they were mid air, Gai and Lee were able to dodge the attack by sending a burst of chakra through their feet, allowing them to change direction and maneuver around the attack, before they landed on the ground again.

"We avoided her in time," Gai said, looking at the swords of light with narrowed eyes. He didn't know what they were, but they looked dangerous. "Lee, are you okay?"

Lee appeared to be unscathed, but a small cut opened on his cheek, and a thread of blood trickled down from it. Lee wiped the blood from his finger, before staring at their new opponent.

"I am, Gai-sensei. But it's been a close one," Lee commented.

They were soon joined by Neji and Tenten, the two of them already on fighting stances, ready to face the new opponent.

"In all my years as a ninja, I've never seen anybody able to dodge my Tempest Release jutsu like that," the woman said. "One has to be faster than lightning in order to do so."

"Yes, all of us train to be as fast and strong as our bodies allow us to be. And then some," Gai told the woman.

"Tempest Release," Neji repeated. "The combination of Wind and Lightning. It produces jutsu with unmatched cutting power and speed. That's the Bloodline Limit of the Tokimune Clan."

"I see you know about us. Even if Kumo isn't that big on clan culture or promoting clans over the individual. You can all me Sayu, Sayu Tokimune," Sayu said, making a bow. "I have nothing against you, Konoha ninjas, but I'm afraid I have no choice but fight you to the best of my ability. The commands of the one who resurrected me are impossible to ignore. Tempest Release: Razor Starfall!"

Sayu clapped her hands together before making a hand seal. Silver sparkles started to appear around her body, before they shot forward in the form of a barrage of glowing needles.

"Everybody, behind me!" Neji warned, as he started to spin in place while releasing chakra from every single point of his body. "Heavenly Spin!"

Neji turned into a spinning dome of chakra that successfully deflected the incoming barrage of glowing needles. When Neji's spinning started to lose speed, the green clad Jonin knew they had to go on the offensive, or else their foe would control the pace of the fight.

"Good job, Neji, now it's our turn to attack!" Gai excitedly said, as he rushed towards the white haired woman, with Lee and Tenten behind him.

"I'd advise you not to get close to me if you expect to come out of this fight alive," Sayu calmly said, as she made more hand seals. "Tempest Release: Blades of Light!"

This time, two blades made of light appeared on each hand of the Kumo reanimation, and swung them to strike the incoming Gai and Lee. However, much to her surprise, Tenten appeared in front of her, a katana crackling with electricity on each hand, and parried the twin blows. The two kunoichi struggled against each other, until Tenten's swords were cut in half.

"Your speed is impressive, and you had the foresight of channeling elemental chakra through your weapons to counter my attack," Sayu praised., even if her tone didn't change. "However, with just one element-"

"Double Konoha Whirlwind!"

Both Gai and Lee delivered a brutal kick to the kunoichi's chest, sending her hurling backwards, and making her to release her energy swords into the air. However, rather than falling on her back with a loud thud, Sayu used the force of the kicks to do a backflip, and landed gracefully on her feet. And as a final touch, she casually caught the swords of light as they landed.

"Clever maneuver," Sayu praised once again. "Will you be able to do it again? Tempest Release: All Cutting Crescent Moon!"

Sayu swung her light swords in arcs in opposite ways, creating a crescent shaped energy blast that flew forwards in a straight line, slicing that trees and rocks that it found in its way like they were made of butter, without losing any kind of momentum. Gai's team paled upon seeing the destructive power of such attack.

"Everybody, watch out!" Neji shouted, warning not only his teammates, but the Allied ninjas that were fighting Zetsu clones and other reanimations around him. "Do not let that jutsu touch you under any circumstances!"

Thankfully, most ninjas that heard Neji were able disengage and jump away in time in order to avoid the attack. Others weren't so lucky, and were caught in the area of effect. While some Allied ninjas and Zetsu clones only lost either an arm or a leg, the less fortunate ones were cleanly cut in half, dying almost instantly.

"The cutting power of her attacks is too great. Any idea on how are we going to counter it?" Lee asked, as he eyed the Kumo reanimation.

"Tempest is the combination between Wind and Lightning. We'd need Wind and Fire to stop it," Neji replied. "And sadly, the only member of our squad that uses elemental ninjutsu is Tenten, and she only knows Lightning jutsu."

"In that case, we have no option but dodge her attacks and try to get close to her," Lee guessed. "We already did it once, I'm sure we can do it again!"

Meanwhile, Sayu made a chain of hand seals as she prepared her next attack.

"Unfortunately, this jutsu isn't as easy to block as the ones before," Sayu warned, and slammed her hands into the ground once she made all the seals. "Tempest Release: Slash of the White Tiger!"

Suddenly, five vertical blades of light emerged from Sayu's hands, moving forward. They grew in size as they advanced, while carving five furrows onto the ground. The gap between each blade also grew bigger as they moved, with arcs of lightning jumping between each blade. The effect was as if a giant beast was slashing the ground with an invisible paw.

"I'll try to stop it!" Neji said, as he rushed forward to meet the deadly attack in the middle. "Gate of Healing, open! Gate of Life, open!"

"Neji, wait!" Lee tried to stop his teammate, but it was in vain.

"Heavely Spinning Lotus!"

Neji turned into a blue and green chakra dome of spinning chakra, much larger than the normal Heavenly Spin, and moved to intercept the attack. The five vertical blades crashed against the spinning dome, both attacks trying to grind each other, until the former started to push the latter back. Neji released even more chakra and increased the rotation speed in return. Eventually, it proved to be too much, and the five blades of light shattered in a million dots of light.

Still, Neji didn't stop. He advanced towards the Kumo reanimation, carving a large furrow as he moved.

"A Heavenly Spin that allows the user to move while he's casting it... I fought many Hyugas when I was alive, yet none of them managed to push their clan's taijutsu to such levels," Sayu complimented, as she started to make hand seals. "Let's see if you did something about that glaring weakness of yours! Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

Sayu's body crackled with electricity for a second, before it was engulfed by a massive and bright flash of light. The effect was immediate, and Neji abruptly stopped spinning, tripping on his feet before falling to the ground, hands clutching his eyes.

"MY EYES!" Neji shouted in pain, as tears of pain streamed from his hurt eyes.

"I see not. Disappointing," Sayu said mostly to herself, shaking her head. She started to make hand seals again. "Unfortunately, you won't have the chance to-"

Suddenly, several kunai landed around her, stabbing themselves into the ground with a thud each, followed by Tenten, already making a hand seal. Each kunai had an explosive tag attached to them, which was already burning, and a couple seconds later, Sayu found herself engulfed by a chain of explosions.

"Well done, Tenten!" Gai praised, as he and Lee landed behind her. Lee quickly but carefully helped Neji back on his feet.

"Thanks, but I'm afraid something so basic won't be able to keep her down," Tenten said, her eyes fixed on the cloud of smoke.

And indeed, just like she said, a powerful gust of wind dispelled the cloud of smoke, revealing Sayu, her arms wide open, and her damaged body slowly regenerating.

"It's okay, you already did enough," Gai told Tenten, before turning at Lee and Tenten. "Stay with Neji until his sight gets better."

"Yes, Gai-sensei," Tenten replied, nodding.

"She's a formidable opponent, Gai-sensei. Won't you need our help?" Lee questioned.

"You're right, Lee, she's a magnificent adversary. But don't worry, since now that I saw how her jutsu works, I know the perfect way to counter it!" Gai told him, as he pulled out a pair of nunchakus from his backpack. "Tenten, I need you to stay close to seal that reanimation once I incapacitate her."

"Understood, Gai-sensei. Please be careful," Tenten said before she and Lee took Neji away, leaving Gai alone against the white haired woman.

Gai walked calmly towards the Kumo reanimation, a confident grin on his face, while skillfully twirling his nunchakus around. Sayu saw this, and raised an eyebrow.

"So, you plan to beat me all by yourself?" Sayu asked, cocking her head to the side. "No matter how good you are with those weapons, they won't be enough to beat my Bloodline Limit."

"Then I'll be more than happy to prove you wrong!" Gai excitedly said. "Gate of Pain, open!"

A blue aura appeared around the green clad Jonin the moment he opened the fourth gate, as chakra poured from every pore of his body, raising gusts of wind in every direction.

"An impressive power up. Let's see if it can really help you," Sayu replied, as her hands started to fly through hand seals. "Tempest Release: Deadly Light Blossom!"

Sayu pulled several shuriken from her ninja tool pouch, and infused them with both lightning and wind, before tossing them at Gai. The two elements combined, granting the shuriken a star shaped aura, greatly increasing their cutting range. It reminded Gai of Naruto's Rasenshuriken. They even made a similar loud whirring noise.

Gai rushed forward, while channeling chakra through his nunchakus, while he made them spin at an even faster pace, producing a strong wind current. Using his enhanced weapons, he quickly deflected the incoming elemental shuriken away, careful they weren't towards areas with allied ninjas fighting.

"You... you deflected my all-cutting shuriken? Impossible!" Sayu cried, as she made more hand seals. "This is something you won't be able to deflect! Tempest Release: Razor Starfall!"

Casting her hands forward after clapping them together, Sayu send a storm of light needles towards Gai. Gai had to admit she was right, there's no way he could deflect projectiles so tiny, some of them would slip past him. Fortunately, he had another way to counter the attack.

"I don't need to deflect your jutsu if it never gets close to touch me!" Gai said, as he started to twirl his nunchakus at an even faster speed, before facing them towards Sayu. "Winds of Youth, blow everything away!"

The nunchakus spun so fast, they started to raise a very powerful gust of wind, taking the shape of two tornadoes. The light needles caught in the wind quickly slowed down, until they disappeared completely. None of them managed to reach the green clad Jonin.

"The Razor Starfall too? How can you nullify all my jutsu?" Sayu asked in disbelief.

"People tend to look up to ninjutsu and underestimate taijutsu, and they don't realize that there's more to taijutsu than just punching and kicking!" Gai shouted, as he took a fighting stance. "I let you attack me twice, now I believe it's my turn to strike!"

Gai crossed the gap between the two of them in less than a second, and swung his nunchaku at the Kumo reanimation. However, the white haired woman was fast enough to generale a blade made of wind anf lightning on each hand, parrying Gai's swings.

"Don't think I'm harmless in close combat just because I'm a ninjutsu specialist," Sayu said, as she and Gai traded blows.

"I would never dream to underestimate an opponent, much less one as formidable as you!" Gai replied. "But this is over now!"

In a quick motion, Gai crouched and delivered a low kick to her claves, making her fall on her back. But before her back touched the ground, Gai kicked her once again into the sky. He then leaped after

her, and wrapped his arms and legs around his body. The two of them started to spin as gravity pulled them towards the ground.

"FRONT LOTUS!"

Gai released Sayu just before she smashed against the ground, opening a crater when she crashed down. Her whole body appeared to be shattered, with all four limbs separated from her body. It slowly began to regenerate, but not in time before stopping them from sealing her.

"It is done," Gai said, looking at his fallen opponent. "Tenten!"

Team Gai's only kunoichi landed besides her teacher a few seconds after being called. Without being told what to do, she immediately pulled multiple sealing tags, some chakra suppressing and others body immobilizing, and started to place them on Sayu before she could regenerate completely.

"You were a fantastic adversary, Konoha ninja," Sayu praised Gai. "I wish I could have fought you in life, under different circumstances."

"My feelings are the same," Gai replied. "I know the enemy brought many past ninjas who would be a formidable opponent. Too bad everything that's at stake will stop me from enjoying beating such foes."

"Take joy in peace, not in battle, Konoha Jonin," Sayu told him, as she felt the seals disabling her body and chakra. "Now do me a favor... and help end this war... so my fellow Kumo nin... can return home safe..."

"It's done," Tenten said. "What should we do with her?"

"Somebody should take her to the rear guard, so she can be properly safekept," Gai told her.

"Why don't you do it yourself, sensei? Opening the gates must have leave you a little winded, while I'm still pretty fresh," Tenten suggested.

"What!? And leave my students alone in the middle of a battle? That would be mostly unyouthful, and there's no way-

explosion release

Gai was silenced when he noticed the glare Tenten was shooting at him.

"Gai-sensei, you did a lot here. So take her away and rest a little. Neji, Lee and I may be your students, but we aren't little kids anymore. We will be fine," Tenten chastised the older man.

"A good ninja always recognizes a battle he can't win," Gai said in resignation, but in good humor. He threw Sayu's body over his shoulder, and leaped away. "I'll be back as soon as possible!"

...

Allied Ninja HQ

Inside the Allied Headquarters, Supreme commander Jiraiya and the military experts and advisors brought by the other villages were contemplating the course of the battles, and devising strategies according to them.

A multitude of sensory ninja had been linked together through a machine, and were using their expanded senses to monitor how the battles were going. So far, there were only minor skirmishes going on, with the exception of Kurotsuchi's second division, which were fighting a large force of Akatsuki, and could be considered a real battle.

"Supreme Commander, news from Kurotsuchi!" Ao shouted. "The Second Division is losing ground against the enemy! New mutant

variants of the Zetsu clones with increased strenght and ranged capabilities are giving them some trouble. Plus several reanimated ninja with powerful Bloodline Limits. Even if one of them have been defeated, the number of casualties has been high."

"Should we divert some troops from other divisions in order to reinforce her position?" Onoki suggested. Even if he was trying to hide it, one could tell he was worried for his granddaughter.

"I suspect that's what the enemy is expecting us to do," Chiyo replied. "Then they'll move to attack our less reinforced positions. We can't allow them to do that."

"While I agree with Chiyo-san," Shikaku said. "We can't afford to lose ground so early in the war. We need to find a way to reinforce their position without compromising our other fronts."

Jiraiya, however, smirked confidently. "That's why I decided to keep our strongest asset in standby, since I knew something like this could happen."

Chiyo looked at Jiraiya. "You plan on sending her, don't you?"

"Indeed," Jiraiya said with a nod. "Send a message to Tsunade-hime. She and a few of her medics must head towards the Second Division's position in order to reinforce them. Let Akatsuki be the ones to taste the power of the Rinnegan."

Author's Note: And thus the war begins.

Aside from Gari and Pakura, I had other two Bloodline Limit elemental combination users, not so coincidentally, the ones that didn't appear in canon. I teased Plasma release with Sasuke all the way back to the Chunin Exams, and now you saw what the real deal was (more next chapter), as well as Tempest Release: the name I gave to the combination of Wind and Lightning.

Once again, many thanks to DryBonesKing for coming up with the names of the clans that used these bloodlimits. The Tempest Release clan name, Tokimune literally means "inquisitive", but the name references the Japanese samurai/second-in-command to the shogun at the time, Hojo Tokimune. He was a man who helped lead Japan in a war against the Mongolian Empire. During this time period, Japan was aided by two tsunamis and tornados that managed to do damage to Mongolian warships and armies. The wind references in the history fit a tempest release user, and Tokimune was also a devout zen Buddhist.

Then there's Sutoku. Named from another former japanese emperor that got deposed for supporting the wrong samurai clan in a rebellion. He was removed from office, replaced by his son, and became a monk. In Japanese folklore, Sutoku became enraged and bitter and became a spirit that cursed Japan with bad natural disasters such as fires and earthquakes. Hence how this Sutoku claims to be a demon that seeks revenge on the clan that brought him and his own clan down.

Some people complained (rightfully, admittedly) that I was giving Team Gai the short end of the stick, and they kinda had a point. Turth be told, fights that are nothing but taijutsu are a bit hard to write, since hand to hand combat is something that works better on a more visial medium rather than a written one. Still, I hope you guys were satisfied with their fight (there will be more in the future, don't worry).

Also, I'd like to point out that Ruka and Ran aren't OCs. They appeared in some filler episodes during the anime's take of the Fourth Ninja War arc.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Hope you guys enjoyed the beginning of the war, and remember to stay safe, practice social distance, keep washing your hands,

and leave a review on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Battle Among the Flames

Author's Note: Well, not much to say here other than enjoy the second part of the first day of battles:

Chapter 102:

Battle Among the Flames

or

The Land of Fire, on fire

Forests of the Land of Fire

The first battle of the ninja war continued, with neither side appearing to gain advantage over the other. Akatsuki had superior numbers, but most of the Allied ninjas were individually stronger than the white Zetsu clones. Plus, the Allied ninjas also had the Chakra Golems, whose armor resisted all but the strongest of the physical attacks, and their seals allowed them to absorb elemental ninjutsu. And thus, they were excellent at dealing with the White Zetsu clones.

At least the normal ones. Some Zetsu brutes noticed the Golems, and went to destroy them. While the golems were strong, the mutant Zetsu had enough muscle to tear their armors apart.

"These pieces of scrap will help the Allied Ninja no longer!" a Zetsu brute yelled, as he was about to trash yet another golem.

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Suddenly, multiple vines emerged from below the giant Zetsu, and tightly wrapped around his arms, legs and body, leaving him completely immobilized.

"What the...?"

"I'm sorry, but dad said those golems are quite expensive," a white haired girl said, just as she landed in front of him. "And dad says that we must take care of expensive stuff."

The Golem wasted no time, and slammed its fist into the Zetsu's head, blowing it into multiple chunks of white flesh. The rest of the body lifelessly fell back on its back after the girl undid her jutsu. Nodding to herself in satisfaction, Kaida went to look for more targets.

...

"Lava Release: Scorching Rocks jutsu!"

Kurotsuchi expelled a large amount of lava from her mouth, which took the shape of multiple burning boulders, spreading in an arc towards the enemies surrounding her. Some found their marks, while others missed, before falling to the ground below. However, while she was casting the jutsu, she felt a foot smashing against her back, and talons trying to pierce her flak jacket, interrupting her attack and sending her tumbling down.

"SHIT!" Kurotsuchi loudly cursed as she tried to regain her balance mid air. As she did, she saw more aerial enemies diving at her.

Right now, the Tsuchikage was fighting against yet another type of White Zetsu, one that had leather wings instead of arms, which allowed them to fly. On top of that, their feet ended in long and sharp talons, which was their main method of attack, but it wasn't the only one.

"Yes, you dumbasses, come to me if you dare!" Kurotsuchi said as she started to make hand seals before she clapped her hands together. When she brought them apart, a cube made of white light appeared between them. "Dust Release: Atomic Dismantling Jutsu!"

Kurotsuchi send the cube towards the incoming Zetsu, which increased its size tenfold in less than a second, catching the flying Zetsu within. The cube then flared with white light, and the Zetsu were no more.

"That takes care of that group," Kurotsuchi said, panting a little. Looking around, she saw dozens of those flying Zetsu converging upon her. "A shitload of them remains. And they can attack me from pretty much any direction. Time to break out that jutsu then," Kurotsuchi said, as she started to make hand seals. "Lava Release: Lava Chakra Armor!"

The air around Kurotsuchi started to ripple as heat build around the young Kage, before her body flashed with a bright red light. The next instant, her whole body was covered in an armor made of molten rock, leaving only her eyes exposed.

"All right, all set! Come on assholes, come here and see if you can touch me!" Kurotsuchi taunted. Much to her surprise, the flying Zetsu did so. Kurotsuchi merely raised an eyebrow, and smiled under her mask of lava. "Your doom, then."

...

"Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

Once again, Akashi fired his destructive orange beam at the Uchiha brothers, who dodged it by jumping in opposite directions. The beam carved yet another furrow as it moved, but this time it didn't kill anybody as collateral damage. Both the White Zetsu clones and allied ninjas learned to get away from the Sutoku clan head, and let Itachi and Sasuke deal with him.

"Sasuke, I'm going in!" Itachi said, as he rushed forward, katana in hand. "Cover me!"

"You got it!" Sasuke replied, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke exhaled a volley of fireballs in a wide arc forward, which forced the reanimation to jump back in order to avoid them. Taking advantage of that moment, Itachi Body Flickered next to him, and brought his sword down. However, Akashi was fast enough to block it with a kunai.

"You're fast, Uchiha, but you won't catch me off guard so easily!" Akashi boasted, as he pulled another kunai and swung it at Itachi.

The older brother parried it, before delivering another swing that was dodged. The two of them exchanged blade swipes, though it was clear that Itachi was the superior swordsman, and slowly pushed Akashi back.

"Your Plasma Release jutsu have an impressive destructive power, but they have a glaring weakness: they can't be used in close range!" Itachi said, as he pressed his attack with more powerful sword swings.

"Don't you dare underestimate me, Uchiha! We of the Sutoku clan aren't one trick ponies reliant on our Bloodline Limits!" Akashi boasted.

Akashi delivered a swipe with one of his kunai, which Itachi was ready to parry. However, in the last second, the kunai started to crackle with electricity as lightning chakra was channeled through it, allowing it to cut Itachi's katana as if it was made of paper. Even if Itachi was able to dodge the electric kunai, the second kunai, wreathed in flames, plunged into his chest, just below the neck.

"Got you!" Akashi said with a sadistic smirk, as he dug the kunai even deeper.

"Itachi!" Sasuke yelled, as he rushed to aid his brother.

Itachi, however, smirked, much to the reanimation's confusion, before the older Uchiha burst into a murder of crows that started to fly around him, cawing loudly, and pestering him with pecks.

"What the... oh, I get it, this is a fucking genjutsu!" Akashi said, as he dispelled it.

"Too late!" the real Itachi said, as he appeared behind him, his Susanoo already formed. A sword of golden flames appeared in one of the red chakra construct's arms. "Sword of Totsuka: Seal!"

As he delivered a swing of his flaming sword, Akashi turned around, revealing an orange ball of energy that crackled with chakra.

"Plasma Release: Light of Judgement!"

Akashi tossed the sphere at Itachi, which exploded upon touching the Uchiha's Susanoo. The chakra construct managed to absorb most of the blast, but it was shattered to pieces, and the resulting shockwave hurled Itachi against a nearby tree.

"You think you can catch me off guard with one of those accursed genjutsu of yours, Uchiha?" Akashi said, angrily boasted. "We know how to deal with your kind! That's why your miserable clan had to ally with your longtime enemies in order to-"

"Lightning Release. Thunder Blade!"

Crackles of electricity alerted Akashi of Sasuke's attack, and he turned around just in time to parry Sasuke's swing of his electricity-enhanced sword with a kunai empowered the same fashion.

"Ah, the runt," Akashi said, rolling his eyes. "So, you don't want to see your brother die? Do you prefer if I kill you first, then?"

That moment, Sasuke's Sharingan morphed into their advanced form, as the air around them started to become much hotter.

"Amaterasu!"

Akashi burst into black flames, and the youngest Uchiha jumped backwards in order not to be burned by them, as he flinched when the memory of his near-kill of Naruto washed over his body like a

blanket of anguish. However, before he could cry victory, there was a small burst of smoke, and the black flames weren't consuming the Plasma Release user, but a mere log.

"A Replacement? Shit!" Sasuke cursed, as he looked around, lamenting having to force himself to relieve that trauma for nothing.

"Sasuke, to your right!" Itachi called.

Sasuke turned to said direction, just in time to see an orange light glowing brighter.

"Plasma Release: Light of Judgement!"

Once again, Akashi threw a sphere of plasma at Sasuke, who dodged it the best way he could. Unfortunately, just like his brother a moment ago, he was unable to avoid the ensuing shockwave, and was hurled away. Through rather than smashing against a tree, the younger Uchiha landed on the ground on his back, bouncing multiple times before.

"Shit... that was..." Sasuke grunted, as he tried to shake away the pain from his body. Unfortunately, he wasn't going to have time to nurse his wounds.

"Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

Sasuke's Sharingan watched in horror as another orange destructive beam carved a furrow in the ground as it moved towards him, leaving a trail of flames. Even if caused him no small amount of pain, Sasuke made a hand seal and molded some chakra, and was able to use Body Flicker to dodge the attack before it could reduce him to cinders.

"Dammit... I could use Sakura or Karin right now..." Sasuke complained, as he held the left side of his body. He swore he would never take his teammates for granted ever again.

"Sasuke!" Itachi said, as he landed besides him. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better," Sasuke replied, coughing some blood. "If just one guy can do so much damage, I can't imagine a whole clan of them."

"There's a reason as for why they were exterminated," Itachi pointed out.

"We can't beat this guy on our own. We better fall back and get some help from the main body of the division," Sasuke suggested.

"We can't do that. His jutsu are incredibly destructive and have a very wide area of effect. We would risk causing even more casualties to our side. We have to defeat him ourselves," Itachi stated.

"You're very confident in our chances, Itachi," Sasuke dryly said.

"I am. I know your potential, Sasuke, and if we fight together, that reanimation won't have a chance against us," Itachi assured. "Can you use Susanoo?"

"A little. I still haven't mastered it yet," Sasuke replied. "I can use it, but I won't be able to keep it for long."

"In that case, save it if you're unable to dodge that man's jutsu. I'm alive thanks to my Susanoo cushioning the blast of that attack," Itachi said. "I can end this fight in one hit. If I can stab him with the Sword of Totsuka, I can seal him permanently, and won't come back even if he's a reanimation."

"I don't think you'll be able to get close enough to him for that," Sasuke observed, "At least not before he obliterates your Susanoo like he did before."

"No, if he doesn't see me coming," Itachi said.

"So, that means I'm going to be the distraction, don't I?" Sasuke asked. It was something he wasn't looking forward to.

"No. Both of us will be," Itachi cryptically said. "Confusion will be our greatest weapon, and his downfall."

...

Not far away from there, Maki continued the battle against her resurrected sensei, who now had the help of another reanimation. Despite trying to fall back and ask for help, the zombies wouldn't let them go much further. The Suna Jonin decided it was for the best to go all out.

"Selaing Art: Cloth Binding Armor!"

Whips of cloth wrapped around Maki's limbs and body, covering it completely, and leaving only her eyes visible.

"Huh, what's that?" Gari asked, cocking his head in mild annoyance. "You plan to copy the Second Tsuchikage's style or what?"

"See if your Tsuchikage can do this!" Maki boasted, though she immediately realized that trying to compare herself to a Kage would make her sound ridiculous. "Multiple Cloth Razor Whips!"

Many whips made of cloth emerged from under Maki's bandages, and lunged themselves at the two reanimations, like a bunch of angry snakes hungry for their prey. Pakura and Gari were able to dodge the attack, yet Maki was able to redirect half of the razor whips towards Pakura and the other towards Gari, and this time they were unable to dodge them.

"Yes!" Maki cheered.

However, victory was still far from her reach. Even if she aimed at their vital spots, zombies had none, and could still go on. Pakura grabbed the cloth whips, and focusing her chakra, used them to channel a stream of fire that spread through the cloth whips towards Maki. Realizing she made a mistake, Maki broke the whips that tied

her to both Pakura and Gari, and jumped backwards in order to avoid being burned.

"Too late, mummy gal!" Gari said, as he leaped towards her, glowing fist reared back. "Explosion-"

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

A white and dark blue blur crossed between the two of them, accompanied by the sound of crackling electricity, and Gari saw how his arm was cut away from the rest of his body.

"Got you!" Ran said, gripping her electricity-infused tanto.

"Shit!" Gari said, as he broke his momentum for the sake of jumping back. He looked at his sliced arm, which was starting to slowly regenerate.

"Quickly, let's try to overwhelm him now that I crippled him!" Ran called, as she and other nearby ninja went to chase him. The reanimated Explosion Release user ran away.

Maki sighed in relief, as her eyes focused on Pakura. *"Good. With that Iwa ninja out of our hair, our chances of sealing her are all the greater."*

While Maki's reasoning was right, "greater chances" didn't necessarily translate into "good chances". And Pakura, weaving more hand seals, was about to show that. Several flaming orbs appeared around her, and start to spin around her body, their speed progressively increasing. Maki and Raku adapted defensive stances.

"Ruka, let's counter this! Together, like we did before!" Maki said, as she started making hand seals.

"You got it!" Ruka replied.

"Scorch Release: Blast Wave Ring!"

The orbs spun so fast, they almost looked like a ring of fire. Said ring then exploded outwards in a wave of blazing winds. However, the two kunoichi were ready to counter this.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Once again, the combination of wind and water created a powerful torrent that managed to stop Pakura's jutsu from advancing, creating yet another cloud of steam result of the heated air coming in contact with the cold water, blinding all combatants.

"Ruka, get close to me! Back to back!" Maki called, pulling the other kunoichi towards her. "She'll take advantage of the cloud of steam to ambush us! We can't let our backs exposed!"

"You got it!" Ruka said, as she obediently rushed to Maki's side.

"Knowing sensei's hatred of Kiri ninja, she'll attack Ruka first," Maki thought, as she looked around. "The moment she makes her move, I need to act quickly if I want to catch her before Ruka is injured. Sorry for using you as bait like this, Ruka, but this is our best chance to beat her."

Long seconds passed by, and Pakura didn't seem to make any attempt at attacking them. The cloud of steam started to slowly dispel, restoring their visibility and depriving Pakura of a chance to ambush them.

"Don't lower your guard, Ruka. That's what Pakura-sensei is expecting us to do," Maki whispered. Ruka merely nodded.

Then, it happened. The sound of footsteps. Light and soft, but still audible. And just like Maki was expecting, they came from the direction Ruka was facing. It was now or never.

" *I got you sensei!*" Maki triumphally thought, as she made a hand seal. "Multiple Razor Cloth Whips!"

More whips made of cloth emerged from under Maki's bandage, and circling around Ruka, lunged themselves at the attacking Pakura. The bandages stabbed themselves into the undead kunoichi, stopped her on her tracks just before she could get close to the Kiri kunoichi.

"We caught her! Attack now, Ruka!" Maki commanded.

"Understood!" Ruka said, as she hastily made several hand seals. "Water Re-"

But then, much to the two kunoichi's shock, Pakura exploded in a fiery blast, violently hurling both women into the air, while burning their clothes and some their skin, before they fell back into the ground with a loud thud. Maki's Cloth Armor protected her from the blast, and while injured, she could continue fighting. Ruka couldn't say the same. Even if the Kiri kunoichi was still alive, the injuries caused by the explosion were too grievous to allow her to continue fighting.

"An explosive clone. Pakura-sensei knew that I would expect her to attack from Ruka's side, and send a decoy to bait me," Maki frustratingly realized, as she fought off the pain and battled to get back on her feet.

However, Maki didn't have time to contemplate on her blunder, as she saw in horror Pakura -this time the real one, she presumed-leaping at her with three flaming orbs spinning around her body. She couldn't fight and protect the injured Ruka at the same time. In their current situation, she could only think in one course of action.

"Sealing Art: Protective Cloth Dome! Sealing Art: Hardening Seal!"

Whips of cloth shot from Maki's body, and wrapped themselves forming a dome around her. As the dome formed, glowing seals

started to appear on the pieces of cloth, solidifying and hardening it in order to resist external attacks. One of Pakura's orbs smashed against the cloth dome, making the seals to glow even brighter, but it was unable to breach it. Not that it was going to stop the reanimation from continue attacking.

"I'm sorry, Maki, it pains me to be the one to end your life," Pakura sorrowfully said as she continued bombarding the barrier with more scorching orbs. "But I have no choice in my actions."

...

Meanwhile, not far away from that, Maki's students, Matsuri, Yukata and Mikoshi, following their sensei's orders, stayed away from the zombie ninjas, and resigned themselves to fight against the White Zetsu clones exclusively.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

"Manipulated Attack Blades!"

Streams of fire, blades of wind, and flying kunai and shuriken all found their mark, killing or severely maiming many of the White Zetsu clones. Though, no matter how many of them took down, more rose to take their place. It felt like their numbers had no limit.

"I'm starting to get a little tired..." Yukata complained.

"I know, but we have to keep fighting! The more of these things we kill, the easier time will have sensei and the stronger ninjas fighting the zombies!" Matsuri encouraged, as she kicked a Zetsu clone coming close to her. "And if we can beat them, then getting rid of these things will be much easier!"

Mikoshi was going to say something, but the bespectacled youth then saw something through the corner of his eye. He looked up,

and saw a multitude of greenish-yellow projectiles arcing towards them.

"Everybody, take cover!" he shouted.

"Get close to me!" Matsuri said. As Yukata and Mikoshi did, Matsuri pulled out her johyo, and made it spin above her and her teammates head as she channeled chakra through it for added power.

The next second, a rain of projectiles that appeared to be made of concentrated powder peppered the area, hitting Allied ninja and White Zetsu clones alike. While the projectiles had a corrosive effect on the human ninja -and the ground as well, as multiple holes were opened by the missiles that missed their mark- the White Zetsu clones were unaffected.

Thanks to Matsuri, thought, both her and her teammates avoided being hit, as Matsuri's spinning johyo deflected a couple of missiles that would have hit them.

"What kind of jutsu is that?" Matsuri asked, as she shook some of the corrosive powder from her weapon.

"I don't know, but it was like nothing I've seen before," Mikoshi said, quickly adjusting his glasses. "It came from the west. And I'd say it was cast by more than one ninja."

"Maybe we should try to find the enemy who used that jutsu and get rid of them," Matsuri suggested. "Otherwise, it's going to make fighting these creatures all the harder."

Yukata and Mikoshi nodded. However, before they could move, the ground started to shake, and a Zetsu Brute emerged from underground. He let out a powerful, inhuman roar, while raising his four muscular arms in an intimidating pose, making Yukata to let out a high pitched shriek.

"It seems the enemy read our minds, and didn't want us to interfere with their snipers," Mikoshi dryly noted.

"Let's get rid of this guy as well," Matsuri said, unimpressed. "Come on Yukata-chan, between the three of them, it will be piece of cake."

"I-If you say so, Matsuri-chan..." the terrified raven haired girl whimpered.

The Zetsu Brute made the first move, and charged towards the trio of Suna ninjas, each of his steps making a booming noise. Closing the gap in less than two seconds, he tried to smash Matsuri with a vertical slam with two of his arms, but both she and her teammates jumped backwards, and the giant Zetsu's fist only hit the ground, cracking a crater of moderate size open.

"Such strength! If that thing hits us, we're done!" Mikoshi observed with some unease.

"Agree! Let's keep our distance and fight from afar!" Matsuri said, as her hands flew through hand seals. "Wind Release: Breakthrough!"

The brown haired girl exhaled a powerful gust of wind at the large Zetsu variant. However, much to her surprise, the mutant Zetsu made a couple of hand seals as well, before opening his mouth and breathing a stream of fire at her. The fire was magnified by Matsuri's wind jutsu, and soon the brown haired girl saw a massive wall of fire ready to engulf her.

"Matsuri-chan!" Yukata yelled.

However, Matsuri already found a way out. Rather than cancel her jutsu, she aimed it towards the ground. The stream of wind she was blowing propelled her upwards, elevating her above the torrent of flames just as it passed under her position. However, before she could sigh in relief, she saw much to her horror that the mutant Zetsu was also in front of her, one of his fists reared back.

" When did he jump-"

Her thoughts were interrupted by the incoming punch, which send her flying back against the ground. She managed to cover herself with her forearms just in time, and the armored vambraces on her forearms prevented her bones from breaking. Still, that didn't made the fall any less painful. The mutant Zetsu landed with a loud boom, and dashed towards the fallen kunoichi.

"It's time for you to die, Suna scum!" the giant Zetsu roared.

That moment, several kunai with explosive notes attached to them landed around the mutant Zetsu, detonating a second after that, engulfing the large creature inside a chain of explosions. As this happened, Mikoshi and Yukata rushed to aid their unofficial leader in their sensei's absence.

"Matsuri-chan, are you okay?" a worried Yukata asked.

"Let me heal you," Mikoshi said, as he placed his hands over Matsuri's worst bruises, and applied the Mystical Palm jutsu.

"Yes... I think so..." Matsuri said, as, Mikoshi's healing slowly alleviated her pain. She looked at her vambraces, which had been completely shattered, and removed them completely, leaving her arms bare. "But yes, that guy is as strong as his appearance suggest."

"Not to mention resistant. Look!" Mikoshi said.

When the clouds of dust and smoke raised by the chains of explosions dispelled, the Zetsu was still there. There were some wounds and burns across his body, but not only did they barely affect the monster, but were slowly beginning to heal.

"Nothing but a direct hit with powerful attacks will bring him down," Matsuri deduced, as she stood back on her feet once Mikoshi finished patching her up. "Maybe a combination between more

explosives directed with Mikoshi-kun's Blade Manipulation and Yukata-chan's fire jutsu, aimed for the head."

"Easier said than done. That guy's as fast as he's strong," Mikoshi pointed out.

"Then I'll force him to stop. When I give you the signal, attack," Matsuri said, as he pulled out something from her ninja tool pouch and put it inside her mouth.

"Matsuri-chan, what do you plan to do?" Yukata asked.

Matsuri didn't reply. She pulled out her jōhyō once again, and started to spin it as she ran towards the giant Zetsu. The mutant creature smirked widely upon seeing the Suna kunoichi running towards him.

"What, you didn't have enough? Hehe, very well, if you're so eager to die..." the Zetsu Brute said, as he took a fighting stance.

Matsuri threw her weapon at the giant Zetsu, the dart at the end of the rope easily stabbing into the Zetsu's surprisingly soft flesh. The giant Zetsu, however, grabbed the rope, and pulled Matsuri towards him with all his might. Something that Matsuri already expected, as the force of the pull didn't offset her balance, while pulling out a kunai with her free hand.

Once she reached close combat distance, Matsuri brought the kunai down at the Zetsu's head. Unfortunately for her, the Zetsu was quicker, and grabbed her wrist with one of his arms, while using his two lower arms to grab Matsuri's body.

"That was a mistake, little girl," the Zetsu said with a grin. "Now die-"

However, before the mutant creature could tear the Suna kunoichi in half, Matsuri spat what she was holding inside her mouth, hitting the Zetsu's left eye, before said object exploded into a cloud of smoke.

"AAAAARRGGH! MY EYE!" the giant Zetsu screamed as he unwittingly dropped Matsuri.

The Suna kunoichi quickly pulled out two more kunai, and stabbed them on each of the Zetsu Brute's knees, forcing him to fall on them.

"Mikoshi-kun, Yukata-chan, now!" Matsuri called.

"Blade Manipulation!"

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Multiple kunai with explosive tags attached to them flew towards the Zetsu, before finding their marks, sinking themselves into either his face, or around his head. It was then followed by a stream of fire that detonated said explosives. Multiple chunks of white flesh were splattered everywhere, signaling the fact that the giant Zetsu had indeed been destroyed.

"Yes! We brought him down!" Mikoshi shouted, pumping his fist in triumph.

"Matsuri-chan! That was so brave!" Yukata said, as she rushed towards her friend. "I don't think I would have been able to do that without freezing completely!"

"Thanks. Though, I was quite terrified,. That thing could have ripped me in half easily," Matsuri replied. "Not to mention, I had to make sure the smoke bomb didn't burst inside my mouth and-"

Matsuri's words were interrupted by yet by the sound of nearby explosions. It wasn't less the explosions themselves -which happened quite often around them- and more where said explosions came from.

"That's where Maki-sensei is fighting..." Yukata said in a whisper.

Turning at said direction, they recognized their sensei's protective cloth dome, with Pakura relentlessly bombarding it with her orbs of

heat.

Maki's students didn't need to speak. A shared look and a nod is all what they needed before the three of them headed to assist their sensei.

...

Maki was resisting as best as she could her former sensei's onslaught. So far, her defensive seals were resisting, but she could feel them eating more and more bits of her chakra each time Pakura hit the cloth dome. And while Maki would eventually run out of chakra, Pakura didn't have to worry about that.

"Come on... somebody! I need some help!" Maki cried, hoping a nearby ally could lend her a hand. Said cry for help was going to be addressed.

"Don't worry sensei, here we are!" a female voice said.

"Matsuri... no!" she cried. This time, she no longer feared for her life, but for her students' lives instead.

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Ignoring her own safety (and that of Ruka's) Maki undid the dome, and saw her three students facing one of the most dangerous ninjas Suna had ever produced. Making a couple hand seals, Pakura generated three of her scorching heat orbs, which started to spin around her body. Maki's eyes widened in horror.

"Get away from her!" Maki shouted. "Come close to me, now!"

Thankfully for her, her students listened, and fell back to their sensei's position.

"Are you okay, sensei?" Yukata asked a bit worried.

"I am. But Ruka isn't," Maki replied, as her eyes drifted towards the fallen Kiri kunoichi. "Mikoshi, can you help her?"

"Her wounds appear to be much more serious than what I'm capable of healing, but I'll do my best," the bespectacled boy said, as he kneeled besides Ruka and started to treat her wounds. Meanwhile, Matsuri and Yukata placed themselves at each side of Maki, and adopted fighting stances.

"So, what's the plan, sensei?" Matsuri asked.

"So, your students returned," Pakura observed, and fixed her eyes on them. "You should have listened to your sensei. This fight is too big for you."

"Maybe. But we aren't going to fight alone! We're going to help Maki-sensei to beat you!" Matsuri proudly stated.

"Like, totally!" Yukata added, her love and pride in her sensei overcoming her fear, even if barely.

"You better take them away from me. I don't want kill the next generation of Suna ninjas, and I don't think I'm able to hold back," Pakura warned them.

"I did try, but they're way too stubborn for their own good," Maki replied, as she inched closed to her two students.

"Too stubborn for their own good? Why does that sound familiar to me?" Pakura asked, sending Maki a taunting look. However, said look was replaced by one of worry and even horror. "Maki, watch out, I'm going to attack again!"

Pakura leaped forward, her three orbs of heated air spinning around her. Maki didn't have to tell Matsuri and Yukata to put some distance.

"Beware of her jutsu. Scorch Release is nothing like any other elemental combination. It works by boiling the water in your body,

leaving you a mommified husk," Maki warned them.

"Don't worry, sensei, we will be okay!" Yukata assured her.

"Being confident is good, but this is Pakura we're talking about. Even without her Bloodline Limit, she is still one of the most powerful ninjas Suna has ever produced," Maki insisted. "I will fight her head on. You two cover me and attack when you see any openings."

"Understood," Matsuri replied.

"You got it, sensei!" Yukata added.

"Alright," Maki took a deep breath, and closed her eyes for a second. After opening them, she shoot her former teacher a determined stare, and charged forward. "Here I come, sensei!"

Pakura didn't reply, and merely summoned another two orbs of heat on each hand. Just like how Maki was expected. And now that Pakura had her hands occupied, Maki send several whips of cloth at the undead kunoichi's ankles, which tightly wrapped around them. However, Pakura quickly infused one of the orbs into her hand, and making a chopping motion, the cloth whips were swiftly cut. Pakura repeated the process with the other hand, and tried to punch Maki.

"Aiming for my legs when my arms were busy," Pakura recollected. "Smart, but you aren't the first one to try that!"

Even if Maki managed to jump aside just in time to dodge the fiery punch, she could feel the unpleasant heat warming her skin way too much. Her Cloth Armor wouldn't prove much protection for such attacks.

"Our turn, Matsuri-chan!" Yukata said, the ditzy kunoichi realizing that Pakura was wide open, as she formed hand seals as fast as she could. "Fire Release: Flame Cannon!"

"Certain Kill Treasure Tool Meteor!"

Matsuri launched her johyo at Pakura once again, while Yukata exhaled a fireball in tandem. It didn't appear that the undead kunoichi was in position to dodge, but just like Maki said, Pakura didn't become one of Suna's finest by relying exclusively on a powerful bloodlimit.

"Scorch Release: Heat Blast!"

Aiming one of her hands aside, Pakura released the heated air infused into her hand in the form of an explosion that propelled her sideways, avoiding both attacks.

"No!" Matsuri cried.

"Not bad, girls, not bad," Pakura praised. "Maki trained you good. But-"

Pakura was interrupted when Yukata's fireball, just before passing her, split into three smaller fireballs, two of them turning to each side, and another turning upwards. One of those smaller fireballs managed to hit Pakura in the legs, blowing one of them.

"YES! Direct hit!" Yukata cheered, pumping her fist into the air.

Pakura made a backflip, and landed on her good leg, while waiting for the other to regenerate.

"Now that she can't move as good, we should press the attack!" Matsuri urged.

"Agreed," Maki said. "But let not change the strategy. I'll deal with her directly. And when I tell you, attack again. Use those very same attacks."

"The same? But Pakura-san will be ready for-"

"Do not question me, just do as I say!" Maki insisted. "I know how to defeat her!"

"I hope whatever plan you have, Maki, it will be good to bring me down," Pakura said, still standing on one leg. "And honestly, you should listen to your students. The same attacks won't work twice."

Maki didn't reply. She generated two whips of cloth from the bandages under her wrists, and channeled chakra through them, making them rigid, solid and sharp, like blades of cloth that could be used as if they were swords. Maki engaged her former sensei in close combat, harrasing her with powerful and fast swipes, not letting her use ninjutsu.

" She will try to hit my other leg in order to make me lose my balance completely," Pakura thought, seeing through her former students' movements. *"I'm sorry Maki. I thought I taught you not to use the same strategy on the same opponent more than once."*

And indeed, just like she foresaw, several whips of cloth appeared from under Maki's bandages, and lunged at her good leg. However, this time Pakura was ready. Rather than aiming for the whips, she changed her target. She brought her hands together, and made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Maki jumped backwards while covering behind her arms, but she was too close to Pakura, and was unable to dodge the wall of fire, which quickly engulfed her. All she could do was channel even more chakra through her Cloth Armor in order to make it sturdier.

"Maki-sensei!" Matsuri cried.

"Don't worry about me! Attack, now!" Maki urged, as she fell to the ground on her back, her Cloth Armor being on fire on multiple spots.

Matsuri and Yukata followed her orders, and ignoring her sensei's plight, unleashed their attacks once again.

"Fire Release: Flame Cannon!"

"Certain Kill Treasure Tool Meteor!"

Once again, Matsuri's dart and Yukata's fireball flew towards Pakura whom, at that moment, her leg finished regenerating.

"I can dodge the johyo easily. And the splitting fireball, while clever, has a glaring flaw in its design," Pakura thought, as she placed herself in front of the fiery projectile. *"The fireball will split in three, two projectiles going sideways and the other upwards. Meaning that the best way to dodge it is standing in front of it!"*

And Pakura's prediction turned to be true. When the larger fireball split into three smaller ones, they changed their course and passed her by harmlessly.

"Just as I expect-" Pakura was about to say, when she caught something from the corner of her eye. "What?"

From the ground, Maki launched yet another whip cloth at her. However, probably due her current position, Maki's aim was a little off, and Pakura only needed to sidestep in order to dodge the attack.

"So, you were using your students' attacks as distractions, and tried to catch me off guard," Pakura noted. "Not bad Maki, but-"

"I wasn't aiming at you!" Maki furiously replied.

"Huh?"

That moment, Maki's cloth whip wrapped itself around Matsuri's johyo, who was still moving past Pakura. Maki then pulled the cloth back, making the johyo spin around Pakura, wrapping the rope against her, pinning her arms against her body, before maneuvering it back towards Matsuri, who caught it expertly, and pulled with all her might.

"What the-?" Pakura asked, as she tried to break free.

"Sorry, sensei, but this is the end. Cloth Binding Jutsu!"

Wasting no time, Maki generated even more whips of cloth, which wrapped themselves around Pakura, starting from her legs, before moving upwards, until the undead kunoichi was completely trapped inside a cocoon of cloth. As the final touch, Maki placed a chakra suppressing seal on the cloth prison, making sure Pakura wouldn't be able to escape.

And then, Maki fell on her knees.

"Don't worry, sensei," she sorrowfully said. "Soon you'll go back to your eternal rest."

The solemn moment, predictably, didn't last, as Maki heard her two female students rushing towards her.

"SENSEI!" Yukata cried in joy.

"We did it!" Matsuri shouted, elated. "We beat Pakura of the Scorch Release! They won't believe when we tell them."

"Yes, we did. Good job, girls," Maki congratulated her students. "However, this battle is far from over, and we can't let the enemy free Pakura-sensei. Now go and take her to the rear guard for safekeeping. The ninja there will know what to do with her."

"You got it, sensei!" Yukata said, still high from the victory rush.

"We'll come back as soon as we can," Matsuri promised.

The two girls grabbed the bandage-made cocoon, and leaped away. Maki meanwhile decided to return with her remaining student, and check how Ruka was doing.

...

"Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

The head of the disappeared Sutoku clan fired his signature jutsu at the Uchiha brothers. However, rather than a straight line, he instead

moved it in a wide arc, in order to hit both Sasuke and Itachi. Both brothers used the Body Flicker to quickly evade the attack, which carved another furrow into the ground, burning the grass around it.

"The creepy voice in my head told me to decapitate you and collect your Sharingan!" Akashi gleefully said. "And you know what? I agree with him!"

"Many were the fools who tried to steal the Sharingan for their own," Itachi replied. "So far, none of them had succeeded!"

Technically speaking, one man did,. The very same man that was now controlling Akashi like a puppet. But Itachi doubted that Orochimaru would have been able to get his hands on a Sharingan without taking advantage of some chaotic event like the Uchiha insurrection. Still, Itachi hoped Orochimaru wasn't listening at that point.

"There's a first time for everything!" Akashi replied, and Itachi had to suppress a flinch. The undead Sotoku clan head made more hand seals, before firing one of his signature jutsu. "Plasma Release: Light of Judgement!"

Itachi pumped chakra into his legs, and leaped into the air just as the orb of plasma hit the ground where he had been standing on, resulting in another explosion. The shockwave pushed Itachi higher into the air. Something the Uchiha was counting on, but his enemy saw as a mistake. Itachi bit his thumb and started to make hand seals.

"You can't dodge while you're in mid air!" Akashi boasted, as he pointed his index and middle fingers at the older Uchiha. "Plasma Release: Light of Death!"

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Itachi thrust his hand down, creating a sealing array mid air, followed by a burst of smoke, just before the destructive beam pierced it. After

a couple seconds, Itachi emerged from said cloud, riding the back of a giant crow.

"Sasuke, now is your chance!" Itachi shouted from the sky.

"I'm way ahead of you!" Sasuke said, as he appeared right behind Sutoku, ready to deliver a swing from his electrified katana to the undead's neck.

Akashi, however, proved once again to have excellent reflexes and reaction time when he turned around and parried the blow with an electrified kunai.

"Trying to catch me off guard won't-"

"Fire Release: Phoenix Scarlet Claw!"

Alerted by several whirring noises coming from above, Akashi jumped back just in time to avoid a flurry of fire-infused shuriken from pelting him. He gritted his teeth and looked at the flying Uchiha with eyes full of hatred.

"Oh, so you plan to blindside me from above. You think you're so smart, don't you?" Akashi growled, as he started to make hand seals. Another sphere of plasma appeared between his hands.

"Plasma Release: Light That Burns the Sky!"

Thrusting both arms upwards, he tossed the sphere into the sky in Itachi's direction. The giant crow managed to evade the attack easily, and it lost between the clouds. Panic crept through Sasuke after his Sharingan analyzed that jutsu.

"Itachi!" Sasuke warned.

"I know," Itachi calmly replied, as his eyes drifted towards the clouds above him. "He didn't hit me because I wasn't his target. Get ready, whatever comes now, it's not going to be pretty."

...

Not far away from there Natsu Hyuga was fighting alongside other allied ninjas against a large group of White Zetsu. Her lack of power meant that she wouldn't be of much help against the stronger reanimated ninjas, so she had to deal with the Zetsu clones and made sure they wouldn't get in the way of the ninjas fighting the undead.

She lamented not being able to fight at Itachi's side, but she tried to find some comfort in the thought that what she was doing was also important as well. Still, she couldn't help but worry about Itachi -and Sasuke, to some extent-, and take advantage of her Byakugan in order to steal a peek at how the Uchiha Brothers' battle was going on.

So far, what she saw didn't fill her with hope. The reanimation Itachi and his brother were fighting not only possessed a ridiculously destructive jutsu, but the man seemed to be motivated by an intense hatred towards the Uchiha, which made the fight rather difficult for the brothers. She saw him prepare an attack that carried an absurd amount of chakra, and tossed it towards Itachi, riding on a giant crow. Much to her relief, Itachi evaded the attack.

" Good," she thought. "Come on Itachi, I know you can defeat this opponent. I have faith in-"

However, Natsu's thoughts were interrupted when her Byakugan noticed something. The last attack the undead ninja had used against Itachi didn't merely disappear into the sky, but its chakra spread evenly among the clouds above them. Her already naturally pale face lost all trace of color when she realized what was going to happen.

"EVERYBODY, TAKE COVER!" she warned.

Sadly, not many people heard her among the chaos of the battle, and the few who did simply asked her what was going on. The answer came in the form of the dark blue and gray clouds turning

reddish orange, before golden beams of energy started to rain down from above, creating huge blasts upon impacting.

The golden meteors and the explosions they caused didn't seem to discriminate between Allied ninjas and White Zetsu clones, catching both of them in their blasts. Soon, most fighters were more concerned with dodging the lethal attacks rather than fighting the enemy.

"What the hell is this?" an Iwa ninja asked.

"Who cast this jutsu?" a Kiri kunoichi cried.

"Who cares, run for your lives!" a Konoha ninja shouted in desperation.

Some ninjas with Earth affinities tried to create protective domes made of rock in order to shield themselves from the rain of fiery death, but the meteors blasted through them as if they were nothing. Others tried to use fire, water and lightning ninjutsu to counter the meteors, to varying degrees of success. Even making them detonate prematurely was better than letting them land.

"From what I can see, the meteors have a mix of fire and lightning chakra, meaning that water jutsu are the best way to counter them," Natsu thought. "Unfortunately, unlike Hinata-sama and Hanabi-sama, I don't know how to use elemental ninjutsu. Maybe Hinata-sama should try to encourage our clan to stop looking down on traditional ninjustu and relying on the Gentle Fist exclusively."

Her thoughts were interrupted when her Byakugan caught another meteor that was about to land close to her. She ran away as fast as her legs brought her, seconds before the meteor crashed where she stood seconds before. Even if she managed to avoid the initial explosion, she was caught in the shockwave, which violently hurled her forward, crashing against a small group of Allied ninjas. Thankfully, neither she nor the ninjas that unwillingly cushioned her fall were hurt from the hit.

" *If we survive this battle, that's it,*" the former Branch House member grimly thought.

...

"THE FUCK'S GOING ON!?" Kurotsuchi yelled.

On the good side, the firestorm coming from the clouds was doing a magnificent job clearing the sky out of those annoying flying Zetsu clones. On the bad side, Kurotsuchi risked sharing their fate. She was trying to dodge the incoming meteors, but was having a hard time maneuvering.

" *I need to get rid of the Lava Armor, it's hindering my moves!*" she thought in realization, and with a single hand seal, the lava armor clinging to her body fell apart, and dropped to the ground below.

Even if she could fly more freely now, the short distance the meteors were coming from also made dodging them much harder, forcing the Tsuchikage to return to ground level.

...

Needless to say, Sasuke and Itachi were also taking the brunt of what was Akashi's most powerful jutsu. And given that they were closer to the reanimated ninja than the rest of the army, more meteors were landing around them. Thanks to their training, skill and the Sharingan, they were able to predict the trajectory of the meteors and jump to a safe place. However, they were nearly caught by the explosions more than once.

The explosions dug multiple craters into the ground, spread flames, and brought down trees struck by the meteors. Soon, Sasuke and Itachi were surrounded by fire and fallen trees, with no place to escape.

"This is your end, Uchihas!" Akashi boasted, before letting out a sadistic laugh. "Now disappear the same way my clan did!"

Sasuke and Itachi continued their deadly dodging game, as the two of them tried to desperately come up with a plan to stop the deranged and powerful undead ninja.

" Given his jutsu, he created the perfect conditions for my Kirin. However, as long as his jutsu is active, I won't be able to use it," Sasuke thought, as beads of thought trickled down his face. It was hard to tell if it was due the increased heat or his growing desperation. Probably both. *"And to add insult to the injury, the guy didn't even move. Given that it's his jutsu, maybe the meteors won't hit him... hey, that's it!"*

Knowing what to do, Sasuke gripped the handle of his katana, and rushed towards the enemy, dodging the incoming meteors as best as he could. Itachi saw what his little brother was doing, and chased after him.

"Sasuke! What are you doing? This is no time for such reckless actions!" Itachi called him.

"We already tried caution, and it didn't work!" Sasuke shouted back, as he slowly bridged the gap between him and the enemy. His Sharingan gleamed in anticipation upon seeing how close he was.

"And this won't work either, brat!" Akashi shouted.

Suddenly, a meteor landed in front of Sasuke. Even if the Uchiha managed to stop in time to avoid the initial blast, the shockwave hurled him backwards. Itachi managed to grab Sasuke, but the force of the impact made him drop on his butt. His Susanoo quickly formed around the two of them, the Yata Mirror appearing on the left arm raised upwards to shield themselves from the falling rain of fiery death.

" Dammit Sasuke, what the hell are you thinking-" Itachi was about to ask, before he noticed something with his Sharingan. "Oh, I see. Very smart, Sasuke," he whispered.

"You must be a truly exceptional Uchiha in order to master Susanoo to such degree, Uchiha," Akashi said, as his tone seemed to reflect genuine admiration. "That will make my victory over you all the sweeter! And no, that jutsu won't save you from the destructive power of my Bloodline Limit!"

"Destructive indeed. Be careful you aren't hit by your own attack," Sasuke taunted.

Akashi laughed uproarously. "Hahaha! You dumb Uchiha! My jutsu won't target me! The area of effect around the initial casting point is completely safe! I knew you guessed that, given that you were trying to get close to me, but I shouldn't have expected so much from your clan."

"Are you sure about that?" Itachi asked, smirking confidently.

Akashi knew the Uchihas were trying to play a mind game on him. Still, he couldn't repress the urge to look up and prove the Uchihas wrong. He was confident he could spare a quick glance, since his hated foes weren't close enough to attack him. So his eyes moved up...

"WHAT!?"

... and much to his shock, he saw a meteor that was about to land right on top of him,

Akashi let out a yell and jumped away just in time to avoid being obliterated. However, there was no explosion when the meteor hit the ground, much to his confusion. It took him a couple seconds to realize what had happened.

"A fucking genjutsu! I knew it was a trick!" He shouted in anger, before making a hand seal, and send a burst of chakra through his body.

However, as he was doing that, he didn't realize that he had jumped out of the safe zone, and another meteor landed near him. This one did result in an explosion that send him flying away. However, his flight was interrupted when he saw a blade made of golden flames erupting from his chest.

"Wh..what the...?" he babbled, as he turned around. He saw that Itachi's Susanoo was now holding a sword made of golden flames in one of its right hands. A gourd formed in the other right hand, as he felt pulled towards it. "H-How...?"

"Yes, I figured out how your jutsu worked," Sasuke explained. "Though I didn't want you to get close to you in order to get away from the meteors, but to put you under a genjutsu. Whose purpose was to make you leave said safe zone."

"That's how you used that jutsu of yours, right? You stay in one spot and watch how the meteors burn everything else to ashes," Itachi continued. "But if somebody made you leave that zone... you aren't used to dodge your own attacks, are you?"

"S-Shit... !" Akashi cursed, as he was slowly absorbed into the gourd.

"Don't worry, your suffering will end soon," Itachi said, as he stood up. "In the meantime, you shall be sealed."

Once the deranged undead ninja was completely sealed, his jutsu was cancelled, and meteors stopped falling from the sky.

"Finally. His constant yammering was even more annoying than those meteors," Sasuke said, as he got back on his feet, and shook his clothes from possible dust.

"This fight is over, but the battle is far from being won," Itachi said. "Come on, I'm sure there are far more reanimations out there that need to be sealed."

Sasuke nodded, and the two brothers returned to where the main battle was taking place.

...

Meanwhile, back in the thick of the battle, Ran and a few other Allied ninjas were trying to beat Gari. Bodies kept piling around him the longer the fight went on. Some tried to overwhelm him with numbers, but such tactic didn't work given the former Iwa ninja's Bloodline Limit, whose jutsu had a wide area of effect.

This didn't go unnoticed to the undead ninja's enemies, as the Allied ninjas were becoming more and more hesitant to attack him, given the sheer power of his jutsu.

"What's wrong, guys? Don't tell me you're afraid of me?" Gari mockingly asked. His taunt only made the ninja around him take a step back. "Well, if you're not going to move, don't mind if I take the initiative! Explosion Release: Devastating Napalm!"

Gari slammed both hands into the ground, generating a row of explosions in a straight line, killing the ninjas directly caught in the explosions, and tossing those near them around the place, Ran among them.

The Kumo kunoichi tried to get back on his feet, but much to her horror, Gari had decided to target her as his next victim.

"Don't think I forgot about the arm you sliced off!" Gari shouted, ignoring the fact that said arm grew back shortly after, as he prepared another explosive jutsu. "Explo-ACK!"

Suddenly, Gari was yanked mid air by an invisible force, pulling him towards an unspecified point, until he felt a strong hand clamp over his neck.

"W-What...?" Gari asked, realizing that the one holding him by his neck was an attractive blond woman with a piece of cloth covering

her left eye. It didn't take him long enough to recognize her.
"Tsunade...?"

"Ding ding ding, winner!" Tsunade mockingly said, before placing her other hand on Gari's head. "Ningendo!"

Using her Rinnegan powers, Tsunade ripped Gari's soul out of his body, which started to fall apart into dust and ashes the moment she dropped it. Satisfied with her one hit kill, Tsunade looked around, seeing Allied ninjas fighting White Zetsu clones and reanimations. Soon, she was joined by more ninjas, all of them medics, such as Shizune and her female students.

"It seems that we arrived just in time, Tsunade-sama," Sakura mentioned.

"Not in time. I can see quite a lot of dead bodies littering the battleground," Shizune pointed out.

"Yes. However, that doesn't mean we can save those who are still alive. Spread out, and help those groups who are having the more troubles!" Tsunade ordered. Her subordinates nodded, and did as she asked. "Now, let's see what else I can do. Shurado!"

Tsunade pointed her arm at an incoming group of White Zetsu clones. Said arm morphed into a mechanical cannon, which started to gather light particles, before it fired a powerful blast of chakra at the group, instantly obliterating the White Zetsu directly hit, and greatly damaging those around them, sending them in every direction.

"Damn, that was even better than during the training!" Tsunade cheered, as her arm morphed back to normal. "Though this Rinnegan shit consumes quite a lot of chakra. Fortunately, there's plenty of food around here. I'm not much of a fan of vegan buffetes, but guess I can't complain. Bansho Ten'in!"

Tsunade spread her arms outwards, as she used the Deva Path to telekinetically pull two normal White Zetsu clones to one of her arms each, just like she did with Gari. The moment she touched them, she started to quickly drain their chakra. The more chakra they were drained of them, the Zetsu started to wither and shrink as if they were plants that have been deprived of water for far too long, before they were reduced to piles of dust.

"Ah, that hit the spot," Tsunade said with a smirk of satisfaction. "Oh look, there's a tormented soul that's in need of salvation! And a good beating since we're at it!"

...

With Tsunade's arrival, the tide of the battle was turned in the Allied Ninja's favor. The reanimations and White Zetsu clones, even the stronger variants, were simply no match for the power of the Rinnegan. Once all reanimations were destroyed by Tsunade, the remaining White Zetsu decided to flee. Or were ordered to flee. Not that it made any difference.

And thus, the first battle of the Fourth Ninja War came to an end with a victory for the Allied Ninja Forces. Despite the victory, it left some people with a bittersweet taste in their mouths, wondering if they would have been able to win had Tsunade not showed up for help.

After that, Kurotsuchi ordered for her division to set up camp in the middle of the battleground -given that the battle has cleared most of the trees and rocks- so the medics of Tsunade's division could start properly healing the wounded.

Meanwhile, at the Mountain Graveyard, Obito didn't say anything or react in any way when one of the Zetsu informed him about their defeat. He merely teleported away, leaving Orochimaru alone in the cave they were using as an improvised command center.

Though, despite being on the losing side and losing all the reanimations he had deployed for the battle, Orochimaru was

nothing short of excitement due to the discovery he had made.

"Kukuku... so they gave the other Rinnegan to Tsunade-hime," the Sannin said to no one in particular. "That may complicate things... but also simplify many others. If I play my cards right, I might be able to get my hands on not just one but both Rinnegan!"

Author's Note: Well, here's the end of the first battle of the Fourth Ninja War, with a victory for the good guys. Though, can you call it a victory when they needed reinforcements so soon? Well, maybe future battles will go better. Or not, who knows what kind of aces under the hood both Akatsuki and Orochimaru have...

I just hope that you enjoyed the battles nonetheless. I know that, with the exception of Sasuke and Itachi, and Tsunade towards the very end, most of the battles were focused on minor characters, such as Maki and her students. There are many characters, both major and minor, that I like and I want to give them some moment under the spotlight. Worry not, I can assure you that every character will have their chance to shine during this war.

Next chapter will be the aftermath of the battle, as members of the Second Division relax and reflect on the battles they fought, as well as the challenges that fate is saving for them. Not everything is going to be fighting, or else this story would be exhausting to both write and read.

Thanks to Ookami88 for beta-reading this chapter.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Don't forget to share your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Aftermath of the First Battle

Author's Note: Even if no one has asked about it yet, I'm going to address this topic now: I'm not going to include the whole "Zetsu can turn into another person, down to their chakra signature", mostly because I feel it would make this arc more complicated than it needs to be.

Anyway, enjoy the conclusion of the first day of battles:

Chapter 103:

Aftermath of the First Battle

or

Sibling Strife

Moon

When they exited the cave where the other end of the chakra portal was located, they were greeted with a sight not unlike earth: mountains, rivers, forests, the kind of environment you would see on Earth. Couple that with a blue sky with a sun bathing the lands above in its light, and one would think they didn't left Earth.

Of course, they didn't take long to realize that they weren't on the Moon's surface, but under it. And the sun that provided light wasn't the same sun that illuminated the Earth, but an artificial construct, probably created and/or powered with the Otsutsuki superweapon. When Hinata looked at it with the Tenseigan, she could see a chakra barrier surrounding it.

" The Otsutsuki superweapon must be there, but I have the feeling that charging headfirst will result in a messy death. We should better

look around and try to gather information that may help us in our endeavor," she thought.

With the vast area of vision the Tenseigan provided her, Hinata found several villages around the place, and thus they decided to inspect one of them to see what they could find. Thanks to Sai's giant ink birds, they managed to arrive there in a minimal amount of time. For safety reasons, at Shisui's insistence, they decided to land in the outskirts of the village.

"You know, I told you that the village is completely empty," Hinata insisted. "There are no enemies waiting to ambush us."

"I know, but better safe than sorry," Shisui replied. "I know that your Tenseigan can see very far and nothing we know can hide from it, but there's no harm in being cautious."

"I agree with Shisui-san," Nori added. "This is the enemy's domain. Not just that, but we're very far away from the Earth and thus, there's no way of communication or getting any reinforcements. Let's watch our step."

"Understood. I know what's at stake," Hinata assured them. "Alright, I think we should split to cover more ground. The village isn't too big, so we won't be that far away from each other. Make sure there's always a ninja with you in case enemies appear. Everybody with a Byakugan, keep it active at all times in case Toneri's minions decide to pay us a visit."

They all nodded at Hinata's instructions, form small groups, and scattered around the abandoned village in search for clues.

Forests of the Land of Fire, Second Division Camp, nighttime

As night fell over the Land of Fire, Kurotsuchi's Second Division had just finished setting up their camp for the night. The mood was, overall, cheerful. Despite the number of casualties has been higher than most would have expected, those who weren't mourning the

loss of their comrades and friends were celebrating that the war started with a victory for the Ninja Alliance, calling it a sign of a good omen.

The wounded were being treated at the tents that formed the makeshift infirmary, and those assigned guard duty kept watch over the outskirts of the camp until their replacements would take their place in a couple hours. Those who were neither injured nor on watch duty were free to relax, eat something, and spend time with their friends if they were lucky enough to be in the same division as them.

The commander of the division, Kurotsuchi, had no such time to relax, unfortunately. As soon as the camp was set up, she had a ninja from the Yamanaka clan, wearing a helmet that concealed half his face which was connected to a machine, which would greatly expand the range of his abilities, link her up with HQ so she could deliver her report on the battle.

"Congratulations on your first victory as a commander, Kurotsuchi," Onoki's voice said in her head. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint us."

"Thanks, gramps. Though I just wish I could feel the same," Kurotsuchi replied. "I had the feeling that without Tsunade's intervention, the course of the battle would have been much different."

"What matters the most is the result of the battle," Jiraiya's voice intervened. "And that's that we won. Though that only means that the enemy is going to push back even harder now. Kurotsuchi, what information have you gathered on the enemy?"

"I think I'll need to write it down in order to include all the details, but I'll try to give you a summarized version. First of all, the White Zetsu clones. You said that the clones used in the attack on Konoha were all human looking, right?"

" Indeed. Though some of them could merge into a single creature to form a much stronger being," Jiraiya replied. "Did you encounter such variant?"

"None of my ninja reported such thing happening, though one of the Zetsu variants we fought was much larger than normal, with large muscles and additional limbs," Kurotsuchi began.

" Maybe they merged before the battle began?" a new voice, one belonging to an older woman, offered.

" I find that unlikely, Chiyo-san," Onoki replied. *"Since my granddaughter alluded to more than one Zetsu variant."*

"Right. Other than the larger ones, which we called Brutes, there were Zetsu clones whose right arms, and only the right arms, looked like some sort of mass of tangle vines with sacs, ending in a cannon shaped like a flower. They could fire projectiles made of compressed corrosive spores from great distance. We called those Snipers."

" We can only assume that the Zetsu are undergoing mutations in order to make them more specialized fighters," Jiraiya said. *"Anything more?"*

"Yes. Some Zetsu grew wings that allowed them to fly. Some of them call them Flyers. I call them Miserable Sons of Bitches," Kurtosuchi growled. "I was planning to oversee and direct the battle from above, but those fuckers completely wrecked my plans."

" An air force. As much as it's painful to admit, that's an smart choice on the enemy's part," Chiyo said.

" Though now that we know that, we can take the proper steps to counter it," Jiraiya said. *"If that's all about the Zetsu, what about the reanimations? I believe there were many."*

"Indeed. Ninjas from many villages, all of them with powerful Bloodline Limits," Kurtosuchi began. "We managed to capture and

incapacitate about half of them before Tsunade's arrival, who took care of the other half. Then, using the Rinnegan's abilities, Tsunade was able to permanently destroy the ones my ninja were able to capture before."

"If I know Orochimaru, I'd dare to say that he didn't even send his strongest minions yet," Jiraiya contemplated. "And is merely testing the waters. I know from his attack on Konoha that he can resurrect former Kages. This time he might not be as inclined as to send them from the get go, and may save them for later."

Kurotsuchi rolled her eyes. If these ninja with Bloodline Limits that made a number on her forces was just Orochimaru testing his forces, she didn't want to imagine what she had to face when the Snake Sannin decided to go all out. She hoped that Tsunade would be close to lend her help. Still, she decided to bit her tongue.

"What are your orders, Supreme Commander?" Kurotsuchi asked.

"For the time being, remain there and hold your position," Jiraiya told her. "Send a warning if you're under attack again. I'll send you a toad if I need you to move your division or just a fraction of it. Now, you and your ninja should take a rest as long as peace lasts."

"Though, make sure you don't fall prey to night attacks!" Onoki reminded her in a mildly worried tone. "Those undead ninja can fight constantly without needing to rest, so Orochimaru may think in a night raid."

"Don't worry gramps, I already assigned many ninja to night guard shifts. I'm not new to this," Kurotsuchi said, rolling her eyes for a second time in a short span -and feeling thankful that her grandpa couldn't see her doing it-. "Kurotsuchi out."

As she felt the mental link vanish, Kurotsuchi exited the tent, and headed to get a much needed snack.

...

Kurotsuchi wasn't the only one who wanted to fill her stomach after spending so much energy and chakra just a few hours ago. Many ninjas were also enjoying an admittedly not all that tasty, but very nutritious dinner composed of ration bars, surrounding the many bonfires scattered around the campsite, illuminating the place with an orange light.

"First day of the Fourth Ninja War, and we're still alive," Matsuri mentioned, before taking a bite of her ration bar. "I guess if we can keep this up until the very end, we will be good."

Mikoshi and Yukata nodded, before the only boy of the team decided to share her thoughts.

"Easier said than done, given all the trouble Pakura gave Maki-sensei," Mikoshi spoke. "Not to mention the other reanimations. And we'll need to win battles without Tsunade's help. She can't be in every battlefield at once."

"Hey, we were doing pretty good, aren't we?" Yukata replied. "Why are you being such a downer?"

"I'm not being a downer, I'm being realist," Mikoshi insisted. "We barely-"

"Yukata is right, you now," a new voice said. The trio of Suna ninjas turned their heads at the source, and saw their sensei taking a seat close to them. "Keeping a high spirit is paramount to win a war. Your teammates need you at your best, Mikoshi-kun. Think how to best keep them alive, not how we're doomed."

"I... I will. Sorry, Maki-sensei," Mikoshi said, bowing his head.

"It's okay, no need to apologize. I know how you feel," Maki said. "You guys are young, and have been thrust into a war. It's normal to be afraid. What it's not acceptable is to wallow in fear. That's what your friends and teammates are for. You can rely on them whenever you need them."

"See? Everything's going to be okay as long as you have us to take care of you!" Matsuri said, as she ruffled the bespectacled boy's hair, in an attempt to lighten the mood, much to his annoyance.

"By the way, Matsuri, this is for you," Maki said, as she handed the brown haired girl a medium sized item wrapped in cloth.

After undoing the cloth wrapping, Matsuri's eyes gleamed with joy upon seeing what her sensei gave her.

"New vambraces!" Matsuri squealed, as she wasted no time and put them on, despite the fact that they weren't in battle.

"The supply caravan arrived not long ago. They brought us lots of new kunai, shuriken, body armors, and medical supplies. I asked if they also had vambraces, and fortunately, they also brought some," Maki explained.

"Thanks a lot, Maki-sensei!" Matsuri replied. "Don't worry, I'll make sure these last longer before they break."

Maki let out a weary sigh. "Please don't do that. Your life is worth much more than some mere forearm guards. If you need to break them to live, do so," the Suna Jonin said, before clearing her throat. "So, this was your first battle in a real war. How are you feeling right now?"

"I'm still a bit shaken from before, but I feel better now," Yukata replied.

"Same as Yukata-chan. I was kind of afraid. And I still am, since we'll be called into battle again," Matsuri replied. "Though I'm not as uneasy now as I was before the war began. I know what to expect now."

"I..." Mikoshi began, his lips quivering, sounding a bit hesitant. "... all the people dying around us... even if most of them were ninjas we didn't even know... it was horrifying."

"It is," Maki sadly agreed with a nod. "And before you ask, no, it doesn't get better the more you see it. If it does get any better, then you should start worrying."

"I see," the bespectacled boy said. "I was so glad I could keep that Kiri kunoichi alive until the real medics arrived the scene."

"You mean Ruka? Yes, I'm sure she's really grateful to you," Maki earnestly told him.

"Sensei, you fought in the Third War, did you?" Yukata asked. "You had to be around our age when that happened."

"You're right about your latter assesment, but no, I didn't fight during the Third War," Maki confessed, surprising her students. "I was a mere Genin, and Genin aren't allowed in the frontlines. At least, in Suna's case."

"And what did you do while it happened?" Mikoshi asked.

"Patrol the village alongside other Genin, and sometimes I was made part of the groups that provided escort to the supply caravans to the front lines," Maki explained. "It was a job I hated, and thought that I could do more in the front lines. Boy, was I naïve back then."

"It's normal to think that. After all the training we undergo in the Academy, and then under a Jonin-sensei... when we do small jobs even a civilian could do, it feels like our talents are being wasted," Mikoshi said. "Though a war might be going too much in the opposite direction."

"Exactly," Maki agreed, nodding.

"What do you think about us, sensei? Do you think we're ready?" Yukata asked.

Maki chuckled in response. "It's a bit late to be asking that, isn't it?" Maki asked, making Yukata look a bit uneasy. She did catch the

hidden meaning behind that question, though. "As my students, keeping you alive is my responsibility, and sometimes I feel afraid that you might die out there, maybe because I didn't train you as well as I could, or because I'm not there to protect you. Today you three showed me it's not the case. In fact, I might have been the one biting the dust if it wasn't for your timely arrival."

"Yay! We're useful!" Yukata cheered. Maki smiling happily upon seeing that her words managed to soothe the raven haired girl.

"Of course we are. All of us did a good job during our first day of hell," Matsuri interceded. "Let's keep doing our best so we can help end this war as soon as possible!"

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, another team was also enjoying some food in peace across another bonfire. One of those team members was also being in the company of his girlfriend, whom he hasn't been with in some time.

"So, how do you feel, Neji-kun?" the redhead asked.

"I'm fine. Just like I was the other five times you asked," Neji told Karin, trying to resist the urge to roll his eyes. "You treated me yourself. Do you doubt your medical capabilities so much?"

"I know. But you used the Celestial Gates. And your body is quite the wreck when you do that," Karin replied. "I want to make sure you're at your best."

"You can breathe in relief knowing that that's the case," Neji insisted. "Gai-sensei, though, might be a completely different story. He had to open up to five Gates. Not only did he need more medical attention, but he'll have to remain bedridden for the next day, at the very least."

Karin's expression turned into a scowl upon hearing that. "I don't like the Eight Gates at all. They may give you a power boost, but given

the backlash, I'd say they aren't worth it."

"They can signify the difference between life and death," Neji rebuked. "I only try to use them as a last resort against opponents my current power and skill are not enough to beat."

"If you're looking for a power boost, why don't you ask Naruto to teach you Sage Mode? It's pretty neat, and carries almost no risk," Karin explained.

Naji quirked an eyebrow. "No risk? Didn't you say that you could turn into a statue if you don't control it properly?"

"Eh, that's mostly at the beginning," Karin said with a dismissive hand wave. "Once you learn to control the nature energy and properly mix it with your chakra, it's pretty easy."

"I'm afraid that, for the time being, that won't be an option, given that we're in the middle of a war," Neji replied. "But I may take on your offer once the war is won and we return home."

Karin seemed to be satisfied with her boyfriend's answer, and didn't press the issue any further, letting the two Konoha ninjas fall into a comfortable silence. They spend a couple minutes watching the fire and enjoying their food. Once Karin finished, she took out a paper and a pencil from her backpack, and started to write something.

"What are you writing?" Neji asked, noticing what his girlfriend was doing.

"Writing a letter to my mom, just so she can know that I'm fine," Karin told him. "Though I won't be able to tell her about the details of this battle. Mail is screened to avoid intelligence leaks."

"Wait, why are you writing her? Isn't she part of the Medical Division?" the Hyuga asked. "I remember she told me she works at the hospital as a medic-nin."

Karin shook her head. "Mom knows some healing jutsu, and her chakra has the same regenerative properties as mine, but unlike me she isn't a medic ninja, but a normal medic. Normal medics aren't made part of the army, so she was left in Konoha, working at the hospital. And truth be told, I'm glad for that. That way I won't have to worry about her when I'm in the battlefield."

"She will worry about you as long as the war lasts, though," Neji pointed out.

"I know. That's why I'm writing her," Karin said, this time she being the one repressing an urge to roll her eyes. "Though, now that you bring the topic, what about your dad? I think he's here, right? As in, here in the war, not here in the same division as us."

"He's part of the First Division, alongside Hikari-sama," Neji replied. "While I do worry about him like any son would, I'm confident in his ability and skill to get out of every battle alive. Not that he's alone, though. He had many comrades to rely on."

Karin nodded, as she continued writing her letter to her mother, with Neji sometimes stopping her to ask what she was writing in particular, and even offering some input about what she could tell M ariko. After that, Neji and Karin continued talking with each other until they were too tired to remain awake, and returned to their respective beds.

...

"Today, you used the Rinnegan for the first time in real combat, Tsunade-sama," Shizune observed, as she adjusted the microscope "How was it?"

Tsunade and Shizune were alone in one of the many medical tents that had been used before to attend injured ninjas. Now that the tent was free, Tsunade had her first apprentice do a check on her body, to see if there was any negative side effect. Konan's words about how only a selected few could use the Rinnegan never ceased

echoing in her head. Technically, she was among those selected few, but better safe than sorry.

"So far, I didn't feel any different than before," Tsunade said. "Rinnegan jutsu puts a heavy toll on my chakra pools, but as long as I use the Preta Path to keep them full, I believe there's no risk."

"That's something that intrigues me," Shizune continued, as she began her analysis. "How can you do that? You aren't an universal chakra receptor. You shouldn't be able to absorb chakra like that."

"Maybe the Rinnegan converts the foreign chakra to match mine before it's absorbed into my body?" the Slug Princess guessed, though not even she was too convinced about her hypothesis. "I mean, it works, and that's what matters."

"So you didn't suffer any form of exhaustion," Shizune told her.

"I already told you I didn't," Tsunade replied. "Hell, those punks weren't able to land a single hit on me. This little eye is sure something."

"Careful, Tsunade-sama. You don't want to go mad with power, do you?" Shizune advised, though there was a hint of mockery in her tone.

The blond Sannin rolled her eyes. "You know that I take little joy in fighting. I only volunteered to get that eye because I'm the the best one to take on that burden," Tsunade insisted. "Once the war is over, this eye will go into the fire, and I'll get my original eye back. And enough chitchat, focus on your job, Shizune."

"I'm doing that right now," Shizune replied, adjusting the microscope. "Red blood cells seem to be okay, as long as leucocytes... triclycerides are at a normal level and... wait, what's that?"

Worry crept through Tsunade's back as she heard Shizune say that. "What?"

"There's... some sort of unknown enzyme here!" Shizune said, as she increased the focus of the microscope.

"An unknown enzyme? What is it doing? It is a benign or malign one?" Tsunade asked, sounding more worried.

"No, wait, it's not unknown. It's similar to another enzyme present in both Rin and the White Zetsu clones," Shizune said, as she continued her observation. "And it's... it's doing the same thing as that other enzyme. It's taking dead cells, and using them to create new cells."

"But... that's..." Tsunade began.

"Yes. The basis of your grandfather's regeneration, which also slowed down aging," Shizune said. "As we speak, those enzymes are rejuvenating your body."

"Wow... that's... but wait, that can't be the Rinnegan's doing, right?" Tsunade asked. Then, a realization hit her. "Of course! Those Zetsu guys I kept draining of their chakra!"

"How many of them did you drain, Tsunade-sama?" Shizune asked.

"Hell if I know, I stopped counting after twenty five," Tsunade nonchalantly said, shrugging. "Still, this is a wonderful news. Can you tell if the change is permanent, or it will fade over time?"

"I can't tell right now. I'd need to make periodic checks during a long period in which you don't absorb anymore chakra from those Zetsu, something you won't do as long as the war lasts," Shizune said.

"Though I'm inclined to think it might be permanent. We know those Zetsu clones were made from your grandfather's DNA, and you're his direct descendant. It is possible that your Senju chakra assimilated the chakra of the Zetsu clones and acquired some of its capabilities."

Tsunade walked to a nearby table with medical instruments on it, and grabbed a small scalpel.

"Let's make a small experiment," Tsunade said, as she made a small cut on the palm of her hand. Blood started to trickle. As both women watched, they saw that the wound didn't close, and blood continued flowing. Eventually, Tsunade healed the wound herself with the Mystical Palm Jutsu. "No regeneration. Rin would take less than a minute to heal such a small wound."

"Hey, you just absorbed them today, maybe the healing factor hasn't set already," Shizune said. "If you drain more, you may accelerate the effect."

"And it may reverse the permanent damage cause to my body by my Creation Rebirth," Tsunade said in awe, before she smiled again. "Heh, I had a feeling it was me who had to get this eye. I'm never going to ignore my gut feeling ever again."

...

Karin wasn't the only member of Shizune's Medical Squad taking advantage of their deployment to spend time with her boyfriend, as Sasuke and Sakura were also making each other company while resting in front of a large bonfire.

Before that, the pinkette spent quite some time healing the youngest Uchiha's wounds from his battle, which prompted her to ask what did he do to end up so bruised and beaten up. Sasuke told Sakura about his fight alongside Itachi against the resurrected Akashi Sutoku, and his deadly and destructive Plasma Release Bloodlimit.

"So, you had to fight a guy that carried the Bloodline Limit you tried to emulate," Sakura recounted. "There's no way that can be a coincidence."

"Yes. Some might say that fate has a strange sense of humor," Sasuke replied humorlessly.

Sakura merely shook her head and smiled. "Come on, don't be that mad. You already beat that guy, isn't that what matters?"

"Itachi did most of the job," Sasuke complained. "I was mostly in the way. If I could only control the Mangekyo Sharingan better..."

"That's not what you just told me," Sakura countered. "Weren't you the one who risked his life to put that guy under a genjutsu, which allowed your brother to deal the killing blow?"

"I wouldn't have needed to do that if I had a better hang of my powers," Sasuke repeated again. "We might -no, we will fight against even stronger opponents in the future. And a clumsy improvised tactic won't be enough then. I need to fight alongside Itachi as his equal, not be a burden for him to protect."

Sakura frowned, and crossed her arms. "Sasuke, that's not true," she said in a somewhat chastising tone. "And I'm sure Itachi doesn't see you that way."

"Itachi doesn't see me through an unbiased perspective. He's my older brother. Plus, whatever he thinks doesn't matter if it stands opposed to the truth," Sasuke replied.

Sakura sighed, and decided that her boyfriend was way too stubborn to make him change his opinion on himself. If she wanted to help him, she'll have to take a different approach to the Uchiha's problem.

"Does the Mangekyo Sharingan still makes you relieve..." she swallowed a little, as she herself shivered at the memory, despite the fact that she wasn't even there. "... that moment three years ago?"

"Yes. Shisui told me that the flashbacks would cease once I learned to forgive myself. But no matter what I do, they persist," Sasuke said, drifting his gaze down.

"You still feel guilty for that, huh?" Sakura said, placing a finger under her chin. "Did you talk with Naruto about the incident?"

"Many times. He told me that he understands why I did what I did, that I didn't have any other options, and that he would have done the same have our roles been reversed," Sasuke replied.

"Did Itachi and Shisui told you what they did to forgive themselves in order to soothe their consciences?" Sakura continued.

"Shisui swore to use the power he had awakened to help others, and to be the best person he could be. Itachi said that, while he will mourn father and all the Uchihis he killed, he didn't regret his actions since they were for the good of the village, and continues to serve the village as best as he can as a proud Konoha ninja," Sasuke said almost mechanically. Sakura guessed he was repeating what his cousin and older brother had told him without understanding it much.

"And knowing that, what have you done then?" Sakura asked.

Sasuke turned at Sakura, and looked as if somebody had dropped on his head a bucket of ice cold water.

"What do you mean what I have done?" Sasuke repeated.

"You told me what Itachi and Shisui did. Did you do anything in particular? Any kind of resolution or vow?" Sakura asked.

Sasuke took a few moments to gather his thoughts before he could answer, despite his answer couldn't be any shorter. "No," was all he said.

"Maybe that's the problem? That you lack a clear goal to set your mind to. Something that will set you on a path to redemption," Sakura explained.

"But, what I'm supposed to do? I already told you that neither Naruto nor his family are mad at me and understand what I did! According to them, I have nothing to atone for!" Sasuke replied, his frustration building up. "Unlike Itachi and Shisui, I awakened the Mangekyo

Sharingan without killing anybody, either directly or indirectly, yet I'm the one having the most trouble getting over it! It would be almost comical if it wasn't so frustrating!"

"Yes, it looks like it. And I can tell that you aren't somebody who doesn't deal with good with frustration," Sakura pointed out.

"Though, if you want my opinion on the issue, I think you're tackling this backwards."

"What do you mean, backwards?" Sasuke asked.

"Don't you see? You're so focused on getting over the side effects of the Mangekyo Sharingan, that you can't see the path in front of you. Take a look at what your brother and Shisui did. They overcame their trauma of the Mangekyo Sharingan not because they aimed to do that, but as a side effect of setting a different goal. Try to emulate them. Set a goal. And you'll see how in the end, you can leave that moment behind."

"Then what could be my goal? Be a better person?" Sasuke asked.
"Am I not good enough?"

"You're a wonderful person, Sasuke-kun. But once again, you're tackling this from the wrong angle," Sakura insisted. "Forget about the Mangekyo Sharingan. Do a little introspection. Look inside yourself, and the solution will appear before you."

"You make it sound so easy," Sasuke said.

"I know it's not. I'm not even an Uchiha, so I can't even begin to imagine what you must be going through," Sakura replied. "I'm only making educated guesses based on what I know about you and your clan."

That comment made Sasuke smirk a little. "You were always quite the smartass."

"And proud of it!" Sakura said in a faux-haughty tone. "Though, if this troubles you so much, maybe you should talk about it with your brother. Where is he, by the way?" Sakura asked, looking around, expecting Sasuke's older brother to be sat near him.

"Itachi doesn't have that much time to spare with me lately," Sasuke said, as he narrowed his eyes at a certain point.

Sakura followed his gaze, and finally located Itachi on another bonfire. He was talking with a young Hyuga woman, probably the same age as him. They were sitting very close to each other, not unlike Sasuke and Sakura, and talking and laughing together. The two of them appeared to be having a nice time. It wasn't hard for the pinkette to notice that something more than mere friendship was building between them.

"She's cute. I think they make a nice couple," Sakura said, smiling at the sight. "Do you know her?"

"Natsu Hyuga. Former Branch House member. Chunin of average ability. She mostly worked as escort and caretaker of the younger Main House Hyugas, such as Hinata and Hanabi," Sasuke said, as his eyes glared daggers at the woman sharing a good time with his brother.

Such hostility didn't go unnoticed to the pinkette. "Whoa there! I only said if you know her, not her professional record! Plus, why do you act as if she's your natural enemy? Has she behaved in an unpleasant way to you or something?"

"No, not really. She's been nothing but polite and gentle towards me," Sasuke replied, his voice almost growling.

"That doesn't make sense. Come on Sasuke, do you think that-" Sakura was about to say, before she stopped herself as a realization dawned upon her. Her mouth curved into a wide, cheeky grin. "Ohhhhhh, I see what's going on here. You dislike that woman because he stole your brother from you, don't you?"

Sasuke frowned upon hearing the pinkette's suggestion. "Don't be ridiculous. Do you think I'd indulge in such childish behavior?"

Sakura's eyebrow arched even more. "Do you really want me to answer that question, Sasuke-kun?" his girlfriend asked in a half mocking, half taunting tone. "Come on Sasuke-kun, that 'I'm so stoic and don't give a damn about anything' façade you put on might fool others, but you can't fool somebody who has been with you for so long. Especially as close as we are now. Deep down, you're somebody who wears his emotions on his sleeve."

"I think you're mistaking me for somebody else," Sasuke replied, crossing his arms, as he averted his gaze in annoyance. "Blond, whisker marks, loud and obnoxious. Some girlfriend you are if you mistake me with him."

"Har har," Sakura pretended to laugh. "Yes, Naruto is also somebody very earnest, the only difference is that he doesn't bother to hide it. Deep down, he and you aren't that different. And right now, you're mad that somebody else is hogging your precious brother's time from you."

"What do you know? You're an only child," Sasuke spat back.

"Perhaps. But like I said before, I'm quite smart, and I have eyes," Sakura insisted. "You always told me how Itachi was always there for you, as long as he wasn't busy with a mission. I believe that the fact that Itachi only spent time with you made you take him for granted."

Sasuke didn't say anything, but Sakura found his silence pretty telling. At least, until Sasuke decided to say something.

"Maybe I do," Sasuke finally admitted. "When I was little, Itachi was the person I admired the most. And I still do. However, he was always busy with high profile missions and training, and I could barely spend time with him. Then the Uchiha Insurrection... happened," Sasuke said, flinching a little upon recalling that memory. "And Itachi went from being my older brother and my role model to

being everything I had, alongside Shisui. I noticed that, even if Itachi's workload wasn't any smaller, especially after becoming the Hokage's spymaster, he made more effort to spend time with me."

Sakura placed a comforting hand on her boyfriend's shoulder. "Come on Sasuke-kun, that woman isn't going to steal your brother from you. Shisui-san married Shizune-sensei, and you have me. Don't you think your brother deserves to have somebody special too?"

"I suppose he does," Sasuke admitted.

"Plus, how would you feel if Itachi was mad at me for dating you?" Sakura continued. Sasuke didn't say anything, he merely let out an unintelligible grunt of annoyance. "Yeah, thought so."

"I hope you don't suggest me to befriend her next," Sasuke said, dreading the answer.

"Why not? She and Itachi might end up dating after the war is over. Wouldn't be the most logical action to try to at the very least, try to be on good terms with her? Otherwise, your relationship with your brother is going to suffer as a result," Sakura told him, making the Uchiha to sigh. And his reaction make Sakura frown. "Come on Sasuke-kun, don't be such a sourpuss! You said she's pretty nice, right?"

"She is," he confirmed.

"Then try to put those childish thoughts and try to get along with her," Sakura said, as her face iluminated when an idea dawned upon her. "Oh, I know! When we have time, the four of us should go on a double date! That way, not only you'll get to know Natsu better, but you can also spend time with your brother while we're at it! What do you think?"

"That... doesn't sound half bad."

Sasuke's underwhelming response made Sakura stand up and scowl, as she placed both fists on her hips.

"Not that bad? That's all what you have to say?" she complained.

Sasuke, however, managed to smile a little. "Good. It's, indeed, a good idea. Befitting a smartass of your caliber."

Sakura's scowl disappeared, replaced by a happy smile. She sat alongside Sasuke once again, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "That's what I wanted to hear."

...

Not far from there, the aforementioned older Uchiha brother was also enjoying some relaxing time with a girl he had hopes she would become his significant other. Still, Itachi didn't hold his breath. Despite he and Natsu clicked from the very beginning, he was aware that it was the conflict around them that brought them together, and wasn't sure if the relationship would continue during times of peace.

That didn't mean that neither Itachi nor Natsu were going to enjoy each other's company for the time being, though.

"How are you doing, Itachi?" Natsu asked. "I heard from the medic-nins that they spent quite some time with you."

Itachi smiled reassuringly at her. "Nothing too serious. Just a case of chakra exhaustion. The fight against the Sutoku reanimation pushed me to my limits."

"I can't imagine what it has to be fighting against somebody of that power, who on top of that regenerates endlessly and has an infinite supply of chakra," Natsu commented, shaking her head. "That jutsu with the fireballs raining from the sky was his, right?"

Itachi nodded. "Indeed. He was a nightmare to deal with. I shiver to think of the ninjas who fought that clan way back in the Warring

States Period. Not just one, but a whole clan of them."

"But in the end, you won!" Natsu added, hoping to cheer Itachi up.

The Uchiha smiled, and nodded. "I won indeed. Though admittedly, I don't think if I could have won if it wasn't for my foolish little brother's stunt."

"Foolish? What did he do?" Natsu asked.

"He managed to figure out how that last jutsu worked and how he could exploit it to our advantage. But doing so involved running through a zone where those meteors fell non-stop," Itachi explained. Natsu gasped, and covered her mouth with her hands. "Don't worry, he's okay. I made sure nothing bad happened to him."

Natsu exhaled in relief. "That boy is sure reckless."

"That, he is. I think he was counting on me to realize what was going on, and fortunately for both, I did, and between the two of us we managed to defeat him," Itachi replied, before letting out a sigh. "I think I need to have a talk with Sasuke about doing something like that again in case we're forced to face such a formidable enemy."

"It was risky indeed. But if in the end you got the desired result... isn't that what matters?" Natsu asked. Itachi's eyes looked at her with genuine surprise. "Sometimes, the safe path isn't the best route. Sometimes... you need to take a risk if you want to gain something."

Itachi chuckled in response, making the Hyuga frown a little.

"Did you find anything I said funny?" Natsu asked. "Or do I look like the kind of person who doesn't like risks?"

"The latter," Itachi admitted. "I'm sorry if my assumption offended you."

"No, it's okay. I don't look the part, do I?" Natsu replied, chuckling as she relaxed a little. "I confess that I'm not somebody who took many

risks in my life. Not that I had the chance to take them, given the circumstances of my birth. But I did see others taking risks, some of them for my sake and others in the same situation. If it wasn't for them, I would still be a slave in all but name to the Main House."

"You talk about the recent reforms of the Hyuga Clan under Hinata," Itachi pointed out.

Natsu nodded. "Hiashi-sama was a good clan head. Strong and competent, who wanted to keep our clan as powerful as it was. But even if he knew that the clan division was wrong, he was too afraid to upset the status quo. The Hyuga was a clan attached to traditions, and believed that making reforms of such scale would cause infighting."

"And weaken the clan from the inside," Itachi continued, earning a nod from the Hyuga.

"Exactly. However, Hikari-sama and Hinata-sama knew that the clan couldn't be strong if it continued divided as it was. They worked to undo that division, first by abolishing the Branch and Main houses altogether, earning the ire from our more traditionalist clanmates," Natsu explained. "And then we took an even greater risk when we allowed Hinata-sama to use her new power on us so she could remove the Caged Bird Cursed Seal. But in the end, both risks paid off."

"I'm glad that they did. I did hear that life as a Branch House member was awful," Itachi observed.

"It was," Natsu confirmed.

"But sometimes, risks are too great, and not worth the potential reward," Itachi began. "My clan took the risk of launching a coup d'etat against Konoha, hoping that it would allow them to claim the respect and power they were owed. Not only did it fail, resulting in most of the clan wiped out, but it greatly weakened Konoha as well.

Hell, Konoha would have been weakened anyway had the coup been successful."

Natsu shook her head. "Those situations couldn't be more different. The Branch House was genuinely oppressed under the Main House. The Uchihas just wanted more power. And accept my apologies for badmouthing your dead clansmen."

"Apologies accepted, but they weren't needed to begin with, since you only spoke the truth," Itachi replied. "What I'm saying is... is a risk worth taking, if the price are the lives of many people?"

"It would depend on the risk. And the lives. Are they willing to take the risk, or is that choice taken from them?" Natsu replied with a question of her own. "I think one is free to risk their own life as they see fit, but shouldn't endanger the life of others."

"That's a good answer, I admit," Itachi replied. "But would you agree with a loved one putting their life at risk, regardless of how good the outcome may be?"

"You were afraid of losing your little brother, aren't you?" Natsu guessed. "It's normal that you feel that way. I don't have siblings, but I can't imagine-"

"It's not just that," Itachi cut her, shaking his head. "After losing Mother and Father... Sasuke is all what I have. The only thing that could be saved from the old Uchiha Clan. After I failed to stop the insurrection from happening, I had no option but quell it by cutting half my clansmen down, including my own father. I just can't let more Uchihas, much less my own brother, to meet their end before their time comes. I... I can't do it. I try not to let my worry show up in front of him but-"

"Shhhh..." Natsu whispered, interrupting the Uchiha as she moved close to him and placed her arms around his shoulders. "It's okay, Itachi. Like I said, it's perfectly normal to feel afraid for your brother. He's young and confident, and his strength and skill might make him

overestimate his abilities. But I saw him in action, and he's as powerful as you are."

"Not as powerful as you think. He still has trouble mastering the Mangekyo Sharingan, and his inability to overcome the trauma that awakened it it's driving him mad," Itachi explained, before he let out a weary sigh. "This is why I didn't want him to awaken the Mangekyo Sharingan, since I feared it would cause Sasuke more troubles than it's worth. I'm afraid that he isn't in the best state of mind to be in the middle of a war."

"You mastered yours. Didn't you offer him some advice?" Natsu asked.

"Both Shisui and I did. Though, in this matter, it's something he has to figure out himself. Our advice can only help him so much," Itachi explained.

"You are pretty close, aren't you?" Natsu asked. "Especially after such... tragedy."

"Maybe not as close as he'd want. Our relationship has a been a little complicated since then," Itachi explained. "Though I want to believe things have been getting progressively better."

"I do believe they got better to," Natsu replied with a nod. "That would explain why your brother hates how I'm spending so much time with you."

"Yeah, that would- wait, what?" Itachi interrupted himself. "Sasuke hates you? When did you get that idea?"

"His disposition towards me has been pretty cold. He wants to be civil, but can't suppress his hostility completely," Natsu explained, much to Itachi's consternation.

"Was he rude to you? Did he tell you to get away from me or something like that?" Itachi asked, fearing the answer.

Natsu, however, merely laughed. "No, not at all. I think that deep down, he knows he's being silly. But he's doing a poor job hiding it. In fact, he's been glaring at me for quite some time. Much to the annoyance of his girlfriend."

"What?" Itachi asked again, as he looked at where Sasuke was. It appeared that Sasuke noticed, and quickly pretended he was looking elsewhere. And just like Natsu said, Sakura was trying to keep his attention on her. He let out a sigh, and shook his head. "That boy... I think I'll have to talk with him about us."

"Don't be too rough on him. I'm sure that he'll warm up to me in time," Natsu insisted. "But I do believe he does want your attention. Maybe he feels safer if he thinks his big brother is close? Though, now that I think about the stunt he pulled earlier, maybe he wants to impress you and earn your admiration?"

"Sasuke already has that, and he knows it. Or he should know," Itachi replied. "One way or another, I better talk to him soon. At least, before we're deployed for another battle."

Author's Note: And thus concludes the first day of the Fourth Ninja War. A couple chapters of battles followed by a chapter of the good guys resting up and reflecting on what's going on. That way, I can also let the readers some time to rest between so much action. Still, I might deviate from this format from time to time.

It's always nice to have the chance to write more Itachi/Natsu. I introduced this couple so late, I was afraid I wouldn't have any time to give it proper focus and development. And given that this is one of the few couples this fanfic has pioneered, well, I think it deserves it, don't you think? Plus I do think they have a pretty nice chemistry.

It's also been a while since the last time I did any Sasuke/Sakura. It's a couple I'm not crazy about (mostly

because I don't enjoy writing Sakura that much) and that I'm not sure if I'm writing them right. I still hope I'm doing a good job with them. I'd say "or at least, better than what Kishimoto did with them", but that's not a very high bar to clear, don't you think?

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter, we'll see Mei Terumi's Third Division. There will be plenty of cool fights, but there's one in particular I've been dying to finally upload. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a reviews with your thoughts on this chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Return of the Blood Mist

Author's Note: And here we come with a new battle of the Fourth Ninja War. Enjoy:

Chapter 104:

Return of the Blood Mist

or

The not-so Magnificent Seven

Turtle Island

"Again!" Fu vehemently insisted.

Killer B chuckled as he shrugged in a condescending manner.

"Girl, I already told you, you can't win, I beat you so hard, your head will spin!" Killer B rapped.

"I said again, goddamit!" Fu protested.

Finally, Killer B complied, and the two of them placed a few good meters from each other, and adopted a fighting stance as if they were going to battle. They eyed each other, as their muscles tensed, ready to strike. The Konoha and Kumo ninjas nearby gathered once again to witness their clash. Then, in a blur, the two of them disappeared, reappearing in the middle, ready to strike each other.

"LARIAT!"

Fu and Killer B hit each other with the latter's signature physical attack, and they remained like that for a second that felt more like a minute. Then, Fu found the air knocked out of her lungs as the force

of Killer B's strike overpowered her, and was send rolling backwards in a somewhat comical way.

"Ow yeah! Killer B wins again, his foe writhes in pain! WHEEEEEEEEE!" the jinchuriki rapper said, raising his arm with his hand forming the sign of the horns.

"Uuuuuugh! I'm far more stronger! Why I can't beat you!?" Fu protested as she repetadly hit the floor with her fists in a chidlish manner.

One may ask the reason behind this odd clash of strength. While they were taking a break from their jinchuriki training, B asked Naruto and Fu about how they did became jinchuriki. Much to his surprise, both of them were made jinchuriki almost as soon as they were born. Naruto shared with his fellow jinchuriki the story he heard from his birth parents about Obito's attack the day of his birth. Fu, on the other hand, was made a jinchuriki because her parents were killed during a skirmish with Iwa ninjas, and since she had no other family, she was a conveninet choice.

Killer B also told them his story. How he was chosen to be A's partner when he was the only one to match the power of his Lariat, and a few years after that, he was made the next jinchuriki of the Eight Tails after the previous host was killed by the beast itself.

However, the part that drew Fu's attention the most was the Lariat. She liked the move, asked B to teach it to her, and then challenged B to a duel of Lariats, thinking that her superior muscle mass would be enough to beat her senior jinchuriki. And much to her frustration, her assumption couldn't be more wrong.

"Again!" she insisted.

While Fu and Killer B continued with their little duel of strength, Naruto decided to end the break and continue with his jinchuriki training alone in one of the shores. Killer B had showed them a Tailed Beast's most powerful move, the Tailed Beast Ball. However,

before they could do it, they had to learn how to transform into the Tailed Beast itself, something they were unable to do so soon after taming their respective beasts. Still, Naruto wasn't somebody to throw the towel when things turned difficult, and decided that he'll master the Tailed Beast Ball even if he couldn't turn into a Tailed Beast yet.

Even then, Naruto and Fu had made great progress in their training. Without the Tailed Beast's corrupting influence, Tailed Beast chakra proved to be incredibly malleable on top of powerful. Naruto was able to create multiple limbs of golden chakra, either with the shape of arms or tails, or create a single gigantic arm of chakra around his actual arm, in a way that reminded of the Akimichi Clan's Partial Multisize Jutsu.

Fu was also able to sprout multiple limbs, albeit these ones were more solid than Naruto's chakra constructs, and could give them the shape of insect and arthropod limbs, such as the blade of a mantis, the claw of a scorpion, the sting of a wasp or the jaws of a stag beetle.

Despite how powerful and versatile such abilities were, Naruto wasn't satisfied. He wouldn't be unless he could master the Tailed Beast Ball. Not just because it would put them a step closer of ending the war, but because of his own pride and stubbornness, even if he wouldn't admit such a thing.

"Okay, here we go. Sixty-three times' the charm," Naruto tried to motivate himself, as he created four arms of chakra. He used them alongside his real arms to focus the chakra into a single point. Soon, red and blue particules started to gather, mixing together, forming a dark pruple sphere. "Eighty percent negative chakra, twenty percent positive one. I can do it!"

Naruto grew optimistic as the sphere began to grew, but said optimism quickly vanished and was replaced why worry and frustration as the growing sphere started to ripple and break down.

"No no no no no no NO!" Naruto said, before firing the ball prematurely into the sea, where it harmlessly exploded. "SHIT!"

" Nice one, brat. If you keep this pace, you might be able to master it before you die of old age," Kurama snarked.

"Shut up, you furball!" Naruto replied out loud. "Instead of mocking me, you could give me some tips, you know!"

" What tips I could give you. What you're trying to do is like walking to me. What kind of tips can you give somebody who is learning to walk other than 'put one foot in front of the other'?" the Fox asked. **"Besides, I don't even use the Tailed Beast Ball the way you do."**

"Maybe that's the problem. How do you do it, then?" Naruto asked.

" Didn't you notice when you fought me? You're so unobservant," the Nine Tails chastised. **"I gather the chakra between my jaws. Then depending on what I want to do, I either fire the ball directly, or swallow it before releasing the explosion in the form of a blast wave."**

Naruto imagined trying to do as Kurama said, which ended with the ball exploding and blowing up his head from his body. Naruto shuddered.

"I'm not going to do that. There must be another way to use the Tailed Beast Ball. I know there is," Naruto said, as he continued his attempts.

...

Border between the Lands of Fire and Land of Frost

It didn't take long for the Akatsuki army to make another incursion into Allied territory. A large Akatsuki army had been spotted marching towards the Land of Frost, probably to invade the Land of

Lightning. This time, not only with an army of White Zetsu larger than the one the Second Division faced, but it also included Moon Puppets and an even greater number of Impure World Resurrection zombies. And on top of that, it was commanded by one of the remaining Akatsuki members, Kisame Hoshigaki.

Jiraiya ordered Mei Terumi's Third Division to move and intercept this army before they could make further progress into the Land of Lightning. It was suggested to form a blockade and let the enemy smash against them, but Mei shot down the idea due their inferior numbers, and opted to break the enemy's formation as it advanced. Mei herself and the Swordsmen of the Mist would lead the charge, followed by the division's Chakra Golems for additional support, and the rest of the army would follow suit.

"Commander, I must insist," Kitsuchi had said. "Being outnumbered, a defensive approach is the most sensible solution."

"A defensive approach is the kind of tactic the enemy is expecting," Mei had replied. "And we're going to show them how in Kirigakure we value quality over quantity. This division has six of the seven Swordsmen of the Mist. In both large battles and small skirmishes, their power is best employed on the offensive, not on the defensive."

And while it sounded reckless, the plan worked. With the sheer power the Mizukage and her Swordsmen packed, the Third Division broke the ranks of the White Zetsu army and cut through them like a knife through butter.

"We halted their advance!" Mei called, as she started making hand seals. "Continue fighting until they're pushed back! Boil Release: Corrosive Armor!"

Mei released a cloud of burning mist from her mouth, which surrounded her body completely, her silhouette vaguely visible. As she moved, so did the corrosive cloud around her. Many hapless Zetsu lunged at her the moment they laid their eyes on her, but their flesh was quickly consumed by the burning mist, reducing them to piles of

smoking white goo. The Mizukage smirked upon seeing the result of her jutsu.

After her, it was the Swordsmen of the Mist's turn to showcase their power and skill. Ameyuri was the first one to arrive at her leader's side. She flashed a sharp grin upon seeing a large contingent of White Zetsu clones charging forward.

"Oh boy, look at all these dumbasses walking to their deaths!" she happily shouted, as her swords started to crackle with electricity. "Thundersword Ninja Art: Eye of the Storm!"

The redheaded swordswoman started to spin with her arms spreaded forward, as the electricity created by her blades quickly enveloped her, turning herself into a moving electric twister. All the White Zetsu who dared to get close to her ended up with at least two limbs cleanly cut off.

"Haha! What about that, huh? Still wanting more?" Ameyuri boasted, once her spinning stopped. Despite all the Zetsu she had killed or maimed, many more appeared to take their place, not intimidated in the slightest by the kunoichi. "I see you want more. Well, I'm more than happy to oblige!"

"Bluntsword Ninja Art: Earth Breaker!"

Before Ameyuri could go on again, Miyaki leaped from behind, and delivered a powerful blow with the hammer half of the Helmet Splitter, which glowed blue with chakra, resulting in a massive quake, shattering the land and sending a handful of Zetsu flying in every direction.

"Hey, those were mine, you asshole!" Ameyuri protested. "Go somewhere else, this is my zone!"

"This isn't a competition, Ameyuri," Miyaki chastised. "This isn't a game either. We stand a better chance if we fight together."

"Bah, these creatures are nothing but rabble," Ameyuri scoffed. "Where are those reanimations? My blade yearns for a more worthy challenge!"

"You're going to have your challenge soon," Suigetsu said, as he landed near the two women. "Our scouts have reported that several reanimations are heading towards our position on small groups!"

"Good! Let them taste the wrath of Kirigakure's blades!" Ameyuri said, her vigor flying high. "To battle!"

...

"DIE!" a Zetsu Brute said, as he brought down all four of his arms down in a slam. Dosu was able to jump back just in time before being turned into bloody pulp.

"More of these monstrous creatures," he said, as he landed near his teammates. "Let's be careful, one hit from them could mean the end of us."

Just as Dosu said that, the Zetsu brute let out a feral roar and charged forward, using his upper limbs to walk as if he were a primate. As this happened, Kin dashed to the side.

"Don't worry, I have a new jutsu I can use to stop them in their tracks!" she said, as the mutated Zetsu rushed past her, before thrusting both hands forward. "Shadow Hidden Snake Hands!"

A multitude of snakes emerged from under Kin's bracers, and wrapped themselves around two of his arms and the shoulder they were connected to. Much to her teammates' surprise, Kin was able to stop the mutated Zetsu's charge, if only because all the poison the snakes injected into him through their fangs. Still, it didn't take long for the aberration to shake the effects off, and moved his other two arms in order to grab the snakes coiled around him.

"Come on guys!" Kin urged. "Attack before-"

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Multiple woden roots emerged from under the Zetsu, and wrapped themselves around his other two arms, immobilizing them completely. Dosu and Zaku saw it was Rin who had come to their aid. The bandaged ninja decided that this was their best chance to strike the monster down.

"Zaku, cover me, I'm going in," Dosu said, as he rushed forward.

"You got it! Heh, Kin isn't the only one who has new tricks under her sleeve!" Zaku said, as he placed his hands as if they were holding an invisible orb, and fired air streams, condensing the air into a sphere. When the sphere reached a large enough size, Zaku thrust his cupped hands forward. "Airwave Blast!"

The air missile hit the Zetsu brute in the head with such force it pushed him backwards, however he was held in place by Kin's snakes and Rin's wooden roots. Before he could recover, though, Dosu was already onto him.

"Resonating Sonic Cage!"

Just like he did when he fought against a similar monster in Konoha, Dosu slammed both his fists against the giant Zetsu's head, creating a cage of clashing, high intensity soundwaves, making the creature's head explode into gelatinous goo. Kin and Rin released their bindings, letting the monster to fall lifelessly on his back.

"Okay, one down, many more to go," Dosu noted, before his one eye rested on Rin. "Thanks for your assistance, Rin-san. Your help shortened this battle considerably."

Rin smiled at him. "I felt you guys could use a hand. This creature-"

Hearing a new attack incoming, Dosu's eye suddenly widened. "Everybody, watch out!"

His teammates and Rin jumped in a different direction just in time to avoid a man with a shaggy afro wearing an Iwa uniform could skewer them with one of his wrist mounted blades. Rin was ready to counterattack, until she realized who this man was.

"This... this has to be a freaking joke..." she said in shock.

In front of her, ready to attack again was Kakko, one of the two Iwa ninjas that captured her during Team Minato's mission to destroy Kannabi Bridge. There was no way that the very same ninja who kidnapped and tortured her with genjutsu was back from the dead and in front of her by mere chance of fate.

"You know, I'm not really sure what happened after you escaped me and Taiseki," Kakko said. "But it doesn't matter! You're not getting away from us!"

"Rin, watch out!" Dosu warned her once again. But in her distracted state, the medic-nin was unable to react in time.

"Earth Release: Rock Crusher!"

Suddenly, many large rocks fell from the sky upon the hapless brown haired kunoichi, quickly burying her under a huge pile of stones. Another Iwa reanimation, a tall and broad shouldered man with black hair and a very intimidating face appeared besides Kakko all of sudden.

"Good job, Taiseki. That girl isn't going anywhere," Kakko noted with a smirk.

Taiseki merely nodded, and looked at the Chunin of Team Anko. "Indeed. We should take care of those other Konoha brats as well."

"More kids. Is Konoha so low on manpower that they have to send kids to the front lines?" Kakko commented with a chuckle. Dosu, Zaku and Kin all adopted defensive stances. "I don't take joy in beating up children, but-"

Suddenly, the pile of rocks Rin was buried under exploded without warning, shattering them, and showering the area in tiny pebbles, and raising a small cloud of dust.

"I'm so sick of tired of people trying to kidnap me," Rin growled, as she walked forward. Upon stepping out of the cloud of dust, everybody could see her eyes were yellow rather than brown, and there were deep green marks under her eyes and on her forehead. She made a hand seal. "It's payback time! Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The ground beneath the undead Iwa ninjas started to shake, and before they could react, multiple wooden roots emerged from underground. They jumped away, but no matter where they landed, more roots emerged, until they finally ran out of space, and the roots reached them and wrapped themselves around the two confused men, immobilizing them completely.

"The hell!? That little girl has Wood Release!?" Taiseki roared, as he tried to break free.

"Can't... move!" Kakko said, as he futilely struggled to break free.

Panting with anger, Rin turned at the ex-Oto ninjas, which flinched upon seeing the enraged Sage. However, her expression and body posture visibly relaxed, she let out a sigh of relief, and smiled. "Wow, that was so cathartic! I feel so good!"

Kin let out a whistle. "Damn, that was brutal, girl. Remind me not to get on your bad side."

"That's the power of a Sage to you," Dosu observed.

Before anyone could say anything, though, they heard another whistle. One the ex-Oto ninjas recognized.

"Anko-sensei is calling us," Dosu said.

"Some other reanimation must giving her some trouble," Zaku deduced. "Let's go!"

The members of Team Anko and Rin nodded, and head in the direction of the Snake Mistress.

...

While Anko's students and Rin were fighting against one of those giant Zetsu, their sensei was also in the heat of the battle, facing a couple of Moon Puppets, bombarding her with constant golden chakra blasts.

"That's all you can do, you oversized toys?" Anko asked, dodging the attacks as she tried to come closer. She knew her taunts would have no effect on a mechanical enemy, but she was too used to trash talk her enemies. As she ran, she made several hand seals before pulling a shuriken. "Fire Release: Shadow Clone Flaming Shuriken Jutsu!"

Anko breathed fire into the shuriken, giving it a cloak of flames, before tossing it forward. The moment the burning steel star left her hand, a dozen more appeared around it. The Moon Puppets, however, proved to be more skilled than what Anko or other living ninja judged them by expertly dodging the flaming shuriken, or parrying them with small beams of golden chakra. Once the attack was neutralized, one of the Moon Puppets cupped its hands and summoned another sphere of golden chakra ready to throw at Anko. However, thanks to all the noise going around the battlefield, the puppet was unable to hear a Chakra Golem getting close. The much larger Golem grabbed the puppet by the head, and started to slam it against the ground multiple times.

"Now's my chance! Shadow Hidden Snake Hands!"

A multitude of snakes emerged from under Anko's sleeves, and wrapped against the other puppet's neck before he had the chance to assist its "brother". Anko then pulled the puppet towards her,

quickly slapped an explosive tag on its torax, and threw it against a nearby bunch of Zetsu. The ensuing explosion ended the puppet's existence, as well as the White Zetsu clones unfortunate enough to be close to it.

"BAM! Multi kill combo!" Anko cheered. "Man, too bad there was no one to record that swift move-"

Anko was interrupted by a pair of Fuuma Shuriken flying at her from above. The Snake Mistress, however, was able to gracefully dodge them by making a backflip, and the giant steel stars merely hit the ground. A reanimation wearing an Otogakure uniform landed besides the shuriken, and pulled them from the ground. Anko was ready to fight this new foe when she realized who he was.

"Wait a second... Mizuki? Is that you?" Anko asked, narrowing her eyes a little.

"Exactly!" Mizuki triumphantly said, as he pulled the second Fuuma Shuriken from the ground. "You thought you had killed me, but thanks to Orochimaru-sama, not only I live once again, but I am immortal!"

Anko raised an eyebrow, feeling more surprised rather than shocked or disgusted. "Orochimaru turned you into a zombie, one that isn't even in control of his own actions... and you're grateful to him? Boy, you have issues."

"Didn't you hear what I say? I'm immortal now! Not only I'll live forever, but I can't be killed!" Mizuki boasted.

"Okay, a few things wrong with that," Anko began. "First, you aren't immortal. We have ways to premanently kill a reanimation. And second, even you'd live forever, you'd do so as Orochimaru's slave, who would release the jutsu and thus send your spirit back to hell once you're no longer useful to him. Hell, I'm surprised that he bothered bringing you back from the dead, given how mediocre of a ninja you are."

"You spout nothing but foolish nonsense. But what can I expect of somebody who feels unfortunate to have been blessed with Orochimaru-sama as sensei?" Mizuki asked.

"Seriously, did Orochimaru wired your brain to shower him with praise or what?" Anko asked, now being annoyed.

"Enough chitchat! Let's see if you can back up those words with actions! Fight me, and try to defeat me if you can!" Mizuki said in a boastful tone, as he adopted a fighting stance.

"Eh, no, you aren't worth my time. But you know what? I know the perfect adversaries for you to fight against," Anko said, before putting two fingers on her mouth, and let out a loud and sharp whistle.

In mere seconds, her students, as well as Rin, landed besides her. Naturally, Mizuki's presence didn't go unnoticed for the three former.

"You called, sense-whoa! Mizuki-sensei? Is that you?" Zaku asked.

Upon seeing his former students, Mizuki looked like he was going to explode. "The fuck!? What the hell are you three doing wearing those Konoha uniforms!"

"They're *my* students now," Anko stated, lazily placing a hand on her hip. "And they're going to kick your sorry ass."

"Those three useless failures? Please! Even if I wasn't immortal, they wouldn't even be able to touch me!" Mizuki boasted again.

"Useless failures?" Kin repeated, as her left eye began to twitch.

"If we were failures was because you didn't to teach us shit!" Zaku loudly protested. "Now we're going to show you how much we grew under Anko-sensei!"

"Oh, so you little shits think you already surpassed me?" Mizuki asked, chuckling confidently. "I'd be more than happy to prove you

wrong."

As the Chunin of Team Anko prepared to fight, Rin was going to join them, but Anko grabbed her shoulder, stopping her from doing so.

"You don't want me to help them?" Rin asked her former classmate.

Anko shook her head. "They're more than able to beat him. Besides, your Wood Release and Sage power would be better used on their stronger reanimations. Like that one. Is that an Uchiha? Yep, I think it's an Uchiha. I remember the custom uniform they wore during the uprising."

"Alright, let's go then," Rin said, before both kunoichi leaped away.

...

"Blastsword Ninja Art: Bombardment Wave!"

Kumori swung the Splatter in a wide arc, releasing a multitude of explosive tags that flew at the enemies in front of him, which he took no time to detonate. Despite the chain of explosions took down quite a few White Zetsu clones, his main target evaded the attack. A reanimated middle aged ninja with silver hair, squinty eyes, and wearing a black flak jacket similar to those used by Konoha ninjas.

"You'll have to do better than that to match the power of the Uchiha, Kiri scum!" the Uchiha reanimation said, as he started making hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

The Uchiha exhaled a huge fireball at the masked swordsman, who once again swung his sword in another wide arc.

"Blastsword Ninja Art: Exploding Barricade!"

The explosive scroll unravelled around Kumori, before it ignited, resulting in a chain of explosions whose blasts were directing outwards, creating a protective field of destruction around Kumori. The explosions managed to negate the fireball, however, the Uchiha

reanimation took advantage of the ensuing cloud of smoke to close the gap between the two of them. Kumori raised his sword once again, but the Uchiha proved to be faster, and with a roundhouse kick, smacked the Splatter out of Kumori's hands, and taking advantage of the building momentum, kicked Kumori with his other leg, sending him a few meters backwards.

"You Swordsmen of the Mist think yourselves so great with your tricked out swords, don't you? But you take the sword away, and there's nothing left," the Uchiha taunted, before pulling out several shuriken and tossing them at the masked Kiri ninja.

Kumori rolled to the side in order to avoid the steel starts, before leaping back to his feet.

"The same could be say about the Uchiha and your Sharingan," Kumori replied. "Though in the end, both the Splatter and the Sharingan are tools. It doesn't matter how powerful they are, but how skilled is the ninja who uses them."

"You'll find I'm plenty skilled," the Uchiha zombie replied.

"Let's see it then," Kumori said, as he made a single hand seal. "Water Release: Hiding in the Mist Jutsu!"

In a few seconds, a very dense fog covered the small area the two ninjas were using to fight.

"I'm deprived of my sword, and you're deprived of your superior sight," Kumori said. "Let's see who is the best of us."

" *Idiot! Blinding me is useless if you keep blabbering like that!*" the Uchiha thought, as he silently rushed towards then pulled a couple of kunai and lunged one forward to where Kumori was. "DIE!"

However, his kunai didn't cut any flesh, but was parried by another kunai. Though it was less the interception rather than who stopped his attack who surprised the Uchiha.

"What?"

Because he found himself looking to a clone of himself, even if the clone had a dark blue tint to his skin and clothes. The clone then pushed the kunai out of the Uchiha's hand and delivered a swing with the other. The zombie and his clone started to trade swings, with neither of them gaining the upper hand, as the reanimation realized much to his anger, the clone was just as skilled as he was.

"You said you needed more than what I had to match the power of the Uchiha. So I hope you don't mind I used some of your power for that," Kumori's voice said from behind.

"Shit!" the Uchiha zombie said, as he pushed the clone back, and turned around for the inevitable attack.

There was a loud clang, and the Uchiha saw that what he parried wasn't a normal blade, but the Splatter.

"And while you were busy fighting that Dark Mirror Shadow Clone, I took the chance to get my sword back. Now do the polite thing, and please stay put until somebody seals you."

Kumori detonated the explosive tags on the sword, blowing the Uchiha's lower half of his body, while the remaining upper half was launched backwards inside a ball of smoke.

"Any sealmaster nearby, can you guys take care of that smoking hot Uchiha?" Kumori asked.

...

Meanwhile, not far from there, two Swordsmen of the Mist battled as well. However, unlike the others, these two were on opposite sides of the war.

"I'm impressed that you sought to fight me again after the beating I gave you and your flunkies in Kiri," Kisame said, laughing a little, as

he swung Samehada with one hand at Zabuzā.

The former Demon of the Mist parried, and with an expert twist of his wrist, pushed Samehada aside before lunging at his blue skinned opponent. However, Kisame managed to skillfully dodge Zabuzā's onslaught.

"That was more than two years ago. I knew that our blades would cross again, and thus I've been training non-stop for such battle!" Zabuzā said, as he delivered several powerful swings, which made Kisame fall back.

"You can't-"

However, Kisame was interrupted when the corner of his eye caught the Sewing Needle flying at him, and with a wide swing, he managed to deflect it just before it could pierce his body. The owner of the sword, Suigetsu, landed a few meters away from Kisame, as he pulled the wire attached to his sword to get it back.

It wasn't the end of the attack, as the next second, Chōjūrō and Ameyuri attacked him from two different directions, while Zabuzā and Suigetsu placed themselves in the two possible directions Kisame could jump to in order to avoid the attack. However, contrary to what many believed, there was more to the blue skinned ninja than a mere fancy sword.

"Water Release: Exploding Water Shockwave!"

Kisame expelled a truly massive amount of water from his mouth, forming a torrent that expanded in every direction, and violently dragged Ameyuri and Chōjūrō backwards just before they could strike him down, while forcing Zabuzā and Suigetsu back as well. Kisame smirked upon seeing the result of his work, but the smirk disappeared when the water he had created formed several tentacles which wrapped around his arms and body, and started to pull him down, burying him into the earth.

"Miyako, now!" Kumori's voice called.

"I got it!" Miyako said, already leaping towards Kisame, ready to cut him down with the axe half of the Helmet Splitter.

Kisame struggled against the water tentacles, until he felt Samehada sending a burst of chakra through his body, and the tentacles disappeared, as if they never were there. His limbs now free, he was able to parry the admittedly powerful blow from the blue haired kunoichi.

"Distracting me with a genjutsu while you go for the kill," Kisame said in realization. "Clever. It would have worked on any other ninja, but Samehada can disrupt my chakra if an enemy attempt to ensnare me with an illusion."

"That illusion already served its purpose!" Miyako said, as he moved to strike the axe with the hammer half of her weapon.

However, before she could do such a thing, Samehada burst into a mass of dark blue razor sharp scales, shredding the bandages that were wrapped around it. The scales grew longer and sharper, threatening to impale the kunoichi, forcing Miyako to fall back.

"As you can see, it didn't," Kisame replied, his grin only growing wider, as he swung his sword again. Samehada's hilt stretched to great length, while the sword dashed at a seemingly random rock. Said rock, however, rippled before it disappeared, revealing Kumori, who jumped back to avoid being caught by the sentient sword's jaws. The hilt then retracted back to its normal length. "And hiding from me won't work. Samehada can smell your chakra."

"Shit, not even all of us together can-" Suigetsu began, before he realized of something. He looked at Kumori with an indignant expression. "The fuck!? You can talk!?"

"Yes, we can beat him!" a new voice said, as the Mizukage landed between her loyal Swordsmen. "Kisame might be powerful, even

more with Samehada, but he can't stand against the combined power of all seven of us!"

As soon as Mei said that, two reanimations, other two Uchihas, given their activated Sharingan, landed behind Kisame.

"I'm not fighting alone either. I'm part of a larger group, you know," Kisame said.

"That pair of Uchihas won't make much of a difference," Kumori confidently said. "I was able to beat one on my own. With my fellow comrades, they have even less of a chance."

Kisame, however, laughed. "I wasn't talking about them."

"Summoning Jutsu!"

The Uchihas slammed their palms into the ground, and after six bursts of smoke, six more coffins appeared. Each coffin was marked with the kanji of "water" on their respective lids. Said lids then fell forward with a thud, revealing their contents. Six Kirigakure ninjas. The Allied Swordsmen of the Mist and their Mizukage were unable to hide their surprise.

"T-Those are..." Chojuro stammered.

"... the previous Swordsmen of the Mist," Miyako finished.

The first three coffins had three people that a couple years ago were still alive: Jinpachi Munashi, Kushimaru Kuriarare and Jinin Akebino, all of them killed during the Kirigakure Civil war that ended with the victory of the rebels.

"Hey bitches, we're back!" Jinpachi boasted.

"Ready to avenge our deaths and get back the swords that you stole from us!" Kushimaru added.

Jinin Akebino didn't say anything at first, until he spotted Miyako wielding the Helmet Splitter.

"So they gave you my sword in the end, girl," Jinin said. "Make sure you don't dishonor it."

"I'd die before letting that happen, Jinin-san," Miyako said.

Of the three remaining, one was a man that resembled Zabuza, and even dressed in a way similar to him, albeit he was unmasked, had a cross shaped scar under his right eye and a red, grid-shaped tatoo covering his lower jaw.

"Juzo-sensei..." Zabuza muttered.

"Well, well, well, do my eyes deceive me? It's little Zabuza! Though I see you aren't so little now, hehe!" the man named Juzo laughed. His stare hardened as his eyes rested on the Executioner's Blade. "I see you have my sword."

"It's MY sword now, old man!" Zabuza replied defensively.

"No, it's not. You didn't earn it. You were supposed to take that sword after killing me yourself. Yet instead, you waited for somebody else to do your job for you, didn't you?" Juzo said in a taunting manner. "Ah, Zabuza. When they told me about the massacre at the academy, I was overjoyed. I thought I found a worthy apprentice, for only those who know about extensive bloodshed can wield the Executioner's Blade. But you turned out to be such a disappointment..."

"You think I need to kill you so I'm worthy of my blade? Well, guess what, it seems that it might not be too late for that," Zabuza replied, adpting a fighting stance. "I'm not the same confused kid blinded by anger! I'm not afraid if you anymore!"

Mei silently placed a hand on Zabuza's shoulder, who seemed to have a soothing effect on the man.

"Don't let him get to you, Zabuza," Mei whispered. "Keep your head calm. You're better than him, and you know it."

"Oh, look at that, you ended up tamed by some weak woman. It seems there's no limit of how much of a disappointment you can be," Juzo mocked.

"At least I wasn't killed by a mere Genin!" Zabuza fired back. "Is there any more disgraceful way for a Jonin, much less a Swordsman of the Mist, to die?"

While Zabuza continued trading angry shouts with his former sensei, Suigetsu and Chojuro focused on the second of the three remaining coffins, which held a man that greatly resembled Suigetsu, including the shoulder length light blue hair and purple eyes. A person Suigetsu knew better than any other Kirigakure ninja.

"Brother..." Suigetsu said.

"Mangetsu-sensei..." Chojuro said as well, almost in a whisper.

"Suigetsu. I'm happy to see that you're alive," Mangetsu said. "And you finally got one of the Seven Swords. The Sewing Needle, huh? That's not one I would have pictured you wielding."

"I know. But one must work with what is given," Suigetsu replied, chuckling a little, even if his voice was trembling.

Mangetsu's eyes drifted to the bespectacled swordsman. "Chojuro, my apprentice. I'm also happy to see you, and that you still keep my sword. Even if your training wasn't complete, I have faith you made good use of that blade."

"I did my best, Mangetsu-sensei! Every time I swing this sword, I do so to honor your memory!" Chojuro said, almost yelling.

Mangetsu smiled in return. "I'm sure you do. Also, if you guys have all the swords minus Samehada, I take the Rebellion was

triumphant?"

"You can bet it was! We invaded the village, and Yagura's forces ended up surrendering. Mei is the Mizukage now," Suigetsu explained. "Though not everything was as clear cut. Turn out Yagura was controlled by Akatsuki, who also captured him for his Tailed Beast."

"I see. That was... very unfortunate," Mangetsu said, shaking his head. "Though, at the very least the Bloody Mist is no more. People from the Land of Water won't fear ninjas as demons anymore."

"Yes. We made plenty of progress on that area. Mei-sama is a very diligent Mizukage, and works diligently to show the entire world that the new Kirigakure is not what it used to be."

As Suigetsu and Chojuro continued talking with the former's brother and the later's sensei, Ameyuri watched in shock and anger the occupant of the last coffin step out of it. A man with long dark green hair, blue eyes and thick lips.

"What the... where am I?" the man asked, a bit disoriented. "And why is a little girl holding my swords!?"

"These are MY swords, asshole!" Ameyuri yelled back, gripping the Thunderfangs even harder. "Go back with the rest of those failed relics, Raiga!"

"Now the numbers are a little more even, aren't they?" Kisame laughed, as he rested Samehada over one of his shoulders. "Seven and seven. Albeit one of you isn't a Swordsman of the Mist."

"Yeah, and six of you don't have swords!" Ameyuri replied, raising her swords above her head for added emphasis. "Numbers mean shit when-"

However, Ameyuri was interrupted when dust and ashes started to gather around the hands of the revived former Swordsmen, creating

replicas of the six swords in the hands of the Swordsmen loyal to Mei. Everybody instinctively took a step back.

"You were saying?" Kisame said, before letting out an even louder laugh.

...

Back in the Akatsuki secret lair, Orochimaru was kneeled in front of a board with white and black pellets on it, that he was using to plan his fight, as well as to better monitor his undead puppets. Besides Orochimaru, the only other Akatsuki in the lair was Obito, lazily slouched against one of the cave's wall, accompanied by a small group of White Zetsu clones. Probably to act as some sort of escorts if Orochimaru decided to attack and steal the Uchiha's Rinnegan. Not that they would be of much help if he decided to do so, but for now, he would play nice.

"With this improved version of Impure World Resurrection, I can also create replicas of the weapons the deceased ninjas were holding the moment they were killed. And since all the seven swordsmen died with their swords in their hands..." Orochimaru thought, as he licked his lips in anticipation. *"Now, let's take this chance to gather six of the seven swords for my collection. I can take Samehada later, once Kisame lowers his guard."*

...

Back in the battlefield, the six undead Swordsmen took a step forward, and flanked Kisame, whom they appeared to consider their captain, and adopted fighting stances. Mei's swordsmen took a step back, looking a little frightened or unsure, with the exception of Zabuza, who kept his cool and held his ground, and Ameyuri, who coped with even more bravado, growling and showing her sharp teeth at the enemy.

"Do not fear, my swordsmen!" Mei shouted, as she took a step forward, moving close to Zabuza. "All of you proved yourselves

powerful ninjas of Kirigakure and worthy wielders of those swords! The enemy only has cheap replicas wielded by criminals who fell before us in the past, and they shall fall again! Now stand and fight, and show the world the might of Kirigakure's champions!"

Mei's words seem to have the desired effect, and restored the moral of her ninja, who appeared now less doubtful and more ready to fight.

"Pretty speech, Mei-chan. You always had your way with words," Kisame said, grinning, as he swung Samehada. "Though I think an epitaph would have been more appropriate here, given what's going to happen. Everybody, charge!"

"Swordsmen of the Mist, attack! Show these undead relics no mercy!" Zabuza called, as his fellow swordsmen charged towards the incoming enemy.

Given that they were matched in numbers, the fight split into seven one on one duels. Ameyuri was the first one to charge, and engaged Raiga, her eyes burning with hatred as if the former owner of the Thunderfangs were her natural enemy. Suigetsu decided that he should be the one to face his brother. Miyako faced Jinin Akebino, to show him that she's worthy of the Helmet Splitter. Kumori and Chojuro teamed up against Kushimaru and Jinpachi. Juzo wanted to go after Zabuza, but his former apprentice chose to go after Kisame instead, and ended up facing Mei.

"Who the hell are you, woman!?" Juzo angrily asked, as he delivered a wide swing at the redhead, who dodged it with ease. "You aren't even a Swordsman of the Mist, yet you dare to get in the way!?"

"I dare, yes. Because I am the Fifth and current Mizukage, Mei Terumi," Mei replied, as she started making hand seals. "And my husband doesn't have time to deal with such a little annoyance like you. There's a much bigger fish to catch. Fire Release: Searing Lash!"

A whip made of fire appeared on Mei's hand, which she used to flog the undead swordsman, forcing him to fall back. Still, Juzo wasn't going to let Mei set the pace of the fight.

"Mizukage? YOU are the Mizukage? Just what happened with Kiri after I died?" Juzo said in disgust. "Oh well, let's test if you're worthy of the hat then!" Jumping backwards, he gripped his fake Executioner's Blade with both hands, and the sword started to flow blue as it was infused with chakra, before tossing it at his opponent.

Mei undid her fiery whip, as she started to make more hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

The Mizukage slammed her hands into the ground, erecting a wall between herself and Juzo. Thanks to the chakra it was imbued with, the sword was able to break through the barrier, albeit it did so at the cost of much of its momentum, meaning that if Mei just jumped backwards, she could avoid being hit. However, before she could do that, Juzo burst from underground in front of her and grabbed his sword as he flew.

"You're mine!" Juzo said, as he brought his sword down.

Mei, however, was quick enough to weave a few hand seals as she jumped backwards.

"Boil Release: Skilled Mist Jutsu!"

Mei exhaled a cloud of corrosive mist at the incoming swordsman, who was stopped on his tracks as the force of the mist pushed him backwards while his body started to quickly erode. However, Juzo quickly burst into water.

"Oh, a water clone. Should have seen that coming," Mei said nonchalantly, as she started to make hand seals.

The real Juzo burst from underground behind her, ready to skewer her for real.

"Stop acting as if this is some fucking game!" the scarred ninja yelled, as he delivered an horizontal slash.

"Boil Release: Corrosive Armor!"

Another acidic cloud burst through Mei's position, this one more powerful than the one before, corroding Juzo's body with such speed, his forearms fell off from the rest of his arms.

"Shit!" Juzo cursed.

"Still think I'm weak? Or that I don't deserve to be Mizukage?" Mei asked, as she made more hand seals. "Not that I give a damn about what a caveman like you think. Now time to send you back to the place you belong: into oblivion with the rest of the Bloody Mist! Lava Release: Melting Apparition Jutsu!"

Mei exhaled a gigantic stream of lava at the undead ninja. Juzo tried to jump back, but the corrosive cloud eroded his legs until they broke and he fell helplessly on his back. His undead body started to regenerate, but the acidic cloud said regeneration didn't take. And thus, Juzo was buried under a pile of burning lava, leaving him completely immobile. Mei followed the attack with more ahnd seals.

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Mei spat a stream of cold water at the lava, cooling it down as it solidified into solid rock, producing several hissing clouds of steam. Once the undead swordsman was trapped under a cocoon of stone, Mei placed several chakra suppresing sealing tags to make sure he couldn't be able to break out on his own.

"That's one down," Mei said, before hey eyes drifted towards the spot her husband was fighting Kisame. Zabuza appeared to be holding his ground, but given that Kisame was only using one hand to hold his weapon, it was obvious he wasn't fighting seriously yet. But that could change anytime soon. "Better help Zabuza as soon as possible. Between the two of us, we can bring that monster down."

...

Meanwhile, at another part of the battleground, Mizuki has fighting Anko's students. The turncoat ninja decided to use directly the second Stage of the Cursed Seal, transforming him into a bulky monster of maroon skin, black eyes, and an additional pair of arms ending in a curved bone blade similar to the blades of a mantis, sprouting from his back.

"Fire Release: Cursed Flame Destruction!"

Mizuki exhaled a massive stream of blue fire from his mouth, forcing his former students to jump away in different directions. As he jumped, Zaku tried to move forward, as he aimed his palms at his former sensei.

"Decapitating Air Bullets!"

Zaku fired a barrage of vacuum bullets from the holes in his palms at the mutated ninja, now forcing Mizuki to be the one to retreat, as the bullets blew a trail of holes in the ground, sending bits of shredded grass into the air. Dosu decided to take the opportunity to strike, and dashed towards his former sensei. Once he closed the distance, he delivered a hook with his gauntlet fist.

"You think you can use those pathetic tricks against me?" Mizuki said, as his enlarged hand caught Dosu's fist, squeezing it, crunching the gauntlet as well. "Do you think that I forgot how those gauntlets of yours work?"

Mizuki then turned around, and tossed Dosu away. However, the former Oto ninja managed to regain his balance, and making a backflip mid air, landed on his feet. Zaku and Kin quickly rushed towards him so he wouldn't be alone against his former teacher.

"Now it's my turn to attack! Feel the power of Orochimaru-sama!" Mizuki boasted, as he started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullets!"

A dragon head made of mud and stone rose from the ground in front of Mizuki, opened its jaws, and fired multiple mud projectiles at the trio of former Oto ninjas. However, Mizuki wasn't done.

"Fire Release: Fire Dragon Blast!"

Mizuki exhaled a stream of fire from his mouth, igniting the mud projectiles.

Dosu's one eye locked onto the white haired man, before slamming both fists into the ground.

"Resonating Echo Tremor!"

Dosu sent a powerful sonic shockwave through the ground towards Mizuki, carving a furrow as it traveled.

"Zaku, Kin, combine your jutsu to counter his!" Dosu commanded. The two of them nodding in unison and taking a step forward, Zaku raising his palms forward, and Kin making hand seals.

"Decapitating Air Waves!"

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Kin expelled a torrent of water from her mouth, while Haku released two streams of pressurized air and sound. Both attacks combined into a watery storm, putting out all the fiery projectiles and blowing them away, creating several clouds of steam that started to expand in every direction. Then, without saying anything, Dosu charged forward, his arms raised to protect his head and torso. And indeed, he managed to parry the blow of a bladed arm.

"How did you...?" Mizuki, the one who delivered the blow, asked.

"You seem to forget about my extremely acute hearing, *sensei*," Dosu sneered. "And even with all the noise of the battle around us, I can still sense the vibrations your feet make with every step."

"So that's how you knew I was getting closer. Cheeky brat," Mizuki said, before pushing Dosu back and kicking him in the chest, making him fall on his back. "But that's not going to help you!"

"Summoning jutsu!"

There was a burst of smoke, followed by a brief but powerful gale of wind that dispelled the steam in the air. Mizuki then saw Kin riding a top of the head of a gigantic cobra.

"Look what Anko-sensei taught me to do," Kin said in a taunting manner. "Did Orochimaru allow you to sign the Snake Contract? For how much you praise him, I'm going to assume he did, right?"

"I don't need to summon some armless lizard to do my job!" Mizuki angrily said, as he started to make hand seals. "Fire Release: Cursed Flame Destruction!"

Mizuki exhaled a stream of blue fire, so hot it burned the ground above it even if it was untouched, as it flew towards Kin and her giant snake. With an impressive speed despite its lack of limbs, the giant cobra started to quickly slither around, dodging the deadly fire jutsu Mizuki was projecting towards it.

"This is my chance to strike!" Dosu whispered to himself, as he rushed towards Mizuki. "Resonating Echo Tremor!"

Dosu slammed both fists into the ground, sending a sonic shockwave underground, carving a crack in the ground as it followed. Mizuki, however, knew what Dosu was trying, and would have smirked if he could move his mouth. He jumped aside to avoid the underground attack while keeping the fire jutsu active, but rather than Kin and her snake, which were moving further and further away, he directed the fire towards the much closer Dosu.

"Air Burst Propulsion!"

Before Dosu could be incinerated, Zaku slammed into his former sensei with force of a missile, using the air expelled from his hands to increase his speed. The flames disappeared, as Mizuki's air was blown out of his stomach.

"You fucking-"

Mizuku's curse was interrupted when Dosu quickly bridged the gap between them, and delivered a right hook at him. The white haired man instinctively dodged, and realized a second too late of his mistake when his head felt prey of terrible nausea and vertigo that didn't even allow him to walk straight.

"Kin, now!" Dosu called.

Before Mizuki could regain his balance, he heard a slithering sound growing louder, and the blurry image of a snake appeared in his field of vision. Kin's giant cobra slammed Mizuki with its head, sending him flying against a tree. After that, the cobra wrapped itself tightly against the undead ninja, pinning his arms against his body leaving him completely immobilized.

"And I believe that's a wrap," Kin said, placing her hands on her hips. "Literally."

"Look at that, Anko-sensei was right. We were able to beat Mizuki after all," Dosu observed.

"Of course we did! We're super strong! Anko-sensei said we could beat him, and we totally did it!" Zaku excitedly said.

"That's all good, but we just defeated one enemy. The battle is far from over." Dosu reminded his teammates, especially Zaku. "Let's bring Mizuki to the selamaster ninjas, and then resume the fight."

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, Kisame and Zabuza were fighting against each other, mostly trading blows with their huge swords. The two swordsmen never stayed still, constantly running and leaping from one place to another, being little more than quick blurs for an onlooker.

"I have to commend you for your bravery facing me again on your own, Zabuza-san," Kisame began, as he delivered a vertical slash with Samehada. "You can't use ninjutsu against me, since my sword will absorb it. You can't also rely on your famed assassination skills since Samehada can track your position by sensing your chakra. All you have are your swordfighting skills, while I have no such limit."

"That's the difference between you and I, Kisame," Zabuza said, as he parried the blow, before pushing Samehada aside and lunging his Executioner's Blade forward. "I always relied on nothing but my own skills to get by. I don't need to use a tricked up sword as a crutch."

"Still trying to hurt my ego so I remove my greatest advantage in a fight?" Kisame laughed, as he moved aside, letting Zabuza's sword harmlessly pass by him. "Come on Zabuza, we both know you're biting much more than you can chew. There's a lot of stake in this war, you shouldn't risk it so badly for your own ego."

"You're really confident I can't beat you, that you can afford giving advice to an enemy?" Zabuza asked, visibly enraged.

"I couldn't have said it better," Kisame replied, grinning widely, as he prepared to attack again. "Besides-"

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Suddenly, large boulders started to fall from the sky towards Kisame, making thundering noises as they impacted against the ground. The shark man tried to dodge most of them, and those he couldn't were shattered to pebbles with a mighty swing of Samehada. When the attack ceased, Kisame saw Mei Terumi landing besides Zabuza.

"You know what? I think you might be right. That sword is too much for me to overcome alone," Zabuza replied, grinning under his mask.

"So I decided to drop by and balancing things out," Mei added.

"Oh, how cute, the lovely couple comes to face me together," Kisame laughed. "However, your Mizukage isn't going to be of much help against me. She has no ninjutsu Samehada can't nullify and absorb. All she will accomplish is in giving me another source of chakra to devour!"

"We aren't afraid of you, traitor!" Mei replied. "Besides, my husband is right! All your power and strength comes from that sword! If we take that sword away from you, the fight will be ours!"

"Your naivety is adorable," Kisame replied, shaking his head. "Do you think you're the first one who tried to separate me from Samehada? As you can see, that tactic never yielded much results."

"There's a first time for everything. Even if Samehada can return to you on its own, you won't be able to use it if I cut your hands off!" Zabuza said, swinging his blade for added emphasis.

"You're so sure of yourselves, aren't you? Okay, I'll take on your challenge!" Kisame boasted as he removed his Akatsuki cloak, revealing his bare chest, and much to Mei and Zabuza's shock and confusion, he jabbed the sword into his abdomen.

"What the...?" Mei asked, confused.

"You... have no idea... of all the things Samehada can do..." Kisame said, smiling evilly. It took a moment for the two Kiri ninjas to realize that there was no blood on Kisame's torax. In fact, it appeared as if Samehada was being absorbed into his own body. And as it happened, Kisame started to transform as well. His head grew elongated and more shark-like. His hair receded, and a fin grew on top of its head to replace it, with two additional fins grew on his

forearms. His hands had now webbed fingers, ending in sharp claws. "SAMEHADA AND I ARE ONE NOW!"

"Man, I'm hating that goddamned sword more and more..." Zabuza grumbled, before turning to his wife. "So, taking his sword away isn't an option anymore. Any other ideas?"

Mei smiled, and nodded, before biting her thumb. "Yes, just one. I still have an ace in the hole I've been saving for this very moment. Something I have been preparing since the moment I became Mizukage, and I think this is the best moment to break it out. Summoning jutsu!"

Mei slammed her hand into the ground, producing a burst of smoke. When the smoke cleared, there was a small blue skinned cephalopod with a yellow spiraling shell, large eyes, and very thick eyebrows. Zabuza couldn't help but raise a non-existent eyebrow at Mei's supposed "ace in the hole", while Kisame merely laughed.

"That's it? That's your trump card? Some tiny squid?" Kisame said, laughing out loud. "Heh, if anything, it'll make a great appetizier."

"I wouldn't laugh if I weren't you, Kisame. This is no normal squid, but Rasen-sama, Great Sage of the Depths," Mei said.

"You called me, Mei-chan. I take this is the moment?" Rasen asked.

Mei nodded. "Indeed it is, Rasen-sama. Let's begin."

The small elderly squid climbed Mei's body until he reached the top of her head, while Mei herself started to make hand seals. The Mizukage started to glow with a blue light as her body started to build up chakra.

"Sage Art: Sage Transformation!"

There was a burst of smoke, and when it dispelled, both Kisame and Zabuza were startled to see the result: it seemed that the squid had

fused with Mei, and his shell covered Mei's head as if it was a helmet. Her long locks of auburn hair were now long, reddish tentacles that wiggled as if they had life of their own. Mei's teeth were now sharper, looking like her husband's or Kisame's teeth. Her eyes were yellow, and had black marks around them.

"After seeing Naruto's Sage Mode during the Kirigakure Civil War, I knew I had to master it as well, so I asked the squids to teach me how to do it," Mei explained. "I kept this a secret, training on my own during the little spare time I had. Just for this moment alone. Get ready, Kisame! The shame you brought to your home village with your treachery will disappear before the day ends!"

OMAKE: Mei's Alternate Sage Transformation

"Sage Art: Sage Transformation!"

There was a burst of smoke, and when it dispelled, both Kisame and Zabuza were startled to see the result: Mei had shrunk to half her usual size, having the appearance of a little girl. Her hair was now much shorter, its locks looking like the tentacles of an octopus, with two of them falling down, framing her face to the side. But what was more bizarre was a gigantic water gun she was now wielding, filled with orange ink, as the orange droplets that fell from the tip of its barrel was any indication.

Both Zabuza and Kisame stared at the weird transformation, stunned and confused.

"Inkling Mode, success!" Mei said in a squaky, high pitched voice. She then cocked her gigantic water gun. "Come on Zabuza, let's splat the shit out of him, woomy!"

Author's Note: Heh, it's been a while since the last omake, hasn't it ? Before you ask, no, I don't really play Splatoon, but the idea for the omake was just too good to pass.

This is one of the battles I've been wanting to write the most since I was planning the Fourth Ninja War. Kiri is easily one of my favorite villages, and has some of my favorite characters as well. I borrowed an idea from "War of the Biju" involving Kisame leading the zombified Swordsmen of the Mist, while at the same time thought that I could have them fight the current generation of Swordsmen led by Zabuza. And man, I loved getting to write the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist once again.

And Team Anko comes full circle once Dosu, Zaku and Kin beat the man who was once their sensei. It might not be among the most spectacular or decisive battles, but it was important for them. As for having Rin fight the revived versions of the Iwa ninjas that kidnapped her, well, I thought it would be both funny and cathartic.

Though even then, all of the above is just an appetizier, as the next chapter we'll get the main course: Mei and Zabuza versus Kisame. Which, again, allowed me to show another user of Sage Mode in Mei. I know I've said this a million times already, but I love Sage Mode and it pissed me off that so few characters got to master it in canon.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

How are you finding the second battle? Hope it's up to your expectations. Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Water Warfare

Author's Note: Second part of the second battle of the Fourth Ninja War. It features one of the battles I enjoyed writing the most, so I hope you enjoy reading it just as much:

Chapter 105:

Water Warfare

or

Demons, Squids and Sharks

Turtle Island

"Come on... come on... !" Naruto said, beads of sweat running through his hair, as with the help of four other arms made of chakra, attempted to create a Tailed Beast Ball for the umpteenth time. Just like his many previous attempts, the ball appeared to be stable at first, but once it reached a certain size, it grew unstable, before exploding in the blond's face. The blast pushed Naruto backwards a couple meters, before he fell on his butt. He deactivated the golden chakra cloak, and punched the sand in frustration. "GODDAMIT!"

Letting out a despondent sigh, Naruto lied on his back, though a better term would be that he dropped on it, and extended his arms, and looked at the sky. The sun shone brightly, there wasn't a single cloud, and the air was filled with the sound of the waves crashing against the shore and the cries of seagulls. Naruto could also heard steps of somebody walking towards him, but paid the newcomer no attention.

"Man, this sucks," Naruto moaned. "What I'm doing wrong?"

"Struggling to master your new power, Naruto-kun?" the voice of an elderly man said. "You aren't planning on giving up, are you? That would be very unlike you."

Naruto sat up, and saw the Third Hokage standing besides him. He also sat down on the sand.

"Yeah. The Tailed Beast Ball," Naruto explained. "It's a Tailed Beast's most powerful ability. You see, it's-"

Hiruzen raised a hand, interrupting Naruto. "I know. I witnessed that jutsu many times in my life. Both when I fought against foreign jinchuriki, as well as when the Nine Tails ravaged Konoha. I admit they aren't memories I treasure much."

"Wait, a Tailed Beast Ball is powerful enough to wipe a large chunk of Konoha out. How did the village survive that?" Naruto asked in shock. While he saw the destruction caused by the Fox in pictures of the Academy's history books, it didn't look like a Tailed Beast Ball went off there.

"Fortunately, your father was there to help with that," Hiruzen explained. "Using his Flying Thundergod Jutsu, he managed to teleport the Ball far away before it could detonate. Hadn't he intervened when he did... I shiver to imagine the even greater death and destruction such an attack would have caused in the middle of a village as large as populated as Konoha."

"I can relate to that. Obito tried to pull the same shit with his half of the Nine Tails during the Akatsuki invasion," Naruto told him.

"Fortunately, mom and I were there to ensure that such thing didn't happen."

Hiruzen nodded, and his lips curved into a small smile. "Each passing day, I'm so glad that your parents decided to return when they did. I can't imagine what would have been of Konoha if they didn't return. Especially with your birth parents' tragic demise."

"Speaking of which," Naruto began. "I know my birth mom, Kushina, was the previous jinchuriki of the Nine Tails. Was she able to control his power the same way I do?"

Hiruzen shook his head. "No. Kushina rarely, if ever, drew the power of the Nine Tails. Then again, her seal was far more restrictive. So was Mito's."

"How so?" Naruto asked. "What's the point of keeping a jinchuriki, if they can't even use the power of the Tailed Beast within them?"

"Back then, we believed it to be unnecessary. The other great villages were very reliant on their jinchuriki, but Tobirama-sensei didn't want Konoha to follow that path," Hiruzen explained. "He wanted the jinchuriki to be the village's trump card, and wanted our first line of defense and main deterrent for war to be our finest ninjas."

"Like Hashirama was in the day, I guess," Naruto said. He had heard about the legendary First Hokage's power, closer to that of a god than a man -no wonder he was called the God of Ninja-, and was glad that he wouldn't never have to fight a ninja of that caliber.

"Yes, and Tobirama-sensei after him. Tobirama-sensei always wanted to find the most talented and gifted ninjas since they were children, and train them in order to bring out their potential to their fullest. I was one of such kids. And I continued with Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru. Tobirama-sensei's idea was for Konoha to be known for the quality of their ninjas, first and foremost, and rely on the power of the Nine Tails as little as possible," Hiruzen explained.

As Naruto processed the information, he nodded. "Makes sense, I guess. Though, why would my biological dad would want me to use the power of the Nine Tails, then?"

"If I have to guess, it would be because he knew that it was time to use that trump card," Hiruzen said, placing a couple fingers under his goatee. "While I'm proud of my reputation as a fearsome ninja, I

was already long past my prime, and I wouldn't get any younger. Minato knew he was going to die. One of the Sannin was a traitor, and the other two decided to leave Konoha for personal reasons. It's possible that he guessed that being your godfather, Jiraiya would come back, but still thought it wasn't enough. We needed something, anything, that would allow Konoha to keep its edge."

"You know, as good as the Second's intentions were, depending on a few, super powerful ninjas isn't that much better from depending on jinchuriki," Naruto noted, frowning a little.

"Wise words. Jiraiya probably thought the same, that's why he put a bigger focus on the Academy, so we could get a better and stronger generation of ninjas, rather than relying on a couple of prodigies," Hiruzen said, nodding in agreement.

"We still have a couple of prodigies among my generation," Naruto noted. "Neji was called as such. And would have been the strongest Hyuga if Hinata-hime didn't awaken the Tenseigan. There's Sasuke as well, though that's the norm for his clan."

"True, true. But I believe that you're forgetting about somebody, Naruto-kun," Hiruzen said with a knowing smile.

"Who, me?" Naruto asked, quickly catching the old man's implicationns. The blond scoffed dismissively, as he rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure."

"Don't sell yourself short, Naruto-kun," Hiruzen said. "You learned the Rasengan, a jutsu that took your biological father years to make and your adoptive father months to master, in a mere week. And not just that, but you combined it with elemental chakra, something your biological father was never able to do. Same goes with Sage Mode."

"If I was a prodigy, I would have this stupid jutsu mastered by now," Naruto complained.

"Even prodigies have their limits," Hiruzen said. "Like I said before, there were many things your father, considered one of the strongest and most skilled ninjas Konoha ever produced, was unable to do."

"I'm sure that if he was in my place, he would have mastered this in an instant," Naruto said, letting out a weary sigh. "Dad told me that, when Orochimaru invaded the village, he used Impure World Resurrection on him and Kushina, and upon seeing the elemental Rasengan, managed to replicate it in an instant."

"Because Jiraiya told him the secret behind it," Hiruzen pointed out. "Though, now that you mention the Rasengan, and trying to master the Tailed Beast Ball..."

"What? What about them?" Naruto asked, his curiosity started to peak.

"Apparently, after seeing the Tailed Beast Ball during the Third Ninja War, Minato believed humans could use that jutsu," Hiruzen started to explain. "He tried to replicate it, but he wasn't successful at first."

"Well, of course, you need to be a-" Naruto interrupted himself when he realized the last part of what the former Hokage had said. "What do you mean 'at first'?"

"To put it simply, that's how he came up with the idea of the Rasengan," Hiruzen said. "His attempts to replicate the Tailed Beast Ball failed, as he couldn't emulate the shape manipulation of the chakra. Then he decided to spin the chakra in order to stabilize it. The result was the Rasengan. Naturally, it wasn't as powerful as the jutsu it was trying to copy, but it's still a very powerful one, don't you think?"

"Wow... I wasn't aware of-" Naruto said in awe, before an idea dawned upon him. "Hey, wait a minute! If the Tailed Beast Ball was the inspiration for the Rasengan... then maybe I can use the principles behind the Rasengan to master the Tailed Beast Ball!"

Thanks for the idea, Old Man Hokage!" the blond excitedly said, as he reactivated his chakra mode, and resumed his practice.

"I'm glad I could be of help, Naruto-kun," Hiruzen said with a kind smile.

...

"Bluntsword Ninja Art: Underground Fissure!"

"Bluntsword Ninja Aart: Earth Breaker!"

Jinin charged the axe half of his weapon with chakra, before hitting the ground with it, sending an underground shockwave that cracked the ground as it moved forward. Miyako, however, channeled chakra through the hammer half of her weapon, before smashing it onto the ground, shattering it, and sending many rocks and pebbles flying in every direction, and most importantly, stopping Jinin's attack.

"Not bad, girl, not bad," Jinin said, acknowledging his opponent. "You make good use of the Helmet Splitter."

"I've been training every day since the day I became its owner. I want to be as good as you were in life," Miyako said, as she swung the hammer half of her weapon at Jinin

The undead swordsman started to swing his hammer as well, albeit in circles. "Bluntsword Ninja Art: Hurricane Hammer!"

A powerful tornado raised around Jinin, managing to deflect the incoming attack, before Jinin swung the hammer forward, sending the tornado at Miyako. The blue haired girl put her weapon down and started making hand seals as fast as her hands allowed her.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Miyako spewed a massive torrent of water from her mouth at the incoming tornado. The two elemental forces clashed, splashing water everywhere, but in the end, Miyako's jutsu won out, and the

tornado was dispelled. Unfortunately, just as the two attacks died down, Jinin leaped at the now unarmed Miyako, ready to strike her down.

"You shouldn't have dropped your weapon, girl. You never drop your weapon," Jinin said in an even but still chastising tone.

Miyako ignored Jinin's reprimand, and quickly pulled a pair of kunai with explosive tags attached to them from her ninja tool pouch, and tossed them at the incoming Jinin. The undead ninja tried to swat them away, but Miyako detonated them before he even had the chance. The explosion didn't catch Jinin inside, but the resulting shockwave managed to push him backwards, allowing the blue haired woman to pick up her weapon.

"A good ninja has more than one weapon, no matter how good it is," Miyako replied.

Jinin landed on his feet, sliding back a bit, before breaking his movement with the help of his copy the Helmet Splitter, by stabbing the axe half into the ground

"Nice save. You won't die easily. That's good," He complimented, as he pulled the axe half of his weapon back.

"I didn't get to become part of the Seven Swordsmen by dying easily," Miyako spat back. "And neither did you, despite your end."

"I guess so," Jinin conceded. Miyako got ready for the next attack, but after waiting for a few seconds, it didn't come. "Let me ask you something girl, given that you have my sword, that Jinpachi and Kushimaru are dead, and that Yagura is no longer Mizukage, I take your side won the Civil War, right?"

"Yes, thankfully we did," Miyako did. "Albeit we didn't enjoy our victory as much as we could. Yagura was mind controlled by the Akatsuki, and we were unable to break the brainwashing before they

took him away and extracted the Three Tails from him. In fact, I'm surprised he hasn't been reanimated alongside you guys."

"I see. That was... regrettable," Jinin said. "Is the village stable, at the very least?"

"The village is at the most stable it has ever been. When the truth about Yagura came out, his supporters pledged their loyalty to Meisama and the rebellion," Miyako explained. "In the meantime, we also made efforts to build ties with other villages as well."

"Good. That's all I wanted to know," Jinin said, and without any warning, he charged at Miyako.

The blue haired kunoichi parried the incoming axe blow with the axe half of her Helmet Splitter.

"Don't you regret it?" Miyako asked, as she struggled against the undead man. "Siding with Yagura?"

"No," was his firm reply. "I fought for what I believed was right. If I will go down in history as a villain, then so be it."

"How can you say that?" Miyako replied, before pushing Jinin back and trying to smash him with the hammer half. "If you knew that Yagura was mind controlled, would you have still fought for him?"

"But I didn't know that. Or at least, I didn't have solid evidence about it," Jinin said, as he dodged the hammer blow. "Thinking about scenarios that will never happen, wondering what could have been, it's pointless. All that matters is the present, the future, and what do you plan to do in the former to reach the latter."

"I guess I can't help but agree with that," Miyako said, as she raised her weapon, preparing for an attack. "The future I want is one with no more pointless war and bloodshed. And I plan to reach it by sending you back to the Pure World, where you belong. For starters, at least."

"That's good," Jinin said, mimicking her action. "Then show me what you're capable of! Show me your conviction to do what's right!"

"I shall do it!" Miyako replied, as she dashed forward. "Water Release: Razor Stream!"

Both Kirigakure ninjas dashed towards each other, gripping the axe half of the Helmet Splitter. When they were close enough, they struck, Miyako being the first one to move, delivering a diagonal downwards swipe. However, she attacked too soon, and her swing didn't reach Jinin. The bearded man noticed this, and didn't hesitate to capitalize on his opponent's mistake, and attacked.

SNAP!

"What the...?"

The leather strap that kept both halves of the weapon linked was cut in two. As so was Jinin's head, and one of his arms, both falling from his body, before the body fell back lifelessly.

"What? How...?" Jinin's decapitated head asked.

Miyako wordlessly walked towards him, and brought the axe half of the Helmet Splitter close to his face. It was then when he saw it: an extremely thin and long blade of condensed water, almost invisible to the naked eye, channeled through the blade of the axe, almost doubling its range.

"Oh... I see," Jinin said in resignation, but then he smiled. "A jutsu that's both deadly and subtle. The way of Kirigakure. I like you, girl."

Miyako's victory didn't go unnoticed, and several Sealmaster ninjas landed besides her, and started to seal Jinin before he could fully regenerate.

"Regardless of being at the wrong side of the Civil War, I always admired you, Jinin-san," Miyako began. "You always fought for

Kirigakure's future and well being. You were the kind of ninja I wanted to become."

"You shouldn't have done that," Jinin said, surprising the blue haired girl with his chastising tone. "You should have strived to be better than me. And I can say that you did it. You're a worthy wielder of the Helmet Splitter. Just like I did, fight for Kirigakure, fight for what you believe it's right, so when your time comes, you will die without any regrets."

Miyako nodded. "Don't worry... I will."

After Jinin was finally sealed, the Sealmasters took him to the rear guard, so the enemy wouldn't try to release him. And after a few seconds of contemplation, Miyako decided to look for a new opponent. This battle was far from over.

...

Kisame locked his eyes on Mei, as he scanned her new form. He could sense a very powerful chakra radiating from her body. It was almost as if Mei was absorbing the ambient energy around her and making it her own. Such an interesting ability, not even Samehada was able to do.

"So... Sage Mode, hm?" Kisame asked, as he grinned in anticipation. "I did hear from the other Akatsuki that the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails, as well as the Toad and Slug Sannin, mastered such a mode. I wasn't aware that you had Sage Mode as well."

"Afraid?" Mei asked, as he placed a hand on a hip, though she already expected Kisame's answer.

"Afraid? Are you kidding me?" Kisame asked, almost sounding outraged. "You might be the first worthy opponent I face in years! You have no idea how much I wanted to fight a Sage, but they're so rare..."

"I knew you were going to say that," Mei said, shaking her head.
"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I can smell your chakra... it's like nothing I've experienced before! I'm going to devour all of your chakra, until nothing remains!" Kisame said in excitement, as his own chakra started to flare around him.

"Zabuza, things are going to get ugly," Mei whispered her husband.
"As we are now, Kisame and I are on a completely different level. So please, I must ask you to ignore your pride and let me deal with him myself. I can't fight him and protect you at the same time."

"I'm not going anywhere, woman," Zabuza said, his eyes locked on Kisame. "I'm the captain of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, and it's my duty to recover the sword in the hands of that traitor. Not to mention, protect my wife and Kage."

"Zabuza-"

The black haired man raised a hand to silence her. "I may be prideful and ambitious, but I'm not an idiot. I'll let you do all the heavy lifting. I'll stay close to you, and strike whenever there's an opening, or I'll protect you if you happen to be left wide open."

"Understood," Mei said, nodding, before her eyes also drifted to Kisame, who prepared to attack. "Be careful."

"You too."

"Let's start this already! Samehada hungers, and so do I!" Kisame shouted, as he started to make hand seals. Despite having webbed hands now, the shark ninja had no more trouble weaving hand seals than before. "Water Release: Shark Bullet Jutsu!"

Suddenly, a torrent of water exploded around Kisame, swirling around a single spot, taking the form of a gigantic shark. Kisame brought both hands forward, sending the shark-shaped water projectile towards his two foes. Mei, however, wasn't going to stay

idle, as she started to weave hand seals of her own, before slamming her palms into the ground.

"Sage Art: Earth Release, Titan Grip!"

The land started to shake, and a gigantic hand made of rock and dirt appeared between Mei and the incoming shark missile. Its stony fingers quickly wrapped around the watery shark, stopping it on its tracks. Mei then closed her hand into a fist, and the giant stone hand did the same, squeezing the shark until it exploded into a million water droplets.

"You think I don't know what you're doing, don't you?" Mei asked. "You expected me to counter that direct jutsu with one of my own and-"

Mei was interrupted when Kisame, surrounded by a cloak of raging water, shattered the giant stone hand by crossing through it, before delivering a vertical slash with his right claw. Mei, however, managed to jump in time, and Kisame only hit the ground, opening a large crater with the force of his blow.

"Thank goodness for the chakra sensing, or else I'd be a goner," Mei thought, still mid air. "He's much faster than before."

However, Kisame wasn't going to give up, and launched himself towards Mei, almost like a living torrent. However, before he could strike her, Zabuza delivered a flying kick to the shark man's temple, breaking his momentum, and sending him flying sideways. Kisame, however, managed to regain balance while mid air and landed on his feet.

"Well done, Zabuza!" Mei praised as her feet touched the ground, before making more hand seals. "Boil Release: Earth's Deep Breath!"

As Kisame charged once again, he started to notice that not only was the ground shaking beneath his feet, but it was starting to get

warmer as well. The nature energy overflowing the zone only made the danger more obvious, and jumped away. And just as he did, the ground cracked open, and a massive geyser shot upwards. Even if it failed, Kisame could feel the sheer heat of the boiling water that rocketed into the sky.

"That was close," the shark ninja said. "If I let that-"

However, Mei's jutsu didn't end there, as another geyser exploded close to Kisame, followed by another and another, and another. Eventually, Kisame was surrounded by burning-hot geysers, and had nowhere to go.

"Excellent. Now let's see how you get out of this," Mei said with a smirk, as she made more hand seals. "Boil Release: Majestic Burning Hurricane!"

All the geysers started to form a swirl around Kisame, until they turned into a massive tornado of burning steam. Even if Kisame was able to absorb chakra, he wouldn't be able to absorb all of it before he was cooked alive.

However, deep down, Mei knew that if it was so easy, Kisame wouldn't be a member of Akatsuki.

"Water Release: Greater Exploding Water Colliding Wave!"

Suddenly, a massive watery torrent appeared from inside the steam tornado, dispelling it in almost an instant, before it expanded in every direction, flooding the entire zone, crushing everything on its path beneath gigantic tidal waves. Grinning, Kisame was standing at the epicenter of the ever growing tsunami.

"Oh shit!" Mei yelled, before she and Zabuza were buried by a massive wave.

...

"Water Release: Multiple Water Gun Jutsu!"

"Don't block them, just dodge!" Suigetsu said in a panicked voice.

"I k-know!" Chojuro stammered back.

Mangetsu mimicked a gun with his free hand, and from the tip of his finger fired deceptively large globs of compressed water in rapid succession towards the two Swordsmen of the Mist, which had the foresight of running in different directions. They managed to avoid the deadly watery missiles, which opened large holes in the ground when they impacted.. Some of them still found some marks on some unlucky Zetsu clone or Allied ninja

Given that Mangetsu was focusing on Chojuro, Suigetsu decided it was time to strike. Using water ninjutsu against Mangetsu wasn't going to produce any results, so he dashed as fast as he could, and tossed the Sewing Needle at him. Without having to stop his current jutsu, Mangetsu parried the flying sword with a mighty swing his copy of Hiraimekarei, sending the Sewing Needle back at Suigetsu.

"Shit!" Suigetsu cursed, as he caught his sword back, and engaged Mangetsu in melee.

This forced the older brother to stop firing water bullets at the bespectacled swordsman and focus on his younger brother. Suigetsu started to with a string of aggressive thrusts, but Mangetsu quickly turned the tide in his favor, and countered with more powerful wide swings, as his fake Hiraimekarei glowed blue as Mangetsu channeled chakra through it.

"If there's a silver lining to this mess, is that I'm able to see you one more time, Suigetsu," Mangetsu said as he continued his onslaught. "You've grown since the last time I saw you. You also got stronger."

"I had to, if I wanted to get my hands on one of the Seven Swords," Suigetsu replied, as he managed to stop his brother's attack and

lock their blades against each other. "Not to mention that I no longer had you to protect me."

Mangetsu managed to break the blade lock and overpower Suigetsu with more fast swings. One of them managed to slice one of his arms off, which quickly broke down into water, as a few water droplets leaked from the stump. Suigetsu jumped backwards to avoid the last swing, and to give himself some time for his lost arm to grow back.

Then, he noticed something: with Mangetsu none the wiser, Chojuro was able to sneak behind him and was ready to strike. Hiramekarei had more power and thus was more effective on a Hydrification user than Suigetsu's Sewing Needle, which was more suited for capture and torture. He decided that Mangetsu needed to have his attention focused on the younger brother for Chojuro's ambush to work.

"Heh, never thought you'd have it in you, Chojuro," Suigetsu thought, as he smirked. *"Guess that all that beatings disguised as training from Zabuza-taicho did pay off, huh?"*

As Suigetsu charged forward, ready to impale his undead brother with the Sewing Needle, Chojuro moved to strike.

"Hiramekarei, release!"

Chojuro's balde burst with chakra, said chakra forming a gigantic hammer, which would crush Mangetsu into a puddle of water, giving the Sealmasters enough time to seal him before he could reform. However, just as Chojuro prepared his attack, so did Mangetsu.

"Hiramekarei, release!"

Mangetsu's own sword also burst with chakra, before he split it into to two blades, and started to spin around, turning into a blue razor tornado that both shredded and pushed Suigetsu and Chojuro back. While Suigetsu's own Hydrification technique saved him from any

permanent damage, Chojuro lost his flak jacket to the attack, leaving him unprotected.

"Not bad, apprentice. Your stealth got much better since the last time I saw you," Mangetsu told Chojuro, with his back still turned at him. "It would have worked if Suigetsu didn't alert me of your presence."

"WHAT!?" the very outraged Suigetsu asked, his face so contorted with anger it was almost comical. "What did I do!?"

"You smirked while you charged towards me," Mangetsu calmly told him. "And even if I couldn't see him, I knew he had to be close. Your sudden display of confidence despite struggling against me couldn't mean anything else."

"Goddamit... I knew you were good, but I forgot how good you were," Suigetsu said, as a bead of sweat trickled down his temple.

"Suigetsu-san, if may offer a suggestion...?" Chojuro asked. "Your sword might not be the best one to deal with your brother. Ameyuri-san has the best chances against him, given her affinity for Lightning Release:"

"A sensible suggestion," Mangetsu agreed. "Where is she?"

"The girl's fighting the previous owner of her swords, Raiga Kurosuki," Suigetsu said. "She really wanted to prove that she's better than her predecessor. I doubt that girl will want to lend us a hand as long as Raiga is alive. Well, living dead, you know what I mean."

"Then go and fetch her," Chojuro request, as he held Hiramekarei in front of him in a fighting stance. "I'll keep Mangetsu-sensei at bay until you come back."

Suigetsu was going to protest and say that Mangetsu was going to cut Chojuro to pieces without any backup. However, he knew that there was no time to argue, and that Ameyuri was their best bet.

"Alright. Just try not to get killed," Suigetsu said, before leaping away.

With his brother out of the way, Mangetsu turned around, and smirked at the blue haired Kirigakure ninja.

"So, you and me. A one on one. Like in the old times," Mangetsu commented.

"Except that if I lose, I die," Chojuro pointed out.

"If you die to me, that means I made a lousy job training you," Mangetsu said, before dashing forward. "Show me how well I trained you, and how much you improved since my demise!"

...

As Suigestu and Chojuro fought the reanimated Mangetsu, not far from there, Ameyuri was engaged in her own little duel against Raiga Kurosuki. From time to time a bunch of White Zetsu clones would try to interfere with the fight but all their efforts got them was being sliced to pieces by either Raiga or Ameyuri.

For most of the time, they kept the fight close and personal, sparks of lightning flying whenever their blades clashed. However, the two of them had the same idea of jumping back and trying ranged attacks, to test how the opponent reacted to them.

"Thundersword Ninja Aart: Feast of Lightning!"

Both Ameyuri and Raiga stabbed their swords into the ground, releasing a mass of thunderbolts, cutting through the ground as they clashed against each other, resulting in an explosion of lightning bolts that opened a crater in the ground.

"You're strong, girl," Raiga said, as he pulled his swords out of the ground. "Your funeral will be a worthy one."

"Shut up! Of the two of us, I'm not the one who's actually dead!" Ameyuri protested, as he did the same, before raising her swords into the air. "Lightning Release: Depth Charge!"

After a bright blue flash of electricity, Ameyuri was completely coated in a cloak of crackling lightning. Wasting no time, the angry redhead dashed at the undead swordman, trading swords swings once again, even if this time, Ameyuri moved much faster and her blows packed far more power. Raiga didn't appear bothered by her spike in power, though he was pushed back with each blow.

"Your skill with the Thunderfangs is commendable, but there's still much you need to learn before you can get on my level!" Raiga shouted, as he tried to push Ameyuri back.

The redhead grinned, showing a mouth full of sharp teeth. "Really? Let's see how do you like this then."

Ameyuri threw her sword, though not at Raiga, but to the side, as she continued to fight the undead ninja with her remaining blade. The sword she had tossed, crackling with electricity, started to spin around the two of them, flying into Raiga at random times as if it had life of its own, forcing him to split his attention to two opponents at once, one that had no body he could harm.

"Did you know that you can use the Thunderfangs that way?" Ameyuri asked in a teasing tone as she continued her assault. That moment, the flying sword decided to strike, and when Raiga parried the blow, Ameyuri attacked that arm, slicing it cleanly. "HA! Got you, old man!"

Raiga disengaged and jumped backwards.

"Time to cast the kids gloves off," Raiga said, as his remaining sword started to crackle with electricity. "Lightning Release: Lightning Strike Armor!"

Just like Ameyuri moments before him, Raiga's entire body was coated with electricity, which shone so brightly it was almost impossible to directly look.

"Come at me if you dare now, little girl!" Raiga said in a taunting tone, pointing his remaining sword at her.

"I'm not a little girl, you fucker! I'm twenty!" Ameyuri yelled, as she charged forward. "Twenty times I'm going to kill you now! I'm going to cut all your limbs, your head, and whatever pathetic excuse of a manhood you have between your legs, wait until it grows back, and do it again!"

Ameyuri channeled even more chakra into her lightning cloak, making it crackle and shine with more intensity, and she and Raiga clashed again. Despite having an arm, Raiga managed to keep up with the redheaded woman until his cut arm and the sword it was holding regenerated again from ash and dust.

"The armor not only protects him from my attacks while harming attackers, it also increased his speed and reaction time!" Ameyuri thought in realization. *"It's like the Fourth Raikage's famed Lightning Chakra Mode, only on a lesser scale. Still, if I don't find a way to counter it, I'm so fucked!"*

"What's wrong, little girl? Did you realize your mistake of fighting an actual Swordsman of the Mist?" Raiga boasted.

All of Ameyuri's worries and doubts quickly evaporated, as her temper, as short as her stature, quickly replaced them with pure, undiluted anger.

"STOP CALLING ME A LITTLE GIRL!" Ameyuri bellowed, as the electricity across her body flashed brightly. "That's it, you're so fucking dead right now! Thundersword Secret Art: Eye of the Storm!"

Ameyuri started to spin in place, turning herself into a tornado of lightning, before dashing towards Raiga, carving a furrow as she

moved. Raiga merely chuckled at Ameyuri's attack.

"So, spinning it is, then? Fine by me," the thick-lipped zombie said with a chuckle, as he crossed his copies of the Thunderfangs over his head. "Lightning Release: Lightning Dragon Tornado!"

Like Ameyuri, Raiga started to spin, and the lightning coursing through his body started to form a vortex of wind and electricity. Said vortex then took the shape of a dragon. The lightning dragon let out a metallic sounding roar, which was more like a screech, before lunging at the incoming Ameyuri.

Both lightning attacks clashed, and in the beginning, Ameyuri managed to power through Raiga's dragon tornado, however, her advance became slower and slower, until it appeared she might be pushed back. However, all the energy gathered by the two ninjas eventually reached a critical point, resulting in a massive explosion that send both swordsmen flying backwards, leaving a rather large crater in the place of their clash.

"Ugh..." Ameyuri groaned, as she tried to get back on her feet, using her swords as support. "Note to self... never try shit like that again... ugggh..."

"Hey, need some help?" a new voice asked.

Ameyuri was a little startled upon seeing Suigetsu suddenly landing besides her. He faced Raiga, who was also getting back on his feet, and took a fighting stance.

"Get lost, dumbass! I didn't ask for your help, nor I need it!" Ameyuri angrily berated.

"Really? Because it doesn't look that to me," Suigetsu said. Before Ameyuri could protest, he continued. "Listen, you may not need my help, but Chojuro and I need yours. We're fighting against my brother, and he's kicking our asses so badly it's not even funny. Of all of us, your skillset is the most fitting to deal with him."

"I'm not going to do your fucking job. Now scram, I have a relic that needs to be send back to oblivion," Ameyuri dismissively said.

"Goddamit Ameyuri, this isn't a game! Can't you just put your pride and ego aside?" Suigetsu hotly asked, making the redhead glare. "We're fighting a war, for fuck's sake! I can't deal with my opponent on my own, and neither can you! So stop being so fucking stubborn, and let me help you so can help me in return!"

Ameyuri's fingers gripped around her swords, as she clenched her teeth at the white haired ninja. She wanted to yell at him to leave her alone, but she was forced to admit that he had a point. If that dumboass got himself killed, then Magetsu would more than likely move to fight another swordsman, herself included. In the end, common sense won, even if barely.

"Fine, you win," Ameyuri finally said in defeat. "But how do you plan to help me against Raiga, smartass? He has a similar skillset to mine. You'll be nothing but dead weight."

Suigestu merely smirked at her. "Just leave that to me."

...

"Water Release: Underwater Breathing!"

Zabuza barely had the time to made the seals that would allow him not to drown underwater before he and Mei were engulfed by a massive wall of water. The two of them had to strengthen their bodies with chakra as much as they could so the crushing torrent wouldn't break their bodies. The masked man looked at his wife, who appeared to be fine despite the fact that she didn't use the same jutsu as him to breather underwater. However, he could see three gills at the side of her neck -and guessed there were other three at the other side-, and sighed in relief knowing that she'd be okay.

" She'll be better than me. This jutsu will drain my chakra little by little, while I guess that she can brether underwater at no additional

cost as long as she keeps that form," Zabuza thought, before his eyes drifted towards Kisame. *"And the same can be said of him, if those gills around the shoulders are any indication."*

"Now, time to rip and tear!" Kisame shouted, and shot like a missile towards Mei, leaving a trail of bubbles, as he extended his arms and large claws grew from each of his fingers. In no time, he would close the gap between himself and Mei. Kisame was already fast underwater, and when he was merged with Samehada, his speed increased even more.

Mei, however, wasn't going to let the Akatsuki kill her without putting up a fight. She made a hand seal.

"Sage Art: Tentacle Grip!"

Four of Mei's locks-turned-tentacles grew in size and length, and lashed at the incoming shark man. Kisame merely dodged the first two, while slashing at the other two with his claws, cutting them off. Seeing her counterattack ineffective, Mei opted to fall back. Not that she was going to escape from him.

"I'm craving some fried squid!" Kisame said, as he prepared to strike Mei with a claw swipe.

However, Kisame's claws didn't tear soft flesh like he expected, but met metal instead. It took him a second to realize that Zabuza managed to get in the way between Kisame and his prey, and used his Executioner's Blade to parry the attack.

"You aren't the only one who can move fast underwater!" Zabuza said, as he defiantly stared at the shark man.

"Water Release: Multiple Water Bullets!"

Before Kisame could attack again, Mei spat many missiles of highly pressurized water at him, forcing the shark man to fall back, even if

briefly, to dodge the deadly projectiles. Making a U-turn, Kisame shot towards Mei and Zabuza once again.

"Zabuza, I'm afraid that not even with Sage Mode I'll be able to match Kisame. At least, not as long as we're underwater," Mei suggested. "We should try to go back to dry land."

"I agree. We can't let him have such a bug advantage," Zabuza said, as he watched Kisame charge towards them again.

"Be ready to swim to the edge of the water. I'll prove some cover," Mei said, as she started to make some hand seals. "Boil Release: Skilled Mist Jutsu!"

Mei exhaled a massive cloud of acidic mist from her mouth, which manifested in the shape of a mass of super heated bubbles that spread in every direction, forming an improvised smokescreen between them and their Akatsuki foe.

" *That should be enough to cover our escape,*" Mei thought, before he looked at Zabuza. "Come on, swim towards the border!"

Nodding in return, both Zabuza and Mei started to swim away as fast as they could towards the edge of the water, taking With the bubble cover, Kisame wouldn't know which direction they took until it was too late. Or at least, that was in theory, given that no matter how fast they swam, it felt like they didn't move at all.

"How wide does this improvised sea spread?" Mei asked, upon noticing that they weren't making any progress.

"It's as if the water moved at the same pace as we do!" Zabuza replied, just as perplexed.

"You can't escape from me!" Kisame's voice said from behind.

Much to their surprise, and a little horror, Kisame managed to power through the barrier of acidic bubbles as if they were nothing, and

found the two Kiri ninjas with amazing ease, before lunging at them with the same gusto as a predator hunting their favorite prey.

"As long as I'm fused with Samehada, I can sense chakra! Especially if you're trapped inside my artificial sea, which amplifies my sensing ability!" Kisame boasted, as he dived at them.

Once again, Zabuza put himself between Mei and Kisame, and made a hand seal with his free hand.

"Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

Using the water around him, Zabuza created an army of clones, which instantly dived at Kisame, ready to cut him to pieces. However, this turned out to be a little more than a distraction for the shark man, who was able to destroy them with one swipe of his claws, while absorbing their chakra. Then again, all that Zabuza hoped was that they could give them some time to form a plan.

"Well done, husband," Mei said, as she floated besides him. "But they won't keep him busy for long."

"I know," Zabuza acknowledged. "Come on, let's keep swimming. We can't be that far away from the border."

"Actually, we are. I've been noticing that the chakra in the water doesn't stay still, it moves as well. It's like you said, the artificial sea moves alongside Kisame. As long as he chases us, we won't make any progress," Mei said.

"Then let's split. Kisame can only chase one of us, allowing the other a safe escape. Hopefully, he'll go after me, given that I'm the easiest enemy," Zabuza said, as he prepared to swim again, but Mei grabbed his shoulder.

"No. I won't let you sacrifice yourself like that," Mei said, and continued before Zabuza could protest. "I have another idea. I'm

going to the bottom. I need you to keep Kisame distracted a little more. Can you do that?"

Zabuza saw that Kisame just finished destroying the last of the water clones, and was now swimming at them once again.

"Understood. Now go!" Zabuza said.

Mei nodded, and swam to the bottom of the artificial sea, while Zabuza intercepted Kisame once again who was ready to strike Mei down.

"You think you can protect her from me? That's so cute," Kisame said in a mocking tone, as he engaged Zabuza. "In fact, she's the one who needs to protect you."

"Do not underestimate me!" Zabuza said, as he tried to stab at the shark ninja, who dodged Zabuza's blows with insulting ease.

"Give me a reason not to underestimate you then!" Kisame fired back, as he tried to get past Zabuza, seeing how Mei was getting to the bottom. Feeling a little more restless, Kisame went on the offensive, delivering a flurry of claw swipes at Zabuza.. "I don't know what that woman is trying to do, but it will be useless!"

"Samehada is a powerful sword indeed. But its power blinded you, and made you overconfident," Zabuza said as he expertly blocked the blows. However, he couldn't help but worry upon seeing how Kisame's strikes were leaving pretty big dents on his sword. Not to mention that it was becoming increasingly difficult to move underwater. *"Come on Mei, whatever are you planning, do it now!"*

"If you're so eager to die protecting that woman, then so be it!" Kisame said, smirking menacingly, as spike-like scales grew all over his arms and shoulders. "I can't wait to see her face when I present her your decapitated head!"

Meanwhile, swimming as fast as she could, mei managed to reach the bottom of the artificial sea. Wasting no time, she made several hand seals, before slamming both hands into the ground.

"Sage Art: Earth Release World Breaker!"

Mei allowed herself to float away from the bottom as the ground beneath her started to shake violently. Soon, cracks started to spear and spread in every direction, growing larger and wider, forming a spiderweb of fissures. Many pieces of rock and dirt separated from the ground and started to lazily float around... and that moment, what Mei was aiming for finally happened.

Above Mei, the still fighting Zabuza and Kisame felt a powerful water current pulling them down towards the ground. It didn't take them long enough to realize what was going on.

"That woman... just what the hell she did!?" Kisame said, forgetting momentarily about Zabuza, while trying to swim upwards as fast as he could.

"That's what you get for underestimating her!" Zabuza said, swimming as well, but not taking his eyes from Kisame. "Let's see how you fight us now that you won't have field advantage!"

Soon, the entire artificial sea was drained by the gigantic cracks in the ground, lowering the water level to a meter or so above surface, allowing Zabuza and Mei to merely use Water Walking to stand above it.

"Good job, Mei. That was impressive," Zabuza told his wife.

"A compliment from you? Now, it had to be something truly amazing to deserve something like that," Mei chuckled in return.

"I'll give you more compliments if we manage to kill this guy for good and get Samehada back," Zabuza replied.

"Your sappy and corny exchange might kill me if you keep it for long," Kisame replied, unamused, and pretending to gag.

"What's wrong, Kisame? Don't you like sweetness? I think we all could do with a little more sweetness in our lives," Mei replied, before she placed a hand on Zabuza's shoulder. "You should have seen Zabuza before. Nothing like he is now!"

"Yes, I can see. One of the deadliest, most powerful swordsmen, now tamed and under the control of a weak woman that feeds him lies in order to keep afloat a corrupt system," Kisame fired back, as he once again grew spike-like scales over his arms and shoulders. "Now let's see what YOU taste like!"

As Kisame dashed forward, Mei made a hand seal, and more tentacles shot forward as they grew in size. Kisame, however, started to spin around his feet while jumping from one side to another. With each spin, his blade-like long scales sliced some of Mei's tentacles, and absorbing some of their residual chakra.

That moment, Zabuza appeared behind him, ready to strike him down. However, with a move of his arm, Kisame was able to parry Zabuza's blow with the blade scales of his arms.

"Didn't you listen when I told you I can sense chakra in this form?" Kisame said, sounding a little irritated. "Your silent killing won't be of any use against me!"

Kisame pushed Zabuza's sword backwards, and before the latter could defend, he delivered a wide chop with his other arm. His blade-like scales started to glow blue with chakra, and the moment they hit the Executioner's Blade, they cleanly cut the sword in two, much to the masked swordsman's anger, but above all things, shock.

"Shit, my sword!" Zabuza cursed, as he disengaged Kisame and jumped back to Mei.

"Normal weapons are useless against me, Zabuza. Not even the other Seven Swords are a match for Samehada's power when it manifests through this form," Kisame boasted, before letting out a taunting chuckle. "There's nothing you two can do to cause me or Samehada any harm."

"You okay? Did he hurt you?" Mei asked, a bit concerned.

"I'm mostly fine," Zabuza said. He looked at his sliced sword with sadness and anger. Even if it still could be used, he was only half as long now. "Damn, I'll have to kill a lot of people to repair so much damage..." he then noticed his wife's severed limbs. "What about you?"

"Don't worry, I have a healing factor in this form," Mei replied, as one of her head tentacles slowly regrew. "It takes some time, but it allows me to fight for longer."

"Let's see how well your regeneration those against THIS!" Kisame said in a mocking tone as he clapped his hands together. "Water Release: Divine Maesltrom!"

The water all around the place started to stir and shake, as it started to gather around Kisame, forming a column of spiraling torrent, elevating the shark ninja above the Mizukage and her Captain Swordsman. The gigantic watery column started to move towards the two Kiri ninjas, almost like a tsunami that came back to life.

"You think you can counter that?" Zabuza asked, as he saw the giant mass of water ready to engulf them.

"I'll try," Mei said, as she started making hand seals. "Earth Release: Mountain Sandwich!"

Mei slammed her hands into the watery floor, and two gigantic rock formations raised to the sides of Kisame's titantic whirlpool, depriving it of momentum and splashing the water around as the liquid tornado

was crushed. Kisame, however, managed to leap out of the way of Mei's jutsu in time, and started to make hand seals.

"Let's see how well you do against my strongest jutsu! No matter what you do, you won't be able to stop it! Water Release: Great Shark Bullet Jutsu!" Water started to gather around Kisame's arms, which took the shape of a gigantic shark. The blue skinned man then thrust both hands downwards, releasing it at Mei and Zabuza.

"You will be surprised," Mei confidently said, as she started to make hand seals of her own. "Sage Art: Lava Release Pyroclastic Meltdown!"

Mei expelled a barrage of lava projectiles from her mouth towards the coming water shark. The two attacks eventually clashed, resulting in the lava projectiles exploding upon contact in a fiery blast, and struggled to push each other back. Kisame was expecting that his attack would literally eat through Mei's, and absorb its chakra to become even stronger, but for some reason, it was unable to cut through the lava explosions.

"I don't get it. I can feel it absorbing the chakra of the lava release attack. Why it's not pushing forward? Is that woman pouring more chakra into her jutsu than it gets absorbed?" Kisame thought, as he descended towards the water. Then, he noticed something: the intense heat of Mei's lava blasts was slowly but surely evaporating his shark. *"That cheeky woman! She knew she couldn't beat my jutsu with brute force, so she opted to destabilize it through heat! I have to-"*

"Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Kisame felt a spike of chakra below him, and looking down, he saw the water gathering in a spiraling column, before it took the shape of a serpentine dragon. The dragon then let out a roar, and lunged at the still airborne Kisame, was unable to dodge, and was trapped between the watery beast's jaws.

"Forgot about me already? I might not be as strong as Mei, but I can sure be a thorn in your side!" Zabuza boasted, as he made another hand seal.

As the water dragon arched down, Kisame started to absorb its chakra. However, it was too late. Before the dragon could break down into harmless liquid, Kisame was slammed against the floor, making a huge splash. Even if that wasn't nowhere enough to put Kisame down, it did cause no small amount of harm.

" *Damn... that... hurt more than what I'm willing to admit,*" Kisame thought, as he tried to get back on his feet. Being fused with Samehada granted him a healing factor that he could keep running by absorbing more chakra from his opponents. However, right now it wasn't healing him as fast as he was hoping. Splashing sounds warned him that Zabuza wasn't done. And indeed, he was coming at him with his broken weapon.

"Don't think I'm done yet!" Zabuza said, as water started to gather around his ruined weapon, taking the shape of the missing chunk Kisame had cut before. "Water Release: Water Spirt Blade!"

" *Excellent! That fool is going to provide me with enough chakra to heal my wounds!*" Kisame happily thought, as he prepared to catch the attack. "*I only need to-*"

"Fire Release: Double Searing Lash!"

Suddenly, Kisame felt searing pain as two whips made of fire wrapped themselves around his forearms, and pulled them back, leaving him defenseless against Zabuza. He tried to absorb them as well, but deep down he knew that he couldn't do it in time in order to stop Zabuza's attack.

"Time to end this already!" Zabuza said, as he delivered an horizontal chop to Kisame's torso. The moment the watery blade made contact and dug into the Akatsuki's flesh, sharp blue scales started to pour from the wound instead of blood or guts. Zabuza

continued to dig even deeper, until Samehada was forced out of Kisame's body.

Kisame stumbled forward, falling on one knee, the forced way the fusion was terminated leaving him dazed. Still, he was lucid enough to know that without his sword, he'd be defenseless against Mei. He extended his arm "Samehada, to me!"

Like a loyal dog, Samehada flew towards Kisame. However, Zabuza managed to get in the way, and the sentient sword let out a whimper of pain as Zabuza kicked it away.

"No! Samehada!" Kisame shouted, as he tried to move towards his sword.

"Not this time!" Zabuza said. "Mei, now's your chance!"

Mei nodded, and made more hand seals as fast as her hands allowed her. "Water Release: Water Severing Wave!"

Mei expelled a high pressurized stream of water from her mouth, as thin as a thread. She quickly moved the stream in a wide arc towards Kisame, cleanly cutting his head from the rest of his body, which fell to the ground, motionless.

There was a moment of silence as the two Kirigakure ninjas processed what had happened. Did they win? Was the fight really over?"

"Is he dead?" Mei dumbly asked, as exhaustion caught up to her, and fell to her knees.

Zabuza walked towards the headless body, and kicked it a couple times. "I'm no medical ninja, but I don't think this guy is getting up anytime soon. Heh, just like I said. In the end, he wasn't that good without his precious Samehada."

Speaking of which, the sentient sword managed to crawl towards the dead Kisame, and started to whimper like a puppy who just lost its owner.

"Look at that. It seems Samehada is crying the death of its master," Mei observed, before her expression hardened a little. "It will be the only one to cry his death. Today, justice has finally been done. Our greatest criminal has been punished, and the treasure he stole is finally back to its rightful owners. Zabuza, put this sword on a scroll. Careful not to touch it too much."

"I know how Samehada works. And no, I don't plan to replace my Executioner's Blade with it," Zabuza grumbled, as he pulled out a sealing scroll. "Do you have any idea in mind for somebody to wield it?"

"I couple names, yes," Mei replied with a nod. "But now is not the time to talk about that. Kisame might be dead, but the battle isn't over yet, and our allies need us."

Zabuza nodded back, and after he finished sealing Samehada, he handed the scroll to Mei, and the two of them returned to the main battlefield.

Author's Note: First of all, I'd like to confirm that yes, Kisame is dead. So no, he isn't going to pull the same stunt as in canon by hiding inside Samehada while leaving a decoy corpse behind. By this point, I simply have no more use of him, so dying after giving Mei and Zabuza a fierce battle is the best he can do. So yeah, I hope you guys enjoyed Kisame's last battle, since I had this fight on my mind even before I started with Part II, and I'm so happy to finally be able to share it with you guys.

I also hope that the other fights were also to your liking. I didn't show all the Swordsmen fighting because then the chapter would get too long, and another fight against Kushimaru and Junpachi wouldn't add anything to the story, since they don't

have any kind of emotional connection or meaningful bond with the living swordsmen. In fact, I had to move the resolution of those fights to the next chapter since it was getting way too long for my tastes, and I wanted to focus on Mei, Zabuza and Kisame.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and please leave your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Calm Waters

Author's Note: And another day of battle comes to an end. Here's the aftermath. Enjoy:

Chapter 106:

Calm Waters

or

Another Day, Another Battle Done

While Mei and Zabuza were fighting against Kisame, Suigetsu was helping Ameyuri to deal with Raiga Kurosuki. The two living swordsmen were staring down at the undead one, who was ready to attack at any moment.

"So, what's your plan to deal with this guy without getting fried?" Ameyuri asked in a whisper.

"I know something that can work. But I need you to act as fast as possible, and cut down both his arms," Suigetsu told her, as he adopted a defensive position. "Will you be able to do it?"

The redhead frowned at him. "Your lack of faith in my abilities is insulting."

"Just wanted to be sure, no need to get so touchy, geez..." Suigetsu said, before he caught something in the corner of his eye. "SHIT!"

For less than a second, the Hozuki clan member took his eyes from Raiga, which the zombie took as a cue to strike him down. Fortunately, Ameyuri was just as fast, and she was able to parry the blow with both her swords. Electric sparks danced from both blades.

"Still doubting my skill?" Ameyuri said, before pushing Raiga back with an oomph, before delivering fast paced swings, forcing the undead ninja into the defensive. That moment, Suigetsu jumped forward, and tossed the Sewing Needle at Raiga as if it was a javeline. Raiga, however, managed to deflect the piercing blade without much effort.

"Ha! Amateurish!" the undead swordsman boasted.

"You think so? How about this then!" Suigetsu pulled the wire attached to the sword to retrieve it back his sword, as he aimed at Raiga with his other hand, making a finger gun. "Water Release: Water Gun!"

The white haired ninja fired multiple bullets of pressurized water at Raiga, but the undead swordsman deflected them with his electrically-enhanced swords, pushing him a little backwards with each shot. Ameyuri dashed to Raiga through his left flank, and decided it was time to attack. Her own swords also crackled with electricity. However, one hand was all what Raiga needed to block the readheaded girl's blow.

"And you aren't much better!" Raiga said, before kicking her back. "You aren't proving to be worth of a good funeral!"

"Kind of ironic, from somebody who appeared out of a coffin. And to the coffin you'll go back!" Suigetsu said, as he tossed his sword at Raiga again.

The result was the same, with Raiga easily parrying the giant needle, and Suigetsu pulling it back with the attached ninja wire. That moment, Ameyuri choose to attack once again, but Raiga's reflexes proved to be far better than they appeared, and expertly blocked her thrust, before pushing the sword aside and sending her tumbling on her back with a powerful kick.

"I'm starting to get tired of you, you cheeky little girl!" the former Kirigakure swordsman yelled, as he dashed towards her. "Die

already!"

"Shit!"

Still on the ground, Ameyuri raised both swords to block the incoming swing, but said strike never came, much to her confusion. Raiga's right arm was held in the air, trembling, as if it tried to move but it was unable to.

"What the...?" Raiga said, looking at his immobilized arm in disbelief. That moment, both Raiga and Ameyuri noticed a brief metallic shine, and the two of them realized that his arm was wrapped in ninja wire. Wire that was attached to the Sewing Needle Suigetsu was pulling.

"You thought that by parrying my sword, you'll be safe, didn't you?" Suigetsu said in a mocking tone, as he pulled with even greater strength. "The greatest danger is the one that it's not so easily seen."

"Idiot! You're the one who put himself in danger!" Raiga replied, as his body started to crackle with electricity. Said electricity ran through the wires, until it reached Suigetsu, who started to scream.

"AMEYURIIIIIIIII... !" he yelled between spasms.

The redhead took no time to strike. Raiga raised his other sword to protect his immobilized arm, but the redheaded swordswoman already anticipated what he would do, and fainted to the right, before the true swing came, slicing Raiga's right arm. Not letting him any time to react, Ameyuri moved once again, and sliced the immobilized arm, breaking the connection between Raiga and Suigetsu, much to the watery ninja's relief.

"Like we said before, this is going to be YOUR funeral, nobody else's!" Ameyuri shouted before he kicked the now armless Raiga into the chest, making him fall on his back, before stabbing her two swords into the zombie's chest, and unleash an electric discharge through his body. "Sealmaster Ninjas! Take care of this asshole!"

Fortunately, a couple sealmasters happened to be around the zone, and quickly rushed to Raiga in order to seal his body. While they worked, Ameyuri walked towards Suigetsu. The last Hozuki clansman was on one knee, using the Sewing Needle as a cane, smoke coming from his body.

"Hey," Ameyuri said. "You okay?"

"I've... I've been better..." Suigetsu replied. He looked up, and saw that the redhead was offering him a hand. Suigetsu accepted it, and let her pull him to his feet. "Thank you."

"Nice stunt you pulled there. That was quite badass," the redhead complimented. "Not to say that I wouldn't beat him on my own, but thanks to you, we got rid of him much faster."

"Heh... nice to hear that..." Suigetsu said, as he felt his watery body slowly recover from the electric shock. "So, let's go help Chojuro. He won't last long against my brother on his own."

"Sure. Lead the way, Suigetsu."

...

Mangetsu and Chojuro continued their duel, both Hiramekarei clashing against each other. However, it was quite obvious which one was the most skilled swordsman. Mangetsu was the one dictating the pace of the fight, while his poor bespectacled apprentice could do little other than defend while being pushed back, until he inevitably run out of space to fall back to.

"Come on Chojuro, fight back!" Mangetsu shouted, as his onslaught intensified. "If you keep fighting like this, I'm going to kill you!"

"I'm trying!" Chojuro said, as he tried to put more strength into his blows. However, that didn't change that for every time he tried to attack his former sensei, Mangetsu attacked five times in return. "But no matter what I do, my skill pales compared to yours!"

"Your skill matches my own at the very worst! If that wasn't the case, I would never have chosen you as my apprentice!" Mangetsu yelled, as his swings became more brutal. "Come on Chojuro, show me that I wasn't mistaken! Show me how much you've grown since I last saw you!"

Mangetsu delivered one final swing with his fake Hiraekarei towards Chojuro, but the blue haired ninja reacted in time, and parried it with his own. Mangetsu tried to push forward, but found that Chojuro was pushing back with just as much strength. The bespectacled ninja wouldn't bulge, not anymore.

"You mean it, sensei?" Chojuro asked.

"I'm not one to deliver compliments if I didn't mean them. Life's too short to waste it on lies and deceptions," Mangetsu said, before smiling sadly. "I should know that better even now, given that I'm no longer alive."

Chojuro's Hiraekarei started to brightly glow with chakra, before he pushed his former sensei back.

"I always believed that I wasn't worthy of being your apprentice, sensei," Chojuro said, as he delivered a wide horizontal swing, releasing a crescent-shaped chakra blade at Mangetsu.

Mangetsu's sword glew with chakra as well, and with another strike, shattered Chojuro's chakra blast. "I know. That's why I always made my mission to make you see the amazing potential you possess. Once you see it, you'll become more confident, and will be unstoppable."

This time, the chakra around Chojuro's Hiraekarei took the shape of a hammer, as Chojuro leaped at his former sensei, slamming the hammer down. Mangetsu jumped backwards just in time to avoid the blow, but the resulting hit resulted in a powerful shockwave that pushed Mangetsu backwards, almost making him fall on his back.

"When you died, I thought it was fate's way of telling me that I was never meant to be your apprentice," Chojuro said, pulling his sword back from the shattered ground. "That maybe if you had a more competent apprentice, you would still be alive."

"Neither you nor any other apprentice would have prevented my death, Chojuro," Mangetsu replied. "Yagura's troops outnumbered us too much. Somebody had to stay in order to give the others a chance to escape. I was the best suited to delay the enemy."

Mangetsu raised the sword above his head, causing it to shine even brighter, before slamming it down, sending an underground shockwave at Chojuro, cracking the ground as it traveled and sending many rocks and pebbles flying in every direction. Chojuro tried to jump away in order to dodge it, but one of the rocks hit his glasses, breaking one of his lens, and making him lose balance and fall on his back, dropping Hiramekarei.

"Come on Chojuro, this isn't your end!" Mangetsu yelled, as he leaped at the defenseless ninja, who stumbled to recover his blade.

When Mangetsu brought his blade down, it clashed against metal rather than flesh, but it wasn't Chojuro's Hiramekarei, but the Thunderfans the ones blocking his sword. Wielding them was Ameyuri Ringo.

"Hello, Ameyuri-chan," Mangetsu said, smiling down at her. "Nice to see you."

"Feeling's mutual. AND DON'T FUCKING CALL ME AMEYURI-CHAN, ASSHOLE!" the enraged redheaded said as she channeled electric chakra through her swords, forcing Mangetsu to disengage before they could reach him.

"I'm glad to see nothing was able to keep that temper of yours down. Kunoichi as fierce as you appear only once every generation," Mangetsu said, his smile persisting. "By the way, weren't you fighting Raiga?"

"We already took care of that," Suigetsu said, as he landed besides Chojuro, and helped him back on his feet. "We figured out Ameyuri would be the best suited to defeat you, brother, so I made sure to help her finish her fight as soon as possible."

"A sensible tactic. Now-" Mangetsu said before he was suddenly interrupted when he was hurled backwards. A opened coffin emerged from underground, and Mangetsu was pushed into it, before the lid slammed it closed, and finally vanished.

"Uh? What's going on?" Chojuro asked, as he adjusted his broken glasses.

"Hey, look around us!" Ameyuri said.

Looking around, they could see that the remaining reanimations were also retreating, and so did the few White Zetsu Clones present. It seemed that the enemy had conceded the Allied Ninja Forces another victory in the war.

...

Moon

Hinata and her group had arrived to another place of interest: the ruins of a temple. Despite being obvious that no human being has been near the stone building, given its state of disrepair and the vegetation growing around it, they decided it would be a good idea to check it, since it may give them some insight into the Moon, and maybe the enemy they were going to face.

Shisui was the first one to enter, and once he checked that the place was safe -to no one's surprise-, the rest were allowed in.

On the inside, the temple was just as ruined as on the outside, with numerous puddles of water around the floor, and many piles of debris scattered around, some of them in the process of being claimed by nature, given the number of plants growing on them. Only

two things appeared to have survived time: the murals on the walls - the walls that were still standing, that's it- and a large statue of a woman with horns and four arms.

"Well, that certainly looks familiar," Hinata commented, as she walked towards the statue. "Nori-san, I remember seeing that statue in your previous home. Do you know who she is?"

The Moon acolyte walked towards the statue as well, and took some time to admire it. It was partially eroded, and had moss growing all over its legs and spreading upwards, but one could still appreciate its fine craftsmanship.

"I never told you about her? Odd," the priestess said. "Anyway, this is a statue of Kalika, eldest daughter of Hamura. And before you ask, no, she didn't have horns like her father, or four arms. It's the way she was commonly depicted."

"That's... odd," Hinata said.

"It's not that Kalika looked like that, you know," Nori replied. "But there were some myths that spoke that she could turn into some sort of four armed giantess, as some kind of power she developed with the Tenseigan. No hard evidence, but our scholars and historians saw enough mentions of this to be taken into some consideration."

Hinata continued to observe the statue, but her interest quickly evaporated when she was unable to find anything else from it, and her attention was drawn to the murals of the walls, which were already being inspected by other Moon Acolytes and Hyugas.

"Hey, Nori-san, let's check the murals instead," the Hyuga Clan Head suggested. "They may provide us with some hints as to what to expect from the Moon."

"Understood, Hinata-sama," Nori agreed.

Thankfully for the two women, the acolytes already working on the walls had already deciphered what the murals said: it was an historical record detailing the Sage of the Six Paths and his brother, how they defeated Kaguya and the Ten Tails, and how Hamura and his followers left for the Moon, creating a new civilization that would safekeep earth from outworldly threats.

"Interesting," Nori said, as she inspected the last pictures of the mural.

"Something caught your eye, Nori-san?" Hinata asked.

"This," Nori said, as she ran a hand through the picture of a castle that seemed to float in the sky. "According to these glyphs, this is where Hamura and his direct descendants lived. Inside some kind of palace built inside a star."

"A palace built inside a star? That doesn't make sense," Hinata said. "Unless it's some sort of metaphor, right?"

"Not necessarily. Did you notice that, even if we're inside the Moon, it appears that there's a sun that provides light and heat? That's an artificial star Hamura-sama created with his power, and was maintained by the ensuing generations of Tenseigan wielders."

Nori pointed out a symbol that appeared to be an eye with an eight point star inside it, which according to her, represented the Tenseigan.

"That means that Toneri must be powering the artificial sun himself," Hinata said, not knowing how that could be used to their advantage. However, there was something that didn't feel right, that made no sense. The young Hyuga took no time to realize what it was. "No, wait, that can't be right. The Tenseigan was lost for literally centuries, and Toneri and I awoke ours not long ago. If the artificial sun was put out for so long, there's no way all the vegetation could have survived without sunlight."

"Very well, Hinata-sama," Nori praised her with a nod. "What's the conclusion then?"

"That the Branch House weapon powered up the artificial sun instead," Hinata said, before looking up into the sky, through one of the many holes in the temple's ceiling. "That's where Toneri is hiding his weapon. That's where we need to go next."

...

Third Division Base Camp, Nighttime

After Kisame's death, Mei and Zabuza returned to the fight, only to see it dying down as well. Most of the reanimated Swordsmen of the Mist had been put down and sealed, with only Mangetsu, Jinpachi and Kushimaru managing to escape before they could be neutralized. Other reanimations also escaped with their lives (or living deaths) but most of them were sealed and captured.

The next course of action, naturally, was to set up a base so the tired ninjas could rest and the wounded could be healed by medics, and wait until the next supply convoy could replace all the weapons, food and medicine that they had used during the battle and in the aftermath.

Thankfully, the battle has cleared quite a lot of the surrounding forest, leaving an excellent place in order to set up a base camp. Everybody took no time to do so, given that they were both hungry, exhausted and hurt, and wanted to do nothing but to rest and relax.

Though, one ninja couldn't rest no matter how much she wanted to, given that, as the Division Commander, Mei had to report the result of the battle to the Allied Ninja Forces HQ. Mei was now inside the tent designated for communications, covered in sealing tags that both shield those inside from prying eyes. She was sat with her legs crossed in front of a similarly sat Yamanaka, this one wearing a special helmet that amplified his mental powers in order to create a link with HQ.

" You brought us excellent news, Mizukage," she heard Jiraiya's voice inside her heard. "With the death of Kisame and the recovery of Samehada, Akatsuki has lost a very important asset."

"Unfortunately, it didn't come without a cost," Mei replied in resignation. "Kisame alone killed dozens of our ninjas before we could put him down, and many more died to the other enemies. Akatsuki is an even more fearsome adversary than we thought."

" Bah, the important part is that we won, didn't we?" Onoki's voice said. "That means that they lost more people than we did."

" How can you say that, Onoki?" Mei could hear Ao's voice quaver with anger. "Plenty of human lives have been lost! How can you dismiss them like that? Did you lose your tact in your advanced age?"

" Watch your mouth around me, you one eyed Kirigakure brat. I already experienced my fair share of deaths, so don't dare lecture me about that!" The former Tsuchikage replied. "This is a war, and people die in wars! I don't like it anymore than you do, but that's the way it is!"

" You only say that because you know that Kirigakure ninjas are the majority of the Third Division!" Ao fired back. "If it was the division lead by your graddaughter-"

"Ao, enough," Mei interrupted her head of intelligence before things could escalate. "This is no time for such petty quarrels. Onoki-san is right, tragic as it is, we can't fight a war without losing soldiers. This isn't the first time I led my men in battle. And while it never gets any easier, I know what it feels to see ninja under your command die in battle."

Neither Ao nor Onoki continued their argument, much to the Mizukage's relief, and probably those in the HQ with them. Now it would be the best time to divert attention to other matters.

"My ninja will need new weapons, armors, clothes, food and medicine. When can I expect the next supply convoy to arrive?" Mei asked.

" I already sent one the moment news of your victory reached my ears," Jiraiya replied, much to her joy. "It should be there by tomorrow morning. Can you hold up with what you have?"

"I believe we can, Supreme Commander. Though we can't never be sure as for when the enemy will strike again, so it'd be for the best if those supplies arrived as soon as possible," Mei told him.

" They're going as fast as they can, Mizukage. I can assure you that," Jiraiya replied, before he decide to change the topic. "Now, what can you tell us about the enemy? What kind of opponents you and your troops had to face?"

"As expected, most of their forces were composed by those Zetsu clones. The majority were what we called the "standard" variety, but there were several Brutes and Snipers. Fortunately, we knew about them in advance and thus my ninjas weren't caught by surprise, and knew how to deal with them."

" No flyers?" Mei heard Chiyo's voice ask.

Mei shook her head, before realizing that they couldn't see her. "We didn't see any of them. And thank goodness, because this battle was bad enough without the enemy having aerial support."

" If I'm allowed to give my opinion, my guess is that they didn't use their air force because they expected us to counter it," Shikaku chimed in. "It may be a ruse to make us lower our guard, and deploy it once we did so they can hit us when it hurts the hardest."

" Whatever they're planning, it won't catch us off guard. I already devised a plan to put in motion whenever they think they can use the sky against us," Jiraiya firmly stated. "Now, Mizukage, what about the reanimated ninjas?"

"You believed that the first batch of zombies were merely testing our strength before Orochimaru would break out the big names at the right moment. So far, it seems that he decided that the moment has already arrived. The reanimations had many members of the Uchiha Clan, as well as some other strong individual ninjas of many villages, both major and minor. But chief among them were six deceased members of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, complete with a fake replica of the sword they used to wield, led by Kisame Hoshigaki. Though you know about that part," Mei explained. "Unfortunately, we were only able to permanently neutralize about half of them, so expect Kushimaru, Jinpachi and Mangetsu to show up again in another battlefield."

" Understood. That was... troubling. We'll make sure to nail them down the next time they show up," Jiraiya replied.

"Supreme Commander, may I suggest that every village makes a list of their strongest or at least well known ninjas? It is likely that we will face more of them and having readily available info would be a big boon," Mei asked.

" Already doing that, Mizukage-sama. Hopefully we'll have a comprehensive and detailed list before Akatsuki decides to strike again," Shikaku told her.

"Understood. I'm glad to hear that," Mei said with a nod. "In that case, I have nothing more to report. Permission to retire, Supreme Commander?"

" Granted," Jiraiya said. "You and your troops did a good job today, Mizukage. You earned a good rest."

Mei opened her eyes, and let out a sigh of exhaustion, before getting back on her feet, and exiting the communications tent. Her mouth curved into a smile when she saw her husband. He had been standing there, probably making sure nobody got close to the tent while she was inside, keeping guard like an angry watchdog.

"You done?" Zabuza asked.

"For the time being, sweetie," Mei said, as the two of them started to walk together towards their private tent. "Dealing with those old drones can be even more exhausting than fighting Kisame."

Zabuza chuckled, smirking under his mask. "Heh, it's on moments like these where I'm glad that I'm not in your shoes."

"What happened to your ambition of taking my place?" Mei asked, quirking an eyebrow. "Were those times in which you had to take over the hat such harrowing experiences?"

"Let's say they... opened my eyes," Zabuza grumbled. "I'm a man of action. The battlefield is where I belong, not caged in an office behind a desk. In fact, I don't know how can you stand such soul-draining job."

"I like to see it as a necessary sacrifice that I have to make in order to keep our home stable," Mei explained. "Plus the pay is pretty good."

"Not as good as all the money I bring with all the S-Rank missions I'm doing," Zabuza replied, sounding a little boasting. "And now that that blue skinned fool finally got his deserving comeuppance, that means that I'm the strongest Swordsman of the Mist alive!"

"I'm sure you are honey. Especially since you helped me so much dealing with Kisame," Mei replied, as the two of them finally arrived at their private tent. Mei sat on her bed, and started removing her boots. "Ugh, I'm so tired, I could sleep for a whole week."

"I feel you. Not even the Civil War back at home was so draining," Zabuza replied, as he sat besides her. "So, you said you have an idea about who's getting the Samehada, right?"

"Yeah. It might be risky, but it's our best bet," Mei replied. "Yagura's son, Dagura. He was training to be a swordsman. From what I

heard, he was going to inherit the Helmet Splitter, even if he didn't train under Jinin Akebino himself."

"So, good old Yagura wanted to get rid of Jinin and replace him with his own son. Classy," Zabuza said, letting out a chuckle. "That would explain why did he sent him to the Crimson Citadel instead of having him executed on the spot when he felt his loyalty wasn't genuine. His brat wasn't ready yet."

"Yet being the key word. As a sign of conciliation, I allowed Dagura to continue his training, and keep him as a reserve swordsman in case of you or any of the others fell in battle, given that neither of you have formal apprentices. I wasn't expecting to recover Samehada so soon, so I didn't think he'll get his hands on them. But given the convenient timing, I think he's the best choice."

"Let's hope you're right, and he doesn't turn traitor the moment he gets his hands on Samehada, and wants to avenge his father," Zabuza said.

"Come on, have a little faith in me. I'm a very good judge of character. I mean, I think I made an excellent choice with you, didn't I?" Mei teased.

Zabuza grumbled something she was unable to understand, as he averted his gaze.

"Aw come on, don't go all tsundere on me. I thought that we left that phase behind after our honeymoon," Mei said, smiling mischeviously. She then placed a foot on Zabuza's lap. "Now come on, be a good husband, and give my feet a massage. I could use your expert hands."

"I'm not going to massge your feet," Zabuza replied, as he pushed the foot back.

"Awww, come on!" she begged, sounding like a child asking her parents to buy her a new toy. "Do it, and I let you be the one on top

tonight."

Once again, Zabuza grumbled something unintelligible as he begrudgingly started to massage one of Mei's feet.

"You've been the death of my reputation, woman," Zabuza said in resignation.

"Because you know that I'm worth much more than any reputation you might build, sweetie," Mei replied. "Plus, if you care about your reputation that much, you wouldn't have spent so much time taking care of a kid, because-YEOWCH! Careful! " Mei shouted when she felt Zabuzas squeezing her foot with far more force than necessary.

"You know exactly why I took Haku under my wing," Zabuza angrily replied.

"Yes, because you wanted to turn him into your personal weapon, we all know that story," Mei replied, rolling her eyes. "That's why, once his training was complete, you let him go live to another village so he could be with his friends, girlfriend and other loved ones he met there instead of keeping him close to you. Such a heartless monster you are."

Mei expected Zabuza to react even worse to that taunt, but much to her surprise, her husband left that taunt unaddressed.

"I always have faith that that kid will be smart and resourceful enough to stay alive," Zabuza said. "But now, with the war and the kind of enemies we're facing... I wish I could keep him at my side."

Mei removed her foot from Zabuza's lap, and inched closer to him before placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I can imagine how you must feel," Mei began. "But you should remember that Haku isn't alone. He has his friends and sensei to watch his back. Plus, given that you helped train him, I'm sure he's strong enough to survive this whole ordeal."

"I tell myself that," Zabuza replied. "If only we were on the same division..."

"But you are not. Sad as it is, you must deal with it. Listen, I can't afford having you distracted like that," Mei stated sternly. "But if that makes you feel better, I'll pull some strings to give you two some time to catch up, alright?"

"I'll... I'll appreciate that," Zabuza admitted.

Mei smiled widely. "Of course you would. Now come on, you have to do my other foot."

...

"Well brats, you did it! You survived your first day of war!" Anko cheerfully shouted, as she sat among her students, sitting across a campfire. "I guess that you never felt more alive than you do now, right?"

"You can't be serious, sensei," Kin replied, shooting her a deadpan look. "How can war make you feel alive?"

"Because nothing makes you appreciate life more than being in the constant presence of death!" Anko rebutted. "Of course, being ninjas, that's a constant for us, but in times of war the feeling becomes much greater."

"Anko-sensei, I always thought you were insane," Zaku began, as he started to slowly inch away from the purplette. "But never to this extent."

"Aw, come on brats! I'm only trying to make you see the bright side of a grim situation," the Special Jonin said as she pulled several sticks of dango out of nowhere and started to devour them with gusto. "Don't think I'm somebody who thinks war is beautiful or some other nonsense."

"And how did you develop such a... bizarre outlook on war?" Dosu asked, as he carefully measured his next words, for they would touch a sensitive topic. "Was Orochimaru who taught you to think that way?"

Zaku and Kin cringed upon hearing their teammate mention the man Anko hated the most. The three ex-Oto ninjas expected the Snake Mistress to explode in a blaze of anger, but such reaction never came.

"Yeah, pretty much," Anko nonchalantly replied, as she happily munched on her dango. "One of the very, very, very few things that son of a bitch taught me that were worth keeping. I fought under him during the Third Ninja War, just like you guys are fighting under me right now. Did I never tell you that?"

"Not really. You never talk about Orochimaru," Kin replied, now sounding a little more relaxed, given that Anko didn't take offense to the topic Dosu brought up. "Not that we can't tell why."

"Ah, yeah, you have a point. It's kind of hard for me to talk about that asshole without being consumed by the burning anger of a thousand suns. Well, let's try to make an effort," Anko said, as she let out a deep breath. "I think it was like... seventeen years ago? Yeah, that sounds about right. You brats weren't even born yet. I mean, you aren't seventeen, right? Anyway, I'm digressing.

"My team rarely fought in open battles like we're doing right now. Well, both my team and many others. Konoha was outnumbered by both Iwa and Kumo, and our forces were spreaded thin. So we mostly relied on guerilla tactics to disturb the enemy troops from behind, while our powerhouses like the Yellow Flash or the Sannin fought them head on and whittled their numbers down.

"Orochimaru always requested missions that involved high profile targets. Back then, I didn't realize that he did this so he could get his hands on Bloodline Limits for him to study, and hopefully replicate.

That was a pretty big red flag flashing in front of my face, and me none the wiser."

"Orochimaru also allowed you to sign the Snake Contract, didn't he?" Kin asked.

Anko frowned. "Yep. Another of the few things that didn't come with a price tag. Or so I think. When he gave it to me, he told me I was his favorite and that it was a gift for being such a good student, and that more gifts were to come if I continued improving," Anko's hand instinctively rubbed the spot on her neck when the cursed seal used to be, and mentally thanked Hinata once again. "Son of a bitch... anyway, what about you? You used to work for him, didn't the asshole promised you a cursed seal or something like that? Many of his minions carried them, including your former sensei."

"They said that the cursed seals were only for the strongest ninjas," Zaku began. "Given how many people died trying to adapt to them."

"Otogakure's motto was that only the strong deserved to live, and the weak were nothing but stepping stones for those destined to greatness," Kin added.

"For some reason, I don't have a hard time believing that," Anko said, as she rolled her eyes.

"Otogakure had a more... experimental and unconventional approach to training ninjas," Dosu interceded. "Orochimaru believed that normal training could only get you so far, and in order to truly break your limits, you need to go beyond what was natural, and become something greater."

"Body modifications," Anko concluded.

"Exactly. Zaku was the only one brave enough to undergo such process," Dosu continued. "Kin and I weren't so sure. I decided to join the experimental weapons program instead. That's where I got my Melody Gauntlets."

"Orochimaru was also developing a program to grant ninjas Bloodline Limits. I was training to become strong enough to be accepted as a candidate," Kin added. "Orochimaru used to say that humans aren't born equal, that some have either talent or powerful inherent abilities, while others were born with neither, and that he sought to change that."

"That explains how the bastard was able to lure so many people under his wing in order to build himself an army so big," Anko commented, before shooting her students a sharp look. "I'm seriously hoping that your time in Konoha made you realize that all of that was nothing but pure bullshit."

"We realized of that before we even trained under you," Dosu began. "Mizuki-sen... Mizuki rarely trained us, and all our experimental weapons or body modifications weren't enough to beat those Konoha Genin. The fact that the three of us weren't even able to beat that Hyuga girl alone was a real eye opener."

"Though, didn't that girl develop godlike powers or something like that?" Kin chimed in. "I've been close to her, and even if I'm not a sensor I can feel the sheer power of her chakra. And those eyes of her aren't a Byakugan."

"The Tenseigan," Anko told the black haired girl. "Though, by the time you fought Hinata she didn't have the Tenseigan nor any of its assorted powers, so her victory over you was genuine. I hope that taught you that honest hard work pays better than some risky body modification or forbidden jutsu. And before you said that those worked for Orochimaru, you should realize that they came at the cost of hundreds, possibly thousands of lives. Do you really think that Orochimaru cares about his underlings? If he was willing to grant his ninjas exotic powers is because they were convenient test subjects that allowed him to experiment until the process was safe enough to use it on himself."

"You don't have to tell us twice," Kin said, looking down. "So far, we're still alive. Had we continued in Oto, we would be zombies like

Mizuki."

"Actually, I have the feeling you would have been used as sacrifices to summon those zombies," Anko stated. "No offense, but I doubt that Orochimaru would have bothered to raise any of you. I'm still wrapping my head around Mizuki being raised, and the only explanation I find is that he found it funny."

Before the conversation could follow, a new voice interrupted them. "Hey there. Mind if I sit with you guys?"

Anko and her students turned around to see Rin Nohara, standing there a bit awkwardly as she awaited their response. Anko smiled and pretty much dragged her to the group.

"What kind of question is that? We used to be classmates, of course you can!" Anko energetically said, as she made Rin sit next to her. "Guys, she might not look the part, but this gal here used to go to the Academy with me. She's-"

"Rin Nohara," Kin interrupted her. Before Anko could ask, she added: "I already met her shortly before we were deployed. Her, and those other Konoha girls."

"Oh, I see. Nice!" Anko happily said. "Anyway, you already know Kin, so meet my boys, Dosu, and Zaku."

"Hello. Nice to meet you," Rin politely greeted.

"Hey, I think I heard of you," Zaku said. "You're that girl who was dead, right?"

Anko bristled, while Rin laughed awkwardly.

"Hehe, I get that a lot-"

"Just what's wrong with you, dumbass? How do you ask something like that to her?" Anko chastised him.

"Don't worry Anko, it's oka-" Rin tried to say, but the Snake Mistress wouldn't let her.

"Nope, don't defend or justify him! Otherwise he won't learn manners," Anko insisted.

Rin chuckled and shook her head. "Oh boy, you're just the same as when you were my age, Anko-san. Then again, it's a bit refreshing to see that some things stayed the same."

"What do you mean, I stayed the same? Come on, I changed a lot since you were gone!" Anko protested, pouting comically.

"Well, for once, you're still addicted to eating dango," Rin said, chuckling a little.

Anko scowled. "Sure, I like my dango, but I don't eat it constantly. Don't exaggerate so much.-"

"I'm not exaggerating!" Rin replied. Then, she placed her finger under her chin as she recalled a memory. "In fact, I do remember this one time back in the Academy where you ate so much dango, that during a sparring session you-"

Dosu, Zaku and Kin saw color disappearing from Anko's face, as she slapped a hand over Rin's mouth, silencing the brown haired medic, who tried to remove the hand keeping her quiet.

"What? What happened during the spar?" Zaku asked, leaning forward in interest.

"NOTHING! NOTHING HAPPENED!" Anko loudly shouted.

"Your reaction doesn't convey such feeling, sensei," Dosu pointed out.

Anko continued to struggle in order to keep Rin silent. "WELL, THAT'S THE TRUTH! AND WHOEVER SAYS OTHERWISE-"

However, much to Anko's horror, Rin managed to remove the muffling hand, and finished her tale.

"While she was fighting Ebisu-san, she let out the loudest fart you could ever imagine!" Rin said, giggling at the memory. "Poor Ebisu-san didn't even know what to do, and he even forfeited the spar!"

As Anko's face turned as red as a tomato, her students to laugh loudly in return. Except Dosu, who wasn't laughing openly, but one could see that the way his bandages covering his mouth were stretching, he was snickering at the very least.

"Oh boy, this is golden! With this girl, we can get so much dirty laundry on Anko-sensei!" Kin laughed. "Please tell us more!"

Then, all of sudden, multiple snakes emerged from under Anko's sleeves, wrapping themselves around the neck of her students and Rin.

"Rin, the next time you reveal any embarrassing past event involving me, all of you will suffer a slow and agonizing death," Anko seethed, as she glared at all of them.

"Come on Anko-san, what I told them wasn't that embarrassing," Rin tried to protest.

"You mean that you have stories even more embarrassing?" Kin asked, elated. The snakes around her neck tightened their pressure. "... which I'm not interested in hearing, and neither are my teammates."

Pleased, Anko finally released her snakes from her students and childhood friends.

"Now, enough talking about my past, let's switch the topic to something less... infuriating," the Snake Mistress said. "Say, did you guys get to watch the Seven Swordsmen in action? The fact that they had to fight a previous generation of Swordsmen made the fight

even cooler! Oh, those swords! Who could get their hands on them! My favorite is the one that makes explosions!"

Rin, Dosu, Zaku and Kin had to spend the rest of the night hearing Anko fangirling over the Swordsmen of the Mist and their swords.

...

Speaking of which, the Swordsmen of the Mist -minus Zabuza, who was with Mei- were also sitting around a bonfire, enjoying a warm meal after such a brutal battle. Some other Kiri ninjas also gathered near them, hoping to see, and maybe even talk with the foremost ninjas of their village other than their Kage.

"I might have take it a little longer, but I tell you, I could have destroyed that Raiga creep and his fake Thunderfangs myself," Ameyuri boasted, before taking a bite of her fried squid.

"We know. You only said it about sixty times already," Suigetsu groaned, as he rolled his eyes.

"Because it's the truth!" Ameyuri insisted. "Anyway, thankfully that guy's spirit will be back to whatever hell Orochimaru pulled him from."

"Yeah, and Kisame, Juzo Biwo and Jinin Akebino have been sealed and terminated as well," Miyako added, hoping to introduce some positivity in the conversation. "Of the enemy seven swordsmen, more than half have been eliminated."

"Too bad my brother isn't part of that half, but the one that got away," Suigetsu said, his voice laced with some bitterness. "Well, minus the hell part."

Ameyuri didn't say anything, but his expression visibly softened.

"It had to be pretty hard for you, seeing your brother being made into such a mockery of his living self," Miyako sympathetically said.

"A bit, yeah. Though, admittedly, it was nice to get to talk to him again," Suigetsu admitted.

"Agreed. I always thought that I was an unworthy apprentice to him, but hearing his words of reassurance..." Chojuro chimed in. "It renewed my strength."

"That's why we have to try our hardest to make sure my brother goes back to the place he belongs to," Suigetsu firmly stated. "Orochimaru won't defile my brother's soul and memory any longer!"

"For that, we'll need Ameyuri," Miyako said, looking at the redhead. "So make sure you don't get killed until we face Mangetsu again, okay?"

"Ha! As if any of those pathetic zombies could even be close to kill me," Ameyuri scoffed. "If I didn't know you any better, Miyako, I'd feel like you were trying to get under my skin."

"Given that zombies are so below you, maybe we should have let you fight Kisame," Miyako said, smirking at the redhead. "It took Mizukage-sama and Zabuzataicho's combined power to put an end to him, but I'm sure you would have done it in half the time."

"See? That's what I'm talking about. Now, that's a proper challenge. Too bad they had to call dibs on him," Ameyuri said, taking another bite of her squid. "Chojuro and I got to fight him back when we conquered Kiri, but the coward ran away."

"A-Actually, we only got to fight water clones of him, while Zabuzataicho fought the real one," Chojuro felt the need to correct her. "While we beat the clones, Zabuzataicho could barely hold his ground against the original, and I don't think that even with our help we could have defeated him."

The bespectacled swordsman felt an overwhelming killing intent focused on him, and realized that opening his mouth was a huge mistake when he saw Ameyuri piercing him with a furious glare.

"You really are a glutton for suffering, aren't you, four eyes?" Ameyuri seethed.

"Hey, hey, calm down," Miyako said, placing a hand on Ameyuri. "Don't be mad at the boy because he revealed the truth behind your boasts."

"Besides, you don't need to boast. We all know how strong you are and how hard you worked to be worthy of carrying those blades," a new voice said.

Suigetsu turned around, and saw that besides Chojuro was sitting a man he never saw before. He had tanned skin, shoulder length black hair, a thin moustache and a goatee. He was happily eating some fried beef.

"And who the hell are you?" Suigetsu asked, wondering how this stranger felt entitled to intrude in their conversation. Though for some reason, his voice sounded oddly familiar.

"I'm Kumori. Couldn't you tell?" Kumori said, before nodding at the Splatter besides him.

"THE FUCK!?" Suigetsu asked. "YOU TOOK OFF YOUR MASK!"

"Yeah. How else I'm supposed to eat?" Kumori asked. "Though, even if you don't know what I look like, at least you should have recognized me through my voice."

"I didn't know you spoke! I never heard you speak before today!" Suigetsu angrily protested, before he turned at the others. "Did you guys knew he could speak?"

Much to his shock and growing frustration, all of them nodded.

"He only stayed silent whenever you were present. Said he liked to get a reaction out of you," Miyako said, giggling a little.

"And it was worth it every time. Too bad I won't be able to do that again. Oh well, better end it on a grand note than run it into the ground and let it become stale," Kumori said, shrugging.

"Did you guys saw him without the mask as well!?" Suigetsu asked, his anger not disappearing.

"No, not really. At least, this is the first time I see him unmasked," Chojuro said.

"Same here," Miyako admitted. "And honestly, I was also wondering who was that guy and why he was eating with us."

"Me too. And damn, you're kind of hot," Ameyuri said, letting out a whistle. "Why do you hide that handsome mug behind an ANBU mask?"

Kumori smiled. "So when I take my mask off, the ladies gush about how handsome my face is."

Author's Note: And thus the second day of battles conclude. Hope you found it as good as the previous one, at the very least. This time, the battles were getting to long, so I had to include the end of the minor fights in this chapter. Still, I don't think it messes the flow of the chapter too badly.

And another insight into what Hinata and her team are doing in the Moon. How will their new findings affect the outcome of their mission?

Man, gotta love to write moments between Mei and Zabuzza. Aren't just they the cutest? I hope you enjoyed their interactions here, because sadly they aren't going to appear again in a long time, since we need to move the focus to other divisions as well.

I also appreciated the opportunity to write more development scenes for Anko and the ex-Oto trio. I created the team at the end of Part I, and never had the chance to give it proper spotlight until many arcs later, and again I had to keep them in the background, because I decided that I wanted to give every character Kishimoto screwed their proper dues, which resulted in having a massive cast that can be such a pain in the ass to juggle. Oh well, guess I can't complain since I did what I wanted.

Also, I'd like to point out that yes, I'm aware that Anko is about three years younger than Rin, meaning that they couldn't have been classmates. However, in the flashbacks to Obito's childhood (post unmasking) we do see both Anko and Rin as Obito's classmates. This one of the many, many, many, and I do mean MANY inconsistencies that one can find examining the time period of Kakashi's formative years.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter, it's time for Mifune's Fifth Division to see some action, and for Kakashi in particular to meet and fight a very important person from his past. I'm sure you all can imagine whom I'm talking about ;)

Anyway, if you enjoyed this chapter, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

White Thunder

Author's Note: And here we begin another day of battles. I'm sure you guys will love this one:

Chapter 107:

White Thunder

or

Father Knows Worst

Island Turtle

As the war raged on, Naruto and Fu continued their training to master their new jinchuriki powers. Naruto tried to apply the Rasengan method in order to master the Tailed Beast Ball, but soon he found it wasn't as easy as he believed, since Tailed Beast Chakra was heavier and much harder to shape and mold than human chakra.

Given that they were making a very slow progress when it came to transform into Tailed Beast mode, Killer B decided to take a different approach to their training, and had them spar using their Chakra Cloak/Armor. His logic was that they needed more time and experience weaving Tailed Beast chakra so pure, and that once they got enough practice, they'll have less trouble reaching the Beast Form.

"Before we run we must learn how to walk, alright? So let's master what you have before you try to reach a new height," the Eight Tailed jinchuriki had said.

And thus, Naruto and Fu spend the next couple days both sparring against Killer B in their newest forms, and seeing them train on their

own. They had to hold back during the spars, as per the Kumo ninja's warning, not only they could easily damage the island's ecosystem, but they could hurt Genbu himself.

When they trained on their own, Killer B encouraged them to push their limits and use their imagination to use their new power in new and creative ways. The better they could mold the Tailed Beast chakra, the less problems they'll have achieving its full potential. Part of the training also involved using normal ninjutsu fueled by Tailed Beast chakra, usually aimed towards the ocean.

"Alright guys, you're doing great, in no time you'll be the best!" Killer B cheered with a thumbs up. "But you've been training all morning, how about a little rest?"

In response, both Naruto and Fu fell on their butts, and started to pant heavily.

"Yep, without any doubt, you needed that time out. Anyway, I'm heading to my house to work on a song, though don't think you can slack off, I won't be gone for long!" Killer B said, before disappearing with the Body Flicker Jutsu.

"Man, using Tailed Beast chakra so continuously is so draining," Fu complained. "Killer B-sensei makes it look easy."

"Eh, he has far more experience than us. I bet we'll be on his level in no time, sis," Naruto replied.

Fu raised an eyebrow, noticing that last word. "Uh, what did you call me? Sis?"

"Yeah. You don't like it?" Naruto asked.

"Well, we aren't related. Not that I wouldn't like the idea of having you for a brother, but it's kinda weird," Fu replied.

"We did bond a lot over the past few months. Especially since we're jinchuriki. I like to think of us jinchuriki as family. We're nine of a kind, we have something nobody else has, something that links us and makes us unique," Naruto began, smiling brightly. Though his smile disappeared, as an expression of bitterness crept up his face. "Four of a kind now, thanks to Akatsuki."

"Don't you mean three?" Fu corrected him.

"I'm not leaving Gaara out," Naruto firmly said. "He might not be a jinchuriki anymore, but he was one for most of his life, since even before he was born. He underwent the same experiences as we did, probably even worse, and thus knows the struggle of having a Tailed Beast sealed inside you against your will."

"You have a very high opinion of him, don't you?" Fu asked.

"Yeah. I believe that, even if he wasn't a jinchuriki, he would still be a very precious friend to me. That's why I like to think of him as a brother as well," Naruto earnestly said.

"I see. Well, if that's that important to you, then you can call me your sister... bro," Fu replied, smiling at Naruto, who smiled back. "You know, I always wanted to have a little brother..."

However, Naruto's smile disappeared the moment Fu's smile turned into the most evil smirk he ever saw. In a flash, Fu was onto him, a strong arm wrapped around his neck while she used the other to give the blond a noogie.

"... A little brother to torture to no end! MWAHAHAHAHA!" Fu laughed maniacally, as she harshly rubbed her knuckles on Naruto's head. "Feel my sisterly love!"

"ACK! Get your hands from me, you maniac!" Naruto screamed, trying and failing to break Fu's hold, but the green haired girl was way stronger than him. "I changed my mind! Kaida is the only sister I want!"

"Oh no, no take backs! I'm your sister now!" Fu laughed, as she continued her playful torture.

Eventually, she decided to release the blond, who indignantly protested about Fu's childish antics, while the Taki kunoichi laughed her ass off.

"You're a psycho, did anybody tell you that?" Naruto asked, rubbing his sore scalp.

Fu shrugged. "Eh, I've been called worse," she nonchalantly replied. Then, she rubbed her chin as she started to hink. "Actually... no, I don't think I've been called worse than a psycho."

"Are you this rough with Shino too?" Naruto asked.

Fu snorted, before smiling condescendingly at Naruto. "Please, I'm MUCH rougher with him. Then again, Shino is manly enough to take in all my love," Fu proudly said, though Naruto could see the faint trace of a blush crossing her face. Naruto was going to ask something, but he noticed how the green haired girl's mood noticeably dropped. "Heh, now that you mention him... I wonder what is he doing now... and if he's okay..."

Naruto mentally kicked himself for bringing up the topic of Shino in such thoughtless fashion. Even if he also missed Hinata and was worried for her, Naruto knew Hinata was powerful enough to take care of any Akatsuki that dared to get close to her, Toneri included. Shino didn't have such power to rely on. Sighing, Naruto sat closer to his fellow jinchuriki.

"Hey, don't worry much about him. Shino is pretty strong. Plus, he isn't alone, he has all his teammates covering his back, as well as the rest of the people of the Ninja Alliance," Naruto reassured her.

"I know but... I still wish I could be there with them, and help them," Fu lamented.

"We will be there in no time," the blond said. "Though, I think Shino and the others would appreciate if we had faith in their abilities and trust them to be okay. I mean, I would hate if Hinata-hime or the rest of our friends didn't believe that I wouldn't be able to master the power of the Nine Tails."

"You know what? You're right!" Fu said, sounding determined. "I need to have faith in them, that they can hold the fort until we get there to help."

"Well said! I'm sure that they're kicking plenty of ass right now!"

...

Land of Frost

"Goddamit, we're getting our asses kicked by these guys!" Kiba complained.

The scouts of the Ninja Alliance had discovered another large force of Akatsuki moving towards Kumo. This time, they were moving through the Land of Frost, the only way to access the Land of Lightning through land. Naturally, the Supreme Commander moved the closest division to the Land of Frost, the Fifth Division commanded by Mifune, to stop them before they could set a foot on the Land of Lightning.

This army of Akatsuki appeared to be stronger than the ones fought by Kurotsuchi and Mei's divisions. Even if their numbers were roughly the same, the quality of their troops was significantly higher: there were far more Brute Zetsus on the vanguard and many Snipers on the rear guard, plus more of Toneri's Moon Puppets.

Naturally, there were also multiple reanimated ninjas, especially Uchihas and Hyugas who died during the Uchiha Coup d'etat a few years back. Soon the snowy forest became the third battlefield of the Fourth Ninja War.

Kakashi's Animal Squad had little trouble fighting against White Zetsu clones when Konoha was invaded by Akatsuki. They even took some of the Zetsu merged mutants with some well practiced teamwork and clever strategy. However, fighting against multiple Brute Zetsu was proving to be a completely different beast to tame.

"Fire Release: Blistering Firecat!"

Tamaki exhaled a massive wave of fire that took the shape of a giant firecat. The firecat dashed towards a trio of Brute Zetsu, leaving a trail of burned grass and thawed snow, before it clashed against its target, resulting in a fiery explosion. However, when the smoke vanished, while the giant Zetsu had burns over their bodies -and some parts of them were still on fire- the damage appeared to be minimal.

The closest Brute let out an inhuman roar, and slammed the ground with both fists. It sent an underground shockwave traveling forward, cracking the ground as it moved, while sending rocks and pebbles everywhere. Tamaki, Kiba and Shino were unable to dodge in time, and were thrown off balance.

"Everybody, get up before-" Kiba said, but he was interrupted when something blocked the sun. Looking upwards, he saw that the two other giant Zetsu were leaping at them, ready to smash them to pulp. "SHIT, RUN!"

The three teens and the one dog managed to run in different directions before they could be flattened by the large artificial humans, who opened a large crater when they violently landed down, sending a shower of rocks and pebbles in every direction. Soon, they were joined by the first one.

"Our normal jutsu won't work against these variant of Zetsu. Their strength and durability are simply out of the ordinary," Shino observed. A swarm of beetles emerged from under his shirt, and started to surround the giant Zetsu. However, it seemed they were unperturbed by the Aburame's attacks. "Not only their skin and

muscles protects them from external attacks, but their regeneration allows them to heal the attacks that do harm them. Look, the burns caused by Tamaki-san's jutsu have already disappeared."

Once again, the Zetsu Brutes charged towards the three Konoha ninja, their booming footsteps making the ground shake a little.

"Then what the hell are we going to do to beat them!?" Tamaki asked, as she dodged a brutal punch that opened another crater in the ground.

"Yeah, I refuse to rely on the Werewolf Form so early into the battle!" Kiba complained, with Akamaru barking empathically, as they tried to blindside a Brute. "Especially with such unworthy enemies!"

"Like I said before, if external attacks won't work, then you should rely on internal attacks instead," Shino said, while making a hand seal. "Aburame Secret Art: Parasitic Giant Beetles!"

Suddenly, the Brute Zetsu fighting against the Animal Squad stopped on their tracks, and started to scream in pain as they clutched their bodies. Then, Kiba and Tamaki watched in horror as gigantic beetles burst from their bodies, ripping them apart from the inside. Despite being enemies, it was such a gruesome display, Kiba and Tamaki were green around the gills.

"What... what was that?" Tamaki managed to ask.

"An improvement," Shino laconically replied, though he then decided he should elaborate. "In the past, I used my own chakra to enlarge my beetles. But now, I instead introduce the beetles inside the enemies' body, and have them drain their chakra instead to grow. The fact that their growth also destroys the enemies' body from the inside is an added bonus."

"Man... that's fucked up," Kiba said.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side again, Shino," Tamaki said, laughing nervously.

"Do not fret. I would never use this jutsu on a comrade," Shino said upon perceiving their uneasiness. With a hand seal, the giant beetles stood to attention for a second, before launching themselves against a nearby group of normal White Zetsu clones. Their screams soon filled the air. "Plus, we're in a war, fighting against an enemy that won't hesitate to throw at us everything they have. You should use your strongest jutsu from the get go if you feel it's necessary."

Kiba let out a sigh. "Well, guess I'll have to swallow my pri-EH!?" Kiba interrupted himself in shock, as he started to shake. Alamaru whined at him.

"Kiba? What's wrong?" A concerned Tamaki asked him.

"This scent... it can't be..." Kiba said almost in a whisper.

"Well, well, well, look at that. We meet again, Kakashi's brats," a familiar deep voice said.

Turning around, they saw Kakuzu, strongly gripping a terrified Kumo ninja by the neck. In a second, he pierced his victim's chest with his hand, plucking his still beating heart out of it. A mass of threads crawled his arm, took the heart, and buried it under his skin, before stitching the gap in his body.

"And that's the fifth one," the former Akatsuki said, satisfied with his work, before tossing the now lifeless Kumo ninja aside as if he was garbage. "Now I'm ready to get serious."

"Kakuzu..." Tamaki said. "Of course Akatsuki would resurrect their deceased members."

Kiba managed to shake off his shock, and put on a brave face. "Well, it doesn't matter! We already beat you before, and we shall do it

again! Plus, we're much stronger than we were when we first faced you!" Kiba yelled, and Akamaru barked in agreement.

"I wouldn't be so sure, Inuzuka brat," Kakuzu said, as he started to menacingly advance towards them. "You overestimate your contribution to that battle. It was mostly the jinchuriki of the Seven Tails and the Hyuga girl with the Tenseigan the ones who did me in, and I don't see either of them here. No ninja without that kind of power can face me and live to tell the tale. Plus, thanks to Impure World Resurrection it's impossible for me to die even if you destroy all my hearts."

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Kakuzu suddenly saw a giant fireball coming at him from above. Without panicking, he quickly made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Roaring Waterfall!"

Kakuzu opened his mouth, expelling a massive cone of torrential water, easily putting out the fireball before it could reach him. However, the undead Akatsuki heard the noise of a thousand birds chirping, and out of the water emerged a silver haired ninja with his hand coated in electricity, leaping directly at him.

"Lightning Blade!"

Kakuzu managed to cancel his water jutsu and jump back just before Kakashi Hatake slammed his electrified hand on the spot where he was standing, releasing lightning bolts in every direction that teared the very earth apart.

"Of course, Hatake wouldn't be that far away from his students, would he?" Kakuzu said with a chuckle. "I see you still rely on that noisy lightning jutsu."

"They're right, Kakuzu. We already beat you once, and we will do it again. You were already a relic from a time long past when you were

alive," Kakashi said, as he pierced Kakuzu with his glare, while his students moved to stand besides him, adopting fighting poses. "We don't need Fu nor Hinata to put you down!"

"You forget that this isn't like the last time. I'm far from the only enemy you have to face. In fact," Kakuzu's eyes focused on Kakashi. "There's a certain somebody who has been revived for the express purpose of fighting you, Kakashi."

As soon as those words left Kakuzu's lips, a man in a Konoha uniform with white hair dashed past him and charged at Kakashi, wielding a tanto that left a trail of white light as it moved. Kakashi was fast enough to pull a kunai and parry the blow before it could cut him open, but the force of the stranger's onslaught was so big, Kakashi was pushed away from his students.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Tamaki screamed.

"Wait, who the hell is that guy!?" Kiba asked.

At first Kakashi didn't notice who was this new enemy, but after refocusing his sight on him, the silver haired Jonin felt his heart skip a beat. Looking at him with an expression of sorrow was a man with white hair tied on a spiky ponytail, that resembled an older version Kakashi.

"F-Father?" Kakashi stammered.

"Hello, son. Despite the horrible circumstances, I'm happy for the chance to see you again. You've grown quite a lot," the reanimation said, letting out a tear.

Kakashi was too stunned to say anything, though fortunately, not enough as to not defend himself from Sakumo's flurry of swipes, who pushed Kakashi even further away from his students. One of them had already realized the identity of the newcomer.

"That's Sakumo Hatake, the White Fang of Konoha, Kakashi-sensei's late father," Shino said, as he adjusted his glasses. "A hero of the Second Ninja war, strong enough to be considered a candidate for Hokage."

"Then there's no way Kakashi-sensei can beat him alone! Come on, we need to help him!" Tamaki urged, as she was ready to go after her sensei.

However, before either she or her teammates could move any further, their way was cut by two of Kakuzu's masked monsters landing in front of them, and another two to the sides, leaving them surrounded.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't let you leave," Kakuzu said in a mocking tone. "Let's give the White Fang and his son some privacy to catch up. Don't worry about your sensei, you will die much sooner than he will."

The four masked monsters charged at Kakashi's students.

...

Meanwhile, at another side of the battleground, Mifune, commander of the Fifth Division, was leading his fellow Samurai against an horde of White Zetsu clones, supported by several Zetsu Brutes, and some Moon Puppets. The White Zetsu were able to morph their arms into long organic blades to parry the swords of the Samurai, and use them to try and skewer them.

The Shogun of the Land of Iron was trading blows with a couple of Moon Puppets, one of them fighting in close combat with a sword made of golden chakra, while another peppered the area with explosive spheres made of the same chakra as well.

"For not being human, I admit you have quite some dexterity," Mifune said as he parried a blow from his enemy, his own katana glowing blue as he channeled chakra through it.

The puppet pushed the katana away and delivered a brutal kick to the old Samurai's stomach, tossing him into the ground. The second puppet conjured a cluster of golden chakra spheres and made them rain over the fallen Samurai.

While Mifune was old, he was far from defenseless. Jumping back to his feet, he fell back as he parried the golden blasts he was unable to dodge in time. Several Samurai, who were seeing their leader in trouble, tried to offer him some assistance, but were stopped by the multitude of White Zetsu littering the battlefield.

"Mifune-sama is in trouble! Whoever can help him, do so!" A samurai captain, who stood out by his blood red armor, called while he delivered a swing of his chakra-enhanced axe at a Zetsu Brute.

"No! Your help is appreciated, but not needed! Samurai, you have your duty, and protecting me is not part of it right now!" Mifune cried, as his sword started to glow brighter as more chakra was channeled through it, while the puppet swordsman dashed at him. "Akatsuki needs more than this unworthy foe to bring me to my knees!"

Mifune rushed forward, ready to meet the enemy. When he was close enough, but not enough for his enemy to strike him, he delivered an horizontal swing.

"DANCING BLADE RISK!"

There was a brief but intense flash of light, and Mifune appeared between the two puppets, who stopped on their tracks. Then, after a few seconds, both human-shaped machines crumbled down into a pile of sliced parts.

"Amazing," a nearby samurai thought. "By releasing the chakra channeled into his sword in the shape of a thin wave, Mifune-sama can slash down an enemy out of the reach of his sword with the same force as if it was in striking distance. He was right, we shouldn't worry about his well being."

Mifune proved this line thought true when, in a single swift swing, managed to slice to pieces more Zetsu -this time, the normal variant-who lunged at him from multiple directions. However, the next enemy Mifune would have to face would prove to be more challenging than the weakest variant of White Zetsu clone.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

The old Samurai managed to jump back just in time before several small fireballs rained upon the zone, exploding as they touched the ground, but the attack didn't stop there; from the smoke, multiple shuriken emerged, flying at Mifune, making a metallic whirring noise. Channeling more chakra into his katana, the Shogun of the Land of Iron spun his blade, deflecting the steel stars. As the smoke created by the fireballs started to vanish, Mifune raised his katana in a defensive stance, as his opponents came into view and looked at them with a critical eye.

His two new foes were a pair of men, one in his twenties and another good fifteen years older, both wearing a ninja uniform that looked like that wore by Konoha ninjas, except the flak jacket was black instead of green, and the crest on the forehead protector was a fan rather than Konoha's symbol. Still, the red color of the Sharingan, made even more visible by their black scleras, was a dead given for their identities.

"Uchihas," Mifune said, mostly to himself.

"Yeah, it seems that this is our punishment for following that shit Fugaku's lead and try to overtake Konoha," the younger Uchiha said. "Not only we wasted our lives, but we aren't even allowed into the afterlife either."

"Do not disrespect our leader that way!" the older Uchiha chided his younger counterpart. "Fugaku-sama always wanted the best for the clan, and acted accordingly."

"And that worked so well for us did it?" the younger Uchiha snapped, before he felt his body tensing up. He looked at Mifune. "Whoops. Sorry old man. Nothing personal, I don't know who you are -in fact, you don't even look to be a ninja- but whoever's controlling my body wants you dead."

"You should know that, no matter how much you harm us, our wounds will heal in mere moments," the older Uchiha reminded him. "If you value your life, you should try to flee."

"Thanks for your advice. Your concern for my wellbeing is appreciated, but it won't be necessary," Mifune said, as he prepared for the inevitable charge. "Do not worry, soon you'll be back to the place you belong to."

In a blur, the older Uchiha pulled a kunai and dashed at Mifune, who parried the surprisingly powerful blow in time.

" *Don't look into his eyes!*" the Shogun reminded himself, recalling everything he knew of the now near extinct clan. As he struggled against the older Uchiha in a blade lock, Mifune noticed that the younger one had leaped above him, wielding a kunai on each hand, ready to strike him from above. He tried to disengage and fall back, but his opponent was skilled enough not to let him to.

"Sorry old man, but this is-ARGH!"

The younger Uchiha, still mid air, was interrupted when a black sphere with a faint purple gleam smashed into his arm, tearing it from his body. Three more spheres followed the first one, each blowing a hole in his body, tearing it to pieces. The orbs then flew at the older Uchiha, carefully maneuvering around Mifune, destroying the zombie's arms, heads, and finally body. Neither Uchiha regenerated.

"These are the so called Truth Seeking Balls," Mifune said in realization. "Then that means..."

"... aaaaaand, you're welcome," a youthful voice said.

Mifune looked upwards, and saw Hanabi Hyuga floating above him, hands on her hips, and one leg slowly raised, her body language displaying the typical cockiness you get by mixing unbound power and youth. The four Truth Seeking Balls quickly returned to her, placing themselves behind the young girl's back.

"Hanab Hyuga," Mifune said, as he locked eyes with her. "While I appreciate your assistance, shouldn't you be in your post above the battlefield?"

"Eh, that's why I wanted to talk with you, commander. You see, I caught a pretty big force of flying Zetsu coming here from the south," Hanabi said, Mifune opening his eyes wide. "Soon the skies will belong to Akatsuki. I will try to hold them back, but I alone won't be able to take care of such a multitude. They'll be here in a few minutes, so you should use that time, little as it is, to prepare a way to deal with them."

"Do not worry, young Hanabi, we already foresaw this situation. For the time being, return to the skies and try to eliminate as many airborne enemies as your capabilities allow you," the wizened Samurai said. After the first battle, Jiraiya and the rest of advisors decided to formulate a counter-strategy to curb Akatsuki's newfound aerial superiority. Once it was done, every commander, Mifune included, was told to alert HQ if Akatsuki deployed their air force again.

"Aye aye, commander," Hanabi said, before returning to the sky.

"Somebody contact the communication officer and send an urgent message to HQ!" Mifune bellowed, catching the attention of several nearby ninjas and samurai. "Akatsuki is sending their air force against us, so be prepared!"

"Yes, commander!" a chorus of voices replied.

For the next few minutes, the battle continued normally, when suddenly a chain of explosions shook the ground, sending both Allied ninjas and samurai as well as White Zetsu clones flying in every direction. And from the cloud of smoke raised by said explosions emerged a man that Mifune knew too well. A man wearing an old fashioned Amegakure uniform, the lower part of his face obscured by a respirator. His hands were carrying a menacing-looking kusarigama.

"Ah, samurai," the masked man said. "This certainly brings out memories!"

"Hanzo..." Mifune said, almost in a whisper.

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Ninja Alliance HQ

"Hokage-sama, we have a report from Mifune of the Fifth Division!" Santa Yamanaka, the HQ's communication officer, yelled. The man was sitting down with a helmet that had multiple cables connected to it, whose purpose was to amplify the Yamanaka's mental powers in order to enable long range telepathy for communication.

"What is it?" Jiraiya asked, though he already could imagine what it could be.

"A large group of the winged variant of White Zetsus have been spotted moving towards their position," Santa replied. "They're also supported by many Moon Puppets riding on flying mechanical bird-like creatures."

"Just like the other time, Akatsuki will want to end this battle through aerial superiority," Onoki guessed. "The last time, it wasn't enough."

"But this time, the ground forces our ninjas are fighting are much stronger and numerous than the first battle with Kurotsuchi's division," Shikaku guessed. "There's only one ninja in that division

that can fly, Hanabi Hyuga. And while the girl is one of our most powerful ninjas, not even her will be able to face or even hold such a numerous enemy on her own. This may tip the balance in Akatsuki's favor."

Jiraiya smirked confidently. "Fortunately, I already devised a counter-strategy for this, since I knew it would happen again. Santa, contact Suzumebachi! Tell her to move her division to support Mifune!"

"Wait, wait, wait..." Chiyo interrupted. "Did you create another division? And you handed it to that girl with the bees?"

"Indeed. We believed she was the most suited person to lead it," Ao intervened. "Other than Konan, but we don't want a former Akatsuki in a position of power."

"What kind of division? How it is going to be of help here?" Onoki asked.

Jiraiya's smirk widened. "Easy. We'll counter Akatsuki's air force with one of our own."

...

Back in the Land of Frost

Kakuzu watched as his masked monsters attacked Kakashi's three students from four different sides, pelting them with fireballs, air blasts, streams of water and lightning bolts. So far, they did a good job dodging them, but the creatures' attack was so relentless that the three young ninja were unable to strike back. From time to time, whenever Kakuzu saw an opening, he'll try to land a hit, though they were agile enough to dodge them.

"I might be immortal now, but unlike that fool Hidan, I'm not going to let it turn me into a reckless idiot. Reanimations might not be able to die, but they can be sealed if they're weakened enough. Though,

speaking of Hidan..." Kakuzu thought. "Hey, brats, what happened with Hidan?"

Despite being harrassed by many sides by Kakuzu's creatures, Shino took the time to answer the undead Akatsuki.

"Your partner fell at the same time you did. We might have not been able to put him down for good like we did with you, but we found a way to incapacitate him permanently," Shino explained as he dodged a pressurized stream of water, which grazed his hood, leaving a small cut.

Kakuzu let out a sigh. "Somehow, I found that easy to believe. That idiot wouldn't last a second without me holding his hand. Anyway, that's in the past... and so will you soon enough," the undead ninja threatened, before bringing his hands together and forming a hand seal.

Suddenly, two of the masked creatures jumped away, while the other two placed themselves in front of Kakuzu, and opened their mouths. Shino immediately recognized what Kakuzu was trying to do.

"Kiba, Tamaki, watch out! Those masks are the ones using Fire and Wind Release. He plans a combined attack to unleash a blaze of fire with a wide are of effect," Shino said. He bit his thumb and made a five hand seals, before slamming his palm into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

While fire and wind were building up on the monsters' mouths, a giant beetle appeared under Shino's feet.

"Quickly, get on the-"

"Too late! Die!" Kakuzu said.

The two masked creatures unleashed a stream of fire and a cone of gale forced winds. The two attacks merged, the wind amplifying the fire, generating an impressive wall of fire that expanded in a cone

forward, scorching the earth as it moved, as well as consuming every tree or plant it touched almost instantly. Shino's beetle took no time to fly upwards, narrowly avoiding the wall of fire, but the same couldn't be said of Kiba and Tamaki.

"NO!" Shino shouted from above.

Kakuzu snorted a laugh, as he commanded his creatures to cease the attack. As the fire dispelled, it was obvious that nothing had survived the fiery assault. "Well, two out of three with this attack. Guess taking down an aerial target is going to be a little-"

Suddenly, the ground started to shake, and cracks started to form in front of the masked creatures. Kakuzu immediately realized what was coming, but wasn't fast enough to command his monsters to dodge, as two tornadoes coated in electricity pierced them as the loud screech of thousand birds filled the air.

"Fang Passing Chidori!"

"Chidori Drill Claw!"

There was an explosion of thread, gore and lightning bolts as two of Kakuzu's monsters were completely destroyed. The two electrical tornadoes stopped spinning, revealing to be Kiba and Tamaki. A second later, Akamaru climbed out of the hole Kiba emerged from.

"What the...?" Kakuzu asked in shock, stumbling back. His eyes looked at the holes from where the two young ninjas had come out. "Oh, I see. You escaped from my wall of fire by digging underground. Clever. Very clever. And that jutsu that looked like Kakashi's..."

"The Hiding Like a Mole jutsu is a very useful technique. Even if you don't have Earth affinity, it can be learned quickly and used very easily," Tamaki boasted. "And it's better for ambushes than the Body Replacement Jutsu."

"And yeah, the Chidori can't be used unless you have a Sharingan or something to avoid the tunnel vision thing," Kiba continued. "But guess what? The Chidori is perfect to add more edge to our physical jutsu. It won't work as an assassination jutsu anymore, but who cares? We're in a war, not infiltrating some closed place."

"I can't believe I lost two hearts so soon to you two again, almost using the same jutsu you did the first time," Kakuzu's two remaining monsters jumped back to him, standing at each side.

Shino's giant beetle lowered so it floated a couple meters above Kiba and Tamaki.

"You were very overconfident in your abilities and experience in life, and it seems that death didn't change such an attitude," Shino admonished. "That's why you're destined to lose against us again. We're much stronger than we were when we battled with you and Hidan in Taki."

"Well said, Shino!" Tamaki agreed.

As they prepared to strike Kakuzu and his two remaining creatures down for good, the sky suddenly darkened. Looking up, the members of the Animal Squad saw a mass of flying White Zetsu clones flocking the sky.

"Well, well, well, look at that. Some excellently timed reinforcements. While you have fun dealing with them, I think I'll restock on the hearts you made me lose," Kakuzu said, as he looked around. "Yes, there are many ninja already dead around that won't miss their hearts," he said before leaping away, his masked creatures trailing behind him.

"Hey, get back here, you bastard! Everyone, after him!" Kiba yelled, Akamaru loudly barking in agreement.

However, before they could run after the undead Akatsuki, the three Konoha Chunin were stopped by several flying Zetsu swooping at

them from below.

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High in the sky, Hanabi was trying to hold back the horde of flying Zetsu from reaching the ground. She decided that using her most powerful jutsu so far would be a good way to thin their numbers.

"Turquoise Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Hanabi's four Truth Seeking Balls spun around each other, coming closer until they merged into single energy orb. Said orb exploded into a torrent of light blue flames that spreaded forwards in a wide cone. Many flying Zetsu were caught by the blue blazes, being reduced to ashes almost instantly. However, once the flames dispelled, Hanabi saw much to her shock and frustration that many more still remained, flying at her while hollering something the young Hyuga couldn't undestand among so much noise.

She made several hand seals as fast as her hands allowed her, and generated four more Truth Seeking Balls. Despite the Tenseigan coming with a rather hefty and welcome expansion to her chakra pools, Tenseigan jutsu consumed a heavy amount of chakra, and weren't something that could be spammed endlessly. Given how relatively little that first jutsu did to the enemy, she better approach this more carefully.

"Okay, that didn't do much, but what can I-YEOWCH!" the young Hyuga shouted as a golden chakra blast grazed her skin. "What the hell!?" Focusing her sight on the direction from the blast, Hanabi saw several Moon Puppets riding flying mechanical contraptions, while also preparing a barrage of blasts. "Aw damn, I forgot about those guys. They're far more troublesome than the Zetsu. And if I focus on them, the flying Zetsu will go after the people fighting on the ground... well, I guess there's no trying to fool myself into thinking I could hold this many enemies on my own."

Merging two of her two Truth Seeking Balls, she formed a shield shaped like a dome in front of her, and flew towards the incoming Moon Puppets, who greeted her with a storm of golden chakra blasts. However, her improvised shield was enough to block the enemies' attack, and slammed her shield into the closest enemy, destroying it to bits. She then split the shield back into the orbs, shaped them and the other two into spears, and threw them into different directions, impaling the puppets and reducing them to small pieces of scrap.

Not all the flying Zetsu dived down, though; some of them remained in the air, waiting for the puppets to offer an opportunity to strike. And now that the brown haired girl was no longer using those pesky black orbs for protection, it was time to attack.

"She's vulnerable now! After her!" a voice said.

"Not as vulnerable as you think!" Hanabi retorted, as she started to spin around while releasing chakra from every tenketsu. Soon, she turned into a spinning sphere of chakra. "Heavenly Spin!"

The Zetsu unfortunate enough to be close to her were blown away with an incredible force, as if a giant hand swatted a mosquito. Those not as close but still near were also blown away by the jutsu's shockwave, though many recovered just as fast. Then, Hanabi's spin speed started to drop.

"Now she's defenseless! Go!" another Zetsu said.

"Huh?" Hanabi asked, before she realized mid-spin that the Zetsu was right. "Aw, shit!" Hanabi cursed, forcefully stopping her spinning, which resulted in a brief feeling of dizziness. Having seen the White Zetsu flocking towards her, but not having the time to recall her orbs, she thrust an open palm in their direction. "Vacuum Palm!"

Hanabi released a powerful conical vacuum wave towards the White Zetsu, managing to violently push backwards many of them, but did

little to stop those on the back, as well as those who dodged, who were starting to converge on her.

"Come, Truth Seeking Balls, come back to- huh?" Hanabi asked, as her expanded vision noticed something floating above her: a blue haired woman flying thanks to large wings made of paper attached to her back. While she didn't meet this woman, she had an idea of who she was.

"Paper Drizzle!"

The blue haired woman flapped her wings once, unleashing a massive storm of razor paper darts, thrown with such accuracy that while they hit every Zetsu close to Hanabi -which was torn to shreds-, Hanabi was left completely untouched. The woman then lowered to Hanabi's altitude, floating besides her.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, thanks for the assist," Hanabi replied, looking a bit uneasy.
"You're the ex-Akatsuki, right? Konan."

"Yes," was her only answer.

Hanabi's stare darkened a little. "My sister told me about you. She fought you and the one with the Rinnegan once. She barely made it out alive."

"You must be talking about Hinata Hyuga. And if you have a Tenseigan, you must be her little sister. Though I'm afraid I don't know your name."

"Hanabi," the young girl replied.

"Alright, Hanabi-san. I'm not going to apologize for fighting your sister that one time. The two of us fought for what believed was right, and she wouldn't have hesitated to kill me if she had the chance. I do acknowledge that she was on the right side, and I do deeply regret

the lives I put to an end, or helped others to end," Konan said, before fixing the young hyuga with an unreadable stare. "I do hope that for as long as the war lasts, we can cooperate so this conflict can end as soon as possible. And once such thing happens, if the two of us are alive and want to settle the score, I'll welcome you to fight me."

Hanabi crossed her arms, and frowned. "I do know that Akatsuki is the biggest threat right now, and you're important to beat them, so you won't have to worry about me trying to kill you in the middle of the battle and passing it off as an accident or whatever. Though, I may take on that offer once the war ends."

Konan wordlessly nodded, and looked forward, where more flying Zetsu had gathered. They were all fixing Konan with a hateful glare.

"You! What are you doing here!?"

"You betrayed us!"

"No one betrays Akatsuki and lives!"

"Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! Traitor!"

All the flying Zetsu felt prey to a collective rage, as they all swarmed towards the two floating kunoichi. Hanabi was a little startled, but Konan's face remained stoic and unimpressed. Her wings started to flap, releasing more small paper sheets like a bird molting its feathers. Said sheets of paper folded themselves into butterflies, and started to flock around the incoming Zetsu.

"Your words mean nothing to me. You're just disposable mooks, your fate sealed since the moment you were born," Konan said, making a hand seal. "Now perish!"

The origami butterflies glowed for a second, before they exploded. For almost two minutes, Konan unleashed a chain of uninterrupted explosions. The Zetsu unfortunate enough to be caught by the blast screamed in agony, but their voices were drowned by the thunderous

explosions. By the time they ended, there were no Zetsu left. Those had survived got the message, and realized that Konan was too much for them.

"Wow..." Hanabi said in awe.

"The skies are clear! Ninja Allied Air Force, advance and support the ground troops!" Konan said.

It was that moment when Hanabi noticed a large group of ninjas approaching from behind, some of them riding giant beetles -he could tell those were Aburames, given their appearance, clothing and of course, the shades-, others giant bees, while others rode different flying animals like a bat, a pelican, a dragonfly, and so on. The one leading the division was an Iwa kunoichi riding on a giant bee.

"Squads three and four, make sure the sky is free of the Akatsuki!" the Iwa woman commanded. "Everybody else, follow me, do not lag behind! That goes for you, Aburames!"

Despite the woman's orders, Konan made no attempt to follow her. Instead, she looked at Hanabi, and asked: "I know for a fact that Hanzo of the Salamander is here, raised as an undead. Hanabi-san, can you do me a favor and locate him? I imagine you do know what he looks like."

"Eh, sure," Hanabi said, as her Tenseigan scanned the battlefield, and in no time, he found him. "Got him! He's on the western part of the battlefield. He's fighting Mifune-sama and a few of his samurai."

"Understood, thanks for your assistance," Konan said with a nod, before he diving towards the direction Hanabi said.

Hanabi pondered for a second what she should do now, if staying in the air, or go down and try to permanently destroy some of those reanimations. Her eyes caught the portion of the air force that that

Iwa woman left there, facing against several flying White Zetsu and even more Moon Puppets.

"Those guys are going to be big trouble if we don't deal with them quickly. The people below can take care of the ground forces," Hanabi said, making her mind, before flying to assist her fellow Allied ninjas.

...

"Water Release: Watercutting Sword!"

The snow around Shibuki quickly melt, turning into water, before gathering on Shibuki's hand, taking an elongating shape, before it formed a sword, just in time as a Zetsu with blade-like arms dropped from above. Despite being made of water, said sword proved to be as hard as steel, and effectively parried the blow from the organic blade. The two of them struggled for a bit, before Shibuki managed to push the Zetsu back. Undeterred, the artificial human charged again, letting out a primal yell to intimidate his opponent. Shibuki, however, ducked the incoming swing, and with a strike of his own, separated the upper half of the artificial creature's body from the lower part, killing it instantly.

"Okay, that was one," Shizuki said, panting a little, as he looked around. His eyes were not so greeted to the sight of many more Zetsu fighting Allied ninjas, as casualties for both sides happened each second. "Thousands still left."

As the Takigakure leader scanned the battleground for his next target -maybe ninjas of his own village that may need his help-, something drew his attention: several Allied ninjas fighting against a single opponent he couldn't see, but instantly recognized the jutsu he was about to use.

"Water Release: Lotus Light Rupture!"

Droplets of water started to form around the group, which took the form of lotus petals. Said water petals started to spin around, unexpectedly exploding when they touched their unfortunate victims. Shibuki paled upon seeing that jutsu, not because of its sheer power, but because he already saw it before. And most importantly, who was the one behind its creation and use. As the young Takigakure leader ran forward, the smoke of the explosions faded away, revealing the caster of the jutsu, confirming Shibuki's fears.

"No... not you..." Shibuki cried, as he tried to suppress the tears forming inside his eyes. "Father..."

Because in front of him, sporting cracked skin and black eyes, was a middle aged man with graying brown hair, a brown goatee, wearing a Takigakure forehead protector around his head, as well as the Takigakure Jonin uniform. This was his deceased father Hisen, the previous leader of Takigakure, who tragically died during the Third Ninja War due the backlash caused by the Hero Water. Hisen seemed to notice his son, and smiled wearily.

"Shibuki? Is that you, my boy?" Hisen asked. Shibuki wordlessly nodded. "I'm very happy to see that you're alive and well. And what a fine man you grew up into."

Despite the sincere praise, Shibuki flinched at those words.

"I... I tried to be a strong ninja like you, father," Shibuki began. "And to be a strong leader as well. But-"

Hisen's eyes widened, as a blade of water formed in his hand, and dashed towards his son. "Watch out, boy!"

Fortunately, Shibuki still had his water blade, and managed to parry the blow just in time. Father and son traded more blows, though it was obvious that Hisen was both the stronger and more skilled of the two, as evidenced by Shibuki being pushed back with each strike.

"You're a strong ninja, son. And I'm sure that you'll eventually surpass me," Hisen encouraged.

"Sadly that's not true. I'm too weak, and a horrible leader," Shibuki said. "Akatsuki attacked our home, and ravaged it to the ground."

"No!" Hisen shouted in horror. "Is Taki truly gone, then?"

Shibuki shook his head. "We managed to retake it, and began its reconstruction, but... we were unable to do it without Konoha's help. We needed somebody else to fight our battles and deal with our enemies."

"Son, do not be afraid nor ashamed of asking for help when an enemy proves to be too much for you alone to beat," Hisen said, as he continued his onslaught. "The safety of Taki's people should be your first priority. Did asking Konoha for help prevented unnecessary deaths?"

Shibuki wordlessly nodded, as he did his best to parry his father's attack. During one of his blows, Shibuki instead moved to the side, letting his undead father trip forward. Hisen tried to regain his balance, but Shibuki landed a powerful hit to the side of his face, sending the gray haired man bouncing against the ground. Taking advantage of this moment of helplessness, he weaved several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

The snow around him turned into water, and gathered in the shape of spinning shuriken. Hisen managed to get back on his feet and dodge some of them, but several found their marks, leaving large gashes on his shoulder and legs. However, said wounds took no time to close.

"I know the people of Taki are important, father, but... what will the world think of us if we're so helpless?" Shibuki asked. "How can I help the people of Taki, if I keep our village weak?"

"A weak village can become strong later on! A destroyed village will remain a forever ruin!" Hisen angrily snapped back, as he started to make hand seals. "Son, you know the next jutsu I'm going to use, so I pray you're able to counter it. I don't want to see you die, by my own hand no less. Water Release: Lotus Light Rupture!"

Droplets of water started to form around Shibuki, spinning around him as they took the shape of lotus petals. Fortunately for the young Village Head, he knew what to do in order to protect himself from such attack.

"Water Release: Water Tornado!"

A twister of water formed around Shibuki just in time before the water lotus petals exploded, shielding him from the chain of blasts. When the tornado of water receded, Shibuki wasn't any worse for the wear.

"That's my son," Hisen whispered, smiling in satisfaction and some pride, before the two of them continued their duel.

...

As Kakashi and Sakumo engaged in their own personal duel, they started to move away from the main battleground little by little. The two white haired ninjas took the fight above the ground, jumping from one tree branch to another, trading punches, kicks, bladed strikes, and sometimes ninjutsu. After Kakashi parried yet another blow from Sakumo, the two of them landed on a nearby branch each. Kakashi braced for his father's next attack, but it didn't come.

"Even as a boy, you were such a strong and talented ninja, Kakashi," Sakumo replied. "I always wondered just how strong you'd be when you reached your prime. I'm glad I got to see it, even if it's in such wretched situation."

"Then it's good to see that at least one of us sees the bright side of this situation, father," Kakashi replied. "I was praying that

Orochimaru wouldn't bring you back, but given your reputation and skill, it was a fool's hope."

"No hope is ever foolish, son. Losing hope is," Sakumo replied.

"You're not the best one to talk about losing hope, father," Kakashi replied, as he started making hand seals. If Sakumo wouldn't attack him, then he'd take the initiative. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Calling forth the Uchiha Clan's signature attack, Kakashi breathed a massive fireball at his opponent. Sakumo's reflexes didn't let him down, and prepared another attack to counter it. After making the hand seals, he brought his hands together, the two index fingers pointing forward, as they crackled with electricity.

"Lightning Release: Piercing Light Spear!"

From the tip of his fingers, Sakumo fired a lightning bolt that flew in a straight line forward, piercing the fireball, making it burst into dozens of harmless embers, before continuing forward. However, he saw that his son was nowhere to be seen.

" *So, the fireball was just a distraction, huh?*" Sakumo thought, as his body tensed up, bracing for the incoming attack. "*Now where did he...?*"

Without even turning around, Sakumo thrust his tanto backwards, channeling chakra through it in order to increase the range of his blade, which indeed stabbed into something.

"I hope that wasn't the real you, son," Sakumo said.

To answer his question, Kakashi started to crackle, before he exploded into a burst of lightning, coating Sakumo in electricity. He tried to move, but the electricity severely impaired his movement. Sakumo managed to bring his hands together and form a hand seal. In an instant, the electricity coating his body moved onto his of his tanto, forming a blade made of lightning, and swung it upwards, just

in time to parry Kakashi's lightning-enhanced kunai strike, resulting in an explosion of lightning bolts that sent both men flying into opposite directions, both landing onto the cold ground below on their backs. The two of them both jumped onto their feet, and got ready to continue their clash.

"You know, son, I have the feeling that you're not very happy to see me," Sakumo said, sounding a little sorrowful. "And I don't mean being forced to fight against me."

"What I feel right now is irrelevant. All that matters is that I need to put you down, since your existence is a threat to the Ninja Alliance," Kakashi said, lifting his forehead protector covering his left eye, revealing his Sharingan. Sakumo's eyes widene upon seeing it. "Until now, I was merely probing you, testing your strength. The real fight begins now, father."

And, after banishing the torrent of conflicting emotions to the back of his mind, Kakashi charged towards his father, ready to send him back to the place he belongs.

Author's Note: Yeah, as many people correctly guessed, Kakashi will have to fight his father. In canon he had that chat with him when he briefly died during the Pain Assault, but no such thing happened here, so time to face those daddy issues. Then again, there were a few things that the manga didn't touch that I feel should be addressed.

As for Kiba and Tamaki having a version of Chidori, you can have DryBonesKing to thank for the idea. He suggested that it would be nice if Kakashi got to pass his signature jutsu to his pupils, given that Sasuke isn't his student this time around (but then again, Sasuke used the Chidori for evil stuff, so it would have been better if the didn't teach it to him). Of course, I had to modify it to get around the limitations of a lack of Sharingan, but guess that I came up with something workable.

So yeah, next chapter, the Kakashi vs Sakumo battle in full, as well as the resolution of the minor battles.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

If you liked what you read, please leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Lightning Clash

Author's Note: Yeah, I'm aware I have several PMs that I need to reply. I'll try to answer them as soon as possible.

In the meantime, enjoy the next chapter:

Chapter 108:

Lightning Clash

or

Father's Day Special

"Come on Akamaru, let's go! Human Beast Combination Transformation: Berserker Werewolf!"

"Let's do it Hina! Human Beast Combination Transformation: Cat Warrior!"

Kiba and Tamaki merged with their animal companions, and after a brief burst of smoke, their human forms were gone, replaced by their animal-like forms. Wasting no time, the two teens leaped forward, ready to rip the flying Zetsu to shreds.

"Hey Tamaki," Kiba said, as he teared the wings from a particularly unlucky Zetsu clone. "I bet I can kill more of these things than you do!"

The cat kunoichi wasn't somebody to leave such challenge unanswered, especially if it came from her long time rival. "Oh, you're on!"

The corpses of the White Zetsu clones started to pile around them as they fought with all their strength. Watching from above, Shino

shook his head upon seeing how his teammates once again made light of a dire situation for the sake of one-upping the other. Then again, given their drive and the gusto they were slaying Zetsu clones with, maybe that was a good thing.

"Guess I can stop worrying about them, and focus on the enemy at hand," Shino thought. With a hand seal, he directed his remaining giant beetles to fight against the flying White Zetsu surrounding him. Several tried to attack him from multiple directions, but Shino already had a way to counter them. Spreading his arms, swarms of beetles emerged from under his sleeves, and started to fly around him and his giant beetle, almost like forming a protective barrier. "I'm sorry, but you won't be able to land a solid hit on me no matter where you attack me from."

Such boast proved to be his undoing, as something from below violently hit his giant beetle, causing it to lose balance and accidentally drop Shino to the ground. While he wasn't flying so high to worry about the fall harming him in any serious way, it still hurt.

"Ugh... I dropped my guard..." Shino chastised himself, as he adjusted his shades, while getting to his feet as quickly as he could. He was in a very vulnerable position. He scanned the battleground to see how he had taken him down, and found his answer when he saw Kakuzu with his right arm raised, just as his right fist reattached itself to it. "You..."

"I grew to hate airborne targets. I also grew to hate the people that were involved in my death," Kakuzu said with an angry snarl, as his two remaining monstrosities landed besides him. "And guess what, you happened to be both."

Without having to ask for help, Shino's summoned beetle instantly dived from above towards Kakuzu. And without Kakuzu having to order them to do it, his remaining masked monsters released a torrent of water and a storm of lightning bolts, forcing the oversized coleopterous to change course and fly away in order to avoid the attacks.

"You know, I always felt that people who held grudges were fools, that let petty revenge get in the way of the truly important things in life, like wealth," Kakuzu began, as he started to advance towards Shino. "But given my current state, I think I'm going to indulge into revenge just this time. You'll be a good starting point. Then, the mutt and the cat girl. I shall present your decapitated heads to Kakashi, if he survives his encounter with his father, that's it."

Shino took a step back, and made a hand seal. Kakuzu raised his arm again, and fired his hand at Shino.

"I know you're a ranged fighter, hence the first order of business is to bring you to hand to hand distance!" Kakuzu said.

"Thousand Bee Stings Jutsu!"

Suddenly, multiple razor sharp stings rained over Kakuzu, forcing the former Taki ninja to jump back. He managed to harden his skin in order to make sure the surprise attack didn't harm him, but his jutsu didn't extend to the threads holding his body parts together, and the threads connecting his arm and forearm to the rest of the arm were severed, leaving him one armed.

"Dammit! What the hell was-?"

Suddenly, Kakuzu found himself staring at a gigantic bee, with a smirking Iwa kunoichi riding on its back. Before Kakuzu had time to react, the bee opened its jaws, releasing a torrent of sticky honey that left the undead ninja pinned to the ground.

Thankfully, his masked monsters sensed their master's plight, and quickly went to aid him. Unfortunately for them, the newcomer wasn't going to let them release her prey.

"Sorry Kakuzu, but that's not gonna happen. I read your entry of the bingo book, and I know about those things you create with the heart of your enemies," the giant bee rider said as she made several hand seals. "Bee Bomb Jutsu!"

Suddenly, a swarm of bees appeared out of seemingly nowhere, split in two groups and flew towards the incoming masked monsters. Both Shino and Kakuzu realized that most of the bees were carrying explosive seals. Kakuzu tried to order his minions to turn back, but it was too late. The bees latched onto them, and the Iwa ninja triggered the explosive tags. Kakuzu's monsters were engulfed by a multitude of explosions, reducing them to charred remains.

Before anything could happen, Shino rushed towards the trapped Kakuzu and placed several chakra suppressing sealing tags onto the honey trap, which would ensure that the former Akatsuki wouldn't be able to brute force the way out of the trap. The giant bee lowered its position almost close to ground level, and Shino could hear the woman letting out a mocking laugh.

"An Aburame saved by a member of the Kamizuru clan," the woman said in an almost taunting manner. "And not just any Aburame, but the heir to the clan. How does it feel?"

Shino adjusted his glasses, and looked at his savior. She recognized her as Suzumebachi Kamizuru, current leader of what was left of the Kamizuru clan.

"Regardless of our respective clans' past history, I will always be grateful towards anybody that helps me in battle," Shino said, before crossing his arms and scowling a little. "However, you should do good in revising that attitude. We're allies now, fighting an enemy unlike any other. Petty squabbles have no room in the battleground."

Shino's dressing down erased Suzumebachi's smirk of superiority, and scoffed at him. "Hmpf. You Konoha scum are always so self righteous. I think I wasted enough time with you, brat. I have a battle to win."

As Suzumebachi and her giant bee returned to the skies, Shino shook his head before looking for his next opponent.

...

"A Sharingan," Sakumo said, dumbfounded. "Just... how? Did you take it from an Uchiha corpse or something? How is that the clan allowed you to keep it?"

"First of all, this eye is the parting gift of a precious friend," Kakashi began. He repressed the image of Obito as a member and currently leader of Akatsuki. Even to this day, even after fighting him, he still had a hard time reconciling with the fact that his teammate and the monster who started this war were the same person, and sometimes he refused to believe they were one and the same. "And second, the Uchiha clan no longer exists. As a big clan, at least. Their numbers can be counted with one hand."

"I did see plenty of Uchiha among the reanimations," Sakumo began. "Many Hyugas as well. Son... just what happened to Konoha?"

"Plenty of disasters befell the village. Fortunately, we managed to endure, and came out stronger as a result," Kakashi replied.

"It's a relief that at very least, you're still alive and well," Sakumo said, as his body tensed, ready to attack. "Make sure my body doesn't betray such statement!"

Sakumo leaped forward, his tanto leaving a trail of white light. Kakashi parried once again his father's weapon, and pulling a second kunai, he counter attacked with a series of quick swipes that Sakumo expertly parried, even knocking a kunai out of his hand, Kakashi wasn't deterred, and before parrying another blow from Sakumo, he pulled another kunai and used it to stab his father in the neck. Sakumo was fast enough to catch Kakashi by the wrist before he could do such a thing.

It was then when Sakumo realized that the second kunai had an explosive tag attached to it, which was already ignited. He opened his eyes widely, and tried to tell his son to avoid the explosion, but it proved to be unnecessary, as Kakashi disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving a log wrapped in more explosive tags.

There was an explosion, followed by a chain of more blasts, so powerful and in so quick succession that they took down several trees, clearing out a small area of the snow covered forest. From the ensuing cloud of smoke, Sakumo emerged, landing on the giant crater formed by the explosions. He wasn't incapacitated as Kakashi was hoping, but he definitely was far from unharmed. He was missing a whole arm -the one he was holding the White Chakra Saber with- as well as several chunks of his body, including part of his head. Such damage would have been enough to kill a normal man, but alas, it was insufficient for a reanimated ninja.

" Still, I managed to weaken him enough. All he needs is the final blow!" Kakashi thought, as he dashed at Sakumo from behind, his Sharingan focused on his still regenerating form, while electricity coated his right hand as he readied his signature ability. "Lightning Bla-"

"Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

Sakumo's body crackled with electricity for a fraction of a second, before a bright white light engulfed the area. The effect was even worse for Kakashi given his Sharingan, and instinctively stopped, cancelling his jutsu, and closing his eyes shut, but still getting ready for a counterattack as long as his blindness lasted.

" He was able to use that jutsu without using hand seals," Kakashi thought, as he gritted his teeth under his mask. *"Was he always this good, or am I underestimating him?"*

Kakashi opened his eyes slowly, and was greeted by a blurry sight. The copy ninja directed chakra into his eyes in order to restore his eyesight faster, but when the blurry vision was gone, so was Sakumo.

"You're fighting full of anger, son," Kakashi heard Sakumo's voice. He tried to pinpoint its location, but was unable to track it. It felt like it came from multiple directions at once. "You're letting your emotions cloud your judgement."

"I'm fighting my long deceased father that killed himself when I was a mere child!" Kakashi fired back in an uncharacteristical display of anger. "Excuse me if I'm not a paragon of stoicism!"

"Yet I have the feeling that your anger isn't entirely directed at the man who orchestrated this scenario, but at me as well," Sakumo said. "Am I right, son?"

"Just keep talking. That way I can track your position better and end this charade already," Kakashi said, as he nervously looked around, trying to predict where Sakumo's attack will come from.

"Lightning Release: White Fang!"

Sensing the faintest breeze of air behind him shift, Kakashi turned around as he channeled electricity through a kunai, parrying a sword made of pure electricity, that was being channeled through a kunai. Sakumo managed to overpower Kakashi and push him back, before delivering more swings. While the Copy Ninja managed to dodge them all, his flak jacket got a few cuts.

" His specialty was close combat. I can't beat him in that area. I need to put some distance. Let's raise a wall and- no, not a wall, earth jutsu is awful to counter lightning, though there may be something..." Kakashi thought as he continued to jump back from Sakumo's swipes. He realized much to his frustration that his father was only using one arm, while the other was still regenerating. "I can't let him push me into the defensive! Earth Release: Hiding Like a Mole Jutsu!"

The moment Kakashi's feet touched the ground, he quickly sank into it as if it was made of water rather than solid matter. Not that such a just was going to stop Sakumo.

"I'm afraid that's not going to be enough, son. Lightning Release: White Fang Wolf Bite!" Sakumo sadly said, as he slammed his lightning sword into the ground, releasing a mass of lightning bolts in

every direction, breaking the ground and releasing rocks and pebbles in every direction.

Among the objects launched into the air, Kakashi was among them, however, the Copy Ninja wasn't as surprised as one would expect, probably because he was already expecting his father's reaction. While mid air, he made several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Phoenix Fire Sage Jutsu!"

Kakashi breathed a volley of fireballs from above towards his father, whose torn arm finished regenerating. Grabbing the kunai with both hands, the lightning sword it was projecting grew in length, and started to spin it so fast, it looked like a disc of light. The spinning lightning sword created a makeshift shield that deflected all the fireballs that would have hit him.

" Just as expected. And while he's doing that, he can't see me," Kakashi thought as he rushed towards him, making hand seals. His hand crackled with electricity as the screech of a thousand birds filled the air. "Now, it's just a matter of landing a strike. Lightning Blade!"

As the White Fang stopped the spinning, Kakashi thrust his lightning-coated hand into Sakumo's midsection. However, Sakumo was fast enough to use his elemental sword's remaining momentum to move it down and intercept Kakashi's attack.

"I know you're another clone," Sakumo stated.

"Then this may not surprise you," Kakashi said, before he exploded into a mass of lightning, surrounding Sakumo. However, the Lightning Clone's discharge was deflected by his lightning sword, and failed to do any harm.

That second, the ground around Sakumo started to rumble, and three Kakashis emerged from the sides and behind him, all three of

them with another Lightning Blade already prepared, ready to impale him from three different sides.

However, Sakumo didn't become a living legend by letting himself fall prey to such ambushes. Displaying an amazing, almost inhuman speed, Sakumo started to spin around his feet while pulling a second kunai with his other arm, generating a second lightning sword through it. When Kakashi and his clones landed their strikes, all they hit were Sakumo's elemental swords. The energy clash between all the lightning jutsu resulted in three explosions that destroyed Kakashi's shadow clones, while launching the real one several meters back, painfully bouncing a couple times on his back.

"When you were a kid, you told me you wanted to fight me when you were old enough," Sakumo recalled, his eyes glinting with a sad light. "I presume that this is not what you were expecting, were you?"

"Are you talking about the beating you're giving me, or the fact that you're a reanimation under the control of one of Konoha's greatest traitors?" Kakashi bitterly asked, as he shook off the pain and got back on his feet as best as he could.

"Son, you can't beat me if you keep fighting like this," Sakumo said.

"Shut up. You're nothing special. People might have called you a legend, but I've seen ninjas that could wipe the floor with you," Kakashi seethed. "And you would have seen them, have you not took your life like you did!"

Fueled by anger, Kakashi charged forward. Sakumo smiled inwardly. So, that was what was keeping his son from doing his best. Now that he had that hint, there might be some hope.

...

At another side of the battlefield, other one on one duel took place. This time, between Hanzo the Salamander, former leader of Amegakure, and Mifune, the commander of the Fifth Division. So far,

the two of them limited themselves to armed combat, Mifune's katana clashing against Hanzo's kusarigama, filling the air with metallic clanging noises every couple seconds.

"Samurai surely fell low if they are so willing to become a ninja's lap dog!" Hanzo taunted, as he delivered a blow at Mifune's legs.

The samurai expertly blocked before countered with a swing to his neck, which Hanzo parried with the chain of his kusarigama. "We samurai do not meddle in the affair of ninjas and nations that support or employ them. But this war... this war isn't just a matter of ninjas! It's a matter of survival, for all of us!"

Hanzo swung the mace of his kusarigama at Mifune's head. The old samurai managed to duck in time, and taking advantage of Hanzo being wide open, he stabbed his katana into the Ame reanimation's gut.

"That was a mistake, Mifune," Hanzo said.

Suddenly, a purple gas started to leak out of the hole Mifune had made into the man's stomach. He didn't ask what it was, since he could figure it out, and jumped back as quickly as his legs allowed him to, praying that he didn't accidentally inhale some of the gas.

" So, even as a reanimation, Hanzo still keeps that Black Salamander poisonous gland," Mifune thought. "It was careless of me not to assume that."

"Mifune-sama!" a nearby samurai called while tossing his leader a spare samurai helmet.

The Shogun of the Land of Iron took no time to put that helmet on, given that it had a gas mask built on it as well. After thanking his fellow samurai, Mifune looked at Hanzo, who was in the process of making a chain of hand seals.

"You might have stopped me from making hand seals with your twice damned iaijutsu, but my poison bought me all the time I needed to do this!" Hanzo finished, before slamming his hand into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

There was a burst of smoke, and the next second, Hanzo was standing on top of Ibuse, his feared Salamander summon. Upon seeing this, Mifune gripped the handle of his kanata tightly, not taking his eyes from his opponent. The fight had become much harder now.

"Everybody, stay away from Hanzo! Only samurai, or those who are able to avoid the poison of his salamander should face him!" Mifune shouted.

"How brave. Telling the others to save themselves, instead of asking for help when it's obvious that you need it," Hanzo observed. "You samurai didn't forsake your honor, I can concede that."

"A warmonger like you has no right to talk about honor," Mifune said in subdued anger. "Much less to judge somebody else's!"

Hanzo smirked under his rebreather. "Very well then, no more words, just actions! Ibuse, after him!"

The large eyeless amphibian charged at the Shogun of the Land of Iron, small quakes caused whenever its large legs hit the ground. The blade of Mifune's katana started to glow as he channeled chakra through it, before making an horizontal swing, releasing a crescent shaped chakra blast at the incoming monster. However, Hanzo was already expecting such a move.

"Ibuse, now!" the Ame reanimation said, as he jumped into the air.

Ibuse stopped on its tracks, and buried itself underground headfirst. Meanwhile, Hanzo threw the mace half of his kusarigama at Mifune, who wrapped itself around his wrists, pinning them against each

other. Upon landing, Hanzo pulled the chain towards him, but Mifune managed to resist and didn't bulge.

"Your resilience is worth praising, samurai, but this is your end. Ibuse, get him!" Hanzo ordered.

The ground beneath Mifune's feet started to shake, as he knew what was coming. He tried to break free from the chain binding his wrists, but Hanzo's pull was too firm.

"Paper Chakram!"

Suddenly, a large sharp ring made of paper descended from above, cleanly cutting the chain holding Mifune in place, and the old samurai managed to jump backwards just before Ibuse emerged from underground and tried to swallow him whole.

" *Where did that attack come from?*" Mifune thought, as he started to carefully look around, thought without taking at least one eye from Hanzo. Following the direction of the paper jutsu, Mifune saw a blue haired woman floating above him, with two wings made of many sheets of paper coming from her back. While he never met her before, this woman met the description he had given of the ex-Akatsuki member that now worked for Konoha, Konan. "Thanks for your assistance," he said, before smirking a little. "Heh, this is the second time today that I'm helped by a flying kunoichi."

"You're welcome, Mifune-sama," Konan said, as she floated down. "May I ask for a favor in return? I wish to deal with this opponent myself."

"I don't think I can allow such thing in good conscience. Hanzo is not an opponent to be underestimated," Mifune said. "You're welcome to join the battle."

"I'm not somebody to be underestimated either, as many ninjas who fought against me can attest. Those who are still alive, regrettably enough," Konan replied, her amber eyes narrowing at Hanzo.

"Hanzo and I have some history together. I studied his fighting style in depth, and I have the perfect way to permanently put him down."

Mifune looked at Konan, and could see the fire burning in her eyes. He knew that she needed more than a fiery spirit to defeat an opponent of such caliber, but then again, the Shogun of the Land of Iron was also told of Konan's ninjutsu prowess, so it was likely that she could back up her words with actions. Wordlessly, Mifune fell back and went to look for another opponent, though he made sure to stay close in case the bluenette may need his help.

"I take that back what I said," Hanzo said in disgust. "That samurai has no honor left in his old bones."

Konan's eyes narrowed even more, as her mouth curved into an ugly snarl. "The man who ambushed a trio of kids with an army of ninjas because he was too afraid of them dares to speak about honor!?"

"A trio of kids...? Just what the hell are you talking... wait a minute..." Hanzo began.

He then remembered something. A flashback to some years ago. That man with orange hair, piercings, and purple rippled eyes. The very man who put an end to his life, and Hanzo, the man who fought and defeated the Sannin in their prime, the one who anointed them with such title, wasn't even able to touch him. His defeat was so humiliating, he was almost glad when his attacker put an end to it.

...

Amegakure, a few years ago

"Such a disappointment, the legendary Hanzo the Salamander," the purple eyed man said, his voice deep and imposing. "I guess if you aren't fighting against a trio of children with an army backing you up, your skills alone don't take you too far. And Jiraiya-sensei lost to you when he was in his prime? Disgusting."

" Trio of children? Jiraiya-sensei? Who are you? You came here to avenge him?" Hanzo asked, the building panic not allowing him to think coherently. His many wounds didn't help either.. "Just what do you-"

" Silence," his attacker said. He didn't raise his voice, but his commanding tone compelled Hanzo to shut up. "I don't want to hear your voice anymore. I don't want to see you anymore. The mere thought that I once admired you makes me want to hurl. Your mere existence is blight upon this world that I plan to correct right now. SHINRA TENSEI!"

...

Those were Hanzo's last moments, who has been repressed the moment this cursed jutsu brought him to life, but the blue haired woman's words brought to the surface of his mind.

Then, another memory. An ambush he carried out alongside a Konoha high ranked ninja named Danzo, against a trio of Ame ninjas that were growing in power and influence. Better deal with them now before they became a threat. He didn't remember much of that day, the horrible image of that grotesque giant statue as it massacred his ninjas, while letting out nightmarish roars replaced everything else.

Though now, he could remember who were his targets: two boys, one with orange spiky hair, and another one a redhead, plus a blue haired girl. A blue haired girl with amber eyes. The same amber eyes that were now glaring daggers at him. Though while those eyes were full of innocence and fright, those eyes now reflected weariness, regret, and above all else, anger.

"You... that day... you're the girl I took hostage..." Hanzo said in realization.

Konan's snarl turned into a smirk of satisfaction, but her anger did not subside one bit. "Good. So you finally remember us. You know, the first time Nagato wanted to deal with you alone. He didn't want

me near, he said that I didn't deserve to get my hands dirty with your blood. Of course, I disagreed, but I didn't want to argue with him. And now... I finally get to avenge Yahiko's death personally. And unlike the last time we saw each other, I have no intention of becoming a damsel in distress."

"You're getting it wrong, girl. It's me who will get to avenge my own death! Ibuse, get her!" Hanzo commanded.

The salamander opened its jaws, releasing a wide stream of purple colored poisonous haze at the flying woman. Sheets of paper started to spin around her, as she made a chain of hand seals before thrusting her arms forward.

"Paper Cyclone!"

The sheets of paper formed a twister that flew towards the incoming stream of toxic fumes. Some of the paper sheets started to glow, revealing themselves to be explosive tags before they detonated, creating a chain of explosions that stopped the attack. From the resulting clouds, the mace half of Hanzo's kusarigama rocketed towards her, wrapping the chain around her ankle. With a mighty pull, Hanzo slammed her into the ground.

"First order of business, bring you back to ground level!" Hanzo said. "Now, for the second and final order of business, to deal the death blow!"

Fast as lightning, Hanzo dashed forward, and sunk the blade half of his weapon into Konan's neck. However, Konan's expression remained unchanged, and no blood seeped from her wound.

"Don't you think I know every one of your little tricks?" Konan asked, as she burst into a mass of papers that enveloped the former Ame leader, forming a cocoon of paper around him.

"What I think is that you're underestimating me!" Hanzo indignantly said as he made a hand seal and escaping the paper prison with the

Body Flicker jutsu before the paper cocoon formed completely.

"I would never dream of underestimating you," Konan's voice said. Hearing that it came from above, Hanzo looked up and saw Konan floating above him, but the worrying part were the literally thousands of origami shuriken floating besides her. "Now be torn to shreds and disappear!"

Motioning her hand down, Konan commanded the paper shuriken to rain upon Hanzo and his salamander. However, Hanzo had enough time to weave several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Multiple Flame Plumes!"

Hanzo removed his rebreather before unleashing a wave of fire projectiles towards Konan. The blazing missiles and paper shuriken met in the middle, resulting in a multitude of explosions. However, much to Hanzo's surprise, he saw that Konan's attack was overpowering his.

" *What the...? How can paper beat a fire jutsu?*" the reanimation panicked. "*How can this-*"

Hanzo's thoughts were interrupted when the paper shuriken raining upon him suddenly multiplied by one hundred, quickly overpowering his fire jutsu before the attack reached him. He tried to jump back, but even if he only spend less than two seconds being pelted by the razor sharp paper projectiles, it was still enough to torn him to shreds, just like Konan said. With plenty of deep cuts across his body and his four limbs completely rendered useless, Hanzo helplessly fell on his back.

His wounds quickly began to regenerate, but the sight of Konan descending upon him, more papers fluttering around her, told him that he wasn't going to regenerate in time. The papers fluttering around Konan started to move around Hanzo, slowly wrapping around him, forming a paper cocoon.

"It's hard to believe that you were the same man who beat the Sannin in their prime. I didn't believe Nagato at first when he told me how easily he beat you," Konan began, as he looked at him with eyes full of contempt. "Guess that you let your reputation precede you, and didn't keep your skills honed."

"... perhaps I did," Hanzo sadly admitted. He then looked at the papers quickly covering him, and realized of something. "Though, before you seal me... there's something I want to know..."

Konan didn't say anything, but Hanzo took her silence as a cue to ask. It's not that he was going to lose anything for doing so.

"What happened with Amegakure?" Hanzo asked. "I saw some ninjas wearing the Ame uniform around. I tried to avoid them. How is the village doing?"

"Nagato and I ruled the village after you were out of the picture," Konan began to explain, deciding to humor the old man's last request. "Then Nagato died, and I'm the sole ruler of Ame. And as its Village Head, I pledged the forces of Ame, few as they are in comparison to the Great Villages, for the cause of the Ninja Alliance."

"I see..." Hanzo said, looking somewhat relieved. "Regardless of what I did, or said... if there's one thing you can believe about me, is that I cared about my village... given that the village is now yours, make sure it stays strong... and don't let the Great Villages stomp over you..."

"That thing won't happen. Not just because of my leadership," Konan replied. "But because I, alongside others, are helping to build a better world where the bloody conflicts from the past will remain forever in the past."

Hanzo didn't say anything, and let the papers envelop him completely, forming the cocoon. Konan walked towards it, and

placed a couple of chakra suppression seals, making sure that Hanzo wouldn't be a danger anymore.

"Nagato, Yahiko," Konan said, rising her gaze to the cloudy skies. "I'll make sure our dream will come to pass. And this time, it will be done properly."

...

"Water Release. Water Bullet Jutsu!"

"Water Release: Wall of Water!"

Shibuki expelled several watery projectiles from his mouth towards his father. Hisen expelled a wide stream of water that managed to stop his son's attack, and still had enough momentum to continue forward, forcing the young Takigakure leader to jump back, just as Hisen prepared his next attack.

"Watch out, son! The next attack is going to be a big one!" Hisen warned, just as he finished the chain of hand seals. "Water Release: Water Dragon jutsu!"

The water of the previous attacks, plus the water from the recently melted snow gathered under Hisen, forming a tornado of water, which quickly took the shape of a serpentine dragon, with Hisen riding on its head. The dragon let out a roar before it lunged at the young Takigakure leader. While panicking, Shibuki decided to counter his dad's jutsu with a similar one.

"I can use that as well! Water Release. Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Another dragon-shaped water construct of similar size formed from the nearby water and snow, and managed to intercept Hisen's dragon. While the two dragons struggled against the other, Hisen leaped into the air, and formed a sword of water on his hand.

" *Dammit, the first attack was just a distraction!*" Shibuki inwardly cursed, his hands still locked into a seal, pouring chakra into the latest jutsu, before stumbling to generate another water sword to parry his father's incoming blow.

"Son, run!" Hisen warned, as he was about to strike.

"Wolf Claw Strike!"

Hisen saw a white blur, followed by a loud metallic clang, and the next second, much to his shock, there was a huge, feral looking werewolf with white fur between him and his son, parrying his blade of water with his bare claws, that glowed with chakra. The chakra glow increased, taking the shape of crescent shaped energy blasts that violently pushed Hisen backwards.

The sound of a thousand birds chirping coming from above drew his attention, and saw what appeared to be a spinning drill coated in lightning falling on top of him.

"Lightning Release: Chidori Drill Claw!"

Still, Hisen was quick enough to defend himself from the unexpected ambush, and formed more hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Hisen expelled a torrent of water from his mouth at the spinning electric drill, both propelling himself to the ground, and pushing the threat away from him. The drill stopped to spin, revealing itself to be a girl with cat features, wearing bladed gauntlets. Both the cat girl and the werewold landed on the ground on their feet, and rushed towards Shibuki.

"Kiba, Tamaki!" Shibuki said, breathing heavily, still processing the fact that he was alive.

"Are you alright, Shibuki-san?" Tamaki asked.

"I think we cut a little too close. A few seconds late, and who knows what would have happened!" Kiba added.

Shibuki let out a sigh. It appeared to be of relief, but there also of resignation. "Once again, thank you. You came to my aid when I needed it the most."

Tamaki smiled. "Hey, don't sweat it! That's what friends are for!"

"Shibuki," Hisen said, as he walked towards the trio, making Kiba and Tamaki to tense up and adopt fighting positions. "You know these people?"

"Yes. They're Konoha ninja. Part of the group of ninjas that helped us to take down the Akatsuki that nearly destroyed our village," Shibuki explained. "Kiba, Tamaki, this is my dad Hisen, the previous leader of Takigakure."

The two of them winced upon realizing that Shibuki had been forced to fight his own father. Such experience had to be emotionally devastating. Still, they managed to hide their reaction pretty well.

"It's nice to meet you, sir," Kiba said, trying to smile, but in his current form, it appear more like a vicious snarl.

"We don't usually look like this, though," Tamaki was quick to point out. "It's because of a transformation jutsu we're using."

"Don't worry, I've seen ninjas with far more bizarre appearances," Hisen replied. "Though if my son said is true and you helped defend our village, then you'll have my gratitude."

"Taki and Konoha are allies, and we have some good friends in Taki as well," Kiba said. "We did what anybody else would do in our position."

Hisen, however, noticed that his son was less than thrilled with the two Konoha ninjas coming to his rescue.

"Shibuki, what's wrong? Aren't you glad your friends are here to help you?" Hisen asked.

"This is what I previously meant, dad," Shibuki began, sounding dour. "Just like how Kiba and Tamaki had to help me from you, I had to ask other villages to help ours. What kind of leader that makes me?"

"I tell you what: a leader that cares for his village," Hisen firmly stated, as his expression became a little harsher. "Shibuki, needing somebody else's help to do something you can't do on your own isn't a sign of weakness, but of wisdom. Sure, improving oneself and being able to do things on one's own, be an individual like you and me, or a village, is important. But that doesn't mean that we should try to do everything on our own. Not all of us are born equal, just like how not all villages are the same.

"Yet, the fact that you not only kept Konoha's alliance, but strengthened it, shows that you've been a good leader for our village. Think what would have happened if other villages didn't help Taki against Akatsuki. Our beloved home would be a smoking ruin with no hopes of getting it back."

Shibuki stood there, silent, weighting his father's words. Even part of him, the part that loved to put him down, tried to ignore Hisen's wisdom, another part, the rational one, argued that his father was right. Taki had undergone mass destruction, but the loss could have been much greater, and the village was in the process of being rebuilt. As long as Taki existed, there would be hope.

"Yeah, not everybody can get strong on their own. Just because you fight alongside others, that doesn't mean that you're weak," Kiba said. "Or that Taki is. Hell, not even Konoha is strong enough to take on Akatsuki alone! We had to seek the help of many other villages, both major and minor, to do so!"

"Plus, take a look at us!" Tamaki said, chuckling a bit, as she pointed at both herself and Kiba. "We had to merge with our animal

companions for a power boost! If that's not relying on others to grow strong..."

Shibuki sighed, though this time, it didn't appear to be a sigh of weariness or sadness. If anything, it appeared like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He closed his eyes, and shook his head as his lips curved into a smile.

"I've been such an idiot..." Shibuki said, almost in a whisper. He opened his eyes, and fixed a stare on his father. Hisen was almost taken aback to see that the doubts and self pity he could see reflected on his son's eyes were gone, replaced by steel hard determination. "Kiba, Tamaki... help me seal my father, so we can later return him to afterlife where he belongs!"

"Alright!" Kiba said, dropping on all four.

"You got it!" Tamaki said, crouching down like a lioness would before pouncing on her prey.

Hisen smiled. He wasn't even worried when his body moved on its own again, and rushed to attack the trio of ninjas. Shibuki, Tamaki and Kiba also charged forward, ready to meet the former Taki leader in the middle, whose hands were flying through hand seals.

"Water Release: Double Water Blade!"

This time, masses of water appeared around the undead ninja's hands, before they took the shape of swords, one with a straight edge, the other with a curved and serrated brought his arms together in a swift x-shaped motion, making Shibuki to break and jump back, and Kiba and Tamaki turn to the sides. Though, as he moved his swords, they released small blades of water to the sides and the front.

Shibuki managed to deflect all of them with quick swings of his watery sword. Tamaki did the same with her bladed gauntlets, but some razor droplets found their mark and left several cuts on her

arms and legs. Kiba, however, was the one who took it the worse, given his lack of weapons to use to defend himself as well as his increased size. Soon, patches of red started to grow around his white fur.

"Kiba!" Tamaki called, concerned.

"I'm okay! You need more than a few superficial cuts to take me out!" Kiba quickly replied. "Focus on the enemy!"

"Right!" Tamaki said, shifting her focus from Kiba to Hisen, as she and her partner charged back at him.

Sensing this, Hisen prepared his next move.

"Water Release: Water Clone Jutsu!"

The water around the area gathered and took the shape of three Hisen clones, all of them already armed with a water sword. However, rather than intercepting Kiba and Tamaki like the feral duo was expecting, they moved towards Shibuki, while the real Hisen went after them.

"It seems that whoever is controlling me considers you two a greater threat than my son," Hisen warned them, sounding a little sorrowful. "I have faith that Shibuki can beat a trio of water clones, though as for you, you better prepare."

"Don't worry, you won't be able to make me bleed twice!" Kiba boasted, as he rushed to meet Hisen. Long chakra blades formed around his claws as he spread his arms, ready for a brutal slashing swipe. Hisen raised one of his swords to attack, while keeping the other low for defense. However, just when it appeared that Kiba was about to strike, he instead dived down, and tunneled underground.

"What?"

"Tamaki, go for it!"

The sound of a thousand birds chirping filled the air as Hisen once against found himself facing a living drill coated in electricity.

"Chidori Drill Claw!"

In such amount of time, all what Hisen could do was raise his water swords in an X shape to block Tamaki's onslaught. Channeling chakra into his swords to make them sturdier, Hisen took the attack head on. Even if his swords resisted, the force behind the attack was strong enough to push him backwards, while the electricity that leaked into his body left it stiff.

The earth started to shake beneath his feet, and Kiba emerged from underground, delivering a brutal uppercut with his chakra-enhanced claws. However, much to his surprise, Hisen burst into water when he was hit.

"What the... was he a clone too?" Kiba asked, outraged.

"No, I believe he switched positions with another clone," Tamaki said in realization. Looking at where Shibuki was fighting the clones, she saw that only one remained, which had to be the real Hisen. "Come on, after him!"

Hisen wanted to turn around and adress the more immediate danger, but Shibuki wasn't going to let him. Creating another water blade on his other hand, the young Takigakure leader delivered a double swipe at his father, who used both his swords to block the attack. Hisen could see that his son's eyes were glinting with renewed confidence.

"So, what do you think about my friends, dad?" Shibuki asked, beaming with pride.

Hisen smiled. "They're incredible. Truly remarkable ninjas."

"I know right," Shibuki said, before his mouth curved into a smile. "I couldn't have retaken Taki without them. And I don't think I could

have defeated you without them. That's why I'm going to become much stronger than I am right now, so one day I can be the one who helps them in their time of need!"

Shibuki pushed both of her father's swords to the side with an impressive display of strength, before delivering a kick to the chest that send the reanimated Taki ninja skidding back. Right into Kiba's path, whose front paws burned brightly with chakra as he prepared an attack.

"Wild Howling Strike!"

Kiba delivered a brutal uppercut to Hisen, as the chakra aroundn his paws exploded, and took the shape of a giant wolf head, catching the undead ninja between its maws, and sending it flying up into the sky. As this happened, Tamaki jumped onto Kiba's shoulders, and used him as a springboard to jump into the sky, leaving Hisen below, while her hands flew through hand seals.

"Fire Release: Burning Man!" fire spread around the cat kunoichi, covering her completely in a cloak of flames, as she let gravity pull her body towards Hisen. The former Taki leader tried to weave the seals for a water jutsu, but it was too late. "Blazing Feline Aerial Bomber!"

Tamaki's burning rear impacted against Hisen's chest, both of them pummeling to the snowy grass below, resulting in a massive fiery explosion the moment the two of them hit the ground, spreading embers around, melting the snow, and carving a crater into the ground. When the smoke dispelled, Tamaki was standing besides Hisen, lying on his back with his arms and legs spread, and his body greatly damaged. The Reanimation Jutsu was already working on healing his broken body, but not fast enough to prevent sealing.

"Okay, I think this guy isn't going anywhere," Tamaki said. "I'm going to fetch a sealmaster. Shibuki-san, do you want to say any last words with your father before we seal him?"

Shibuki merely nodded, and walked towards the fallen form of his father as Tamaki leaped away.

"Hey, dad," Shobuki said, a bit sheepishly. "I always wished I to see you again. Be careful with what you wish for, huh?"

"Yes, the circumstances of our reunion weren't the best ones, to put it lightly. But I'm glad that we were able to meet again. Not only because I was able to see my boy all grown up, but because I managed to give you some of the help you needed..."

"Yeah... sorry dad, I didn't want you to see me that way," Shibuki said, as his eyes started to water, but he willed his tears back. "I always wanted to be a ninja you'd be proud of."

Hisen smiled. "You're already that, son. I'm sure you'll be a greater ninja than I was. Just never give up, and remember, don't be afraid to ask others for help if something proves to be too much for you."

"I know, dad. Thank you... and farewell," Shibuki said, before he turned around and walked away. A few seconds later, Tamaki returned with a sealmaster, making sure that Hisen wouldn't be forced to fight against the Ninja Alliance anymore.

...

As Kakashi had stated previously, the real fight began now. No holding back, the silver haired Jonin knew that he had to throw everything he had at his father, or else he would end up dead.

" *And being dead means ending in the same place as my old man, and I'm not really in the mood for that,*" Kakashi chuckled at his own grim joke, as he prepared his next attack. "Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Kakashi breathed several small fireballs through his mask towards his father, who travelled in a wide angle, hoping to cut his room to dodge. Sakumo merely jumped backwards and started to make hand

seals of his own. Kakashi recognized the seals as part of a water jutsu.

"Can my father use ninjutsu other than lightning?" Kakashi thought in surprise, before the answer came to him. *"Heh, of course he can, he was a Jonin."*

"Water Release: Great Water Wall!"

Sakumo expelled a massive torrent of water from his mouth, which was enough to put out all the existing flames. However, as the White Fang did this, Kakashi already prepared his next move.

"I can't let him go into the offensive! If I force him to be on the defensive all the time, I will win!" Kakashi thought, his heart pounding each time faster as the masked Jonin former more hand seals. "Lightning Release: Lightning Beast Tracking Fang!"

A mass of electricity fomed around Kakashi's right arm, before it jumped and took the shape of a hound, still connected to Kakashi through a constant thread of lightning, and rushed towards the now wide open Sakumo without finding any obstacles on its path. When it was close enough, the elemental hound jumped into the undead ninja's neck and closed its maws around it, before it exploded into a blast of lightning.

And then Sakumo vanished in a burst of smoke.

"What the...? A Shadow Clone? When did he create it?" Kakashi thought, as panic began to creep through his back, frantically looking around.

"Kakashi, watch out! Do not get caught by this jutsu!" Sakumo's voice said from behind. Kakashi turned to the direction the voice came from, and prepared for the worst. "Lightning Release: Alpha Thunderstrike!"

Sakumo's entire body was covered in electricity, bruning so bright, it was as if a thunderstorm was happening before his very eyes. Thrusting both arms forward, a truly massive cluster of lightning bolts rocketed from the undead man's hands, before they quickly merged and took the shape of a gigantic wolf head.

"Shit, no jutsu I have can counter that!" Kakashi panicked, as he jumped back, trying to put some distance between him and his foe. There was only one thing he could do. Channeling chakra into his left eye, his Sharingan morphed into its Mangekyo form. "Kamui!"

The air in front of Kakashi started to ripple and deform, before reality itself contorted into a spiraling vortex that devoured Sakumo's attack completely. However, it came at a big cost, as Kakashi could feel his chakra reserves quickly draining, and the exertion made him drop to one knee.

Sakumo perceived his apparent weakness, and quickly charged forward, a kunai on his hand. Kakashi did the same, but rather than charge to meet his father, he used it to make a cut on his thumb, before discarding the weapon and making five hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Kakashi slammed his palm into the ground, forcing Sakumo to break his charge and take a few steps backwards as not to run into Kakashi's summoned ally. However, when the cloud of smoke vanished after a couple seconds, Kakashi was still alone.

"You made me think you were summoning something," Sakumo observed. "Or you did summon something that I failed to see."

"Why don't you get closer and find which one is?" Kakashi taunted his father.

Sakumo's face saddened. "Son, it's quite obvious that you're mad at me."

"Whatever I feel right now is irrelevant. I need to end this fight right here and right now. You're too dangerous of a foe, and I'm one of the few that can put you down," Kakashi said, struggling to keep his voice cool.

"You don't deny it, then," Sakumo said. "But not acknowledging it is just as bad."

"Why do you care so much about how I feel!?" Kakashi shouted, his patience close to snapping. He clutched both fists, and could feel small sparks of lightning crackling around them.

"If you don't calm down and focus, you won't be able to beat me," Sakumo replied. "And if you don't beat me, you will die! Can't you see that?"

"Oh, so now you care about me!?" this was the moment Kakashi's emotional barrier went down. "You didn't care about me in the slightest when you choose to end your own life!"

Sakumo smiled, though sadness did not leave his eyes. "So, that was it. Just like I feared. No wonder you don't have a very good memory of me."

"It's a bit late to apologize, father," Kakashi said, as his hand burst with electricity once more, and rushed forwards.

Sakumo's body moved on its own to pull another kunai, and channel another sword of lightning through it, ready to meet his son's attack.

"It's never too late to make things right, son!" Sakumo said, almost in a pleading tone.

"Really? Do you have a way to reverse time, and fix the childhood I had to spend alone?" Kakashi replied.

Sakumo's expression dropped even further. "I'm afraid not. All what I can say is that I'm very sorry for leaving you alone, son. I'm sorry for

giving up into despair, and failing you as a father. If I was stronger, maybe I could have withstood better the shame I brought upon myself-

"Stop," Kakashi firmly said. "You might have done things you should regret, but saving your comrades at the expense of the mission wasn't one of them."

"How can you say that? That choice is what ended up dooming me!" Sakumo said, as he jumped backwards while making hand seals. "Lightning Release: Forked Lightning!"

Bolts of lightning shoot from Sakumo's fingers, heading into multiple directions in a cone towards Kakashi. However, upon hitting the ground, rocks, trees or plants, they would bounce and continue forward.

" *Ingenius. I'm definitely copying that,*" Kakashi thought, as his Sharingan worked to learn that jutsu, while his hands formed the seals of a counter. "Wind Release: Vacuum Great Wave!"

Kakashi formed a sphere of concentrated pressurized air in front of him, before dropping all the pressure and releasing the air forward in the form of a powerful wind, dispelling the mass of lightnings coming at him, and continuing forward towards Sakumo, tearing away the grass in its path. Sakumo tossed several kunai with explosive tags attached to them to the wind attack, and the resulting explosions undid Kakashi's jutsu.

It was then when Kakashi noticed something from the corner of his Sharingan: something metallic glinting with the sun. Upon focusing his gaze on the glint, he could see it was a weapon embedded into the ground.

" *That's father's White Chakra Saber! He might have dropped it before,*" Kakashi thought. "*I need to get it back before he realizes!*"

"Lightning Release: Double White Fang!"

From the smoke of the explosions, Sakumo emerged, dashing forward, two blades of lightning on each hand. Lightning also manifested on Kakashi's hand, and shaped it like a sword, just in time to parry his father's blows.

"What do you mean, I didn't make the wrong choice?" Sakumo asked. "Had I completed the mission, it would have helped Konoha win the war! Even the people I saved thought so!"

"For a time, I used to think the same. That following the rules, the orders from our superiors, and completing the missions assigned to us was the way of the ninja. But a friend of mine showed me otherwise. Ninjas aren't unfeeling tools bred to kill. We're human beings that breathe, bleed and live. We aren't to be discarded like that," Kakashi rebutted, as he parried a double blow from Sakumo.

"But protecting your friends and loved ones at the expense of the village..." Sakumo began, before Kakashi cut him.

"How can we protect a village full of people we don't know, if we aren't allowed to love and cherish the people we do?" Kakashi asked, as he began his counterattack, pushing his father back. "How can ninjas fight for a village that will send them to their deaths, without taking their lives into consideration?"

Kakashi managed to swipe one of the kunai that Sakumo was using to channel his jutsu out of his hands, and delivered a roundhouse kick to his chest, sending his father flying backwards. Fast as lightning, Kakashi pulled out several shuriken, and after imbuing them with lightning chakra, tossed them at the still flying Sakumo.

With his remaining lightning sword, Sakumo was able to parry the electrified steel stars flying at him. But little did he know, that was only a distraction. He didn't see how several dogs wearing blue clothes and Konoha forehead protectors burst from underground, and slammed against him multiple times, making him drop his other kunai. Despite this, he managed to land on his feet, but the moment he tried to bring his hands together to form a hand seal, but two

more dogs, these ones larger than the first few, bit on each on his arms and forced them apart.

Sakumo's eyes had barely a second to register Kakashi dashing at him, Sharingan glowing with a red gleam, and the White Chakra Saber in his hand, its blade crackling with blue lightning. Then, a diagonal, downward slash followed by a burst of ash and pieces of paper. Kakashi was now behind his father, his back turned to him. Sakumo's upper half of his body slid from his torso, both parts falling to the ground lifelessly.

"For forsaking the mission and saving your comrades, they called you trash. A ninja that doesn't follow the rules is trash. But a ninja that forsakes his comrades..." Kakashi said, before turning around, and looking at his father with fire in both his eyes. "... is worse than trash!"

Sakumo looked at Kakashi in awe, new feeling forming a chaotic whirlwind in the very core of his being. "Kakashi..."

"I hated you for leaving me alone, father..." Kakashi said. "But... to this day, I think you made the right choice. I think you are a hero of Konoha, even if I may be the only one who thinks like that. And I teach my students to follow your example."

"... you have no idea how happy hearing that makes me, son," Sakumo said, tears forming around his black eyes. "Again... I'm sorry for being weak, and not standing strong for you. It makes me happy to see the fine ninja you've become, son, and that your convictions hold such strength. Your students are lucky to have you."

"Father, I..." Kakashi began, sounding hesitant. "I might not have another chance to do this, and I think I will regret it the rest of my life if I don't do it now, but... , despite what happened in the end, I'm proud of calling you my father. And I forgive you."

Suddenly, a beam of light broke through the clouds above, and fell right onto Sakumo, much to Kakashi's surprise. And his surprise

grew wider when not only Sakumo's regeneration stopped, but his body started to crumble and break apart.

"Thank you, son, even if I don't deserve it," Sakumo said, smiling earnestly at his son. "Now... I can finally... look at your mother... in the eye..."

Sakumo's body crumpled completely, leaving a mound of dust and paper bits, and half buried between them, the corpse of a man, whose face was frozen in a scream of terror, an unlucky victim Orochimaru sacrificed used to bring Sakumo from the afterlife.

"Farewell, father," Kakashi said, looking at the cloudy sky. "Might you finally find in death the honor and peace you were denied in life."

Author's Note: Yeah, a pretty Kakashi-heavy chapter, but I felt that this was I fight I had to do. In canon, Kakashi's issues with his dad seem to stem from Sakumo choosing his comrades over the mission. However, it always struck me as odd that Kakashi had no resentment over his father killing himself, especially when Kakashi himself was so young, so I felt the need to tackle such difficult topic. I think it makes Sakumo's sendoff better, and I hope that you think that as well.

The other fight I've been dying to finally do was Konan vs Hanzo. Nothing against Mifune, but the fact that Mifune's past with Hanzo was established on the very same fight, and that Kishimoto tried to portray Hanzo as some misguided visionary gone bad, instead of the power hungry warmonger he had been portrayed so far, well, it kinda left a bad taste in my mouth. So here, Hanzo finally gets some much needed payback from Konan over the time he kidnapped her which resulted in Yahiko's death. Because when you think about it, it was thanks to Hanzo that Akatsuki came to be.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Also, I got some PMs from people saying that they like the story but don't review because they don't know what to say, since these chapters don't move the plot forward much so there isn't much to say. If that stops you from leaving a review, you don't have to write something super long! Sure, I do love long reviews, but if you don't know what to say, just say that you liked the chapter, and that's it! All reviews make me happy, no matter how long or short they are. So if you liked this chapter, please leave a review! It will make me really, really, really happy!

The Light After the Storm

Author's Note: And here we reach the end of the third day of battles. Enjoy:

Chapter 109:

The Light After the Storm

or

Night whispers

Turtle Island, Evening

Despite Killer B having a pretty big house on the island, he didn't allow anybody inside, claiming that nobody was to invade the privacy of his sanctuary. While Naruto and Fu wondered what did he have to hide, they weren't going to pry and earn the ire of their jinchuriki teacher. And since the Kumo garrison on the island didn't have enough space to house all the Konoha ninjas, they had to spend the night in the open.

Not that they minded, as all of the Konoha visitors were seasoned ninjas that were used to sleep under the stars during missions, even the younger ones. Thankfully, they didn't have to hunt or find their own food, as the Kumo ninjas had that part provided. Though there were a few mutters regarding Choza and how long the food supply would last with him around.

"Hey Naruto," Fu asked, as she took a bite from a roasted boar rib. "Wanna come with me into the jungle to see what kind of animals show up at night?"

"I doubt we can do that. We need to get to bed early so we can be up just at sunrise and continue with our training," Naruto replied.

Fu snorted, as she placed her chin under her hand in a lazy way. "Why? Is not that we're making that much progress anyway. We could try to do something fun just once."

"I also want to sleep," Naruto said, suppressing a yawn. "Trying to master Kurama's chakra is like nothing I've tried before, and I'm exhausted. I'm surprised that you still have that much energy for adventure."

"Maybe we need to relax a little from training, you know? I was always told that focusing too much on a problem might not be good to solve it. Sometimes, it's better to take a step back and let your mind wander for a bit."

"Who told you that? Shino?"

Fu smiled brightly, and nodded. "He's a treasure cove of wisdom, isn't he? He doesn't speak much, but when he does, every word he says is worth listening to."

"Tell Shino his wisdom won't work on me," Naruto said, as he stretched his arms. "I think I'm going to sleep. I'm sure that, if I keep with the training, in the end I'll be able to do it. This isn't the first time that I struggle with a jutsu or a new power."

Fu's face scrunched into an unamused scowl. "I don't think I want you as my little brother. You're way too boring."

"Little? I'm older than you!" Naruto protested.

Fu then stood up to her full height, hands on her hips. "But I'm bigger than you. So *much* bigger than you," Fu was trying to sound threatening, but her repressed giggles ruined the intended effect. She playfully flicked Naruto's nose. "So, no talking back to your big sister, mister!"

"Now that you mention it," Naruto began, as she looked at the girl toweing over him. "What did you do to have such a hell of a growth

spurt? We were the same height when I first met you."

Fu placed a finger under her lower lip, as she recalled the previous years." Well, you can say that I always had a lot of energy," Fu began, shrugging casually. "Shibuki said that I needed to burn all these pent up energy I had in my body, so he devised this super tough training regime to expend my excess energy on it. It was hard at first, but I got used to it pretty quickly. Then he increased the training, but I got used to it again. He continued like that for a year, before he gave up, though I decided to continue the training on my own because it wasn't that bad."

Naruto shot her a blank stare. "I refuse to believe that you got like that just by mere training. I train a lot too!"

Fu gave him a condescending smile. "Not as much as I do, that's for sure," and for added emphasis, she flexed her biceps.

"You're right in doubting her claim," both Naruto and Fu heard Kurama joining their conversation. **"Let's say your tenant has something to do with it."**

"Hey! Do not downplay my hard work, you furball!" Fu said, angrily poking at Naruto's stomach.

"I'm just stating the truth, human girl. It's not my fault that you're too mentally weak to accept it," Kurama replied in a somewhat taunting tone. **"Those wings you can generate isn't the only way Chomei influences your body. You can thank her for your endless stamina and strength."**

"That can't be true!" Fu angrily protested.

"It is!" this time, it was Chomei herself who chimed in. **"Beetles are among the strongest animals on the planet! They can lift several hundred times their own weight! And naturally, I'm the strongest of them all! So of course, you got a portion of that strength as my chakra mingled with yours."**

"Awww..." Fu said, discouraged, as she slumped down. "And here I thought it was all me..."

" Hey, don't get so down, girl! If it's any consolation, you're the most badass jinchruiki I ever had, and you aren't even an adult yet! Imagine what you're going to do before you stop growing!"
Chomei tried to reassure.

"Wait... she's going to grow even *more* !?" Naruto asked in both shock and horror.

" Not if she doesn't keep a healthy sleeping schedule!" Chomei replied. **"Naruto is right, time to go to bed! You still need to work hard to master my power!"**

Fu crossed her arms, and pouted childishly. "None of you guys are any fun."

...

Moon

Despite the fact that the sun illuminating the hollow inside of the Moon was artificial, they found that over time, it would increase or decrease its brightness in order to simulate day and night cycles. Something they appreciated, given that it was hard to sleep when your brain was tricked to believe that it was still daylight.

During night, it would not only lower its brightness, it would also mimic the actual Moon. Like a moon inside the Moon.

"Heh," Hinata couldn't help but let out a chuckle at the thought, as her eyes continued to stare at their goal, hanging on the sky.

Right now, they were resting in another small ghost town they found, this one without anything of note. The others were asleep, and Hinata was doing the first guard. The Hyuga Clan Head was sitting on the roof of the town's tallest building, in order to have a better

vantage point. She was sure no enemy would attack them now, but one could never be so sure. After all, their enemy didn't sleep.

According to the pictures and other hints they studied from the many temples, they found that there is a huge castle inside that sun, where the Main Otsutsuki family use to live, and presumably, Toneri's base of operations and where he has his weapon stored. Hinata tried many times to use her Tenseigan to see beyond the sun, but found herself unable too.

It seemed that Toneri didn't bring every puppet to the Earth to fight for Akatsuki, and left a sizeable force to defend his home turf. Many days they could see puppets riding flying mechanical beasts, patrolling the area in search for enemies. It was advised to avoid them as not to alert Toneri of their presence. However, by carefully watching them, Hinata realized that they came and went from inside the sun, somehow. That meant that either it wasn't dangerous to fly near the sun, or had a way to safely cross it.

"Hinata-san?" a voice snapped Hinata from her trance. Turning around, she saw it was Sai, Ino's not-quite-boyfriend. "Hello. I came to relieve you from night watch duty."

Hinata smiled, as she let out a yawn. "Good. I was starting to get a bit sleepy."

"In that case, I recommend you to rest. The success of this mission rests on your power, and it wouldn't do us no good if you weren't at your best," Sai explained, keeping a neutral face.

"Um, yeah, sure," Hinata said, as she jumped off of the roof, and floated back to the ground.

She entered one of the empty houses where Nori and another female Moon Acolyte were sleeping, alongside an empty sleeping bag. She got inside the bag, carefully not to awake her companions, and after a couple minutes, she fell asleep.

"Yes, it worked!" a new voice said. A voice Hinata wasn't expecting to hear right now.

The Hyuga Clan Head opened her eyes, and found she was no longer on the Moon.

...

Land of Frost, later that night

Just like the previous two battles, the Ninja Alliance once again stood victorious against the Akatsuki onslaught, whose forces were driven away from the Land of Frost much to the joy of their inhabitants. And while many Zetsu and reanimations managed to escape to fight another day, just as many lost their lives in the battleground. Now, it was their turn for a well deserved rest.

Unlike the other divisions, Mifune's Fifth Division didn't have to erect a base camp in the middle of a forest in order to spend the night. Fortunately, not far away from the battleground, there was a town that they could use as improvised base of operations.

The town's citizens were ambivalent of the ninjas. On one side, they didn't want such a huge army of mostly foreign ninjas -they were okay with those from Kumo- invading their home, but on the other hand, some said that the ninjas would protect them against the Akatsuki forces still roaming there. Fortunately, the Kumo and Shimo ninjas managed to convince them to let them stay.

Of course, that didn't change the fact that most ninjas had to continue sleeping on tents and sleeping bags, since the town didn't have the capacity to house such a numerous army. Soon, the town was surrounded by a mass of tents from every direction.

And right now, in the special tent habilitated for communications, Mifune was in front of a ninja of the Yamanaka clan, the latter connected to a special device that amplified his mind powers in order

to create a link with HQ, so the Shogun of the Land of Iron could deliver his report to the Supreme Commander.

" You lead your division to a great victory, Mifune-dono," Jiraiya praised the old samurai. "However, some elements of your report are a little unsettling. If Orochimaru has revived Kakuzu, there might be the chance that other Akatsuki members have been revived as well."

"What other Akatsuki members?" Mifune asked.

" For once, my grandson. The very first Akatsuki who fell," It was Chiyo's voice who answered. *"Though admittedly, Sasori won't be much of a threat without his best puppets."*

"Is there a chance that Sasori might have a secret stash of puppets that he can use to replenish those he lost the first time he died?" Mifune asked.

" I find that unlikely," Chiyo replied.

" There's also Kisame, who was finally put down by Mizukage-sama and Zabuza-sama not long ago," Ao intervened. *"But his sword and main source of strength, Samehada, was recovered and is currently in our possession. Even if Kisame is revived, he won't be as much of a threat as when he was still alive."*

" Which leaves us to the most dangerous of the bunch: Nagato," Jiraiya stated, his voice dripping with worry. *"There's no way Orochimaru didn't try to revive a Rinnegan bearer."*

"If that was the case, why didn't he send it against us already?" Mifune asked.

" I'm afraid I can't tell. Trying to understand the mind of my former teammate isn't something that many people can do," Jiraiya admitted.

" We did observe a pattern regarding the Reanimations," Shikaku interceded. "During the first days, the zombies our forces fought weren't that powerful nor great in numbers. Yet their power and numbers have been increasing with each battle. I think Orochimaru wants to assess the extent of our power before he decides to break out the heavy hitters."

" It does make sense," Onoki intervened. "The reports of the Invasion of Konoha stated that Orochimaru revived their previous Hokages. If Orochimaru's mastery of this aberrant jutsu has increased to the point of being able to summon and control undead in large quantities, I bet he also revived several Kages of all the Great Villages."

" If Hanzo's presence was anything to go by, it is something he might do. Hanzo might not be a Kage in the official sense of the title, but had the power to match against one," Mifune stated.

" What about the Air Force? How did it perform against Akatsuki's flying minions?" Jiraiya asked.

"Their presence was a huge relief for the ground forces. Not only did they keep Akatsuki's aerial mooks from attacking us from above, but they managed to bring us much needed support," Mifune stated. "Especially the members of Iwa's Kamizuru clan. Their help was invaluable in taking down many reanimations in a quick manner."

" They better pull their share of the weight, given how long those brats spent out of the village on that wild goose chase," Onoki snorted.

" Excellent, now we have a good way to prevent Akatsuki from conquering the skies," Jiraiya said, ignoring Onoki's snide comment. "Though I wouldn't put past them to bring up something to regain aerial superiority."

" I find that unlikely, flight isn't an ability that common," Onoki stated.

"Even then, it would be wiser to err on the side of caution, and not underestimate the enemy," Mifune advised.

"Something I can agree with," Jiraiya replied. "I believe there's nothing more to discuss. You did an excellent job today, Mifune-dono. Expect the supply caravan to reach your position soon. In the meantime, you and your troops earned a rest."

"Thank you, Supreme Commander."

Mifune could feel the link between his mind and those in HQ vanish as the Yamanaka ended the connection. Repressing a sigh of exhaustion, the old samurai exited the communications tent - guarded by two samurai, who straightened when their leader passed them-, and looked around the campsite: there were many bonfires with ninjas and samurai sitting around them, using them to heat their food. Others returned from the town, carrying food they probably bought from restaurants and inns, as well as some bottles. He could imagine that it was sake.

"I better keep an eye on the troops. They might want to enjoy some alcohol after such a battle, but I'm not going to tolerate drunken antics among my men," Mifune said to himself, shaking his head. He would ban drinking altogether as long as the war continued, but he didn't want to risk low morale, or worse, a revolt.

He saw a group of samurai, wearing their armor but not their helmets, sitting in front of a bonfire, eating some meat and drinking what appeared to be tea. As expected, they immediately straightened upon seeing their leader.

"Mifune-sama," all the samurai said.

"Yoshiteru," Mifune addressed as the man with the higher rank, a broad shouldered man in his late thirties with a buzzcut and a goatee. "It seems some ninja decided to bring some alcohol from the town," this earned some snorts of contempt from the samurai, and he swore he heard one of them muttering something about lack of

discipline. "For the time being, I'm going to let them enjoy themselves a little, but I want you and the rest of the samurai to make sure things don't go overboard."

"Understood, Mifune-sama," Yoshiteru said, bowing quickly, before putting back his helmet, one with horns in order to show his superior rank. The rest of the samurai present did the same. "Leave it to us, and we'll make sure no one brings shame to this division."

Mifune nodded, as he watched the samurai leave, presumably to transmit his orders to their companions.

"I guess I should follow the Supreme Commander's advice and get some rest myself. One never knows when Akatsuki is going to strike," Mifune said to himself once again.

He was heading towards his private tent when something caught his attention: a certain blue haired woman sitting on the roof of one of the houses at the edge of the town, her amber eyes fixed onto the setting sun. The Shogun of the Land of Iron decided that rest could come later, and with a mighty leap, he landed behind Konan, who didn't react in any way to his presence.

"Hello again," Mifune greeted the former Akatsuki. "Do you mind if we talk a little?"

"You're my superior officer. If I did mind, it would be of little consequence," Konan replied.

"This has nothing to do with official matters of the Ninja Alliance," Mifune said, trying to sound friendly. "I witnessed your fight against Hanzo. While I was worried at first, said worries were quickly swept away when I saw the masterful way in which you dealt with him. You're a very skilled ninja, girl. We are fortunate Akatsuki lost somebody like you."

"Thank you," Konan dryly accepted the compliment, but didn't say anything else. They fell into a silence until Mifune decided to break it

again.

"I did hear some of what you said during the battle," Mifune continued. "You had some kind of history with Hanzo, didn't you?"

"Yes," Konan replied. "Is it of any interest to you?"

"You could say it is," Mifune said. "You know, I also clashed with Hanzo in past conflicts, when I was much younger. Though I don't think I made much of an impression on him to make him remember me."

"Hanzo was a warmonger. I'm sure a good chunk of the ninjas present here have some kind of history with Hanzo," Konan stated, displeasure evident in her tone. "If not them, then their parents or some family members."

"True. Though few would be the same kind of close and personal history like you and me. Especially you," Mifune pointed.

"I guess you have a point," Konan admitted. "So, you want to hear about my first encounter with that man?"

"If it's not much trouble, yes, I would like to," Mifune admitted.

Konan gave Mifune a bridged version of how her early life was for context, before recounting the horrible experience that claimed the life of the man she loved, and most importantly, the man that would bring true peace to the Land of Rain. She then told him about how they reformed Akatsuki into what it is today, and finally, how Pain put an end to Hanzo's reign, and seized Amegakure for Akatsuki.

"To think that a single man was able to defeat a foe like Hanzo..." Mifune said, trying to keep his awe in check. "The Rinnegan is truly something."

"True. Though as you could see today, the Rinnegan isn't necessary to beat Hanzo," Konan pointed out. "Though I have the feeling that

the Hanzo Nagato killed, and the one I defeated today isn't the same Hanzo that served the Sannin their most known defeat. Fighting Hanzo, he felt like he was... off. Sloppy. Like he hadn't had a real fight in years," Konan explained. "Though given how long has been since Hanzo was seen in a battlefield, it might have been the case."

"I haven't been in a battlefield for more than two decades, yet that didn't stop me from keeping my skills honed," Mifune pointed out. "You think Hanzo would fall prey to such indulgence?"

"Given his standing, probably. Very few people wanted to fight him directly, so it's not that unlikely that he took advantage of his fearsome reputation."

Mifune shook his head. "It's always a pity when a warrior of such caliber lets himself spoil like that."

For the first time, Konan stopped looking at the sunset, and gazed at Mifune, one of her eyebrows raising. "Your words carry a lot of reverence for a man as despicable as him."

Mifune chuckled a little. "I can't help it, Konan-san. I will always respect the skill of a powerful warrior, be ninja or samurai, friend or foe."

"You do realize that it's thanks to Hanzo that Akatsuki exists," Konan reminded him.

Mifune, however, shook his head. "In that, you're wrong. Akatsuki, at least in spirit, existed longer before that. If Obito didn't convince you to join him, he would have used another method. Included killing your friend Nagato in his sleep and taking the Rinnegan back. Hanzo was, at best, somebody who fostered a fortuitous situation Obito took advantage of."

Konan weighed the words of the commander of the Fifth Division, nodded in agreement, and let out a weary sigh.

"We're truly insignificant, aren't we?" Konan asked. "If other people can use us as pawns so easily."

"Less insignificant than you think, Konan-san," Mifune reassured her. "And we're only pawns if we allow ourselves to be. And you stopped being one the moment you walked out of that criminal organization."

...

"And the score is: Animal Squad two, Kakuzu zero! Wohoooo!" Kiba howled, with Akamaru happily barking for added emphasis.

"Yeah, we beat that guy once, why did Akatsuki think that sending him a second time would be different?" Tamaki agreed.

Kiba looked at Tamaki, eyebrow cocked. "Whoa, you're agreeing with me? Did somebody smack your head really hard or something?"

"Har har," Tamaki replied, rolling her eyes. "Despite what you might think, I don't disagree with you on principle, only when you're wrong."

"You disagree with me most of the time," Kiba said, frowning a little, as he crossed his arms.

"Because you're wrong most of the time," Tamaki said with a mocking grin as he leaned towards him a little. "Just not this time. So enjoy this fleeting moment of being right and me agreeing with you."

Kakashi's Animal Squad was sitting around a bonfire, enjoying their dinner and something to drink while celebrating victory. Both Kiba and Tamaki were in a high mood and amicably talked with each other, while Shino and Kakashi were silent. While it was par the course for Shino, the silver haired Jonin looked a little spiritless.

"While I hate to interrupt the only moment in which your insufferable bickering doesn't spoil the mood," Shino interceded, pushing his glasses. "I must point out that the credit for our victory over Kakuzu

shouldn't entirely go to us. We did have outside help from an Iwa ninja in his capture."

"Ah, yeah, that girl with the scary giant bee," Kiba said, as he recalled the memory of the battle. He then shrugged. "Eh, we would have beaten him one way or the other. She only accelerated the only possible outcome."

"You certainly don't lack confidence in your abilities," Shino pointed out.

"Of course I don't! I mean, it's not that I think I'm invincible or something like that, but I can tell how much I've improved over the past years!" the Inuzuka boasted. "Plus, Kakuzu isn't the only reanimation we fought and defeated. Did you hear about how Tamaki and I crushed Takigakure's previous leader, Hisen?"

"Maybe not as strong as Kakashi-sensei, but close!" Tamaki continued. "And Kiba, Shibuki-san and I totally kicked his butt! Ask Shibuki-san if you don't believe us!"

"You two certainly seem to be in a festive mood," Shino pointed out, suppressing a sigh.

"Why wouldn't be? Today we scored a huge victory!" Tamaki cheered, though truth be told, she wasn't sure if their victory was that decisive or not. Still, a victory was a victory.

"And you should be as well," Kiba said in a mildly chastising tone. "You should be celebrating with us, yet instead you are so dour it looks like you ate a lemon raw!"

Taking some offense to this, Shino crossed his arms and shifted in his seat to give his back to his two teammates. "I don't know what you're talking about. Just because I'm not hollering like you two doesn't mean that I'm not happy for our victory."

There was a moment of silence, until a realization dawned upon Tamaki. She smiled widely and narrowed her eyes at Shino in a mocking manner.

"Ohhhhhhh, I think I know why you're so moddy, Shino," Tamaki said in a teasing manner. "You're mad because that girl with the giant bee wasn't some normal Iwa ninja. I did hear about her clan, they were some rivals or enemies of your clan, weren't it?"

"You can't be right, Tamaki," Kiba interceded, first sounding like he was going to defend his teammate, but soon joined Tamaki in the mockery. "Shino is so obviously above such petty things, he wouldn't let him bother him that much, would he?"

"I think I preferred you two when you were constantly bickering," Shino replied.

"Aw, come on Shino, don't be like that. We're only teasing you," Tamaki said, lightly slapping his shoulder. "Cheer on! Who cares if a member of an ancestral enemy saved your skin? We're here, we're alive, and we won, that's what matters!"

"Well said! Don't you agree with us, Kakashi-sensei?" Kiba asked the silver haired Jonin, but got no answer. "Kakashi-sensei?"

"Huh?" Kakashi asked all of sudden, sounding dazed and disoriented, like he was suddenly snapped from a deep slumber. "I'm sorry Kiba, I wasn't listening to you. You were saying?"

"Aw, not you too!" the Inuzuka protested, throwing his hands in the air. Akamaru whined a little.

"Me too what?" the confused Copy Ninja asked.

"Come on Kiba, be a little more sensitive," Tamaki told the Inuzuka. "Kakashi-sensei was forced to fight his own dad. That must have been quite the crushing experience."

"It was," Kakashi said, letting out a sigh. "And I'd lie if I said that it didn't affect me. But I'm better now. I appreciate your concern, but you don't have to worry about me. I'm better now, promise."

"You know that you can talk to us about any problem you have, right?" Tamaki insisted. "Bottling your emotions can't be good. Especially during times like this."

"Shouldn't I be the one telling you that?" Kakashi asked, as he scratched his temple.

"You know, Rin told us about her time with you when you were our age, and how you used to be back then," Kiba pointed out.

"And how Obito's supposed death affected you," Tamaki continued.

Kakashi let out a sigh that he didn't know was holding. "That girl... always poking her nose on other people's business... if somebody gives her a reason to worry, she won't drop the issue until it's solved. Guess I should be glad she didn't change that much. There's no escape from this one, isn't it?"

Both Tamaki and Kiba wordlessly shook their heads. Shino merely crossed his arms before adjusting his glasses, which reflected the light of the bonfire in an admittedly unsettling way.

"If Rin told you about how I used to be when... when we formed part of Team Minato," Kakashi began, the uneasiness of the memory becoming evident. "Then you know that my ideas of what it meant to be a ninja were markedly different, which were influenced by my father's decision and how he ended up taking away his life."

"Even if thanks to Obito I managed to understand why my father choose his comrades over completing the mission, there was something else I was unable to forgive him for: killing himself, and leaving me alone to fend for myself. I might have been a prodigious ninja, but that didn't change the fact that my age was still in the single digits, with all of what it entailed."

"So even if you gained a better understanding of your father's decision-making, you still resented him for taking his life," Shino summarized.

"Yeah. At first, I tried to make anything to separate myself from him, and I think that taking an opposite worldview was part of that. After Obito made me reconsider... well, then it became even harder. Before I hated my father, and then I had this weird mix of love, respect and resentment, and quite frankly, I didn't know how to deal with it. And thought that the best thing to do was simply not deal with it."

"But why?" Kiba asked.

"He was dead. Nothing was going to change that," Kakashi said with a shrug. "I thought that the best thing I could do was not to dwell on that and move on. Plus, I was still dealing with my whole goddamn team dying one after the other."

"Though in the end two of them weren't dead," Tamaki chimed in, hoping to cheer Kakashi a bit with that fact.

"You have no idea how weird it feels to see somebody alive after accepting that they were dead," Kakashi said, shaking his head. "And then, of course, Orochimaru not only had to revive my father, but he then throws him against me in particular."

"I think it's been long established that that man is quite sick," Kiba said in disgust.

"So all the feelings I bottled for so many years came rushing like a torrent breaking through a damn made of toothpicks," Kakashi said, letting out a mirthless chuckle. "Which I wasn't able to hide, and my dad, clever bastard that he was, picks on them and wanted to help me solve them."

"While you two were battling," Tamaki said, thought it was more a question.

"While the two of us were battling," the Copy Ninja confirmed with a nod.

"And were you able to make peace with him?" Shino asked.

"As unbelievable as it was, we did. He said he understood how I feel, and regretted taking his life. Apparently, he also regretted saving his comrades over completing the mission, but I convinced him he did the right thing. That seemed to bring him some relief," Kakashi said. "Eventually, I mustered the strength to forgive him, because I knew I would never have such a good chance. And do you guys remember how Hokage-sama defeated the zombies of Minato-sensei and Kushina?"

"I believe that, if a zombie reaches a form of closure, the soul will return to the afterlife and the reanimation will be undone," Shino recalled.

"So that's what happened with your father?" Tamaki asked, easily connecting the dots.

"Yes. It was quite... cathartic to watch," Kakashi said, raising his gaze to the night sky above him. "For the first time in my life, I felt like I was finally ready to move on from the past."

"Funny thing, you weren't the only one who had to fight their father returned as a zombie. Kiba and I helped Shibuki-san deal with his dad," Tamaki said once again. "And it seems that Shibuki also had some stuff he really needed to discuss with him."

"Though unlike your dad, Hisen didn't disappear on his own, and we had to seal him," Kiba added.

"It's kind of crazy how many people ended up fighting their dead relatives," Tamaki observed.

"Not as crazy as you may think," Shino intervened. "A man as intelligent as Orochimaru surely took the emotional factor into the

equation when he raised his army of the undead. Fighting a strong ninja with unlimited chakra that can't be killed by conventional means is hard on itself, but if we add the distress of said undead enemy being a person close to you, the fight becomes even worse."

"Like I said, that man is sick," Kiba spat, with Akamaru barking in agreement.

"More like diabolical," Tamaki added.

"Indeed. But as we proved him today, that strategy isn't going to work," Kakashi said, smiling under his mask. His students returned the gesture. "Come on, let's enjoy the night, we deserve a little celebration after such victory."

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"Today's been a good day for the Kamizuru Clan."

To say that Suzumebachi was happy would be an understatement. Sure, there was a lot of joy going around given the Alliance's string of victories, this one being the most recent, but the Iwa kunoichi was indeed ecstatic.

Like most other ninjas, she and her two brothers were sitting around a bonfire while enjoying their dinner, while they discussed the battle that took place that day, as well as making predictions of how the conflict would progress. They made sure to sit along other Iwa ninjas, given their lack of trust in other villages, especially Konoha.

"Yes. It's been a while since we've been in a real battle," an older looking man with tanned skin, a black beard with a moustache added. This man was Kurobachi, Suzumebachi's older brother. Though, despite his seniority, he wasn't the leader of what was left of their clan, given his little sister's superior talent in their clan secret jutsu.

"But with the jutsu we learned from the secret scrolls of the First Tsuchikage, the enemy never stood a chance," a glasses-wearing man with long blond hair that accentuated his overall feminine appearance added confidently. This man was Jibachi, the youngest of the Kamizuru siblings.

The Kamizuru siblings left Iwa in order to search for the First Tsuchikage's secret scrolls, that contained the Kamizuru Clan's most powerful jutsu. They searched in every place they knew their grandfather had been in or was of some significance, to no avail. After almost eight years of search, they were ready to give up.

That's it, until by pure coincidence, they heard of the Bikochu beetle, an incredibly rare insect with an extremely keen sense of smell, which was valuable for trackers for that very reason. After another long and arduous search, they found a specimen of Bikochu ready to lay eggs, and managed to make a newborn Bikochu to smell a piece of cloth that belonged to their grandfather. Eventually, the Bikochu led them to a hidden ninja fortress where the scrolls were stored.

The irony that they managed to complete their mission thanks to a beetle that was previously used by the Aburame clan wasn't lost on them, but they didn't want to dwell on it.

"The best part was probably the face those Aburames made when they witnessed our new powers," Suzumebachi said, letting out a cackle of satisfaction. "Oh, if we only had that scroll during the last war... things would have been MUCH different!"

"You're talking about that Aburame you saved from that one reanimation, don't you?" Jibachi asked, smiling a little.

Kurobachi, however, sneered as he crossed his arms. "Disgraceful. You should have let that kid die. We're fighting this war for Iwa, not for any of the other villages, much less Konoha. If the other nations end up crippled by this conflict, the better for us."

Rather than agree with him, Suzumebachi shot her elder brother a chastising stare. "You should do well to remember, brother, that we're at war with an enemy of a scale unseen before. Maybe Konoha and the Aburame clan were our enemies in the past. And they may be in the future, once this war is won and forgotten. But for the time being, they're allies, and they'll be treated as such."

"You can't be talking seriously!" Kurobachi angrily protested.

"And this, my dear brother, is why I am the one in charge," Suzumebachi said. "Our clan is on thin ice, being the three of us its last remaining members. If we want to come out of this war alive, we will need to be both careful and pragmatic. I'm not asking you to like the Aburames -Kami knows what do I think of them-, but like I said before, they're our allies now."

"I agree with Suzumebachi, brother. There might be a time where we might be on a perilous situation and may need assistance from ninjas from other villages, Konoha included," Jibachi interceded. "And I'd hate that they'd let me die because we were shown unwilling to do the same for them."

"But we won't be in a situation that would require such help! We're not just Kamizuru, but the strongest Kamizuru since the First Tsuchikage, for Kami's sake! Don't you have any pride?" Kurobachi angrily shouted.

"Pride is what caused our clan to fall from grace like it did. I do take pride in my strength and abilities, but not to the point of letting me blind me to reason," Suzumebachi said.

Kurobachi shook his head, and scoffed. "You always had quite the big head, sis. And you only got worse when you caught the eye of Onoki's brat of a granddaughter."

"Tsuchikage-sama may be young and a little naïve, but only a fool wouldn't respect her strength. And most importantly, she has Iwa's

interest at heart. That should be enough for you," Suzumebachi replied.

"You know she isn't here. You don't have to butter her up. I know you're working your way into being the next Tsuchikage, but everything has a limit," Jibachi said, snickering a little.

"If you sparred against her like I did, you wouldn't underestimate her like that," Suzumebachi angrily retorted. "Kurotsuchi is strong, and if I play my cards right, part of that strength is going to be mine. Or better said, for the Kamizuru clan."

Kurobachi raised his eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Two of Iwa's most powerful jutsu, The Light Boulder Jutsu, created by our grandfather, and the Dust Release, created by his direct successor, are secret jutsu privy only to the Tsuchikages. Kurotsuchi-sama was already a formidable kunoichi in no small part thanks to her Lava Release Bloodline Limit, but adding flight and Dust Release to the mix, she became truly deadly," Suzumebachi explained. "Meaning that, if I manage to convince her that I'm a suitable successor, those secrets will be mine as well."

Despite her admittedly opportunistic thoughts and goal, Suzumebachi liked to think of herself as a loyal Iwa ninja and somebody the Tsuchikage trusted.

"But they will be yours alone only, not part of the clan," Kurobachi pointed out. "They won't allow you to share them with us."

"Maybe not, but I have other ways to increase our clan's power. And that's where you two enter," Suzumebachi said. "I suggested Kurotsuchi-sama the possibility of an arranged marriage between members of the Kinryu clan and the three of us. That way, the next generation of Kamizuru clan members will also have Lava Release on top of our clan jutsu. So far, she seems to be receptive to the idea, and promised me that there would be talks with the head and elders of the Kinryu clan once the war is over."

"You certainly thought this very thoroughly," Kurobachichi noted. "And you're confident your plan will succeed."

"I have to be. I've been planning this for more than a decade to let that much work go to waste," Suzumebachichi said, gritting her teeth. She stood up, and shot her brothers a deadly glare. "That's why we can't screw this up, understood? We need to show Kurotsuchi-sama that we're among the best, if not the best ninjas of Iwa. Even if that means working side by side with Aburame clan. Understood?"

"Clear as water," Jibachichi said.

"Whatever, you better know what you're doing," Kurobachichi huffed, rolling his eyes.

...

Hanabi was sitting cross legged on the roof of a building of the town their campsite was built around. She required silence to do what she was trying, and even if she could still hear her fellow Allied ninjas partying and celebrating their victory below, she was far away enough as for their voices to be low and muffled enough to break her concentration.

Unlike Hinata, Hanabi has never been one for meditation. She never really saw the point of it. Hinata always said that Hanabi was too impatient and impulsive. The younger sister would agree, but she wouldn't consider it something that detracted from their ninja skills. At least not until now.

"Come on..." Hanabi said, letting out a long breath, while focusing her chakra.

Little by little, the muffled voices she could hear from below became more and more faint, until silence reigned uncontested. Hanabi took a couple minutes to realize this, and in order to test if her experiment worked, she opened her eyes.

Much to her delight, she was no longer on that town, but on the weird palace where she met Hamura Otsutsuki the time she awoke the Tenseigan. But instead of Hamura, it was her sister Hinata who was standing in front of her, her eyes looking into the distance, as if her mind was off.

"Yes, it worked!" Hanabi cheered.

"Huh?" Hinata asked, blinking a couple times, as if she had been snapped from a dream. She looked around, confused. "Uh? Where am I...? Hanabi-chan?"

"Hey, sis," Hanabi casually asked. "Before you ask, no, you are not dreaming. This is really me. I'm contacting you from the Earth."

"From the Earth...?" Hinata repeated, as if weighting her words. "How?"

"Remember how Hamura said he's bound to the chakra of those that possess the Tenseigan?" Hanabi asked. Hinata nodded. "Well, that means that the two of us are linked through Hamura's chakra. And I thought, since we're linked by our chakra, then maybe I can use it to contact you, just like Hamura talked to us. Plus, the fact that we're sisters should make the connection even stronger."

"That... was rather ingenious, Hanabi-chan," Hinata praised. Hanabi smiled proudly. "So, how are things going down there?"

"So, far, we're winning. Most of the reanimations avoid me, for good reason, so I'm mostly filling the role of air support. Then they have me permanently destroy the sealed reanimations with the Truth Seeking Balls," Hanabi explained. "I did hear some talks that Orochimaru is waiting to send their most powerful zombies for later, when our numbers are lower and we're more tired. What about you? Did you find that mysterious weapon?"

"We have a good idea of where it might be, but reaching there might become a bit of a problem," Hinata said.

"I see. Well, I was mostly checking on you to see how you were doing," Hanabi said a bit sheepishly. "And for you to see that I'm fine."

Hinata smiled. "It's certainly a reassuring thought. Say, do you know something about Naruto-kun?"

Hanabi shook her head. "As far as I know, he's still training on that super secret island. Man, if the two of you were here, this war would go much more smoothly."

"I'll do my best to complete my mission here so we can go back to Earth and help you there, I promise," Hinata told Hanabi.

...

Mountain Graveyard

Orochimaru was sitting alone in the cave entrance of Obito's lair. The Uchiha had left after a White Zetsu announced their defeat, the third one in a row. The first two battles Obito kept his cool, but now the Sannin could tell the Uchiha's patience was starting to run dry. Even if the Snake Sannin didn't fear the new Akatsuki leader, Rinnegan or not, he didn't want to risk their alliance.

Still, Orochimaru wouldn't consider the battle a complete lost, as he made a discovery regarding Impure World Resurrection. While he was monitoring all the fights his puppet zombies took part in, he could sense his control over Sakumo Hatake slowly slipping. His attention was drawn to the White Fang, mostly to see what the enemy was doing that could break his control over them. It already happened in Konoha, and the fact that he still didn't find what they did unnerved him.

It was then when he found out what it was: personal closure. When Kakashi and Sakumo made amends, Orochimaru could feel his control over the reanimation weaken more and more until it was completely undone, and the reanimation crumbled.

"To think that Impure World Resurrection has such a glaring weakness," the Sannin said in disgust, shaking his head. "Almost sounds like something out of a story for children."

Still, now that he knew this, he could take precautions. Whenever he felt that a reanimation would reach closure, Orochimaru would take direct control of them, overriding their personality with his own.

"Fortunately, this discovery didn't come too late, since I still have my best reanimations in reserve," Orochimaru said, rubbing his hands together. "Alright, the kids' gloves are off. I think I already tested the enemy's strength enough. Time to show the world the true power of this jutsu."

Author's Note: Yeah, mark Orochimaru's words, because they mean business. Let's say that these first three battles were more like a warm up. You probably noticed how nobody of note died so far, right? Yeah, from now onwards, that's going to change. It's not like I'm going to go full Game of Thrones, but expect named characters to die from the next battle onwards.

The part I liked to write the most about this chapter was Konan. Really, I love writing a post-Akatsuki Konan, she's so interesting and there are so many things about her to explore... while Kishimoto wasted a lot of the awesome characters he created, Konan definitely sits at the Top 5. And rest assured, this isn't the last you'll be seeing of her ;)

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Again, if you liked this chapter, don't forget to leave a review. It doesn't matter if it's long or small, every review means a lot to me, and they make me really, really, really happy!

Akatsuki's Counterattack

Author's Note: I'd like to announce that Shinobi420 and Animephilosopher1 had published a side story to this fic focused on Hanabi, titled "Hanabi Gaiden". If you want to read it (and you totally should is a pretty neat story), the fic is on Shinobi420's profile.

Anyway, onto the newest chapter:

Chapter 110:

Akatsuki's Counterattack

or

When bad guys stop fooling around

Ninja Alliance HQ

A few days after the battle on the forests of the Land of Frost, another army of White Zetsu and Impure World Resurrection zombies was detected, this one cutting through the Land of Fire, in direct route to Konoha.

"It seems they alternate their targets between Konoha and Kumo each time. A pattern, perhaps?" Onoki suggested.

"Who knows. That's not important now," Jiraiya said, before he turned towards Ao. "Ao-san, which division is closest to the enemy position?"

Ao focused, as his sensing abilities expanded. In no time, he managed to detect all the nearby friendly ninja in the Land of Fire.

"The Raikage's First Division is the closest to it," Ao said. "There's also Kurotsuchi's Second Division and Tsunade's Medical Division as well."

"Good. Send a message to the Raikage to intercept the enemy. He'll be happy to have a chance to break some skulls," Jiraiya told Ao.

"Shouldn't we move the other two divisions as well? Or one of them at the very least?" Onoki suggested.

Jiraiya shook his head. "Akatsuki probably knows the position of our troops, and they may be baiting us to move all our forces into a single point to leave other areas unprotected. We'll keep those in standby as they're relatively close to the First Division's position."

Suddenly, a ninja -from Suna, given the uniform- burst into the room, holding a sealed folder.

"Supreme Commander, we just received the scouts' report of the details about the enemy forces!" the Suna scout said.

Jiraiya nodded, took the folder, opened it, and carefully read its contents. His expression darkened with each name of the reanimations that have been spotted. It seemed that Orochimaru wanted to reopen old wounds on top of creating new ones.

"Orochimaru... this is a low blow..." Jiraiya growled.

"Something you may want to share with us, Supreme Commander?" Onoki asked. "We're a bit in the dark here."

"Several of the reanimations spotted are Konoha ninjas who died during the Uchiha Insurrection," he then looked at Shikaku, as color left the Nara leader's face. "Including Clan Heads Hiashi Hyuga and Inoichi Yamanaka."

Shikaku's shock was replaced by anger as his expression hardened and his hands were clenched into fists. "My boy and his teammates

are part of the First Division. Inoichi wasn't just Ino's father, he was like an uncle for Shikamaru and Choji. Seeing him defiled like that is going to break them."

"I don't want to sound insensitive, Shikaku-san, but if those kids are ninjas, they aren't kids anymore," Chiyo intervened. "They should be ready to face such a challenge."

"And they will face it... but not alone," Shikaku said, before turning at Jiraiya. "Supreme Commander, I know I'm part of the Intelligence Division, but this is a special circumstance. I hereby ask for permission to go into the battlefield."

There was a moment of silence as the Toad Sage locked eyes with the Nara Clan Head. Even if Jiraiya was regrettably out of the village when the Insurrection happened, he did hear some of the details. Among them, how Inoichi died, and how Shikaku watched him die. The man probably blamed himself for his friends' death.

"Maybe Shikaku can help Inoichi find closure, so we can get rid of a reanimation," Jiraiya thought, before making his decision. "Very well then. Permission granted."

"Good. Then I'll go immediately. Even at a good pace, I'll take some time to reach there."

"Leave that to me, Shikaku-san," Jiraiya said before biting his thumb and making five hand seals. "Summoning jutsu!"

Jiraiya slammed his palm into the ground, summoned a large orange toad with dark green markings and yellow eyes. Jiraiya then wrote something into a scroll, and gave it to the toad.

"Gama, please take Shikaku-san to this coordinates. Can you do that?"

Wordlessly, the toad shot his tongue at the surprised Shikaku, before pulling the Nara into his mouth and swallowing him whole, much to

everybody else's horror. Then, the toad disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Jiraiya noticed the looks of bewilderment the others were shooting at him.

"What? None of you guys traveled by toad? Stop giving me those looks, he will be fine!" the Sannin said in an annoyed tone.

Forests of the Land of Fire

Fortunately, it took no time for the First Division to intercept the marching Akatsuki army en route to Konoha, catching them still far away from the village.

The Raikage led from the vanguard. He had traded his usual white haori for the standard Kumo flak jacket, which he wore over his bare chest. He hadn't worn such flak jacket since the Third Ninja War, and couldn't help but admit, with a small hint of sadness, that it was fitting that another war would make him put it on again.

The enemy approached, heralded by a cloud of dust. The scouts from the Hyuga Clan already warned that two lines of Zetsu Brutes led the charge. The Raikage had read the reports from the other divisions on these creatures: made from several normal White Zetsu clones merging together, they were much stronger than the sum of their components, had near unlimited endurance, and only extremely powerful strikes or jutsu could put them down for good.

The Raikage smiled. He loved to hear somebody describing an enemy in such terms. When he heard about something being very hard, he couldn't help but test how much of his strength it would take to break it.

"Raikage-sama, they'll be here soon," an Iwa ninja asked. "Your orders?"

The answer came in the form of a burst of chakra, as an aura of blue light and crackling sparks flared around the leader of Kumo.

"They plan to break our formation with an onslaught," the Raikage said. "So we break their formation first!"

And in an instant, the Raikage was gone. In less than two seconds, he crossed the distance between them and the enemy lines, and sunk his fist into the gut of a Zetsu Brute. The force of the punch, coupled with the momentum of his charge added so much power to the hit, that the artificial monster burst into multiple chunks of goo. It happened so fast, his fellow Zetsu didn't notice what had happened.

Which proved to be a fatal mistake as the Raikage, who still kept some momentum from the initial charge, moved to the left and elbowed another Brute, blowing two of his arms and pushing it against another one.

Finally, the Zetsu stopped their charge, realizing that somebody was making a number on their ranks. A Brute charged the Raikage from behind, two of his arms morphing into blades, and tried to skewer him. However, the Raikage proved to be much faster than his enemy, and not only avoided the attack, but placed himself behind the giant creature. He wrapped his arms around the Brute's waist, and suplexed it into the ground with such force, it opened a crater while releasing lightning bolts everywhere, while pushing the enemies away from him.

The Raikage looked back, and saw that his troops didn't even move, watching in awe the spectacle that was his fighting. This brought an ugly snarl to his face.

"What the hell are you looking at!? ONWARDS!" he yelled.

After a couple seconds of silence, the Raikage's order was replied by a chorus of battle cries, and the First Division charged forward, their morale invigorated. Soon, it was the Akatsuki army who found itself at the mercy of an unstoppable enemy onslaught.

...

Despite the Raikage successfully breaking the enemy formation, the first lines at least, the Zetsu Brutes still proved to be very resilient enemies, being able to shake off low and mid power jutsu, while literally ripping in part the unfortunate ninjas who got too close for them.

"Let the Chakra Golems go first!" Shikamaru shouted, as the aforementioned metallic constructs stomped their way forward. Many of them raised their arms, releasing streams of fire from the flamethrowers mounted on their forearms. While they proved to be effective burning the smaller Zetsu, the larger ones were more resilient. "Okay, it's time for us to enter the fray! Ino, with me! Choji, stay behind us and guard our backs!"

"You got it!" the Akimichi replied.

"Alright, let's go!" Ino said, already seeing her first victim, a Zetsu brute struggling against a Chakra Golem, and made a hand seal. "You're mine! Mind Disturbance Jutsu!"

The Zetsu Brute lost control of his body, much to his confusion, and disengaged the Chakra Golem to attack a fellow Brute fighting some Kiri and Kumo ninjas. Another Brute and a couple of normal Zetsu quickly identified the source of the disruption, and charged towards the Yamanaka Clan head.

"Good work, Ino! Keep going forward. Now's my turn!" Shikamaru said, making his clan's signature hand seal as well. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Shikamaru's shadow darkened and elongated, spreading forward, while also splitting into multiple threads, one for each Zetsu coming towards them. The moment the shadow threads connected with their shadows, the artificial creatures were stopped on the spot.

"Good. Now, stay still while I kill you," Shikamaru said with a smirk, as his hands formed the rat and the bird seal. "Shadow Stitching Jutsu!"

Suddenly, several black needles materialized from the shadows, impaling the Zetsu, who screamed in pain as they were almost instantly killed. However, the Zetsu Brute, even if he was in obvious pain, managed to survive. He even shot Shikamaru a mocking smirk.

"You'll need... something stronger than a few pinpricks to kill me, Konoha scum," the Zetsu Brute said, as he tried to overpower Shikamaru's binding jutsu.

Shikamaru smirked back, as his hands started to do more hand seals. "How about this, then? Fire Release: Shadow Fire Thread!"

A stream of fire moved through Shikamaru's shadow towards the immobilized Zetsu Brute, as if the shadows were trails of oil. Soon, the Zetsu Brute was engulfed by a roaring inferno. The creature let out a scream of pain as the flames devoured his flesh. And that wasn't even the end of it.

"Here, have this as well!" Shikamaru said, as he tossed forward two kunai with explosive tags attached to them. The paper notes detonated the moment the fire touched them, putting the Zetsu Brute out of its misery. "Whew. One down, dozens remain. Wonder if we can do something to-"

"Shikamaru, watch out!" the Nara heard Choji's voice warning him from behind.

Shikamaru pulled out a kunai just in time to see two normal Zetsu clones lunging at him from the flanks. While he could parry the attack of one of them, he'd be at the mercy of the other. Fortunately, Shikamaru didn't have to worry about anything as two giant hands caught one of the Zetsu each, before they slammed them into the ground, killing them.

"Good one, Choji!" Shikamaru praised.

Choji's arms shrunk to normal size, as he smiled at Shikamaru. "Hey, you told me to cover your backs, and I will do that no matter wha-"

"Vacuum Palm!"

Choji was suddenly hit by a vacuum shell on the side of his head, which sent him sprawling on the floor.

"Choji!" Shikamaru cried, and turned to the direction of the attack. There, an undead Hyuga, a man with shoulder length brown hair and delicate features. Main house, given his clean forehead. The man was in the clan's usual battle stance, stood there ready to attack. Shikamaru wasted no time. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

From Shikamaru's shadow, multiple shadow threads rocketed towards the Hyuga reanimation, but the man expertly dodged them, carefully timing his steps.

"I'm sorry, Nara, I wish you no harm, but my actions aren't my own," the Hyuga apologized, as he dashed towards Shikamaru. "Eight Trigrams, Thirty two-"

"Human Tank Bullet Jutsu!"

Shikamaru jumped sideways just as Choji, transformed into a giant spinning meat sphere, rolled forward towards the Hyuga, carving a furrow on the ground as it moved. The Hyuga cancelled his combo, and went for the clan's defensive move.

"Heavenly Spin!"

The Hyuga started to spin, turning into a rotating chakra dome, which formed just in time to parry Choji's attack. Both attacks struggled and grinded against each other, but in the end, the Heavenly Spin proved to be more powerful, and Choji was pushed backwards. The Akimichi heir quickly returned to normal, as he landed on his back, letting out a grunt of pain.

"Choji!" Shikamaru shouted again. But he was unable to assist his fallen friend, since the Hyuga stopped spinning and charged towards Shikamaru. "Shit! Shadow-"

"Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

Suddenly, bright white light filled the area, making Shikamaru to instinctively shield his eyes in order to protect them. The Hyuga, however, wasn't so lucky, and thanks to his Byakugan, the damage to his sight was even greater.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

As the bright light dimmed down, a dark skinned, red headed kunoichi wielding a katana crackling with electricity passed Shikamaru, rushing towards the blinded Hyuga. She delivered several quick swipes, cutting both the arms and the head of the reanimation, whose body fell on its back lifelessly.

"It seems we arrived just in time," the redhead kunoichi said.

"Karui!" Choji happily said, now back on his feet, and rushed towards her. "Thanks a lot! We owe you one!"

"You'll have plenty of chances to repay me," Karui said, as her teammates Omoi and T quickly went to the fallen reanimation, and started to apply chakra and movement suppression sealing tags. "You guys are okay?"

"I've been better, but I could have been worse," Shikamaru admitted. "Nice timing."

"It was luck that we saw you here. By the way, why didn't you move since the battle began?" Karui asked. "You guys are sitting ducks if you stay in the open like that."

"We were protecting Asuma-sensei before he finished," Choji mentioned, and looked back.

Karui looked at where Choji was looking at, and saw the bearded Jonin sitting on the ground in the lotus position with his eyes closed.

"The hell? What is that guy doing?" Karui asked, half surprised, half outraged. "Finished doing what?"

"Gathering nature energy," Shikamaru said.

And just on cue, Asuma opened his eyes, which were yellow rather than dark brown, and had thin red lines around them.

"Gathering complete. My Sage Mode is ready!" Asuma said, as he pulled out his trench knives. Channeling chakra through them, the knives projected a long blade of blue light. "Whoa! It was never this big before!"

The earth started to rumble, and the Konoha and Kumo ninjas noticed a multitude of White Zetsu clones, lead by three Zetsu Brutes, charging towards them.

"Just like I said before, sitting ducks!" Karui said, before turning towards the Konoha ninjas. "Come on, we need to rejoin the main group!"

"Wait. I think I can take care of this group on my own," Asuma said, taking a step forward. Raising one of his chakra blades, he delivered an horizontal swing in his general direction.

With that move, Asuma released a crescent shaped chakra wave, which flew forward towards the incoming group of enemies. The moment Asuma's attack touched the incoming enemies, they were sliced in half, as if they were made of butter. The wave still carried enough power and momentum to continue flying forward, cutting more enemies until it dispelled.

"Wow..." Karui said in awe. "I really need to learn how to do that."

"I can talk with the guy that taught me senjutsu if you want," Asuma said. "But it will have to be another moment. Now we have a battle to win!"

His confidence reinvigorated by his new power, Asuma rushed forward. Shikamaru and Choji were going to follow him, when that moment a giant toad landed seemingly out of nowhere in front of them. And their surprise grew even further when the toad regurgitated a very disgusted Shikaku.

"Dad!?" Shikamaru asked, as he run towards his father. "What are you doing here? And... what were you doing inside a toad?"

"Hokage-sama said it was the fastest way to get me to the battlefield," Shikaku said, coughing, and wiping slime from his body. "Though I don't think I'll want to do that ever again."

"Yeah, Ino said the same thing when she had to get inside a toad," Choji said, as he and Shikamaru helped Shikaku on his feet.

"Why are you here, dad?"

"I had to come. Our scouts told us that one of the reanimations on this division is no other than Inoichi," Shikaku explained. Both Shikamaru and Choji's eyes grew wide as their mouths were left wide open, though Shikamaru quickly shook off the shock.

"Of course. It makes sense that Orochimaru would revive him," Shikamaru said, shaking his head in disgust. "It was only a matter of time until we had to fight somebody close to us."

"Then Ino..." Choji began.

No more words were needed, as they quickly went to look for their blonde teammate, hoping that they would get to her before she saw her defiled form of her deceased father.

...

"... sixteen strikes, thirty two strikes, sixty four strikes!"

Not far away from there, another Hyuga reanimation was in the middle of a fight. This one, though, was much stronger than the one

Karui defeated. At his feet laid the bodies of the ninjas from multiple villages he had just defeated, some of them death, others just unconscious or paralyzed, fallen victim of the zombie's martial prowess.

More Allied ninjas appeared to replace the ones Hiashi had defeated. Two from Konoha, another from Kiri, another from Iwa and one from Ame. The former Hyuga Clan Head was still wrapping his head around seeing ninjas from so many villages fighting together. Despite the fact that other Konoha reanimations gave him an abridged version of what had happened after his death, there were some things that didn't sink in.

"If you wish to defeat me, I'd avoid engaging me in close combat," Hiashi advised, seeing that his new opponents all were holding weapons of some sort, from kunai, to katanas to shotos. "The Hyuga Clan is unbeatable in hand to hand combat, and weapons will do you no good. Try ninjutsu instead."

"Very well then! Thanks for the tip" the Iwa ninja said, as he started to make hand seals as fast as he could. "Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

His companions did the same.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

"Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

Large boulders, a stream of fire, smaller fireballs and shuriken made of water flew in perfect formation towards the former clan head. His expression unchanging, he started to spin as chakra was released from his body.

"Heavenly Spin!"

In less than a second, Hiashi turned into a spinning dome of chakra, rotating so fast and with so much momentum that not only he was able to repel the elemental barrage aimed towards him, but created a shockwave that send his enemies flying backwards.

"Unfortunately, you'll need something more powerful than that to make a dent in my defenses," Hiashi said in a somewhat regretful manner. He then dashed forward, his palms flaring with blue chakra. "Sorry. I won't enjoy this anymore than you will."

However, before Hiashi could strike his next victim, he was alerted by the whirring sound of multiple shuriken flying towards him. He broke his charge, deflected some with a few Gentle Fist strikes, and jumped backwards to dodge the rest. That moment, a newcomer entered the battleground, another Konoha ninja, given the uniform.

Though it wasn't just any Konoha ninja, but one Hiashi knew so well.

"Hello, husband. I was praying that you'd be sent to fight a division other than mine. But alas, fate doesn't appear to be on my side."

"Hikari..." Hiashi said, his expression softening, as his heart whirled with a mixture of sorrow and joy. "It makes me so happy to see that you're still alive. Are our daughters okay? And the clan?"

"Both our daughters and the rest of the clan couldn't be better," Hikari said, before turning at the other ninja Hiashi just defeated, who were getting back on their feet. "I'll take care of my husband. I'm among the few who knows how to beat him."

"As you wish, Hyuga-san," one of the Konoha ninjas said, as both he and the rest of his companions left to look for another opponent.

"You were a strong kunoichi when I was alive, Hikari, but even then you were still weaker than me," Hiashi said, as his body slipped into

the standard Hyuga fighting stance. "Did your strength and skill grow as much as to eclipse mine during these past years?"

"I'm not sure, but I like to think that they did," Hikari said, mimicking her husband's actions. "Guess that there's only one way to find out."

Without further ado, Hiashi launched himself at his wife, and delivered a flurry of palm strikes. Hikari was able to block or dodge all of them nimbly, as well as deliver a few good hits herself. Still, her hits were barely able to hurt her husband.

"You're indeed better than I remember," Hiashi admitted. "Though sadly the Gentle Fist won't work on reanimations like myself."

"Understood. Let me step up my game then," Hikari said, jumping backwards while making several hand seals, before clapping her hands together. "Water Release: Water Palm!"

Water droplets formed around Hikari, before they gathered on her hands, covering them in a cloak of liquid. Hiashi watched the process with utmost interest.

"Elemental ninjutsu combined with the Gentle Fist... that was the idea Hinata mentioned she wanted to develop..." Hiashi said in awe.

"I'm glad you still remember that. Needless to say, yeah, she succeeded with that. If anything, she took the Gentle Fist to heights you'd be unable to believe. Oh, if only she was here to show you..."

"As much as I'd like to see how my daughters are and how much they've grown, I prefer if they don't see me in such a wretched state," Hiashi sorrowfully said, before charging forward. "Now you'll have the opportunity to test how good that combination is, Hikari."

Hikari began her counterattack, delivering palm strikes that released short but power streams of water when she thrust her arms forward. She quickly reared both arms backwards.

"Water Release: Double Torrent Palm!"

Hikari pushed her hands forward, this time releasing a larger stream of water at her undead husband. Hiashi started to spin as chakra poured from his body.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Once again, the Hyuga Clan's greatest defensive jutsu proved to be enough to keep the former clan head safe.

"I must admit, seeing the Gentle Fist combined with elemental ninjutsu is truly a sight to behold," Hiashi praised.

"You should see what Neji or our daughters are able to do," Hikari replied.

"Unfortunately, it's still not enough to cause me any harm," Hiashi continued, as his body slipped into a fighting stance once again. "For your sake, I hope you have more techniques you can use than the ones you showed me."

"Heh, I knew beating you wouldn't be this easy. Anyway, fortunately, I do have a couple more tricks under my sleeve," Hikari said, smiling confidently as her hands flew through more hand seals. "Water Release: Walking Malestrom!"

Water burst around Hikari in large quantities, gathering around her in the shape of a spinning liquid column. Hiashi narrowed his eyes as he scanned the jutsu through the vision of the Byakugan.

" *The water around her is laced with her chakra, hiding her body from the Byakugan,*" Hiashi concluded. He smirked as his Byakugan instantly deactivated. "*Good one, Hikari. That way I won't be able to read your movements as long as I have the Byakugan active.*"

"Water Needle Palm!"

Hikari started to thrust her arms forward in quick succession, releasing a barrage of water needles at her undead husband. In an amazing display of dexterity and speed, Hiashi managed to parry every single one of them with quick strikes of the Gentle Fist, with the Byakugan still deactivated. Hikari moved forward little by little as she continued her barrage, closing the distance between her and her husband.

Until Hiashi suddenly reactivated the Byakugan.

"Eight Trigrams: Mountain Crusher!"

Thrusting both palms forward, Hiashi released a destructive wave of chakra from them. Hikari was too close to dodge, and took the attack in full, and was violently launched backwards, as the wave of chakra carved a wide furrow on the ground-. Fortunately, her watery cloak absorbed some of the impact, so the damage wasn't as severe as it could have been.

As the Hyuga kunoichi struggled to get back on her feet while rebuilding her water chakra cloak, her Byakugan picked her husband rushing towards her, ready to continue the beating.

"*Heh, nice, an opportunity to show him another of Hinata's jutsu,*" Hikari thought, as she smirked. "Water Release: Heavenly Rainstorm!"

Hikari started to spin in place, as she generated more chakra from her body that she instantly turned into more water, encasing herself into a protective watery tornado, just as Hiashi was about to strike her. The former Hyuga clan head felt as if he was trying to fight a tsunami, and this time it was his turn to be pushed backwards.

"Amazing. Not just the Gentle Fist, but the Heavenly Spin too?" Hiashi asked.

"Like I said, you'd be amazed if you could see Hinata and Hanabi now," Hikari replied, after she stopped spinning. Then, her Byakugan

picked up something. "Huh?"

That moment, another Hyuga near identical to her husband landed besides her.

"Hello, Hikari-san. I saw that you were having a little trouble dealing with my brother, so I'm here to offer my assistance," Hizashi said, and without waiting for an answer, he locked eyes with his brother.

"Hello, Hiashi. It's been a while since your demise."

"Hizashi! What are you doing here!?" Hiashi asked, as panic crept through his back. "You need to leave immediately, before I seriously hurt you!"

Hizashi chuckled as if his brother just told him a joke. "Hurt me? Brother, you may have been the first born, but I was the stronger of the two. And I'd like to think that I gotten even stronger since then."

"That's not what I'm talking about! The Caged Bird Seal! I don't think-" Hiashi said, as his body tensed. "I'm sorry, brother."

Hiashi's hands formed the hand seal necessary to trigger the Caged Bird Seal. But much to the former Clan Head's shock, nothing happened. He tried a few more times, but the result was the same.

"What? Why it isn't working?" Hiashi asked, perplexed. "It's because I'm a reanimation now?"

"Perhaps this might shed some light on your doubts, brother," Hizashi said, before removing his forehead protector.

Hiashi gasped upon seeing that his brother's forehead was devoid of any seal.

"The seal... it's gone!" Hiashi said, shocked. "But how? Even if the Main House and the elders somehow agreed to do such a thing, the seal was made to be impossible to remove!"

"It happened after your eldest was appointed the new Clan Head," Hizashi began, as he put the forehead protector back. "As for why and how it happened... both questions have the same answer: the Tenseigan."

"The Tenseigan? What does that myth has to do with anything?" Hiashi asked.

"Hinata has the Tenseigan, Hiashi," Hikari interceded. "And so does Hanabi."

"And the Tenseigan granted Hinata the power to remove the Caged Bird Seal without harming the victim," Hizashi continued. "And yes, most of the Main House and the elders opposed her. But both Hinata and Hanabi have the Tenseigan, and the two of them were on the same page on this issue... who was going to oppose them?"

"Hinata brought the Hyuga to a new era, Hiashi," Hikari said. "The Main and Branch Houses are no more. Now there's only Hyuga. One clan, as it should always have been."

"You saw some of the new jutsu your daughters created. Now, let me show you something that my son did," Hizashi said, as he crossed his arms in front of his face. "Naturally, this is something my son is much better at, but I'm no slouch at either. Gate of Opening, open!"

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"Mind Disturbance Jutsu!"

The Zetsu Brute was paralyzed on the spot, unable to understand why his body moved on his own and was forced to attack his fellow Zetsu clones. The caster of the jutsu, Ino Yamanaka, couldn't help but let out a chuckle of satisfaction.

"These creatures might be big and strong, but their minds are just as easily to control as the smaller ones," Ino said, mostly to herself.

"The better for me! It's is true that saying about the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Eventually, her mind controlled giant Zetsu was destroyed by a reanimation, one possessing a powerful Lava Release Bloodline Limit. She was about to mind control that reanimation when her sensing abilities noticed something: among the sea of many chakras around her, she noticed a particular spike of chakra, the kind of spike produced by using mental jutsu, just like the ones from the Yamanaka.

" *Is there another Yamanka out there?*" the blonde wondered.

"Get away from me! I can't control my body!" she heard some allied ninja scream.

" *A Yamanaka is on the enemy side!?*" she thought, shocked, as she moved towards the source of the disturbance. "Of course, it has to be a reanimation! They'll need me to counter them, whoever it is!"

As she ran, attacking or dodging Zetsu clones that got in her way, she finally saw several Allied ninjas fighting against each other. Yes, this was the work of a Yamanaka. Whoever he was, as the new Clan Head, she would put an end to it.

"Don't worry guys, I'm here! You won't have... to... fear..." Ino said, before her eyes finally saw the caster in question, and her enthusiasm vanished entirely. "D-daddy?"

Standing there, much to her horror, was the reanimated form of her father, Inoichi Yamanaka, just like how she remembered him, minus the cracked skin and black eyes. She felt as if somebody punched her in the gut, even if, in hindsight, she should have guessed that if Orochimaru wanted a Yamanaka for his army of zombies, Inoichi was the obvious choice. Maybe her subconscious didn't want to acknowledge the possibility and thus didn't bring it up.

"No... not you..." Ino sobbed, as tears started to gather around her teal eyes.

"Ino...?" Inoichi said, finally noticing her daughter. "Ino, is that you?"

"Y-Yes daddy, it's me..." she croaked.

"Dear Kami, you've grown so much," Inoichi said, as he appeared he was ready to cry as well. "Such a pretty young woman. And I'm sure you're an even better kunoichi. I'm sorry I wasn't there to see you grow up..."

"Yes, I'm a good kunoichi, or that's what I like to think," Ino said, forcing the tear backs, her lip quivering, as he held a kunai. "And I'm going to show you how good I am by stopping you!"

"Ino!" a new voice said.

That moment, Shikamaru, Choji and Shikaku all landed besides her, making Inoichi to tense up.

"Guys... !" Ino began.

"We knew that the moment you saw your father, you'd want to face him," Shikamaru began. "But that doesn't mean you have to do it alone."

"Yeah, Inoichi-san was like family for us too!" Choji added.

"It's good to see that you're alive as well," Inoichi said, his face looking relieved. "But where is Choza? Please don't tell me that he-"

"Choza is fine," Shikaku was quick to answer. "He's not with us, as he was chosen to be part of a group for a special mission."

Inoichi sighed again. "Thank goodness I was the only casualty among our families that day." He said. Then, his expression went from relieved to panicked, as his body tensed up. "Guys, watch out, I'm going to attack! Mind Evisceration Jutsu!"

The three teens and one adult opposing Inoichi all fell to their knees while clutching their heads in pain when their brains felt like they were being cut with a burning knife. Their enemies incapacitated, Inoichi pulled a kunai and rushed forward.

"You'll need... something better than that to... put me down, old friend..." Shikaku said, as he struggled against the searing pain coursing through his head, and formed a single hand seal. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

Shikaku's shadow darkened before it stretched and rocketed towards the incoming Inoichi, who gracefully sidestepped it without stopping his charge forward. The shadow split into smaller threads, forcing Inoichi to jump back a bit, but he made evident he wasn't going to stop.

Struggling against the mental pain, Ino reached for her ninja tool pouch, and grabbed a smoke bomb -after her battle with Sai, she decided to carry at least a dozen with her before a mission- and tossed it at her father's feet, filling the area in a dense cloud of purple smoke. Inoichi's body decided it was for the best not to attack blind.

" *Good, that bought us some time,*" Ino thought, as she started making hand seals. "Guys, let me enter your minds you I can connect them to mine! Mind Fragmentation Jutsu!"

Fragments of Ino's mind left her and entered her teammates and Shikaku. She could now see and hear what they saw and heard, and their minds were now linked together, allowing them to share their thoughts without the enemy knowing.

"Good job, Ino," Shikamaru said. "I know that Yamanakas can create mental shields to protect yourselves from enemy psychic attacks. Can you do that with us?"

"I can, but since you only have a tiny piece of my mind inside your head, it won't be as effective as a full shield," Ino replied.

"It will be better than nothing, Ino," Shikaku said. "Shikamaru, you and I will focus on immobilizing him. Ino, make sure to counter his psychic jutsu with yours. Choji, you will be the one to squash him once we incapacitate him. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" the Ino-Shika-Cho team chorused in unison.

"Come on Shikamaru!" the Nara patriarch said, as he and Shikamaru made the same hand seal. "Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

This time, two shadowy tendrils rocketed out of their shadows towards Inoichi. The undead Yamanaka had no choice but to fall back, lest him be trapped. Ino saw the perfect chance to strike.

"Alright then, my turn!" Ino said, as her hands made four hand seals as quickly as she could. "Mind Clone Switch Jutsu!"

Cloning her mind several times, she transferred them towards several White Zetsu clones near them, and immediately directed them towards her father. The two Naras noticed what Ino was doing, and they directed their shadows in order to force Inoichi into Ino's trap, and indeed, the possessed White Zetsu tackled the reanimation into the ground.

"Great work, guys!" Shikaku said. "Choji, now!"

"Partial Multi Size Jutsu!" Choji made a hand seal as his arms grew in size. He brought both arms up, ready for a downwards smash. "I'm sorry Inoichi-san!"

However, before Choji could smash the former Yamanaka Clan head, several chakra threads shot from seemingly nowhere, attached themselves to the White Zetsu, and pulled them from Inoichi. The undead Yamanaka rolled to the side just before Choji smashed his enlarged fists into the ground, opening a crater.

"What?" Shikamaru asked.

Inoichi made a hand seal, and thrust his hands towards the defenseless Choji. "Mind Disturbance Jutsu!"

"AAAGH!" Choji yelled, as his body started to twitch. "My body... ! I can't control it!"

That moment, a redhead garbed in Akatsuki cloak landed near them, chakra threads attached to his fingers. After dispelling the threads, he pulled out a scroll from under his robe, and unsealed two ordinary looking human shaped puppets from it.

"That was a nice tactic you were doing there. Pity I had to crash it," the puppeteer said. Given his blackened eyes and cracked skin, was a reanimation as well.

"Wait, who the hell is this guy?" Ino asked.

"He's wearing an Akatsuki cloak, and he's using puppets. He must be Sasori. We got word that Orochimaru revived Kakuzu, no wonder he also did the same with other Akatsuki members," Shikamaru said, grinding his teeth in anger.

"Ah, so you know of me," Sasori said, his tone being clam. "Too bad I don't have my best works of art here to show you. Instead, all I have are these pitiful outdated contraptions."

"I couldn't give a crap about your 'art'. You nearly murdered my girlfriend, and you're going to pay for it!" Shikamaru said.

"I murdered many people, yet you're angry for one of the few I failed to kill," Sasori said, and chuckled as if somehow that twist of logic amused him. "And you will join them soon enough."

"I'm sorry, Choji," Inoichi said, as he commanded Choji to attack Shikamaru.

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!" However, before Choji could get close to Shikamaru, his father intervened, using the clan's signature ability to

root him in place. "Ino, try to relieve Choji from the mind control!"

"I'm on it!" Ino replied.

"No, you won't," Sasori calmly said, as he directed his puppets towards her.

One of the puppets grew several blades around its arms and body, while the other opened up multiple slots across its body that fired kunai and shuriken -more than likely poisoned- towards the blonde Yamanaka.

"Ino, don't let those weapons touch you! They're coated in a deadly poison! Remember Kankuro and Temari!" Shikamaru urgently reminded her, as he moved to assist her.

"Ah, the Fourth Kazekage's other two kids, which somehow managed to survive my poison," Sasori said, sounding a little ashamed. "I guess the girl was the girlfriend you talked about? Oh well, it's irrelevant. Given that you didn't expect to see me, I deduce you won't have an antidote for my poison. All the better then."

While Sasori kept Shikamaru and Ino busy, Inoichi took his chance and... ran away from the fight, much to Shikaku's surprise. Knowing that Inoichi could keep Choji under control while he ran away, the Nara Clan Head tentatively released his jutsu, freeing Choji, who felt that his body was under his control once again.

"Choji, are you okay?" Shikaku asked.

"Yeah. My body is my own again, and I don't think he left anything in my mind either," Choji replied.

"Though, why did Inoichi leave? With me busy keeping you immobilized, it was the perfect chance to strike me down," Shikaku said, worried. "What did-"

"Fire Release: Great Fireball jutsu!"

Suddenly, Shikaku and Choji found themselves about to be engulfed by a massive fireball coming from above. Shikaku was able to push Choji away while jumping to the side, allowing the two of them to dodge the initial explosion. Still, they were close enough to it to be caught in the shockwave, which send the two of them flying in opposite directions, before landing on the ground with a painful thud.

"Dad! Choji!" Shikamaru screamed after noticing what just happened.

"You don't have time to worry about others, brat," Sasori said, as he made one of the puppets to shower him with poisoned kunai and senbon.

"Don't worry, son, I'm okay," Shikaku said, coughing as he dust and ashes raised by the explosion got into his lungs. "Hold on, I'm going to-ACK!"

"DAD!"

Shikaku looked down, and saw the blade of a katana coming out of his chest, red with his own blood. He only had a few moments of consciousness before his eyes rolled into the back of his head, as life left his body. The wielder of the katana pulled by kicking Shikaku's lifeless body forward, revealing the identity of the killer.

It was Fugaku Uchiha.

...

"Lateral Bolt of Pain!"

A delivered a brutal horizontal chop to the nearest enemy who had the misfortune of facing him, this time, a Moon Puppet. The chop carried so much force that not only was the puppet instantly split in two, but said halves burst into many pieces of metal and plastic, which were spread across the grassy ground, joining the many,

many pieces of White Zetsu flesh and more puppet remains that fought the Raikage.

A had separated himself a little from the thick of the battle, since he needed a lot of space to move and his attacks caused widespread destruction and didn't want any of his ninjas under his command to end as collateral damage.

Several reanimations tried their luck against him, with the same results. Despite being strong ninjas -though the Raikage didn't recognize most of them- with powerful Bloodline Limits, A's combination of unbeatable speed and sheer strength proved to be too much for them, and found themselves overwhelmed.

Though, the Raikage was about to face an enemy that would prove to be more than a match for him.

"Shinra Tensei!"

One moment, A was dispatching a White Zetsu brute, and the next one he found himself flying and crashing against a tree, which was snapped in two due to the sheer force of the impact. Still, the First Division Commander appeared to be completely unharmed.

"What the hell was that!?" the Raikage roared, his nostrils flaring and teeth gritting with anger at being caught off guard like that. "Show yourself, coward!"

The answer came in the form of several whistles. Looking up, A saw multiple missiles flying towards him. The Raikage snorted dismissively, and with his phenomenal speed, dodging them was child's play. And by following the direction the missiles came from, A finally found his ambusher: a redheaded man with an Akatsuki cloak. Though what stood out from that man were his eyes, purple with concentric rings. That washed away every doubt about his identity.

"So, you're the one called 'Pain', right? Akatsuki's former leader," A said, locking eyes with the reanimation. "Of course Orochimaru

would bring you back to life."

"That's a name I used to wear, but not anymore. I prefer if you referred to me with my actual name, Nagato," Nagato said, before tilting his head. "Though if you know about me, then you should fall back and come back with reinforcements. I saw you fight and you have power and skill, but not enough to overcome the power of the Rinnegan."

In less than a second, the Raikage was behind him, ready to split him in two with a vertical chop with a hand coated in lightning.

"DON'T UNDERESTIMATE ME!"

"Shinra Tensei!"

Before the Raikage could touch the reanimation, he was violently thrown back. This time, though, he was able to land on his feet, break his momentum, and dash towards Nagato again.

"I know how the Rinnegan works! That jutsu is powerful, but he needs to wait five seconds to use it again!" the Raikage thought, as he blitzed towards the undead Akatsuki. *"And with my speed, I can kill you ten times in a row!"*

Indeed, Nagato was unable to dodge or even block the Raikage's brutal fist aimed towards his face. However, the redhead merely disappeared in a burst of smoke, leaving a log behind, which was instantly shattered to splinters.

"A replacement!?" the Raikage snarled, as he looked around. "A man of your power needs to use such a jutsu to beat me!?"

The earth started to rumble, as nearby trees were toppled down as something big rushed through the forest. Said something turned out to be a gigantic ox and an equally large rhino, both of them with Rinnegan eyes and black rods on their bodies.

"Impressive monsters," the Raikage calmly said, as he prepared for the assault.

The rhino managed to reach first, and lowered its head in order to gore the Raikage with its massive horn. However, A managed to catch the beast's horn expertly, and while he was pushed backwards, he managed to root himself in place by digging his feet into the ground, stopping the giant animal on its tracks.

"You're going to need something more than big dumb animals to put me down!" The Raikage roared, his chakra cloak flaring bright, as he lift the rhino and used it to bludgeon the giant ox. The strike wasn't hard enough to cancel the summon in one go, but A was sure it would be enough to leave them out of comission for a while.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

The Raikage was once again send flying backwards, though this time he felt as if he was being pulled towards something rather than being pushed away. He braced for the impact, but much to his surprise, his flight was stopped not when he crashed into something, but when a giant lobster claw caught him, pinning his arms to his body.

"How many of this animals do you-" the Raikage was about to ask, when he felt a hand placed on his head.

"Psychic Mind Transmission!"

The Raikage felt how a foreign presence tried to pierce his mind. He tried to expel it, but despite his mental fortitude and unbreakable willpower, the intruder was far too skilled in the arts of psychic ninjutsu, and entered his mind. Suddenly, the Raikage was forced to relieve several memories as the enemy scanned his mind, until he found what he was looking for.

A memory where the Raikage was talking with his brother, Darui, Mabui and other high ranked Kumo ninjas about the decision to send

B and the other two jinchuriki to Genbu the Turtle Island for protection and training. His blood froze upon realizing that such information was now in the hands of the enemy.

"NO!"

Fueled by both anger at his enemies and fear for his brother's life, his Lightning Chakra Cloak exploded with power, pushing the Yamanaka away and forcing the giant crustacean's claw open. When the sea creature lowered its claw again, the Raikage grabbed each end of the claw, lifted it above his head, and using his rage to fuel his strength, tossed it against the edge of the forest, toppling several trees in the process.

"I'm sorry," voice said behind him.

The Raikage turned around, and saw a blond man with blond hair styled in a ponytail, wearing the standard Konoha uniform. His blackened eyes and cracked skin betrayed his identity as a reanimation.

"You," the Raikage seethed. "Just what did you do!?"

"Orochimaru forced me to scan your mind. He was linked to me as I did it," the man replied. "He now knows where the jinchuriki are hiding. I'm sorry, I have no control over my-"

In less than a second, the Raikage crossed the distance separating them, and with a powerful punch, he disintegrated the man's head. A second later, his lifeless body fell on his back. Still, the Raikage knew that he would be back in a few minutes.

...

Mountain Graveyard

"Kukuku... I know where the jinchuriki are hidden," Orochimaru said out loud in a taunting manner.

Obito, who was lazily resting against a rock wall with his eyes closed upon that moment, snapped his eyes opened, and almost jumped upon hearing those words.

"What? Where are they!?" Obito demanded, as he stomped towards where Orochimaru was sitting. "Speak!"

"Calm down, Obito-kun. I don't know the exact location, but I obtained a pretty good hint," Orochimaru said. "Apparently, Kumogakure has a base built on a island that's not an island, but a giant turtle. That's where the jinchuriki are being hidden."

"Clever. Very clever," Obito admitted. "Kami knows how long it would have taken us to find such a place."

"Said turtle moves to a different location every day, meaning that even if you find it, it will be on a different spot the next time," Orochimaru warned him.

"I can take care of that," Obito said, snapping his fingers. Zetsu -the original- emerged from under the ground.

"You called, boss?" the white half asked.

"According to new intel, the jinchuriki are hidden on a mobile island. Said island has to be somewhere in the seas to the east and west of the Land of Lightning," Obito explained. "Tell the Flying Zetsu to explore that area."

"It will be done, boss," the black half replied, as it sunk back into the ground.

"Good work, Orochimaru," Obito said, albeit begrudgingly.

"Regardless of the outcome of this battle, you provided Akatsuki with a decisive victory."

Orochimaru smirked sadistically. "Oh, I can make our victory even greater. Now watch."

Author's Note: Welp, there you go. Say goodbye to Shikaku Nara. While he's somebody who died in canon as well, other people that made it alive to the end of the series will join him soon.

Like I said before, this is where the villains decide to up their game. Not only did they send stronger reanimations, but thanks to Orochimaru cleverly using their non-combat abilities, he managed to find the location of the three jinchuriki. As for why Orochimaru used Inoichi instead of the Human Path, Orochimaru simply isn't aware of all of the Rinnegan's abilities, just the most obvious ones like the gravity manipulation or the chakra absorption. Though, don't expect an attack on the Turtle Island anytime soon, since there are still a couple battles to happen (including the assault on the Moon) before we get to that point.

And while Akatsuki making this discovery is already a victory, some of the reanimations, namely Fugaku and Nagato, haven't shown their worst abilities, but will in the next chapter, and this will get very, very messy.

Onto another fights, there's Hiashi. I know some people are going to be a little disappointed that neither Hinata nor Hanabi was part of the fight, but come on, if those two were involved, they would simply oneshot him with the Truth Seeking Balls and be done with it. Meanwhile, the whole confrontation with Hizashi and the reveal of him not carrying the Caged Bird Seal anymore has been in my mind for literally years.

Thanks to Ookamki88 for betareading this chapter.

So, what are your thoughts on this chapter? Share them in a review! It doesn't have to be a long one, you know, long or short, reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Overwhelming Power

Author's Note: First of all, this fanfic broke 4000 reviews! Man, when I was beginning to write this, I wasn't expecting that this fanfic would get more than 1000 reviews, much less more than 4000. Let's see if we can rise that number to 5000 before the story ends! Shout out to Yamichaos for submitting the 4000th review!

Second, after the Hanabi Gaiden was published, a couple people reached me asking for permission to write oneshots based on the Son of the Sannin universe. I'd like to say that yeah, if anybody wants to write a oneshot, they're free to do, though I prefer if you discuss your potential ideas with me first (gotta keep things consistent).

Now that that's out of the way, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 111:

Overwhelming Power

or

When you're crazy enough to fight a god

Shikamaru, Ino and Choji stared at the undead Uchiha, who stared back at them with lifeless black eyes. At his feet was the equally lifeless body of Shikaku Nara. Tears streamed from Shikamaru's eyes, his teeth grinding against each other. Ino couldn't suppress her tears either, and covered her mouth with a hand. Choji's eyes were open wide and his mouth left agape, as if still processing what just happened.

"I'm sorry for that," Fugaku dryly said, before he raised his katana in a menacing way. "Now, unless the three of you are strong enough to

take down a Jonin, I'd suggest you to fall back and find reinforcements. Despite my best efforts, I can't control my actions."

"That won't be necessary!" a new voice said.

The Ino-Shika-Cho trio was snapped out of their stupor when their sensei landed in front of them, and raised a chakra blade protectively.

"A-Asuma-sensei!" Ino stammered.

"Asuma-sensei, Shikamaru's dad-" Choji began, but Asuma raised a hand to silence him.

"I know. I sensed his chakra vanish all of sudden. That's why I came here as fast as I could," Asuma said, his now golden eyes looking at Shikaku's deceased form. "I may not be able to save him, but I'll be able to save the three of you," Asuma said, before pointing one of trench knives at Fugaku. "My name's Asuma Sarutobi, and I shall be your opponent!"

"I have no choice in who I get to fight. But my body is compelled to kill the strongest enemies first. If you're as strong as you appear, you may convince the one controlling me that I should focus on you and ignore the kids," Fugaku said.

"I can assure you you'll find me a challenging opponent," Asuma insisted. "Shikamaru, Ino, Choji, I can't fight an opponent this strong and protect you at the same time. Get away from here and try to fight an enemy more suited to your power and skill. Don't worry about me, I'll be okay."

Shikamaru didn't say anything, he just wiped his tears, and nodded. He turned back and ran away, with Ino and Choji trailing behind him, much to Asuma's relief. He didn't have time for an argument now. Though his relief was short lived, as he saw Fugaku's hands blurring through hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Fugaku exhaled a massive fireball, which flew towards Asuma, leaving a path of scorched grass and ground on its wake. Asuma channeled more chakra towards his trench knives, the blades of chakra they were projecting growing longer, thicker and shining brighter, as he raised them above his head.

"Sage Art: Blade of the Wind God!"

Asuma brought down both weapons, slamming them into the ground, releasing two crescent shaped vertical chakra blasts that traveled forward, carving two furrows into the ground as they moved. They cut the giant fireball coming at the leader of the Tactical Squad, splitting it in two, before the wind around the chakra crescents put the fire away.

"Incredible. Despite my jutsu's power and having the elemental advantage, Asuma's attack-" Fugaku said, before his enemy suddenly appeared before him, trench knife raised above his head, ready to deliver a vertical slash.

Time seemed to slow down, and Fugaku's Sharingan analyzed the blade of pure white and blue chakra slowly descending upon him. He could tell that parrying with his own katana, even channeling fire chakra to counter Asuma's wind, would be useless, as Asuma's chakra blade would overwhelm any defense he might put up.

"What's with that kind of chakra?" Fugaku thought, as he started to move aside. "His chakra is far more potent than any human... and the color of his eyes and the red marks around them... what kind of power is this?"

Time started to flow normally again, and Fugaku was able to dodge Asuma's brutal vertical swipe. It released yet another crescent of chakra that carved another furrow, as well as raising a powerful gale force winds in every direction.

" *It's Sage Mode, Fugaku-san,*" a creepy, unnerving voice said in his head.

Fugaku recognized it as the man who had brought him back from the dead. "*Orochimaru? You know about that?*"

" *Yes. Sage Mode is an extremely rare art. Only the most powerful ninjas are able to master it, and even then, you need to sign a contract with an animal tribe willing to teach it to you,*" Orochimaru said. "*I wasn't expecting somebody like Asuma to be able to learn such a mode.*"

" *Then his chances of beating me are high. Good. I already died being the unwitting puppet of a manipulator, I don't plan to continue being another puppet in death,*" Fugaku mentally replied.

Orochimaru chuckled. "*And what makes you think you have a choice, my dear Uchiha? Now continue fighting. I want to see how the abilities of the Mangekyo Sharingan measure up against the unexpected power of Asuma's Senjutsu.*"

That very moment, Fugaku's Sharingan changed into his Mangekyo form, and made a single hand seal.

"Okuninushi!"

Fugaku's body released a wave of chakra in a single burst, and the air around him looked distorted, as if Fugaku wasn't part of this plane of reality. Asuma, who was on the offensive, jumped backwards while rising a chakra blade in a defensive fashion.

"Interesting. It seems as if you know already what this jutsu does," Fugaku observed.

"Because I do. I didn't see it with my own eyes, but I spoke with somebody who did," Asuma explained.

"If that's the case, then somebody must have pillaged my eyes and used them for their own benefit," Fugaku said, before a scowl developed on his face. "It was Danzo, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was him," Asuma confirmed. The Sarutobi Jonin could feel Fugaku's anger spiking, and decided that soothing him might be for the best. "Still, Danzo is no longer among the living. Maito Gai and Shisui Uchiha put him down."

"Shisui? Is he still alive?" Fugaku asked. "Wait, what about other Uchihas? Please tell me some of them survived the insurrection!"

"Aside from Shisui, only your sons survived," Asuma explained. "After your death, the rest of your clanmates decided they wanted to follow you to the grave and go down fighting, rather than face Konoha's judgement for their actions."

"Even if reduced to a fraction of what we used to be, it's good to hear that the Uchiha still lives," Fugaku said.

"They aren't the only ones. Shisui is a father of two children. It may take generations, but the Uchiha will reclaim their former glory," Asuma said, before his stare hardened. "And thankfully, their leadership won't lose their way like it did under you."

"I know. I'm sorry for killing your father. I'm also sorry for killing Shikaku Nara, even if it wasn't my intention," Fugaku said sorrowfully.

"You were close, but my father still lives," Asuma said, much to Fugaku's surprise. "And now, I shall put you down for good, so no more lives are endangered by you again!"

Asuma dashed forward, while Fugaku jumped backwards, leaving a trail of four negative colored afterimages that mimicked his movements. The former Uchiha Clan Head pulled several shuriken and tossed them at the Sarutobi Sage, and his afterimages did the same. Asuma delivered an horizontal chop in opposite directions

with his chakra blades, creating an X-shaped blast of wind chakra that travelled forward, blowing away all the shuriken.

However, more shuriken came after those, and even more after those. Fugaku and his afterimages unleashed a storm of metal that was able not only of slowing Asuma's attack down, but to stop it completely.

"What the...?" Asuma asked, surprised, as he jumped back from the incoming rain of steel stars, as he made more hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!"

This time, Asuma expelled a huge cone of flames, burning so hot, the shuriken melted into puddles of liquid metal in mere seconds, and expanded in width as it moved towards Fugaku. The former Uchiha Clan head tried to move to the side, but was unable to dodge the incoming firestorm, and he was engulfed by a sea of blazing red and orange.

"Even if he's immortal, that fire should be enough to put him down so he can be sealed away before he regenerates," Asuma said to himself, as he watched the flames in front of him quickly disappear. His eyes also returned to normal as Sage Mode vanished. "And good thing, because I used the last of the Senjutsu chakra I gathered before on that attack."

Sure, he still had a Shadow Clone hidden among the trees gathering nature energy, but he wanted to save that for an enemy of similar caliber.

However, when the flames died out, rather than a charred body in the process of regenerating, he saw that Fugaku was very much untouched. Around him was a giant ghostly ribcage, black with red edges, and some fire around it that quickly disappeared.

"Susanoo. Of course, I should have expected that," Asuma said, scowling in frustration.

"You know this jutsu as well," Fugaku observed. "I presume you saw Itachi or Shisui using it."

"Sasuke as well," Asuma added.

Fugaku was a little taken aback, but made no comments on that detail about his youngest son. Then, Fugaku's Susanoo skeleton continued developing, growing arms, shoulders, a neck and a head, followed by muscle, and then skin. Lastly, two black swords appeared on each hand of the construct.

The Sarutobi Jonin seethed as he made a single hand seal. The Shadow Clone gathering nature energy was dispelled, said energy transferring to Asuma, restoring his Sage Mode.

"This is going to be harder than I believed. But I didn't get where I am now by throwing the towel in the face of a challenge," Asuma said, as he channeled chakra through his trench knives, generating two chakra blades through them. "Let's go!"

...

Shikamaru, Choji and Ino had tried to flee and find a more suitable opponent like Asuma had commanded them. Unfortunately, they were intercepted by Sasori, who decided that they would be his next victims. They've been trying to escape from him, but whenever they moved away, one of Sasori's puppets rained poisoned kunai and senbon on them, forcing them to remain in place.

"Doesn't those things ever run out of ammo?" Choji asked, as he ran away as fast as he could from the deadly metal shower, followed by Ino.

"Even the lesser of my creations are still deadly weapons. Do not underestimate my art," Sasori said, sounding somewhat annoyed.

While one of the puppets continued to rain poisoned weapons on the two Konoha Chunin, the other one generated blades around its arms,

and dashed towards Shikamaru. The Nara, however was unfazed.

"Shadow Sewing Jutsu: Shadow Cocoon!"

Multiple shadowy threads formed around Shikamaru, and wrapped around him, forming a protective shell just in time to block the strike from the incoming puppet. There was a metallic clang upon impact, but the shadow shield didn't break. At least, until Shikamaru commanded it to.

"Shadow Sewing Jutsu!"

The protective cocoon broke apart again into multiple dark tendrils, which wrapped themselves around the puppet's arms and legs, trapping it.

"Now, time to break this thing!" Shikamaru shouted, as he made a hand seal and used his anger to empower his chakra. The shadowy threads started to apply pressure, and a few cracks could be heard from within the puppet.

"I won't let you," Sasori said in his bored monotone.

Shikamaru looked at the undead redhead, but didn't see him doing anything. That's it, until he noticed something on his shin. Looking down, he saw a chakra thread attached to it. Sasori then moved a finger with the thread attached to it, and Shikamaru's leg was pulled with deceptively strong force, making him fall on his back, while Sasori pulled his now free puppet back.

"Not that I care that much for these oldies, but it's the best I have now. Then again," Sasori said, as he looked around. "There are so many skilled ninjas here... many of them with Bloodline Limits. Yes, I can start a new collection with all the bodies that will be left once this battle is over."

"Shikamaru!" Ino shouted, as she and Choji rushed to help his friend, but another rain of poisoned metal stopped her from doing so.

"Sorry, but no interruptions. That was your father there, wasn't he?" Sasori asked, his eyes locked onto Shikamaru. "I also know the pain of losing a parent to enemy ninjas, though in my case, they didn't die before my very eyes. You must feel horrible. But fear not, soon you'll be free of your misery and will be able to reunite with your dad."

With a hand wave, Sasori directed his puppet to finish the now helpless Shikamaru. However, all of sudden, the air was fill the sound of cracking electricity, a white, blue and red blur crossed the space between Sasori and his enemies, followed by the sound of ropes being snapped, and then Sasori's puppets fell to the ground motionlessly.

"What the...?" Sasori asked, as the chakra threads on his fingers dispelled. "Somebody cut the threads?"

Shikamaru felt a pair of hands grabbing him by his shoulders and helping him back on his feet. He saw that Omoi and T were the ones helping him up. In front of him was Karui, smirking at him.

"Hey man, you okay?" Omoi asked.

"I've been better, but yeah. That was a nice save," Shikamaru complimented.

Karui smirked in statisfaction. "You're welcome. You're lucky we noticed you guys were in trouble."

"Because you were constantly checking on Choji," T jabbed.

"Were in the middle of a battle, leave the goddamn teasing for when we win!" the redhead angrily yelled at her teammate.

"Yeah, I like to tease Karui as much as you, but she has a point," Omoi agreed.

"Karui!" Choji yelled as he ran towards the group. "You saved Shikamaru!"

"I know, I'm great," she said with a nod, and suddenly pulled out several shuriken from her ninja tool pouch, and tossed them towards Sasori. The redhead was trying to reattach his chakra threads to the puppets, but Karui's shuriken intercepted them before he could do so. "Trying to recover your toys while we're talking, huh? Not on my watch!"

"T, you know what to do," Omoi said.

T nodded, put herself behind Shikamaru, and started to make hand seals. Shikamaru immediately realized what she was doing, and crouched down and made a hand seal of his own.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

T's body exploded with bright white light, those unfortunate to look at her in that moment, like Sasori, felt like a lightning bolt just fell in front of their very eyes, and instinctively raised his hand to shield his eyes. But just for once, T wasn't using that jutsu to blind her opponent. The bright light, however, had the added effect of greatly expanding Shikamaru's shadow for a few seconds.

A few seconds was all what the Nara needed

"Shadow Imitation Jutsu!"

With a speed never seen before, Shikamaru's shadow stretched and rocketed forward, touching Sasori's shadow, leaving the undead puppeteer completely immobilized.

"This guy won't go anywhere," Shikamaru said.

"Good. T, put some chakra suppressing seals and restriction seals on him before somebody else tries to free him," Karui commanded.

"Understood," the twin braided kunoichi said, as she moved towards the incapacitated Akatsuki.

"Okay, now that we dealt with that creep, I'd like if we went after my dad. He's pretty dangerous, and I feel only I can counter his jutsu," Ino began. She was about to say something more, when suddenly the ground started to shake under her feet. "What the-"

Shikamaru's heart skipped a beat, as he knew what was going to happen. "Everybody, MOVE!"

And indeed, the next few seconds, the ground cracked, before it violently exploded outwards, sending large chunks of earth and dirt flying everywhere, and naturally, the ninjas that were standing there not even a second ago, including Shikamaru and the others. And from under the recently formed giant crack, an equally gigantic black and red centipede appeared.

"What the hell was that!?" T asked, as she looked at the gigantic centipede charging towards a group of Allied Ninjas fighting Zetsu clones. "A summoned animal?"

"Shikamaru! I saw that animal before!" Choji said. "It was-"

"Pain," Shikamaru interrupted. "Yes, that's one of his summons."

"Pain? What Pain?" Karui asked.

"Pain, or Nagato Uzumaki, as we later found, was the leader of Akatsuki, and a bearer of the Rinnegan," Shikamaru explained. "Among his many powers, he could summon a wide variety of giant animals, much stronger than the usual summoned animals." He let out a weary sigh. "Of course, it was obvious that Orochimaru would revive somebody of such power."

"So all the reanimations he sent after the other divisions weren't even his best. It seems that he's been saving his heavy hitters all this time," Karui said in realization.

"That's all nice and good, but you're forgetting about what's important," T cut in. "How do we defeat that guy? Because if he died

before, that means that he we can just kill him again. Or hurt him enough to seal him. So what did you guys do the first time?"

"We didn't do anything. It was Naruto who took him down," Shikamaru replied. "And we can no longer count on him."

"Besides, Pain is way too much out of our league," Choji said. "Only somebody with the power of a Kage is a match for a guy that powerful."

"Thankfully, our Raikage is the leader of this division," Karui reminded, and his spirits quickly lifted. "Yes, Raikage-sama will make short work of that guy, Rinnegan or not!"

"I don't know how strong the Raikage is, but I'm really hoping your faith in him isn't misplaced," Shikamaru said, sounding a little skeptic.

"Though, is there something we can do to help?" Omoi asked, as his eyes darted towards the giant centipede. Then, there was another booming thunderclap, and saw more allied ninjas fighting against a giant lobster. "Damn, another one!"

"Those animals are pretty strong, but they can be taken down with enough firepower," Shikamaru said. "Come on, let's go!"

...

"Watch out!" Fugaku warned.

Fugaku's Susanoo's arm, which was holding a black blade with red edges, was brought down onto Asuma. The Sarutobi Sage was tempted to parry the attack and check how he held against the Uchiha's power, but in the end he refused to take the risk. When the Susanoo sword hit the ground, it created a large crack that kept spreading in its general direction, shattering the ground in its wake.

" *Such destructive power...*" Asuma said in awe, clicking his tongue as he looked at Fugaku, encased inside the giant chakra construct. *"Unstoppable offense and iron hard defense... this is going to be a challenging one..."*

"To think that every Uchiha has this power buried inside their being..." Fugaku commented, sounding amazed as well.

"The Mangekyo Sharingan was known since the time of Madara Uchiha, how is that you only learned about it now?" Asuma asked.

"While the existence of the Mangekyo Sharingan was known, how to unlock it was not. Madara kept that knowledge to himself, and took it to the grave," Fugaku explained. "It was shortly before my death that I discovered the secret behind its activation."

Asuma rushed forward, and Fugaku's Susanoo tried to slam him again. This time, Asuma moved aside, before leaping at his opponent, raising both chakra blades. The Susanoo lifted its other arm, generating a sword to parry Asuma's attack. Blades clashed against each other, but in the end, Asuma's ended up slicing through Fugaku's Susanoo's, and struck the head of the chakra construct. However, the initial parry deprived his blow of much of its momentum, and only managed to make a small crack on its head.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

From within the Susanoo, Fugaku exhaled a huge fireball at Asuma, still clinging to the Susanoo's head, though he was able to jump away before the fiery attack could touch him.

" *At the very least, I proved that I can overpower his defenses if necessary, though that alone won't be of any help,*" Asuma thought, his feet touching the ground, and Fugaku's fireball sailing into the sky. *"Though the fact that Fugaku can use ninjutsu while inside that thing is troubling..."*

Spikes started to grow all around the chakra construct. Asuma tensed up, and noticed that the spikes were all aimed at him.

"Susanoo: Tsukumo!"

The spikes fired off. Still, Asuma wasn't intimidated, and fast as lightning, started to swing his trench knives as fast as possible, deflecting the lethal needles aiming at him. He then noticed another spike of chakra coming from Fugaku, and realized he was making hand seals. He pulled out a handful of shuriken, and tossed them forward while exhaling fire into them, granting them an aura of fire.

"Trying to overwhelm me like that won't work! You still haven't seen the full extent of my abilities!" Asuma said, as he prepared for the new barrage. "Sage Art: Dual Elemental release: Blades of Fire and Wind!"

The blue chakra blades Asuma's trench knives were projecting suddenly increased in length and thickness, while one of them burst into orange flames, and the other turned bluish white. Asuma continued to deflect the Susanoo needles and the flaming shuriken, but now every swing released a crescent of wind or fire, many of them which hit Fugaku's Susanoo. Said Susanoo moved forward, and tried to smash Asuma with one of its giant blades. This time, the Sarutobi clan member opted to parry the attack, crossing his blades above his head. The impact was powerful enough to sink his feet into the ground, but Asuma, with his senjutsu-enhanced strength, Asuma spread his blades outwards in an arc, releasing a powerful crescent of wind and fire that shattered the Susanoo's blade.

Asuma moved again. The Susanoo's other arm moved to intercept, albeit this time it appeared it was trying to grab him. As he moved, Asuma started to spin on his feet, turning into a deadly tornado of cutting wind and fire, and the other Susanoo arm was shattered as well.

" *Yes! If I use the full extent of my power, I can neutralize his offense and overcome his defense!*" Asuma thought in triumph. "Now time to

end this!"

Asuma moved for the kill, and delivered a double thrust towards Fugaku's position. The elemental blades met with some resistance when they touched the Susanoo's shell, but this one too was shattered. The rest of the Susanoo vanished as Fugaku made a single hand seal.

"Okuninushi!"

Asuma felt a burst of chakra coming from Fugaku, and cursed inwardly as he jumped backwards, leaving a trail of negative afterimages. Asuma's blades pierced the solid afterimages, but doing so reduced his momentum, and he failed to reach the undead Uchiha.

"Shit! I was so close!" Asuma cursed in anger.

"Yes, you were close. I didn't think there was something that could match, much less overcome, the mighty Susanoo in terms of power," Fugaku said, as the Susanoo formed around him again. "However, you didn't see the whole extent of its power. That was merely the humaoid Susanoo. Here's the next stage, the armored Susanoo!"

The chakra construct grew in size, and gloves, vambraces, shoulderpads, a helmet and a chestplate formed around Fugaku's Susanoo, encasing it in armor. Then, a cowl covered its head, falling behind its back forming a cape. Finally, it raised a hand, generating a double-bladed katana.

The Susanoo raised the double bladed katana even higher, and started to spin it. The force of the spin was so great, it raised a small tornado around it. Once it built enough momentum, Fugaku tossed it forward.

"Susanoo: Helix!"

"If I dodge that, it will continue forward, and Kami knows how many allied ninjas will die to that! I need to stop it!" Asuma said, as beads of sweat ran down his temples.

Channeling chakra into his arms, he delivered a swing with both his blades, hoping it would be enough to stop the attack. The black double katana was shattered by the impact, but it produced an explosion that hurled the Sarutobi clan member backwards, landing painfully on his back. And on top of the damage taken, Asuma felt how the last of the nature energy strengthening his body faded away.

"S-Shit..." he cursed, as he tried to get back on his feet.

Fugaku moved forward, and his dreadful Susanoo with him.

"And that isn't even the whole power of the Susanoo," Fugaku said. "Orochimaru wanted me to test how my power did against that of a Sage, and now that he has the answer, he doesn't need me to hold back. Now be prepared for the power of the Perfect Susanoo."

...

"Asurato!"

Nagato raised his arm, which reassembled itself as if it were a machine into a canon. The barrel of said canon started to glow with a white light as it gathered energy, before finally firing a bolt of chakra at the Raikage.

The Raikage, however, proved that his monicker of fastest man alive wasn't an exaggeration when he was able to move fast enough to dodge the incoming bolt. More bolts were fired, but the Raikage, now barely a white and brown blur, dodged them easily as he zigzagged towards Nagato, leaving a trail of dust and blades of grass behind. Unfortunately, Nagato had something the Raikage's speed was useless against.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Once again, A felt like gravity no longer affected his body a fraction of a second before an invisible force launched him backwards. Despite tumbling a few times, he was able to land on his feet, skidding back into the ground. Then, all of sudden, the sidestepped and wrapped his arm around seemingly thin air.

"Ha! You think you can catch me off guard with such a pathetic trick?"

The air behind the Raikage rippled and shimmered, revealing a gigantic chameleon, with A's arms wrapped around the neck of the snake that was attached to its head. The snake hissed angrily, but the Raikage didn't budge. And showing once again that his muscles weren't just for show, the Raikage lifted the chameleon above his head before spinning around his feet, building up so much momentum, a small tornado began to form.

"This... may be a problem..." Nagato observed, taking a step back.

"You can have your repulsive pet back!" the Raikage roared, before launching the gigantic reptile at Nagato.

The undead redhead reflexively raised his other arm, and fired his most used and versatile jutsu.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The chameleon screeched as the force of the Raikage's throw clashed against the gravity blast of Nagato's attack, crushing the animal's body, resulting in its forced unsummoning, leaving a cloud of smoke behind. Said cloud was split in two the moment the Raikage blitzed towards Nagato again.

" *Five seconds before he can use that jutsu again!*" the Raikage thought, as he closed the distance between the two once again. *"But this time, make sure no other animal interferes... there!"*

A huge shadow blacked the sun, followed by a loud and high pitched caw, and the Raikage jumped in time just to avoid a gigantic bird gore him with its large and deformed beak, landing on its head, before running through his body. Upon seeing that it had a leg sticking from its back, the Raikage smirked as an idea formed in his mind.

"That was a big mistake on your part!" A said, as he grabbed the bird by the leg, and jumped towards Nagato, dragging the confused animal with him, before slamming it down on the redhead.

"Mistakes like that are easy to fix," Nagato said, making a hand seal.

That moment, the bird was unsummoned, leaving the Raikage empty handed, the sudden lack of the massive weight he was carrying fumbling his balance. Something Nagato took advantage of, as he jumped backwards while casting his hand forward.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Falling prey to the same feeling of weightlessness, this time the Raikage was pulled towards Nagato's hand, which wrapped around his throat, as another hand grabbed his head.

"I'm sorry. But you're already dead. Ningendo!"

Nagato then moved the hand back, pulling the Raikage's soul away from his body. Or that's what he would have done, if the Raikage didn't grab his wrist, leaving the large man's soul only partially out his body. The two of them struggled as if the soul was a rope in a tug-o-war competition.

"Don't you dare underestimate me!" the Raikage shouted, as he forced Nagato's hand to leave his soul into his body.

"What the...? How are you resisting this jutsu?" the stunned Nagato asked.

The pressure on his wrist intensified, until it burst in a small cloud of dust and paper bits, causing the hand to fall to the ground lifelessly, while the Raikage's soul fully returned to his body. Not giving Nagato another chance, the Raikage delivered a rather brutal kick to the redhead's chest, sending him flying backwards.

Before he could press the attack, the Raikage was alerted by another giant shadow looming over him. He jumped away just in time before a giant bear claw smashed against the ground, opening a crater. The Raikage glared at the newcomer with a mix of frustration and anger.

"Now a panda bear?" the Raikage asked in exasperation. "Just how many of these things can you summon!?"

The panda let out a roar, as it stomped towards the Raikage, letting out a loud roar. The leader of Kumogakure was unfazed. Electric sparks loudly crackled around his body as he directed more chakra towards his Lightning Chakra Cloak.

"Thundering Elbow Smash!"

In less than a second, the Raikage leaped at the Panda, and sank his left elbow into the giant bear's gut with all the strength he could muster, making the white and black plantigrade to tumble and fall on its back as if it was a chopped tree.

"Lightning Combo: Rapid Fire Series!"

A's fist were coated with electricity, and started to deliver a series of extremely fast paced punches towards his opponent. The panda's furry flesh felt soft at first, but suddenly it hardened into something that resembled iron, and the Raikage's lightning-enhanced punches were barely making a dent on it, something the man quickly noticed.

Despite being lying on its back, the giant panda delivered another claw swipe at the Raikage, who jumped back before the slow moving animal could reach it. Several whistles alerted him of danger, and

looking up, he saw a multitude of missiles raining upon him. He remained still, letting the missiles fall around him, producing multiple blasts that engulfed him in a massive storm of fire.

Said storm of fire was instantly dispelled as a surge of chakra burst outwards from the inside, revealing the very much unscathed Raikage.

"I could have dodged that pathetic attack had I chose to. But I wanted to see the extent of your raw strength," the Raikage said, looking at how Nagato moving towards him. "And frankly, I'm not impressed. Then again, there's no ninja who has been able to pierce my Lightning Armor."

"I see. Unfortunately for you, what you saw isn't the full extent of my abilities," Nagato said, as his hands started to form hand seals.

A couldn't prepare for Nagato's attack, as the giant panda got back on its feet, and tried to stomp the Raikage, forcing him to jump sideways. And it was that moment when Nagato unleashed his attack.

"Wind Release: Air Bullets!"

Nagato expelled from his mouth several projectiles of compressed air at the Raikage.

" He waited for me to be in the air so I couldn't dodge. Clever bastard," the Raikage thought, as he saw the air missiles coming at him, while trying to position his body in order to avoid as many of them as possible. *"I must increase the power of my armor!"*

Before his feet could touch the floor again, several air bullets hit the Raikage, on his right forearm, right shoulder, and left side of the chest. Even if the armor greatly reduced the power of the attack, they still drew blood and made him feel pain. He did manage to dodge and outrun the rest of the projectiles once he could run again.

"As expected, if your chakra armor is based on lightning, then wind chakra can pierce it," Nagato observed. "And very few people can match me when it comes to elemental ninjutsu."

"Not just the Rinnegan, but an affinity that beats mine," the Raikage growled, as he fixed Nagato with an angry stare. He also could hear the giant panda stomping towards him again. "Then again, I didn't become Raikage by shying away from a challenging fight!"

The Raikage jumped just in time to avoid the bear's claw swipe, though rather than jumping away from him, the Raikage leaped towards it, and performed a downward kick as he landed on the beast's head.

"Let's get rid of you first! Guillotine Drop!"

As he slammed his foot onto the panda's head with such force, it made it drop into the ground headfirst. As he let gravity pull him towards the panda on the ground, the Raikage aimed his fists down and started to spin.

"Kumogakure Drilling Whirlwind!"

The panda had no time to harden its body, and the Raikage's brutal attack pierced its flesh and skin. Taking critical damage, the creature's summoning was undone, disappearing in a cloud of smoke. As the smoke dispelled, the Raikage pointed a finger at Nagato.

"You're next, zombie," the Raikage said. "And don't think that just because you have wind affinity you have an advantage over me!"

"My affinity isn't just wind, but all five elements. That's one of the many gifts of the Rinnegan," Nagato said, as he started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!"

Nagato slammed both hands into the ground, and suddenly the grassy terrain around them turned into a vast quagmire. The

Raikage quickly started to sink, but Nagato remained at the top as if it was solid surface.

"I recognize this jutsu, it's from Jiraiya!" the Raikage said, as he struggled not to sink. "So it's true he taught you ninjutsu."

"Yes. Your biggest strength is speed, and this will make sure to curb that. For your sake, I hope you have something to counter this, because I don't want yet another innocent in my conscience," Nagato said in a sorrowful, almost pleading tone.

The Raikage, however, took that as nothing but an insult. A vein in his forehead swelled in pure anger.

"YOU THINK A LITTLE MUD IS ENOUGH TO STOP ME!? A bellowed as his Lightning Armor burst outward with energy. "THINK AGAIN!"

And much to Nagato's surprise, A lunged at Nagato, slower than before but still at a breakneck speed, raising a wave of mud as he moved.

" *Incredible, even with such a disadvantageous terrain, his speed is still something to behold,*" Nagato thought in awe. A chakra rod formed in his hand, as he prepared to endure the incoming clash. Nagato channeled wind chakra through said said rod, and lifted it just in time to parry a brutal lightning-enhanced punch from the First Division Commander.

The rod broke, but it was able to absorb most of the punch's momentum. And it wouldn't be the last thing that was about to be absorbed. Nagato then placed his other hand on the Raikage's chest.

"Gakido."

The Raikage could feel how his chakra was drained into Nagato, as the lightning armor that surrounded his body started to flicker and

disappear.

The Raikage mentally kicked himself for making such a mistake. *"Shit! His ability to absorb chakra! Since I'm a taijutsu specialist, I didn't pay it much mind, but I should have realized he could have used it to absorb my Lightning Armor!"*

Despite the mud reducing his mobility, A jumped backwards as he channeled even more chakra into his receding Lightning Armor, quickly restoring it to its peak strength. The Raikage prepared to attack again, this time reminding himself to be more careful of the chakra-absorbing ability. But before he could resume the battle, a violent tremor shook the entire battlefield.

"What the...?" the Raikage looked around, and immediately saw the source of the disturbance. A gigantic chakra construct, black in color with red edges, about twelve meters in height, of a heavily armored samurai whose face was covered by a mask with the appearance of a Tengu. He was carrying a double bladed katana that was holding with both hands. "What the hell is that!?"

"Susanoo," Nagato's voice replied. "An Uchiha's most powerful ability. I've never seen one before, only heard about it. Seeing one with my own eyes is... breathtaking."

The chakra construct raised his sword, before bringing it down in a descending arc, opening a huge crack in the ground, sending the unfortunate ninjas caught in the strike flying in all directions, and creating yet another tremor.

"Orochimaru was keeping such a powerful ninja under wraps?" the Raikage asked, as he turned towards Nagato. "I see. He didn't want to show his best cards until we got comfortable with the war."

"Unfortunately, this isn't the worst Orochimaru has to offer. If you don't like the Susanoo, you're going to like this even less," Nagato said, as he raised a hand at the Raikage. The Kumogakure leader braced for whatever jutsu the undead redhead was about to unleash

at him. But much to his surprise, Nagato raised his hand further, almost aiming into the sky. "Chibaku Tensei!"

...

"Water release: Double Water Palm!"

Hikari thrust both hands forward, blasting her undead husband with a torrent of water. Hiashi countered it with a Vacuum palm, but it was overpowered, and was hit by the powerful stream of water. His Byakugan noticed Hizashi coming closer, but was in no position to do anything, Hizashi's chakra flared with power.

"Eight Trigrams: Thirty Two Exploding Strikes! Two Strikes! Four Strikes!" Each one of Hizashi's palm hits was accompanied by a small chakra explosion that tore some of Hiashi's artificial flesh from his body. "Eight Strikes! Sixteen Strikes! THIRTY TWO STRIKES!"

When Hizashi was finished, Hiashi's body was smoking, missing several chunks of his arms, legs, torso, and even head. He limply fell on his back, as he felt the regeneration starting to kick in. But he knew, much to his relief, that he wouldn't regenerate in time before being sealed. And indeed, a couple of sealmasters landed besides the Hyugas, and quickly went to seal the downed Hiashi.

"Don't worry, brother, soon you shall return to your eternal rest," Hizashi solemnly said. "And return to the afterlife knowing that, while the night we lost you we also lost many clan members, the Hyuga Clan is stronger than it has ever been."

"That's... all what I could have... asked for..." Hiashi said, as his body was wrapped in cloths. "I'm glad... that you two... and my daughters... are doing good..."

With that, the sealmasters took the cloth cocoon away, leaving the two Hyugas alone. Hizashi made a move to walk away, but Hikari remained frozen in place. The former leader of the Branch house walked towards Hikari, and a put a hand on her shoulder.

"Hikari-san, I know better than anybody how must you feel now," Hizashi said emphatically. "But the battle is far from over. We can grieve over reopen wounds once we stand victorious."

"Y-Yes. Sorry about that. Let's meet up with-"

Hikari was interrupted when a tremor shook the battlefield. The two Hyuga immediately focused their Byakugan towards the source of the commotion, and immediately found it: a massive Susanoo armor.

"Susanoo?" Hizashi asked. "Whose is that? Shisui went with Hinata-sama to the Moon, and I'm sure Itachi and Sasuke weren't on this division."

"It's obvious that such Susanoo belongs to a reanimation. Other divisions reported of undead Uchihas," Hikari said, as he tried to piece the look of the caster. Unfortunately, the chakra of the Susanoo acted as a barrier for the Bykaugan's enhanced vision. "Plus, the color doesn't match with the Susanoo we know."

"It's massive. Much larger than the Susanoo of Itachi, Sasuke or Shisui," Hizashi said, trying his best to hide his fear and uneasiness. "How are we going to fight that thing?"

"I don't know," Hikari admitted. "I believe Tsunade-sama or Hanabi-chan wouldn't have any problem destroying that thing down. If we could only contact HQ and-"

Once again, Hikari was interrupted by yet another tremor, except this time it wasn't the Susanoo the source of it.

"Over there!" Hizashi pointed into the sky.

Hikari looked where Hizashi was pointing, and saw a massive amount of chakra concentrated into an extremely small point. She only saw something similar once before in her life.

"Hikari-san, is that...?"

The answer in the form of large chunks of earth being ripped apart, trees uprooted from the ground, and rocks elevating into the sky and pulled into the almost invisible chakra orb. And not just that, but some Allied ninjas and White Zetsu clones were pulled into the forming planetoid as well, screaming in horror as they were buried alive by tons of rocks. The fights ceased, and soon everybody was more worried about avoiding an horrible death than killing the enemies. Most of the Zetsu sunk underground in order to escape the powerful gravity pull, but the human ninja weren't so lucky.

A feeling of overwhelming dread overcame the Hyuga matriarch, and scanned the entire battleground, trying to find somebody whose chakra matched the one from the gravity core. It didn't take her long to find the source of her worries, given that the chakra of the caster was so powerful, it was like a beacon in the night.

She was greeted by the sight of the division commander, the Raikage, in the middle of a heated fight with a redheaded man wearing the Akatsuki cloak. But what drew her attention the most were the man's eyes: purple and with a ripple pattern. Despite the fact that she never saw such a man before, she knew his identity.

"Pain..."

...

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!?" Karui screamed, as she tried to stay anchored to the ground through the tree walking jutsu. But the gravitational pull was so strong, it was increasingly hard to do so.

"Chibaku Tensei! One of Pain's most powerful jutsu!" Choji explained.

"You saw this already!?" Omoi asked in shock.

"Pain used this attack when he and Akatsuki invaded Konoha!" Choji replied.

"Once the moon forming about us is big enough, Pain will drop it onto our heads!" Ino told them. "That's why we need to run away from it!"

"How the hell Konoha still exists after Pain used that jutsu above it!?" Karui asked in disbelief.

"Because they were able to counter it, right?" T said, looking at Team Asuma with renewed but still fragile hope. "What did you guys do to stop it?"

"Tsunade-sama and Naruto destroyed it," Ino said. "Unfortunately, we don't have any of them here with us right now!"

Karui looked up at the forming planetoid, and felt dread creeping through her body unimpeded. This kind of power was something not even her admired Raikage would be able to stand against.

...

Upon seeing Nagato's jutsu in action, the Raikage launched at the undead redhead, overwhelming him with a barrage of lightning fast punches and kicks. However, even if he was pushed into the defensive, Nagato was able to withstand his onslaught. The Raikage's desperation grew as he realized that, no matter how much he intensified his attack, the jutsu didn't stop. As it grew in size, it also gained more and more altitude. It eventually grew so big, it was able to block the sun, like a man-made eclipse.

"Impressive, isn't it? You know, outside of training, I only used this jutsu once: to destroy Konoha when I attacked it," Nagato commented, though the lack of pride in his words was evident. "Fortunately, they managed to stop it in time."

"And I will stop it as well! BY STOPPING YOU!" the Raikage bellowed, his Lightning Armor flaring bright.

"I wish you were able to. Like I said before, I killed many innocents in my misguided crusade for a better world," Nagato gloomily said. He then raised his hand, before motioning it down. "And now, even in death, more victims will be added to my conscience."

The Raikage turned around, and saw the planetoid falling down. Even if most ninjas had already moved from the zone where the giant mass of rock and earth was going to land, the resulting shockwave and destruction caused by the crash would cause untold amounts of death. And unlike what happened the last time, Nagato wouldn't bring the deceased back to life.

A had the urge to run towards the falling asteroid, but the rational part of his mind told him that he would only get himself killed. So he was forced to watch impotent how it finally crashed down, resulting in a deafening booming sound followed by a storm of rocks, dirt, dust and human bodies being flung in every direction.

The resulting tremor could be felt from many kilometers away.

...

Mountain Graveyard

Leaning against a stone column, Obito watched how Orochimaru used a makeshift board and some kind of white pellets to direct his army of undead. The Sannin had been smiling and muttering something between laughs for quite some time. It unnerved the Uchiha, but at least it also gave him hopes that maybe this time the battle would go in a different way.

That moment, Zetsu emerged from the ground. He, too, appeared to be pleased.

"Boss, the battle is ours. The enemy has suffered massive casualties, and the Raikage has ordered retreat," the white half explained.

"The reanimated Nagato proved to be quite an asset," the black half added. "His Chibaku Tensei wiped quite the enemy ninja."

"Good to hear that," Obito said, nodding. "About time your abominations managed to bring some results, Orochimaru."

Orochimaru turned at him, and flashed a mocking grin at him. "Yes. Now imagine what you would have done without my 'abominations'. Do you think your pitiful army of White Zetsu would have accomplished anything on their own?"

"Um, sir? What are your orders?" the black half of Zetsu asked, hoping to stop the argument or fight between the two men before it could happen "The enemy is retreating. Should we chase them?"

"Yes," Obito said, his eyes, not leaving Orochimaru. "Our forces must continue pursuit. I'm sure that the Alliance will send reinforcements, but that is of little consequence. How is the search of the jinchuriki hideout going?"

"Our aerial Zetsu have begun the search. The seas to the side of the Land of Lightning are vast, and storms are common over those areas. It might take a while," the white half replied.

"Even if we can't find their location, the news of one of their villages being destroyed will make them come out," Obito said. "Return to the front and continue watching over the enemy."

"At once boss."

And Zetsu disappeared, leaving Obito and Orochimaru alone once again.

Author's Note: I already said in the previous chapter that this battle would be an Akatsuki victory the moment they got their hands on the location of the jinchuriki, but I wasn't done yet. I

wanted to to make this not only a strategic defeat, but a tactical one as well, with the Alliance also losing on the battlefield.

There won't be the typical "after action breather" after this chapter, given the way it ended. Mostly since the battle hasn't ended yet. They're now in retreat, with Akatsuki in full pursuit, and in dire need of reinforcements. Who the reinforcements are, I'm sure you guys can imagine.

But that won't be next chapter. Because next chapter... we go to the Moon! Yeah, it's about time for Hinata to face Toneri for the last (heh) time.

Oh, and while Akatsuki learned about Naruto, Fu and B's location, it will be some time until they learn where they are exactly (remember that they're on an island that moves constantly. Even with the knowledge of its existence and the flying Zetsu, it will take some time for Akatsuki to nail their position). There are still a few battles left until Akatsuki try to capture the jinchuriki.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, what did you think about the chapter? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Or if you don't feel like leaving a detailed review, I do appreciate if you leave a few words of encouragement as well. Long or short, reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Rise of the Byakugan Princess, Part I

Author's Note: First of all, I'd like to thank deviantart user davidshadow275 for working on a better version of this story's cover art. So far, it's only the lineart, but he told me he's working on a colored, digitalized version.

Second, with this chapter, this story is now more than a million words long! Man, I never imagined I'd write such a behemoth of a story. I remember when I finished writing "The Spellbook", my previously longest fic, and I ended up so exhausted I never thought I'd write anything of epic length ever again, yet here we are.

Now, enjoy the chapter:

Chapter 112:

Rise of the Byakugan Princess, Part I

or

Sharingan vs Tenseigan

Moon

Today was the day. After much scouting, investigating and preparing, it was time for the Moon Assault Squad to, well, launch an assault on the Moon.

Toneri's base was somewhere inside the artificial sun. The Moon Puppets entered and exited through a hole that would appear on the surface when they made a certain hand seal. Shisui was able to copy said hand seal with his Sharingan, but when he tried to open a hole in the sun's surface, it had no effect. The Hyugas watching the hole being and closed realized that only the puppets could open it,

given that their chakra was somehow connected to that of the artificial sun.

They also realized that, besides the patrols coming and going, if somebody got close to the sun, several Moon Puppets would fly out of the sun in order to meet the invaders. Fortunately, the Moon Squad knew how to use this to their advantage.

"Everybody, go!" Hinata said.

The Hyuga Clan Head was leading the aerial team, flying on her own. Behind them were the rest of the ninjas -the Moon Acolytes were left on one of the abandoned towns for their safety- were riding on Sai's ink birds, including the former root agent. While success of this part of the mission relied on Hinata, the rest of her team would have a role to play as well.

"Here they come!" Tokuma Hyuga warned, his Byakugan active.

And indeed, that moment, a hole opened into the surface of the artificial sun, and Moon Puppets riding bird-like flying machines poured from it, ready to meet them in combat.

"Shisui-san, you ready?"

"Indeed I am," Shisui replied. He was sharing an ink bird with a Hyuga, sitting cross legged with his eyes closed. When he opened his eyes, his normally black irises were yellow, and there were black marks shaped like wings around them. His yellow eyes then turned red of the Sharingan, before it morphed into its advanced form.

"Sage Art: Susanoo!"

Shisui leaped into the air as the green chakra construct quickly formed around him, reaching its Perfect form, with black marks around its eyes to echo Shisui's. The Uchiha patriarch made two Shadow Clones, who quickly sat cross legged and closed their eyes, gathering nature energy and funneling towards the chakra construct in a constant manner.

"This should make sure I don't run out of Senjutsu juice," Shisui said, nodding to himself, before cracking his knuckles, as he moved in front of Hinata. "Alright, I'll try to draw their attention to me! Hinata, move towards the gate! The rest of you, provide us with cover!"

"Yes, sir!" the rest of the ninjas chorused in unison.

The Moon Puppets gave them no pause, and rained over them a storm of golden chakra blasts. Sai's ink birds dodged and maneuvered around the deadly shots with the same grace and agility as actual birds, while its raiders fired jutsu of their own towards the defenders. However, the initial counter-barrage was only a bit of the things that were to come.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blast!"

"Sage Art: Fire Release Blazing Murder!"

Hinata extended her hands forward, releasing a myriad of blue-purple lightning bolts at the incoming enemies. Meanwhile, the wings of Shisui's Susanoo covered its body, before quickly spreading them outwards, releasing a mass of ravens made of pure fire. The blazing birds flew towards the enemies, and burst into a fiery explosion upon making contact with them. All in all, those two attacks had cut the number of present enemies in half.

"Hinata, now!" Shisui said, as he flew towards the remaining foes, while Hinata turned towards the artificial sun.

The hole the Moon Puppets had opened was starting to close. As Hinata flew to it, she made several hand seals.

"Oh, no, you won't!" she said, before making several hand seals. "Tenseigan Chakra Cloak! Truth Seeking Balls!"

The Hyuga Clan Head created four Truth Seeking balls, and send them towards the closing hole. The four black spheres merged into a shapeless mass, which Hinata shaped into a large ring, large

enough for somebody riding on a giant bird to pass. She placed that ring in the middle of the gaping hole, preventing it from closing.

"There!" She said, nodding to herself. "Everybody, quickly, get inside the sun! It's safe now!"

With Shisui providing cover, the rest of the Moon Team quickly passed through the gate, followed by the Uchiha, and finally Hinata, who undid the black ring, taking back the form of four spheres.

They were greeted by an image that it was just as unreal as it was breathtaking: several small islands floating completely still, around a gigantic stone structure shaped like a crescent moon with a planetoid inside its curve, perfectly mimicking the symbol of the Otsutsuki Branch House. On top of the stone moon was a massive citadel, so large it almost looked like a city.

"I'm seeing an immense source of chakra coming from underneath that building," Hinata told them. "That must be where the weapon is being stored."

"I see it too," an Hyuga kunoichi said, her Byakugan active. "Said chakra seems to be the same the one powering the puppets and their machines. Do you think there's a link between them?"

"More likely," it was Shisui who answered. "Toneri's puppets have been inspected by both Konoha's best sealmasters and Suna's ninja puppeteers, and neither of them were able to figure out how they worked, only that they received their energy from an external source, unlike the Chakra Golems."

"So if we destroy the Otsutsuki weapon, Toneri's puppet army will be shut down," Sai deduced.

"Good. That will make our friends' work on Earth all the easier," Hinata said, as she and her group got closer to their target.

However, the moment they got closer to the citadel, they were once welcomed by a barrage of golden chakra blasts. All around the citadel were turrets armed with double cannons manned by more Moon puppets, focusing fire on them. On top of that, more puppets riding mechanical birds joined the fright, forcing the assaulters to turn back.

"We won't be able to get close to the citadel with so much fire upon us," Sai warned them. "My ink birds can't resist such firepower, and we'll be vulnerable on the ground."

"Hinata-sama, all of our clan have witnesses the great power you possess now. Do you think you could destroy the whole citadel yourself?" Tokuma asked.

"I'll try. Even if I'm not able to destroy the whole citadel, I'm sure I'll at least destroy the defenses," Hinata said, as she extended her hand forward, and her Truth Seeking Balls started to spin in front of her hand, merging into a purple sphere. "Amethyst Wheel Rein-"

Before Hinata could complete her attack, a black sphere, like a Truth Seeking Ball, but much bigger, appeared in the middle of the group, followed by a powerful telekinetic shockwave that blasted Sai's ink birds into black puddles, while hurling its riders away, all of them pummeling to the ground below around the citadel. Hinata's attack was interrupted, as the Hyuga Clan Head was violently hurled forward. Even Shisui's Susanoo send tumbling back.

"What the...? what was that?" Hinata asked, as she regained her balance still mid air. "How did that thing got so close while evading my sight?"

The answer came in the form of the black sphere broke down into a black blob, revealing a hollow interior that held Toneri inside, his Tenseigan Chakra Cloak blazing around him. Said blob then turned into four Truth Seeking Balls.

"He encased himself in a shell made of his Truth Seeking Balls. That's how he was able to evade my Tenseigan," Hinata thought in realization. "Toneri!? How are you here?"

"Hello, my princess. I was expecting you," Toneri said, her mouth curving into a inviting smile.

"You... knew that I was coming?" Hinata asked. "But how? We've been evading all the patrols until now!"

"Indeed, you and your little friends proved to be quite sneaky. And I couldn't afford to go and look for you myself, since I run into the risk of revealing my presence, since I could scare you into running away. But fortunately, everything has transpired according to my plan," Toneri explained, his smile was now of smug pride. "As for how I knew of your presence... you should remember that you and your sister aren't the only ones linked by Hamura's chakra."

It took a second to Hinata to realize what Toneri meant, when the memory of Hanabi telepathically contacting her dawned her. "That conversation I had with my sister! You... you listened to us!?"

"Not the whole conversation. I wasn't the intended target of the message, so I only got a few parts here and there. But I could discern that you were here, to put an end to the weapon my ancestors built in order to free themselves from the tyranny of the Main House's oppression, while I was busy helping Obito with his little silly war," Toneri continued, shaking his head. "I have to admit, that was careless of my part."

Hinata's eyebrow arched at Toneri's last choice of words, striking her as odd. "Little silly war? Don't you... don't you agree with him and his plans?"

"Ah, yes, I know what you're implying, so I'm going to cut the chase and skip directly to the dramatic reveal," Toneri replied. "Turns out you were right. My mind was being manipulated by Obito. I was his slave, and none the wiser about it."

"You... you broke the mind control?" Hinata asked in shock. "But I heard that Kotoamatsukami is nearly impossible to break! Naruto-kun had to be put on the verge of death to do that!"

"I find insulting that you dare to compare me to that blond oaf that you call your lover, but this should be even more proof over my superiority over him. Yes, I was nothing but Obito's thrall, but when Hamura's power developed and reached maturity, seeing the illusion and breaking through it was child's play!" Toneri boasted.

"But then... if you aren't mind controlled anymore... then we don't have to fight anymore!" Hinata said, beaming with joy.

Toneri smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. I do not wish to fight you either."

"Then will you help us stopping Akatsuki?" Hinata asked, sounding hopeful.

Toneri's smile turned into a condescending smirk. "And why would I do such a thing?"

The Hyuga Clan Head was taken aback. "What? But... I don't understand..."

"I might not be mind controlled anymore, but I could see one truth of Obito's plan: the world the Sage of the Six Paths created is a failure. It is beyond saving. It must be destroyed, so something new, and better, can be built in its place, and the Ten Tails is the perfect tool for the job. Obito thinks that by stealing a Rinnegan, he will be able not just to control it, but becoming its jinchuriki," Toneri shook his head, looking amused. "Shortsighted fool. His body lacks the power to contain such power. It will consume him from the inside out the moment he tries to make that power his own.

"However, somebody who has the true power of the Six Paths, like me, can become its jinchuriki without any risks. Once the Ten Tails is done reducing the world down to a more primordial state, I will absorb the beast into my body, and lead what's left of humanity to a

new golden age. The power of the Ten Tails will make my rule unmatched, but such thing won't be necessary, since people will see me as the one who saved them from an unspeakable horror, and will follow my lead unquestioningly.

"And you, Hinata..." he extended his hand, reaching her. "You shall be my queen. You're compassionate, strong, and wise beyond your years. You're the perfect queen to rule the new world alongside me."

As Toneri spoke, Hinata's expression went from shock, to horror, and finally settling in disappointment. This time, it was her who shook her head.

"I see. So even without the mind control... nothing changed," she said, before staring at Toneri with eyes full of resolve. "I'm no queen. The world needs no queens or kings, just people to fight for it. Like Naruto-kun, and the rest of my friends and family. Like me. And I will protect the world by defeating you once and for all!"

"I see. So I have to tame you first before you accept your fate. It's okay, I have already foresaw this," Toneri said. "Unlike our previous confrontations, I'm the one with the homefield advantage, and you have no place to run away, nor allies to call for help, except those few that came with you."

"You're always so sure of yourself. Well, you'll see that the people I brought with me are more than enough to deal with you!" Hinata said, as her four Truth Seeking Balls moved in front of her, and merged into a protective shield.

"Susanoo: Fire Release Meltdown!"

Toneri turned around, and saw Shisui's Susanoo floating above him, exhaling a massive, constantly expanding fireball that threatened to engulf Toneri. However, the last Otsutsuki wasn't surprised, and raised his hand at the incoming attack. His Fourth Truth Seeking Balls merged into a golden orb, before exploding, releasing its energy in the shape of a golden beam aimed at the incoming attack.

The chakra beam and growing inferno clashed against each other, resulting in an explosion that pushed both Uchiha and Otsutsuki backwards.

"Hinata, I'll deal with this asshole! You go find and destroy the weapon!" Shisui yelled.

"Understood!" Hinata said, as she quickly flew towards the Citadel's main entrance.

"I won't let you!" Toneri said, as he flew to intercept her, but was forced to fall back when a gigantic drill-shaped spear almost smashed into him.

"And I won't let *you*," Shisui said, looking at the white haired man from above. He then turned towards Sai, Tokuma and the rest of their team, fighting Moon Puppets while avoiding the fire coming from the Citadel's turrets. "Everybody, follow Hinata and make sure she reaches the weapon unimpeded!"

Shisui was answered by chorus of "yes sir!" and similar responses, before his Sharingan focused on Toneri.

"You seem to be very eager to fight against teens and little kids. Let's see how well you do against an actual adult," Shisui said, as his eyes narrowed in anger. "I still owe you a big one for nearly killing my wife's little brother!"

Shisui's Susanoo dived down, ready to skewer Toneri with his drill lance again. Toneri waved a hand, and send a Truth Seeking Ball to intercept the coming spear, taking the shape of a small shield. However, Shisui's spear cracked it, shattering it into hundreds of small black shards, before coming down, barely missing Toneri, who flew backwards.

"So, you're able to overwhelm my Truth Seeking Balls. First that annoying kid, then that boorish blond, and now you." Toneri said, unamused, as he resummoned the orb that had been destroyed. His

Tenseigan flashed for a second, as he fixed Shisui a hard stare. "Your chakra is definitely different than that of a normal human. And similar to that kid and Naruto. I can see that your clones are absorbing pieces of ambient chakra and channeling it towards the armored construct. I was unaware such thing could be done. Perhaps that's what allows you to bypass my defense?"

"Very clever. But that knowledge will do you no good!" Shisui said, as he charged once again. "Without your precious Truth Seeking Balls, you're helpless against a Sage!"

Toneri smirked, as he raised his hand at Shisui. "Oh, I beg to differ. Silver Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Toneri's four black orbs merged into a silvery sphere, exploding into a typhoon that swallowed Shisui's Susanoo and violently hurled him upwards, until it crashed against the bottom of a floating island, producing several cracks on its rocky surface.

"Did you like that? Because I'm not done yet," Toneri said, smirking triumphantly, his hand still aiming at Shisui, as he summoned four more Truth Seeking Balls to replace the ones that had been consumed. The new ones also merged into a golden orb in front of his hand. "Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The golden orb once again exploded into an energy beam that flew towards Shisui. The Uchiha, however, managed to move the Susanoo out of the jutsu's trajectory and dodge it the last second. Shisui saw how the golden beam blasted the floating island into millions of tiny pieces of rock and pebbles.

"I can't believe Hagane survived that attack. Either that kid is much tougher than he looks, or Toneri grew more powerful since then," Shisui thought, worried. *"Even with Sage Mode, this guy beats me when it comes to raw power. I need to be smart, or I'll end up dead."*

Toneri quickly summoned more Truth Seeking Balls, and aimed his hand at Shisui. The balls started to spin around it once again.

" *Oh shit, gotta get out of the way!*" Shisui thought, as he moved his Susanoo away before Toneri could fire another devastating attack.

"Emerald Reincarnation Explosion!"

This time, the black orbs didn't merge, but merely fired at Shisui, glowing bright green.

"The Truth Seeking Balls can't nullify my ninjutsu anymore, but the way they're glowing is giving me very bad vibes," Shisui noted, as he made a hand seal. "Susanoo: Tsukumo!"

The green Susanoo flapped its wings once, releasing a barrage of large chakra needles of the same color. Then, much to the Uchiha's surprise, as if they had mind of their own, the Truth Seeking Balls started to move in order to avoid the storm of razor-sharp projectiles. Two of the glowing emerald orbs were pierced by the needles, losing their momentum, but the other two reached Shisui, and embedded them into his Susanoo with great force, one of them close to the head, as they started to glow with a brighter light.

"I don't like that..."

Predictably, the orbs detonated, producing two large, green colored explosions, taking a good chunk of the Susanoo's right side, including bits of its head. Still, it was good enough to remain floating mid air.

"Impressive," Toneri said, as he flew towards him, summoning four more Truth Seeking Balls. "That Susanoo is truly impressive. Then again, it's not invincible. In its current state, it won't survive more blasts. Emerald Reincarnation Explosion!"

The black orbs burned with an emerald light as they were charged with chakra, and flew towards Shisui. The Uchiha, however, wasn't going to lie down and take the attack like that. He started to make hand seals as the Susanoo thrust its drill spear forward, which started to spin producing a vortex of wind.

"Susanoo: Fire Release Blazing Vortex!"

Shisui breathed a stream of fire into the drill spear, and when it combined with the wind vortex produced by the drill, it resulted in a roaring inferno that spread forward in a cone. The flames engulfed the coming Truth Seeking Balls, reducing them to ashes. The cone of fire continued forward, forcing Toneri to fall back.

"Now, before he creates more of those annoying orbs!" Shisui said to himself, as he pulled out a Fuuma Shuriken, and tossed it towards the last Otsutsuki. "Shadow Shuriken Clone Jutsu!"

A couple dozen Fuma Shuriken formed around the original, carrying the same momentum, all of them flying towards the white haired man. Shisui, however, wasn't done, and continued making hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Shisui breathed a second stream of fire at the flying steel stars, coating them in a cloak of flames.

Even if Toneri didn't have time to summon more Truth Seeking Balls and use them as shields, they were far from the only weapon the last Otsutsuki possessed. He made a hand seal, and air shimmered for a second, before he cast a shockwave from his body that spread in every possible direction, repelling the burning disks before they could touch him.

The attack evaded, Toneri resummoned his four Truth Seeking Balls again.

"A combination of skill and power. It seems that my beloved Hinata isn't the only prodigy hailing from that ninja village," Toneri complimented Shisui, smiling mockingly. "Then again, you're a Son of Indra, so your talent goes without saying. Violence and hatred flow through your veins."

"Just because I'm an Uchiha you think you already know me!?" Shisui growled, gritting his teeth. His Susanoo started to slowly regenerate as his anger empowered his chakra. "You know nothing about me, my clan, or Earth as a whole! You spent most of your life here, watching us from afar!"

"I did watch you, yes, but way closer than you think," Toneri said. "I'm very much aware of your clan's history, up to the conflict that saw its numbers diminished to single digits. You and the other survivors might think you're better than your deceased clanmates, but in reality, you're only pretending to be different from them. Indra's hatred taints your very soul. It's your fate to create and perpetuate conflict."

"Do you know what is my fate as well? To wipe that odious grin from your face!" Shisui said, as his Susanoo lunged at Toneri.

"You will try," Toneri said, making the same hand seal he did to create the shockwave. Then, the large rocks floating around them started to move towards Shisui as if they were meteors. Shisui's drill grinded them into gravel in a few seconds the moment they got close, but this also forced the Uchiha to slow down. Then, Toneri made three hand seals, and more meteors started to gather around him

"I'm sure you'll find this familiar," Toneri said, as rocks started to gather above him, forming a large meteor. "Pain was a man with a vision of a better world and the power to make that vision a reality. Somebody I respected. Hell, I might had agree to continue being part of Akatsuki if he was still alive. But well, I'm digressing. Even if I only saw it from afar, I found his Chibaku Tensei magnificent. So consider this facsimile an homage to him."

The white haired man moved his hand downwards, sending the gigantic conglomeration of rocks towards Shisui. The Uchiha, however, was far from intimidated.

"You're going to find a much larger rock to crush me with!" Shisui said, as he moved his Susanoo upwards, raising its drill lance.
"Susanoo: Worldbreaking Drill!"

The drill spear started to spin again, this time with increased speed, as a vortex of chakra formed around it, making it appear much larger than it was. The moment the giant meteor was upon him, Shisui thrust the drill upwards, grinding the rock into pebbles as soon as it touched it. Cracks started to spread around the meteor, breaking apart into multiple smaller stones by the ever increasing rotation, until it was reduced to a few admittedly large but no longer threatening rocks.

"HA! What about that?" Shisui boasted. "I told you-"

"Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Shisui saw too late that, while he was busy drilling the meteor, Toneri took advantage of that in order to prepare his most powerful move. Unable to dodge in time, the Uchiha had to watch how the golden beam of energy blasted his Susanoo, violently pushing it back to the vast courtyard surrounding the citadel, opening a crater upon crashing.

Toneri smirked upon seeing Shisui's Susanoo slowly break apart into nothingness. The clones he was using to gather and funnel nature energy were of course gone as well. Still, it seemed that the green chakra construct absorbed most of the blast, sparing Shisui any damage, as the Uchiha got back on his feet with relative ease. However, Toneri wasn't worried. He knew that Susanoo was the most powerful jutsu an Uchiha could use, and he defeated one that was powered by Senjutsu to boot. Deprived of his best weapon, the Uchiha was easy pickings.

"So, I take you aren't going to surrender, are you?" Toneri asked, as he descended, stopping a few meters from the ground level.

"You can bet your pale ass that I'm not," Shisui defiantly said as he unsheathed his tanto from his back.

Toneri chuckled. "So stubborn. Don't you see that you can't beat me? Or do you plan to keep me busy as much as you can in order to buy Hinata the time she needs, even if you have to pay with your life?"

"I can assure you I have no plans of leaving this place as anything other than alive. I have a lovely wife and kids I plan to return to," Shisui said. "I'm willing to die for my family, friends and village, but on this case, it won't be necessary."

"Very well then. At the very least, you'll die with some dignity, Uchiha," Toneri said, smirking condescendingly at Shisui. "But you will die."

Shisui braced as four more Truth Seeking Balls appeared around him.

...

Inside the Citadel

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

Hinata extended her hands forward, purple electric sparks jumping between her fingers, before a lightning storm erupted from them, zapping the Moon Puppets that were mid air leaping at them. The lightning bolts pushed them backwards while breaking them down to burn and broken pieces of plastic and metal.

"A few down..." Hinata said, before spreading her arms outwards. "Hundreds of them left!"

She released a telekinetic shockwave from each of her hands, hurling away more puppets that were going to jump at her. Before more enemies could jump at her, she dashed towards the door she thought it would lead her to the weapon... before more puppets

poured from said door, as well as from three other doors, much to the Hyuga's frustration.

The Hyuga Clan Head let out a weary sigh as she slipped into a battle stance once again. She was past the point of this kind of enemies being a threat to her, but taking care of them was going to be a bother. Not to mention all the time she was going to waste. Shisui and the others were fighting Toneri, and she needed to destroy the weapon as soon as possible. Fortunately, some help was on her way.

"Super Beast Imitation Drawing!"

"Vacuum Palm!"

Several tigers made of ink entered Hinata's expanded field of vision, and pounced at the puppets incoming from the left, and multiple vacuum shells blasted the horde of puppets coming from the right.

"Hinata-sama, we'll take care of this rabble!" a Hyuga kunoichi said, as she engaged a Moon Puppet in direct combat. "You go and find that weapon!"

Hinata nodded. "Understood. Stay safe!" She then turned towards the puppets coming from the gate she was about to cross, and thrust her hand forward. "Lightning Release: Electric Vacuum Palm!"

From her open hand, Hinata cast a huge vacuum shell surrounded by lightning at the incoming group of enemies, which were helplessly blasted away the moment Hinata's attack made contact, hurling them to the sides, leaving an open way for the Hyuga to take.

As Hinata continued flying around the citadel, more and more puppets came to stop her. These ones not dressed as ninjas or warriors, but as butlers, servants, maids and other kind of domestic service. Some of them even had the appearance of children. Still, they weren't enough to stop her. Hinata only needed a wave of her

hand to blast them with a barrage of lightning bolts, reducing them to burned piles of scrap, not slowing them down a little.

"Isn't there an end to these things?" Hinata complained as she zapped yet another group of puppets.

Thankfully, the answer seemed to be yes, as the moment she reached the lower levels of the citadel, no more puppets appeared to stop her, much to her relief. It didn't take long to reach her destination: a gigantic chamber holding an equally large golden sphere that somewhat resembled her Tenseigan eyes. It irradiated pure power.

"So, this is the Tenseigan Chakra Vessel..." Hinata said in awe, as she slowly walked towards it. "I can see its power flowing through the whole Moon... powering Toneri's puppets, the artificial sun, all the Otsutsuki technology... what a breathtaking work..."

"Breathtaking indeed," another voice said besides her, making the Hyuga startle a little. "Too bad it has to be destroyed."

"Ha-Hamura-sama?" Hinata asked, surprised. "What are you doing here? I thought you could only appear in my dreams."

"Normally, it would be the case," the old man nodded. "But with you being so close to my creation, I can manifest as an image while you're awake."

"Your... creation?" Hinata asked.

Hamura nodded once again, smiling sadly. "Yes. It was me who created this device in order to help my followers survive in the hostile environment of the Moon, so we could build our civilization. Everything in the Moon is connected to this sphere."

"I see..."

There was some pride, and a little melancholy, in Hamura's voice. The Vessel was a magnificent work of art, and its technology could be used for so much good. This thoughts made Hinata hesitate in her actions. Hamura, however, seemed to notice Hinata's demeanor change, and continued speaking.

"Unfortunately, the tool I created to help my people here was corrupted into a weapon of war, first by the Otsutsuki Branch House to wipe out the Main House, and later by Toneri, to wage war on the people of Earth. Because of that, and the fact that no more people lives on the Moon, it's time for this artifact to be destroyed. And only somebody with Six Paths Chakra can do it safely."

"I... I understand," Hinata replied. "I'll carry out my duty."

No more words were needed. Hinata nodded, and took a few steps forward. She clenched her fists, and two purple lions made of chakra formed around them, crackling with electricity. Lastly, she leaped at the Vessel.

"Lightning Release: Twin Lion Fists!"

Hinata slammed her fists into the Vessel, producing a burst of lightning that coursed through the entire sphere. The giant golden orb started to blink, before it finally burst into thousands of small glowing white spheres, almost like marbles. Though, upon closer inspection, Hinata realized they weren't marbles at all.

"Wait a minute... these things... they're Byakugan!" Hinata said in realization.

"Indeed. The Vessel started as my own Tenseigan and several volunteers' Byakugan, and over the generations, more and more Byakugan were added to it, increasing its power little by little, until it reached enough destructive potential to wipe out an entire country. Even Toneri himself got his eyes removed when he was a child so they could be added to the weapon, " Hamura's image started to waver. "Thankfully, that weapon won't be used to cause more

destruction anymore... Hinata, my child... only one thing remains... defeat Toneri... and bring peace... to my brother's world..."

With that, Hamura's image vanished completely leaving the Hyuga alone.

"Understood, Hamura-sama. It's time for Toneri to pay for his crimes," Hinata said, as she turned around, ready to rejoin her squadmates and put an end to everything. "Huh?"

However, much to her surprise, the mass of floating Byakugan quickly poured out of the room as if they had life of their own, like a large swarm of fireflies, much to the Hyuga's confusion.

...

Meanwhile, inside the Citadel, Sai, Tokuma and the rest of the Moon Squad were fighting tirelessly against the puppet army guarding the place, when all of sudden, they stopped fighting and fell to the ground lifelessly. At the same time, the lights that illuminated the place went out, leaving all of them in the dark

"Uh, what happened?" an Hyuga asked. "The puppet's chakra just disappeared all of sudden!"

"Wait, could it be..." Tokuma whispered, before he focused his enhanced sight below, where Hinata should be, until he found her.

"Yes, I can no longer see the source of chakra below the Citadel! Hinata-sama destroyed it!"

"Our mission has been a success then," Sai said, his lips curving into a small smile.

"Indeed," another Hyuga before her eyes drifted where Shisui and Toneri were fighting. "However, Toneri is far from defeated. We must rejoin Hinata-sama and help her bring down-"

She was interrupted when the mass of floating glowing byakugan appeared from behind the gate Hinata had crossed to reach the chamber of the Energy Vessel, and continued their way until they reached outside.

...

Meanwhile, in the courtyard, Toneri and Shisui were about to resume their fight, when the light coming from the artificial sun began to dim. Little by little at first, and faster later, the artificial sun started to break apart, until it vanished completely, leaving the place completely dark. The only source of light was Toneri's Tenseigan Chakra Cloak, though Shisui created a little flame on the palm of his hand in order to see better.

"What's going on?" Toneri asked, before he directed his expanded sight towards the chamber under the Citadel. "No! Hinata reached the Energy Vessel and destroyed it!"

"Haha, yes, well done Hinata!" Shisui cheered. "You lost, dumbass! Without your precious weapon, your puppet army is nothing but a bunch of oversized toys! Now come with us quietly if you want to live."

"The Tenseigan Energy Vessel... created by Hamura-sama himself..." Toneri began, seemingly ignoring Shisui. His lip started to quiver. "The treasure my clan sacrificed our eyes to... destroyed..."

Shisui tensed up. He didn't like where this was going. While the idea of Toneri surrendering wasn't something he considered a big possibility, now it was pretty much zero. If what Toneri said was true, the destruction of the Energy Vessel was a huge cultural and personal affront to him. His building rage would make him go on a rampage.

Toneri then turned at Shisui, and much to the Uchiha's surprise, smirked, and shrugged. "Oh well. Things happen."

Now Shisui was taken aback.

"That weapon was most of your power base. Not to mention all that stuff you said about sacrificing your eyes," Shisui noted. "Aren't you angry at us? Not even a little?"

"Angry' Hmmm..." Toneri placed a hand under his chin, and pretended to be in deep thought. "I guess I should, right? But I just don't feel like it."

Okay, now Shisui was really worried. This was even worse than the previous scenario. The destruction of the Tenseigan Chakra Vessel didn't affect him as much as Shisui and everybody else had anticipated. That meant Toneri knew something everybody else was unaware of. Something that right now, made him extremely dangerous.

And Shisui was now going to learn to which extent.

Toneri extended his hand towards the Citadel, and that moment, a swarm of glowing white lights -thanks to his Sharingan, Shisui could tell they were Byakugan- came from the main door, flying towards the last Otsutsuki. The lights started to latch onto Toneri, until they covered it completely. The mass of Byakugan turned into pure white chakra, forming a sphere of pure white light, forcing the Uchiha to shield his eyes with his hand. Then, after a couple seconds of silence, the sphere of light burst like a balloon, revealing Toneri.

At first sight, Toneri didn't look any different than he did a few seconds ago. But thanks to his enhanced vision, Shisui could see that the strength of his chakra had been multiplied. Startled, and admittedly, afraid, Shisui stumbled backwards. Toneri was now on a completely different level. Not even with his Senjutsu Susanoo could beat him now.

"Ah, that reaction. I guess that thanks to your eyes you realize the situation you're in," Toneri said, proudly smirking. "With my Tenseigan, I can absorb the power of the Energy Vessel into my

body, and with it, I can finally do this!" Toneri started to make hand seals, and teal flames burst around him. "Tenseigan Chakra Cloak: Perfect Form!"

All of Toneri's latent power was brought to the surface with a burst of chakra that, for a Sharingan wielder like Shisui, was like looking directly into a lightning bolt. But that was nothing to what followed later. If the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak gave its user the appearance of being surrounded by fire, the Perfect Form made Toneri look as if he was made of fire, with a kimono made of that chakra flames adorned with magatamas covering his body, and a single horn extending from his forehead.

"With these eyes..." Toneri began, his smirk turning into a vicious smile. "I shall destroy the Sage of the Six Paths' world, and create a new one in its place!"

"Toneri!"

Both Toneri and Shisui turned around, and saw Hinata, accompanied by two Shadow Clones, flying out of the Citadel.

"Ah, my princess, your timing couldn't have been better," Toneri said. "As you can see, destroying the Energy Vessel did nothing but make me even stronger. Please, submit yourself to me peacefully. I don't want to fight you again."

"Shisui-san, go with the others. Thanks for your effort, but this enemy is far too much for you," Hinata told him, as she and her clones placed themselves between the Otsutsuki and the Uchiha. "I shall deal with him."

"You won't be able to beat him by yourself!" Shisui said. "His power is much greater than before!"

"I know. But fear not, I have a plan," Hinata said, as she fixed Toneri a stare full of determination.

"Very well then. If you have to fight me again, so be it," Toneri said, shaking his head. "But I won't hold back. I love you, my princess, but if you keep opposing me, you leave me no choice but to use my full power to make you accept your place."

"I would never expect you to be merciful," Hinata replied, as she and her clones charged forward.

Hinata opened the fight with a powerful palm strike that Toneri blocked, but carried so much power it pushed him backwards, producing a booming thunderclap. Then the clones followed suit, repeating the move through from different angles. The trio surrounded Toneri and attacked him from afar before he had any chance to defend himself.

"Vacuum Palm Wall!"

"Lightning Release: Thunderbolt!"

"Lightning Release: Protection of the Eight Trigrams Sixty Four Palms!"

The three Hinatas cast multiple purple lightning bolts, a wave of compressed air and a barrage of lightning needles at Toneri. The Ottsuki merely smirked, and raised his hand forward. A green glowing sphere appeared, which quickly split into eight spheres, revealing to be Truth Seeking Balls once they lost their glow. They then merged and took the shape of a large shield, protecting Toneri. The shield then quickly reverted back to the eight black orbs.

"Eight...?" Hinata asked in shock.

"Yes, the number of Truth Seeking Balls I can summon has doubled. And this is only but an iota of the power I now possess thanks to my Perfect Tenseigan Chakra Cloak," Toneri boasted. He made a hand wave, and six of his eight the Truth Seeking Balls grew and enlogated, taking the shape of gigantic nail-like spears. With another

hand wave, he launched them at Hinata, while the remaining two kept floating behind him.

The Hyuga and her clones flew away from the attack in different directions, causing the black speard to split from them as well.

" Toneri has become much more powerful than before, and so quickly..." the Hyuga thought, as she feld from two black spears. She felt how a clone died, and its memories returned to her. *"But I can't waver now! I need to hold him back a little longer!"*

Meanwhile, in the couryard in front of the Citadel, Sai had just summoned enough ink birds for everybody to ride.

"We can't just stay here," Sai said. "We either have to help Hinata-san deal with the enemy, or we should find a safer place to stay. What are we going to do?"

"As much as it pains me, we can't help Hinata-sama," Tokuma said, shaking his head. "If we tried to help her we'd only get in the way. Even if it sounds cowardly, I think the best we can do is to leave this place so she can fight without having to worry about us."

Tokuma's suggestion was met with murmurs of agreement, as he and the others went to climb the ink birds. Shisui, however, remained in place, intently watching the clash taking place above him.

"Shisui-san," an Hyuga kunoichi said. "We need to leave, now. I know you must feel angry right now, but-"

"It's not that," the Uchiha replied. "There's something wrong. The way Hinata's fighting... it's nothing like other times. She's holding back."

"What do you mean? Are yo suggesting that Hinata-sama is holding back?" another Hyuga asked. "Why she'd do such a thing?"

"No, I think Shisui-san's right," the Hyuga woman replied, as she looked at the fight more intently. "For starters, she isn't using her Truth Seeking Balls, despite being her best asset so far."

"She isn't using Sage Mode either, despite mastering it just like me, and it being the only way to counter Toneri's own Truth Seeking Balls," Shisui added.

"I figured that maybe Hinata-sama would keep a clone or two hidden inside the Citadel to draw nature energy," the Hyuga Kunoichi said, as her gaze drifted towards the large, ornate building. "But there isn't any. One of those two is the actual Hinata-sama."

"She must have a plan then," Tokuma observed. "But what?"

"We'll have to trust her. Now come on, let's get out of here," the Hyuga woman urged the others.

As they got onto their ink birds and fled, Hinata and her remaining clone continued her near hopeless struggle against Toneri. This time, the Otsutsuki wasn't satisfied with letting his Truth Seeking Balls do the job, and went directly after one of the two Hinatas. He grabbed her by the neck, the chakra surrounding his hand glowing brighter than the rest of his cloak, and began siphoning her chakra. "Hinata" exploded into a poof of smoke, meaning it was the other clone.

"Chakra absorption too?" the Hyuga asked in shock.

"Of course I can absorb chakra. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to seal the Ten Tails into my body. The Perfect Mode Cloak is magnificent, isn't it?" Toneri asked, smiling arrogantly. "Now, my dear princess, will you stop this charade already?" Toneri asked in a mocking manner. "Or do I need to use brute force? You saw already you don't stand a chance against me."

Hinata, however, wasn't deterred. "You aren't the first enemy I fought with the power of the Six Paths! Multiple Vacuum Palm!"

Hinata thrust her arms back and forth, sending a barrage of vacuum shells at Toneri, who effortlessly blocked them with his many truth seeking balls. He then waved a hand, and send a single black orb into Hinata, slamming it into her gut, making her double over. The orb then started to glow with an emerald glow.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you'll sustain minimal damage," Toneri said in a reassuring but still condescending manner, before he made the orb explode.

The rest of the Moon Squad, watching from afar, saw in horror as the explosion send Hinata tumbling towards the main courtyard, loanding with a loud thud.

"Hinata-sama!" many Hyuga screamed.

"Sai, turn the birds around! We need to get to her before that monster does!" Tokuma urged.

Sai was about to do so, when suddenly, something happened that caught everybody else by surprise: "Hinata" disappeared in a poof of smoke.

There was a moment of silence as everybody processed what had happened, including Toneri. His expression went from dumbfounded, to desperate, to anger in mere seconds, as he frantically began to scan his urroundings.

"What? A clone? How...?" he asked, looking around. Despite his vision encompassing the whole area, there was no trace of Hinata. "Where is she? Where is she!? Why I can't find her!? There's no way she could have evaded my sight and escape this place!"

...

Meanwhile, inside the Citadel, surrounded but nothing but darkness, Hinata was floating mid air, in a sitting position with her legs crossed,

her hands softly closed and touching each other by the knuckles, as she gathered nature energy.

Besides buying her time for preparing Sage Mode, her clones also served as scouts to gauge Toneri's new power. The fact that he could create eight Truth Seeking Balls as opposed to four was troubling enough, but that chakra absorbing ability was a completely new headache. At the very least, he wouldn't catch her flat footed with those abilities, though Hinata had the feeling that Toneri had more nasty surprises prepared for her.

Since her clones had been destroyed, she could no longer remain hidden. She wished she had more time, but resigned to use the nature energy she had time to collect, hoping it would be enough. She opened her eyes, purple marks appearing around them, stood up, and with a wave of her hand, the sphere she created as a shield broke apart, reverting back to the four Truth Seeking Balls, before flying up to the Citadel's entrance.

"There she is!" an Hyuga said, sounding relieved.

"Her chakra network is saturated with nature energy," another Hyuga said, scanning her with his Byakugan. "Guess she was using the clones as a distraction while she prepared Sage Mode."

Toneri also seemed to be relieved as well.

"So, you were still here after all. Though, I can't still help but wonder how did you evade my sight," the white haired man said.

This time, it was Hinata's turn to smirk. "By copying the same little trick you used to ambush us before: I used my Truth Seeking Balls to hide. Neither the Byakugan nor Tenseigan can see past them."

"So, you hid while you prepared Sage Mode, and send three Shadow Clones to both keep my attention away from the real you and learn about my new abilities. A cunning plan, indeed," Toneri praised.

"Thank you. But flattery will get you nowhere, you should know that by now," Hinata replied, her stare hardening.

"Perhaps. But if my flattery fail to accomplish something, I have power to make up for it," Toneri said, smiling menacingly at her. "Plus your Sage Mode won't do you any good. The Uchiha over there is also a Sage, yet I defeated him even if I didn't have the power I have now."

"You're awfully prone to underestimating your opponents. I thought that your many past defeats would have corrected such habit. I'll make sure this is the last time you make that mistake" Hinata said. "However, before we fight, I'd like to ask you something."

This seemed to amuse Toneri, who smiled in return, mildly curious. "Sure, ask away. I'll answer anything you might want to know, if it's of my knowledge."

"Whose are those eyes you're wearing?" Hinata said, taking Toneri a little aback. "I know they aren't yours, because the Byakugan of a Branch House Otsutsuki can't evolve into a Tenseigan. Not to mention that I know that your original eyes were part of the Energy Vessel."

"Why does it matter whose eyes were this? The man they used to belong to is dead. Now they're my eyes. The eyes that will reshape the world," Toneri boasted.

"During the Uchiha insurrection, several Hyugas witnessed a masked man with a Sharingan and Wood Release, a man we'd later find was Obito Uchiha, taking part in the attack of the Hyuga Compound. Not only did that man kill my father, but then he desecrated his body by stealing his eyes. His, and the eyes of the other Hyugas that died defending their home from the Uchihas.

"Then, years later, you show up all of sudden, as a member of Akatsuki, with those Tenseigan, under Obito's mind control," Hinata

said, fixing Toneri a hard glare. "Those eyes are my father's, aren't they?"

"Like I said before, what if they were? He doesn't need them. These eyes are mine because I made them mine. Just like how I will make you mine, my princess," Toneri replied.

"I don't belong to you, and neither do those eyes. I plan to take those eyes back, and return them to their legitimate owner, even if he's no longer alive!" Hinata shouted, as she started to make hand seals. "Tenseigan Chakra Cloak: Perfect Mode!"

Hinata burst into mass of lavender flames, before said flames surrounded Hinata completely. The amethyst flames surrounding her body took the shape of an elegant kimono adorned with black magatamas, similar to Toneri's. Her four Truth Seeking Balls split into two, allowing her to have eight orbs at once, just like Toneri.

This time, it was Toneri's turn to be surprised. "Perfect Cloak? But how...?"

"Again, I did it by copying you. You absorbed those Byakugan to give yourself a power boost and bring the Cloak to its full power. I did the same using Senjutsu. Now we're evenly matched."

Toneri's shock was short lived, and his stunned expression quickly morphed into a smile of satisfaction. "When I think I have you figured out, you find a way to surprise me. No wonder I love you so much. Now, I can fight without holding back and not be afraid of harming you too much."

Hinata scowled. "I will never give you the chance of harming me, or anybody else for that matter. This ends now!"

And thus, Hinata Hyuga, the last heiress of the Otsutsuki Main House, and Toneri Otsutsuki, last member of the Otsutsuki Branch House, engaged in battle for the last time.

Author's Note: It's been a while since we saw Hinata kicking some ass, isn't it? It felt good writing for her again (as for Naruto, you'll have to wait a little longer until he gets back into the spotlight). Well, I know that most of this chapter was Shisui doing the fighting, but that was the appetizer. The main course comes next chapter, and I can assure you guys you're going to love it.

And thus, both Hinata and Toneri have reached the last form of the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak. According to my interpretation of such power, in order to reach the perfect version you need an external power-up to jumpstart the final stage of the Cloak. Hinata used Sage Mode, and Toneri absorbed the thousands of Byakugan that composed the Tenseigan Chakra Vessel. In "The Last", Toneri used the eyes as some form of final desperate attack, but he botched it and Naruto had to save his sorry ass. Still, I liked the idea of using the thousands of eyes as a power-up.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter, Hinata and Toneri's final showdown! While you wait, tell me what you think about this chapter in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Rise of the Byakugan Princess, Part II

Author's Note: While it lacked a scene towards the end when it was originally published, the second chapter of the Hanabi Gaiden is now complete.

Now, enjoy the conclusion to the Tenseigan duel:

Chapter 113:

Rise of the Byakugan Princess, Part II

or

Family Feud

Mountain Graveyard

Despite the fact that he had left not even half an hour ago, Zetsu appeared once again inside the cave Obito and Orochimaru were using as a base of operations. Given the look on his face, he didn't bring good news.

"Uh, boss, I have bad news." Sometimes, Obito hated being right. "We just lost Toneri's Moon Puppets."

Of course, the Uchiha didn't guess the extent of such bad news. Orochimaru chuckled, seemingly amused by this turn of events. Obito glared at the Sanke Sannin, before turning back at his right hand man.

"What do you mean that we 'lost them'?" he asked, sounding exasperated. "They couldn't be destroyed, since they're scattered alongside different groups. Did Toneri recall them for some reason?"

"No, I mean..." the white half hesitated, as if trying to look for the most appropriate words. "They just... stopped working."

"What do you mean 'stopped working'?" Obito insisted, not getting what Zetsu was implying -or not wanting to get it.

"Well, one moment they were running as usual and then the next... they all stopped moving and dropped down like they were dead. We can't sense any chakra coming from them," the black half explained.

"And this happened to every puppet among our ranks," the white half added. "How could this happen? It's unlikely that Toneri betrayed us."

"If he did, he would have taken the puppets with him instead of deactivating them," Obito said, placing a finger under his chin. "Still, the why is irrelevant. Our army has lost a good chunk of its strength without them. Not helping that Toneri is still missing," Obito let out a weary sigh, as he pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. "We need to find that secret island as soon as possible. How is the search going on?"

"The winged Zetsu are still looking. The sea around the Land of Lightning is extense, and the weather can be a hidrance," white Zetsu said in an apologetic tone.

"Send more to help them with the search. We can sacrifice some of our aerial strength," Obito ordered, before he turned at the Snake Sannin. "Orochimaru, do you have anymore reanimations in reserve?"

"A few. Do you want me to send them to the front?" Orochimaru asked.

"Yes. Quality over quantity, though. Send a few of your strongest," Obito told him.

Orochimaru grinned in anticipation. "As you command, Obito-kun."

"If we're able to keep the Alliance distracted for enough time, winning the war won't be a problem," Obito said.

...

Moon

"Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Toneri's eight Truth Seeking Balls merged into a golden sphere, that exploded in the form of a thick energy beam aimed at Hinata. She, however, merely moved a few of her own black orbs in front of her, and merged and shaped them in the form of a shield. The golden energy beam struck, but it failed to crack Hinata's defense. Toneri was unable to hide a grimace of frustration.

"My turn," Hinata said, smiling confidently, as her Truth Seeking Balls spun before merging into a purple orb. "Amethyst Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The lavender orb exploded into a storm of purple lightnings, spread in a cone towards Toneri's general area. The Otsutsuki tried to use his own Truth Seeking Balls to block Hinata's attack, but they were destroyed after taking a few lightning strikes, forcing the white haired man to flee from the incoming storm, dodging them as well as he could.

"I can use Truth Seeking Balls to nullify all your attacks," Hinata began. "But thanks to my Senjutsu, you can't do the same. Surrender already, Toneri. I just showed you you can't defeat me."

However, confidence quickly returned to the Otsutsuki, as so did that condescending grin he often had on his face, as he resummoned his eight Truth Seeking Balls.

"Please, you underestimate me. Yes, your new powers provide quite the obstacle to overcome," Toneri made a hand seal, and his black

orbs started to glow with a green light. "But any obstacle can be overcome with enough creativity. Emerald Reincarnation Explosion!"

The glowing green spheres launched forward, and Hinata prepared to block them, keeping her guard up just in case it's a distraction of a trick. And indeed, the flying orbs passed by her at high speed...

"What the...?" Hinata asked, as she directed her sight to her back.

... and saw that they were going straight towards the rest of the Moon Squad, which were flying away on Sai's ink birds.

"NO!"

Hinata quickly flew in the same direction, sending her own orbs to the green ones, making them detonate prematurely.

"Three... four... five.. six..." Hinata counted, as she intercepted the emerald orbs, making one last effort to destroy the last two before they could reach her friends.

However, something slammed into her back, sending her tumbling down. She then realized that it was Toneri who attacked her from behind. However, her mind wasn't on Toneri, but on the remaining Truth Seeking Balls that were about to detonate near the rest of the Moon Squad. That is, until another flash of green rose to intercept them.

"Senjutsu Susanoo!"

Shisui jumped from the bird he was sharing with one of the Hyugas, and formed his Susanoo as fast as possible. His drill spear appeared on the chakra construct's hand, and used it to destroy one of the two emerald orbs. The other detonated before it could be destroyed, forcing the Uchiha to use his Susanoo to shield the other from the incoming explosion. The explosion made the green chakra construct burst as if it were a balloon, sending Shisui flying backwards.

Fortunately, one of the ink birds flew towards him and caught him with its talons.

"Good job, Shisui-san! Nice save there!" Tokuma shouted.

"Thanks! But I doubt I'll be able to do that again! So we better move!" the Uchiha replied.

Toneri tried to attack them again, but was swatted away by a gigantic purple hand made of chakra, completely by surprise. Looking down, the Otsutsuki saw Hinata had projected a giant purple arm made of chakra from her palm. As the rest of the squad flew away, Hinata quickly recovered and placed herself between them and Toneri, so the white haired man couldn't harm them again. She fixed the Otsutsuki with an angry glare.

"So, you acknowledge that you can't beat me, so you go after my friends instead, and attack me from behind while I'm busy helping them," the Hyuga seethed. "And you wonder why I prefer Naruto-kun to you? He would never resort to such a despicable tactic in order to achieve victory."

"Everything's fair in love and war, my princess," Toneri said, unperturbed by the insult. He summoned more Truth Seeking Balls. He extended his hand at Hinata, making the orbs to spin around it. "Plus, I do have a way to bypass the protection of your Truth Seeking Balls as well. Silver Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The orbs merged into a silvery sphere, which exploded into a gigantic cone of wind that not only swallowed Hinata, but it continued advancing until it reached the rest of her teammates. Sai's ink birds burst into blots of ink, while everybody else screamed as they were flung away by the tornado.

" *I need to keep everybody close to me!*" Hinata desperately thought, as she projected two giant arms of chakra, which in turn split in two, grabbing several of her teammates, and using her

telekinetic powers to pull the ones she was unable to catch close to her.

The tornado flung the group towards the ground, with such power it drilled a hole, sending them -as well as many large rocks- outside it, landing on hard rock ground.

Thankfully, none of them were seriously hurt, and all of them were able to get back on their feet soon enough. They realized that they were no longer in the Moon, or better said, inside it, given that the brown soil and green vegetation was replaced by a vast, endless extension of gray rock. It wasn't as dark as before, as something was projecting light onto them. It didn't take them to realize what it was.

"Look at that!" an Hyuga kunoichi said.

Everybody looked up, and saw a dark blue sky filled with stars, as well as meteors that lazily floated around. And between all of them, the Earth in all its majesty.

"That's the Earth," Sai pointed out.

"Then we must be on the Moon's surface," Shisui's deduced. "Come on, we have to-"

"Watch out!"

Suddenly, some of the meteors floating above rained towards them, opening a crater and raising a huge cloud of some where they landed, forcing the Konoha ninjas to scatter in order to avoid being crushed.

Hinata's eyes scanned the area looking for Toneri, something she didn't take too long to given the potency of his chakra. Leaving a trail of dust behind, the Hyuga rocketed towards the Otsutsuki as fast as she could, delivering a palm strike the moment he was in close combat distance. Unlike the previous time, Toneri was able to block

and parry her attacks. Even if he was being pushed backwards, he was able to deliver a couple of counterattacks as well.

The two of them continued their aerial struggle. For any onlookers, it might look like a purple flame clashing and chasing a turquoise one, producing shockwaves and thunderclaps every time they crashed. However, there were intricate moves and skilled martial art blows being traded with each clash. Still, it could be garnered that the purple flame appeared to be the stronger party, as it constantly put the turquoise flame on the run.

From time to time, Hinata would generate a giant chakra arm in order to squash Toneri with, but after that first strike, Toneri learned to see those attacks coming and how to avoid them, much to the Hyuga's frustration.

"While admittedly hand to hand combat isn't my forte, we Otsutsuki are no strangers to the Gentle Fist," the white haired man said, smiling in a condescending manner, as he jumped back from a palm strike. "And I'm a very fast learner. You won't catch me off guard again."

Hinata delivered another palm strike, and projected yet again another giant arm of purple chakra. In a fraction of a second, Toneri sidestepped and rushed towards the apparently wide open Hinata, but that moment, the arm of chakra split into two arms of similar size, the second arm stopping Toneri in his tracks.

"I still have a few moves you haven't seen yet," Hinata told him, as both chakra arms retracted back into her body, while she merged her Truth Seeking Balls into a single purple sphere. "Try dodge this! Amethyst Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Toneri braced for the attack, but much to his surprise, Hinata threw the orb high into the sky, where it exploded into a mass of lightning bolts that quickly rained down upon him., forcing him to jump from one side to another constantly.

"Very clever, my princess," Toneri praised, his smile unwavering, much to Hinata's discomfort. She could tell the ground was starting to shake, as if something big was coming closer. "But I already have the perfect counter."

That moment, a gigantic stone statue of what appeared to be Hamura Otsutsuki emerged from behind a large rock formation. The statue was just the upper half of the body, and two grotesque oversized arms. Toneri was covered under the statue, which acted as a shield for the Otsutsuki. With every lightning bolt, the statue lost a chunk of rock and stone, but if Toneri was worried, he didn't show it.

"Hide behind that statue all you want. I'll destroy it and you won't have anything to use as a cover," Hinata said.

Toneri's smile widened, much to her frustration and worry. "Oh, that's where you are wrong, my dear princess. Observe."

And indeed, much to Hinata's shock, as if time was reversed, the pieces of rock that had been teared from the statue flew towards it, rebuilding the statue, looking almost as if it was never broken.

"Impressed? You should be," Toneri said, as he flew from under the statue. "Now go, my golem! Crush my enemies!"

The statue let out a deafening roar, before dragging its body forward, leaving a wide furrow behind. Hinata floated back, a little unsure of what to do. She was confident she could beat Toneri, but with that unkillable giant statue helping him, she wasn't so sure anymore. Still, defeat or surrender wasn't an option.

"I thought I didn't have to use this so soon, but guess I have no choice," Hinata solemnly said.

Hinata clapped her hands together, and focused her chakra into a single point, and molded it. After a few seconds, she spread her arms with her hands completely open, releasing all the chakra she has been manipulating.

At first, a pair of giant purple chakra arms projected from her palms, growing bigger as they moved, before they split in two as well. Similarly, giant chakra legs of the same color grew from her actual legs. The arms and the legs were soon connected by a torso that appeared from Hinata's body, and from the torso's upper part, a neck and a head formed.

While the body at first appeared to have a very generic form -four arms notwithstanding- it soon started to take shape. The legs and rear became a little curvier, as so did its chest. A long loincloth skirt formed around its pelvis, and extended down all the way to its ankles. An elegant top appeared around its chest. Vambraces formed around all four of its forearms, and leg guards appeared on its ankles.

Lastly, a female face that resembled an older version of Hinata appeared on its head, while long dark hair fell down her back. Two small horns grew on its forehead, while a headdress shaped like a fan with flowers around it formed on its head. Lastly, the humaioid construct opened its eyes, revealing two orbs of white-purplish light.

And floating inside its head, there was Hinata. She made a hand seal, and two shadow clones appeared besides her. They immediately sat in the lotus position, and like Shisui did before, began to collect nature energy and channel it through the chakra construct.

"Sage Art: Avatar of Kalika!"

The Avatar's feet touched the ground, producing a soft thud, and its four arms moved, adopting a fighting pose. After Hinata finally completed her ultimate jutsu, everybody, friend and foe alike, couldn't help but watch in awe at the sheer magnificence of the Hyuga Clan Head's chakra construct, which irradiated both power and beauty. It was still smaller than the Statue of Hamura, but big enough to be a match to it.

"Man... and here I thought that there was nothing like the Susanoo..." Shisui said, chuckling good naturedly.

"That giant avatar of chakra..." Tokuma began, narrowing his eyes at it. "It seems familiar. I swear I saw it somewhere, but I can't put my finger as of where..."

Wordlessly, Sai pulled out his sketchbook, and started to calmly flip its pages, until he found what he was looking for.

"That's because we did," the pale boy said, showing the picture to everybody.

Much to their shock, it was an almost perfect copy of the Avatar of Kalika.

"There were some statues like that in the temples we visited during our initial exploration," Sai explained. "And from what I could hear from the Moon Acolytes, they had some statues like that as well in their previous home."

"Yes, now I remember!" an Hyuga kunoichi said. "The Acolytes said that that's how Kalika was represented by the ancient Otsutsuki. They forgot what was the meaning behind the four arms and the horns. Now it's obvious those statues weren't of her specifically, but of her chakra avatar."

Toneri was also looking with his mouth agape at the Avatar of Kalika. After a few seconds, he was finally able to regain his composure, and ask a question.

"Just... what is that?" Toneri asked, unable to completely shake off the sense of amazement. "I studied all the knowledge my clan gathered about the Tenseigan, and no such thing was ever mentioned!"

"Because the Main House Otsutsuki made sure that no such knowledge fell on the wrong hands," Hinata replied. "Behold the

Avatar of Kalika, created by Hamura's eldest daughter as a way to counter Indra's Susanoo."

Toneri's condescending smirk returned to his face once more. "I must admit it's pretty impressive. But I have the same power as you do. I don't know how, but I'll figure a way to replicate that avatar."

"I find that unlikely. The Avatar of Kalika can only be created with Senjutsu chakra. Tenseigan or not, this is something you won't be able to do unless you master Senjutsu and become a Sage like I did," Hinata said. "And do you know who taught me Senjutsu?"

Toneri frowned a little, appearing uninterested. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

Hinata smirked widely, ready to savor this moment. "My boyfriend, Naruto Uzumaki, taught me how to become a Sage. It's thanks to him that I'm able to harness this power. That's one of the many, many ways that Naruto is superior to you."

Hinata could see the second Toneri snapped, his smirk disappearing, replaced by a snarl of fury, as a scowl developed on his face.

"I'm tired of hearing you talk about that boorish blond! I'm going to make sure that not only is he wiped out from the face of Earth, but that you won't even utter his despicable name ever again!" Toneri yelled, his blood boiling with rage. "Attack, my golem!"

The statue of Hamura let out a thunderous roar, and dragged itself towards Hinata, Toneri floating above it. Hinata commanded her avatar to move and meet the stone giant in the middle, its footsteps producing booming sounds.

Once it reached close combat distance, the statue lifted one of its massive arms and brought it down towards the Avatar of Kalika. Hinata motioned the Avatar to lift its two upper arms, and caught the stone arm before it could hit the chakra construct. Still, the force and

momentum of the arm pushed the Avatar back, which dug its feet into the ground to remain still. Hinata made several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Double Thunder Palm Strike!"

The hands of the Avatar's lower arms crackled with electricity, before it thrust them forward, hitting the statue in the face. There was a flash of purple lightning followed by a thunderclap, electric bolts flew everywhere, and the statue, its face cracked, was pushed skidding backwards.

Before the Avatar could move in order to continue the assault, a storm of green chakra projectiles rained upon the giant chakra construct. Directing her sight upwards, the Hyuga Clan Head saw Toneri floating above her, his hands aiming down, firing green blasts at her. Hinata could feel how the blasts were slowly but surely breaking the Avatar. She then send all her Truth Seeking Balls outside, and formed a dome above the Avatar, protecting it from the emerald assault. The dome wasn't big enough to protect the whole Avatar, but it did block most of the attacks.

Toneri smirked. "You fell in my trap."

The white haired man send his eight Truth Seeking Balls at the Avatar of Kalika, flying past the protective dome, placing them at several points of its body, before they detonated. The chain of explosions made the Avatar stumble backwards, as it was engulfed in several clouds of smoke. However, when the smoke of the explosions vanished, the Avatar only had superficial damage, which Hinata easily repaired by directing more Senjutsu chakra into it. Toneri's smirk vanished.

"Let me guess, you defeated Shisui-san's Susanoo with that attack, and expected the same result with me?" Hinata asked, smirking back at him.

"It was merely a test to see the durability of that Avatar of yours," Toneri replied. "Because make no mistake, sooner or later, I will

crack it."

"I'd like to see you try," Hinata replied, scowling at him.

"Is that an invitation, my dear?" Toneri said, as his smile returned to his lips. "Because I think I'm going to take it."

Ground vibrations alerted Hinata that the Statue of Hamura had already regenerated, and was once again charging towards her, its pace much faster than the first time. Toneri elevated above them, and made a hand seal. More asteroids were pulled from above them, and rained towards Hinata. The Hyuga made a couple hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Quad Lion Fists!"

The Avatar's hands clenched into fists, as they were engulfed by balls of amethyst fire. The fire-like chakra took the shape of lion heads, purple lightning crackling around it. Despite its colossal size, the Avatar of Kalika moved rather nimbly, causing small tremors with each step or jump it took to dodge the incoming meteors,, and smashing to pebbles the one it was unable to dodge with its lion-shaped chakra fists.

When the statue jumped at it, the Avatar used its building momentum to deliver such a devastating blow to its face, that the statue was shattered completely, breaking down into thousands of small rocks, scattered away by the shockwave created by the impact.

This time, Hinata was expecting for Toneri to attack while she was busy dealing with the statue. And indeed, she saw him merging his eight Truth Seeking Balls into a golden orb. But rather than the expected energy beam, the orb took the shape of an extremely long sword made of pure chakra. Toneri grabbed the newly created weapon, and brought it down.

"Golden Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

This time, Hinata was ready. She made the Avatar spin on its heels to meet the falling blade, and raising its upper arms -the lion chakra fists were still active- caught the blade before it could hit the Avatar's head. Hinata reflexively tried to counterattack with the construct's lower arms, but due the length of the golden sword, Toneri was too far away to reach him.

And she could see thousands of small rocks gathering and reforming into the shape of the Hamura statue. It didn't take long to realize what was Toneri's plan. As if he read her mind, he pushed down the golden sword with even more force.

"It seems that you're quite in a bind, my princess;" Toneri smugly said, as he watched how the Hamura statue reformed. "What do you plan to do to counter this tactic?"

"How about this?" Hinata asked. "After him!"

Suddenly, the clones that were channeling Senjutsu chakra opened their eyes, stood up, jumped out of the Avatar's head and rocketed towards Toneri.

"You can't use Truth Seeking Balls as long as you're using that jutsu!" the first clone said.

"You thought you made Hinata fell into a trap, but in the end it was her who trapped you!" the second clone said.

Toneri immediately dispelled the golden sword and attempted to resummon his black orbs, but the clones reached him before he could do it, and engaged him in yet another hand to hand duel.

Much to Toneri's frustration, these clones proved to be far more resilient and hard hitting than the ones he had fought before Hinata revealed her trump card. Then again, since Hinata had also reached a greater level of power, it was obvious that her clones would be stronger as well. At first, Toneri had been playing with what he believed to be the real Hinata and her two clones in order to test his

new strength. It was now when he realized that Hinata was also probing him as well.

These clones not only fought with increased vigor, but displayed a greater level of skill. One clone would attack, and when Toneri was about to prepare a counterattack, the clone would retreat and the second clone would strike. Even with the peripheral vision, it was increasingly hard to keep his attention on two targets that were so vicious. He attempted to resummon the Truth Seeking Balls, but was interrupted any time he tried to do it, the last one being particularly brutal.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Palm!"

One of the Hinata clones slammed her electrified palm into Toneri's face, sending the Otsutsuki hurling backwards.

"Heavenly Spin!"

The second clone, placed behind Toneri, began to spin mid air, turning into a rotating sphere of chakra the moment Toneri crashed into her. The force of the first strike grinded Toneri against the spinning sphere, before he was launched in the opposite direction. His flight was abruptly stopped when five giant purple fingers firmly wrapped around his body, leaving him completely immobilized.

"I got you," Hinata said, looking at Toneri trapped inside one of the Avatar's lower hands.

The Avatar turned around as the statue finished reforming, and her two clones returned to their original positions, resuming their gathering and channeling of nature energy. The statue let out yet another roar, as it charged forward.

"Tell that thing to stop and lie down!" Hinata shouted at Toneri.

"As long as I'm in danger, it will never stop attacking," Toneri replied.
"And neither will I."

Once again, lion-shaped chakra fists formed around the Avatar's upper hands, ready to welcome the stone monster with a devastating punch. However, the statue halted its charge midway, rose its arms, and slammed them into the ground with as much force as it could gather. The result was a violent quake, followed by multiple cracks quickly spreading towards the purple four armed giantess, throwing massive chunks of earth and stone forward.

While she was surprised by such maneuver, Hinata didn't falter, and made the Avatar destroy the stones raining upon it with powerful and precise punches. Still, it was unable to catch some of the smaller stones, which hit it with a surprisingly deceptive force despite its size. The giant chakra construct fumbled backwards, and for a brief moment, loosened its grip on Toneri.

That brief moment, however, was all what the Otsutsuki needed. He brought his hands together in the form of a hand seal, and his Tenseigan Chakra Cloak exploded in a gigantic blaze of turquoise fire, consuming the purple hand, leaving the white haired man once again free.

"No!" Hinata shouted, as she tried to catch Toneri again, but without being disoriented first, the Otsutsuki proved to be too fast for the lumbering chakra colossus, and easily evaded its hand.

The Hyuga Clan head was forced to direct her attention back to the Hamura statue, who was once again charging towards her, this time showing no intention of stopping. It lurched at the Avatar, which caught the golem mid air by its massive arms.

"Does this thing ever give up!?" a frustrated Hinata asked.

"No, it doesn't," Toneri replied, smiling in satisfaction, as he floated over the two of them. "This golem is something my family created to destroy the Main Otsutsuki Family, and it earned us a good share of victories. It used to be linked to the Energy Vessel, but since I absorbed it, the statue is now linked to me. It will fight tirelessly and without pause to defeat my enemies. No matter how many times you

destroy it, no matter how small are the bits you reduce it to, it will always rebuild itself to its original form."

"So you finally admit I'm your enemy, and not your lover who is in denial," Hinata said.

"I admit I was blinded by your beauty and kindness, but now I see we were never meant to be. I'm the last member of the Otsutsuki Branch Family. My ancestors, who sacrificed their eyes to power the Energy Vessel up, live now inside me. A Vessel that you destroyed. Because you, as the heiress of the Hyuga, the descendants of the disgraced Otsutsuki Main House, were destined to oppose me from the very beginning," Toneri said, shaking his head. "It was my heart's wish that we could have ended our ancestor's feud, but alas it wasn't mean to be."

"You're so wrong, Toneri," Hinata replied, as the Avatar and the statue pushed back and forth. "I'm not opposing you because of the past history of our families. I'm doing it because you want to destroy the very world I live in! I couldn't care less about past feuds of people long time dead!"

"You may think that, but that's because you fail to see the subtler nuances that lead to certain events happening. The hidden hand of fate," Toneri replied.

"I'm done hearing you ramble about fate," Hinata seethed. "Though since you like it so much, here's a prediction for you: your fate is to lose against me!"

Toneri chuckled in a condescending manner. "I find that unlikely. You can only beat me if you destroy my golem first. And the only way to permanently destroy it is to kill me. No matter your course of action, none of them shall lead to an outcome where you win."

"Then you may find yourself surprised at what's going to happen next," Hinata said, as her eyes fixed on the golem as well.

The Avatar, who was trying to push the golem back, pulled the rock monster towards it instead, much to Toneri's confusion. The purple four armed giantess spun to the side in order to avoid being slammed by the statue, and without letting the statue go and using the building momentum, spun the statue again, and again, and again, building more and more momentum. A tornado started to form around them.

"What... what are you going to do!?" Toneri asked, looking in shock and confusion at what Hinata was doing. He tried to get closer, but he was nearly smashed by the statue being spun, the blowback pushing him back.

The Avatar was spinning so fast while keeping the statue firmly held, they began to look like a purple and grayish brown blurry tornado. And then, the Avatar stopped all of sudden, and launched the statue into the dark sky above them. The golem roared, as it flailed its oversized arms trying to hopelessly get back to the Moon. However, the rock monster became smaller and smaller, until it could no longer be seen anymore, being lost forever in the vastness of space.

Needless to say, such display left all the onlookers speechless with their mouth agape. Toneri included. He opened his mouth to say something, but only incoherent noises came from it.

"And done. Because of the Moon's much lower gravity, I've been able to launch it much higher than if it we were on Earth. I might not be able to permanently destroy it, but I doubt it will be much of a bother now," Hinata said after the Avatar of Kalika stopped spinning. "Surrender now, or you might follow its fate."

"... you... you..." he began, stammering. "The statue of Hamura... how... how did you..."

Toneri didn't have time to dwell on his confusion and astonishment, as the Avatar of Kalika stomped its way towards him. He flew out of the way just in time to avoid being grabbed again. The current

situation snapped the Otsutsuki back to his senses, as rage began to overpower his fear and amazement.

"You surely want to take everything away from me, don't you?"
Toneri seethed as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"You want to take everything away from us," Hinata fired back. "You helped Akatsuki kill countless people, and many more that will die!"

"The world of the Sage of the Six Paths isn't worth saving. If the ninja nations weren't forced to join forces against a bigger threat, they'd continue trying to kill each other;" Toneri insisted.

"That's how you justify the blood of the innocents dripping your hands?" Hinata furiously retorted.

"They were doomed to die one way or another. Their deaths at our hands at the very least will pave the way for a better world."

"No world that needs the death of innocents to come into existence can be deemed as 'better' by any stretch of the imagination!" Hinata replied, as she started to make hand seals. "Sage Art: Lightning Release Divine Lightning!"

The Avatar aimed its upper hands at Toneri, and multitude of purple lightning bolts shot from each of its fingertips in a wide cone. Toneri, meanwhile, charged his Truth Seeking Balls with chakra, making them glow green, and started to spin them around himself as he moved, creating a makeshift shield that deflected the lightning bolts.

"The orbs alone might not be able to nullify your jutsu, but the rotation make them more effective at reflection," Toneri said with a smirk. "I thought about it when I remembered your Heavenly Spin. And that's not the only page I'm going to take from your book! Silver Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

Toneri's Truth Seeking Balls started to spin before merging into a silvery energy ring that exploded into a powerful tornado, swallowing

the Avatar of Kalika. Toneri started to move his hands upwards, making the tornado to change its angle so it faced upwards.

" He plans to hurl me into space like I did with his statue!"

Hinata quickly realized, as she commanded the Avatar to crouch and use its four hands to anchor itself to the ground. Still, the wind carried a lot of power, and slowly pushed the giant chakra construct back, threatening to lift it.

Thinking what she could do, Hinata sent her Truth Seeking Balls towards Toneri, but when they were almost caught in the massive wind vortex, Hinata was forced to recall them.

" What can I do? None of my attacks are fast enough to overcome a gale of this potency!" she thought in desperation, as the Avatar struggled to stay attached to the rocky ground. *"I'll need something faster than... than..."*

Suddenly, a realization hit Hinata. She reached her ninja tool pouch, and pulled out the collapsible chakra bow Tenten had given her.

"Yes, I think this might work," Hinata said, nodding to herself, as she unfolded the bow, the seals on it glowing to life, and generating a purple string made of chakra. Hinata pulled the string, generating a chakra arrow.

"A bow? Seriously? That's the best you can do?" Toneri loudly mocked, letting out a malicious laugh. "Perhaps you weren't as skilled and powerful as I had first thought, princess. Now disappear!"

Toneri increased the power of the wind. Cracks started to appear around the ground where the Avatar was grabbing, before the wind finally teared the ground the chakra giantess was attaching to, and was send flying into the sky This didn't leave Hinata much of a time window.

"Just one shot. But I know I can do it," Hinata said, as she narrowed her eyes. Then, she loosened the string, and two things happened.

The first one was that the arrow was released, and flew straight towards Toneri.

The second was Hinata's Truth Seeking Balls quickly merging into an amethyst orb of pure chakra, placing itself just in the pathway the arrow would take to reach Toneri.

The result was the arrow piercing the orb, and absorbing all its energy, turning into a purple arrow made of pure lightning, which carried enough speed to overcome Toneri's tornado and enough power to finally put an end to the last Otsutsuki.

It should be mentioned, though, that only somebody watching these events in slow motion would have been able to appreciate this string of events. For the onlookers, Toneri included, what it looked like was that Hinata's bow released a lightning bolt rather than an arrow at Toneri. The white haired man was unable to move in time, and the lightning arrow pierced his chest, slamming him against the ground, before it exploded in a storm of lavender lightning bolts.

Toneri let out a scream of pain, the very last sound that would leave his lips.

The tornado finally dispelled, allowing the Avatar to return to the Moon's surface. And after Hinata checked that no chakra came from Toneri's body, she finally allowed herself to dispel the clones gathering nature energy, as well as the Avatar. The Hyuga Clan Head floated herself to the ground, and once her feet touched it, she felt a wave of exhaustion course through her body, making her fall to her knees.

"Hinata!" she heard many voices yell her name before collapsing.

...

Sometime Later

When Hinata opened her eyes, darkness was all what she saw.

She was lying down. It took her some time to notice that she was inside a sleeping bag. Extending her hand and feeling her surroundings, she touched a sheet of tarp, making her realize she was inside a tent. She tried to get out of the sleeping bag. Her body felt numb, but thankfully not sore, so even if she wasn't moving as fast as nimble as she usually did, at the very least nothing hurt.

She wondered what could be outside, tempting to use the Tenseigan's enhanced vision to check her surroundings, but her dizziness dissuaded her from. Plus, her instincts told her that, given where she woke up, she must be among friends.

Pushing the tarp away and getting out of the tent, Hinata's vision was filled with bright orange, some some black blurry figures on it. As her eyesight adjusted, she realized that there was a campfire, with several torches lit around it. There were some people sitting around the campfire, but was unable to identify any of them.

"Hey look, Hinata-sama is finally awake!" she heard a voice that sounded like Tokuma's.

Soon, the Hyuga Clan Head was surrounded by many people: her fellow clansmen, Shisui, Sai, and much to her surprise, some members of the Moon Acolytes.

"Good to see you back on your feet, Hinata-sama. You were starting to worry us," a Hyuga kunoichi said.

"Are you feeling better?" a Moon Acolyte asked.

"Where are we?" the still disoriented Hinata asked. "And... what happened?"

"To answer your first question, we returned to the inside of the Moon," Shisui replied.

"We agreed it was better to bring you to a safer place so you could recuperate in peace. The surface of the Moon wouldn't do," Sai

added.

"And to answer your second question, after you finally ended that creep Toneri for good, you lost consciousness," Shisui continued. "We believe due to exhasution. Since you brought the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak to a whole new level, and used it on a pretty intense fight."

"I... I see..." she said, her mind slowly clearing. "How long have I been out?"

"It's a bit hard to tell given that the artificial sun is out, but I think that about two or three days," Shisui replied.

"Two days?" Hinata asked in shock. "And we're still here?"

"We discussed to make the return trip without waiting for you to wake up. But there were concerns that you might not survive the journey back home via the Gate Seal if you weren't rested enough," Nori intervened. "But don't worry, we haven't been wasting time while you were resting. The cave with the portal is not far away from here, so we can return to Earth as soon as we can."

"I see," Hinata said, shivering a little.. "What... what happened with Toneri."

"He's here," Shisui said, pulling a sealing scroll from under his flak jacket. "The forensics are going to have a field day making an autopsy to an actual Otsutsuki. Hokage-sama will be pleased with the secrets his body will reveal to us. Though," Shisui then pulled a second sealing scroll, and handed it to Hinata. "I believe this should be yours."

"Huh?"

"Those are his eyes. Or better said, your father's eyes," Shisui explained. Hinata's face was solemn. "For some reason, they turned back into normal Byakugan when we went to check his body."

Anyway, we heard you saying how you wanted to return your father's eyes to his grave, so there you go."

"Oh... thank you," Hinata said, putting the scroll inside her ninja tool pouch. "After so many years, my father will be able to rest in peace."

"Do you feel ready to return home, Hinata-sama?" Tokuma asked.

"Yes. I'm feeling a little numb, but I guess that's from all the time I spent sleeping," the blue haired young woman replied, hoping that that was the reason behind the numbness. "Hopefully I can shake it by moving it a little."

"Awesome. Everybody, pick up the camp! We're leaving!" Shisui said, clapping his hands twice.

Hinata shivered a little again. "Why it's so cold all of sudden? Or it's just me? Nights didn't used to be cold here."

"The artificial sun is no more," Nori told her. "Hence the temperature is slowly but surely dropping. That's why we had to set up so many torches, since there is no light either."

"Oh. That means that without light and heat, all the vegetation here is doomed to die," Hinata said with a tinge of sadness.

"There's nothing we can do about it," Nori said emphatically, shaking her head. "The Energy Vessel was what allowed living beings to exist in this place. And now that it's gone..."

"I know," Hinata nodded.

"I'll help the others packing the camp. You stay here and relax, we'll be home in no time."

Hinata nodded as she watched Nori walking away. She sat down cross legged, and closed her eyes. While she didn't plan to move anywhere, she wasn't going to relax. She could hear the noise made by her fellow ninjas as they packed up the camp and chattered

among each other. Their voices and noise began to muffle and lower, little by little until they could no longer be heard. Hinata then felt another presence with her, and that moment, she opened her eyes.

Once again, Hinata found herself inside of an ethereal looking temple made of fine purple stone. There was somebody there with her, though she wasn't aware of her surroundings just yet.

"Hello, Hanabi-chan," Hinata said.

"... huh? Oh!"

In front of her was a distracted and a bit confused Hanabi Hyuga.

"I hope it wasn't a bad moment," Hinata replied. "I could feel your chakra was at peace, but I might have been mistaken."

"No, it's fine. You didn't catch me in the middle of a battle or anything," the younger Hyuga said. "So, you're going to tell me that your mission was a success, right?"

"Yes. How did you guess that?"

Hanabi smirked. "Because there have been reports of all of Toneri's puppets suddenly going inactive. We all assumed it was you, because, well, what else could have happened?"

"Ah, true. Anyway, besides that, I wanted to tell you that there haven't been any casualties among my team. We'll be back on Earth soon," Hinata told Hanabi.

The younger sister beamed with joy. "That's awesome! Guess the mission went just peachy, right?"

"Eh, not as 'peachy' as you thought. Toneri was here, and proved to be quite the obstacle. In the end we managed to beat him, but it was quite the narrow victory," Hinata explained.

Hanabi's smile disappeared, replaced by a grimace of horror. "What!? That creep was there!? I thought he would be here with the rest of Akatsuki! Did he know that you were going there or something?"

"As a matter of fact, he did," Hinata replied. "He... he was listening to our conversation when you contacted me some days ago."

Hanabi's face fell. "How did he do that!?"

"Hanabi-chan, Hamura's chakra links the two of us. But Toneri also has such chakra, hence we were linked to him. That's how we were able to notice our conversation and eavesdrop it," Hinata explained.

Hanabi's palm slapped her face, as she groaned into her mouth.

"Oh, shit! Shit, shit, shit! I'm so fucking stupid!" Hanabi cursed, gritting her teeth in frustration. "I'm VERY sorry! I don't know what came over me, I swear I'm not usually this careless!"

"It's okay, Hanabi-chan. We're in the middle of a war, to not be able to think clearly. Everybody makes mistakes," Hinata reassured her little sister.

"No, it's not okay! This mistake could have costed you your life!" Hanabi insisted. "You said your victory against Toneri was a narrow one!"

"Yes, but in the end, we won. All's well what ends well. Don't fret about it anymore, okay?" Hinata said, smiling warmly at Hanabi. "I know you must feel bad with yourself, but that won't help anybody. You can keep this in mind if it helps you focus better and not make other mistakes with what's left of the war."

"Okay. I'll do that. Sorry again, though," Hanabi repeated, lowering her head.

"Plus, your blunder did have its good parts. For once, it managed to keep Toneri away from the war, and now he won't be able to harm anybody anymore," Hinata said.

"Guess that's a good thing," Hanabi admitted.

"Yes, and that's not the best part. Tell me Hanabi, have you used Sage Mode in battle?" Hinata asked.

Her little sister shook her head. "So far, I didn't find any enemy that merited such thing."

"Alright. See, during my time in the Moon, I've been studying a jutsu that combines Senjutsu with the Tenseigan Chakra Cloak," Hinata began to explain. "For starters, by using the power boost granted by Sage Mode, you can take the Chakra Cloak to the next level."

"Really? That's awesome! Had I know that, I would have used Sage Mode since the war had begun!" Hanabi excitedly said.

"It's not as easy as using the Cloak when you're in Sage Mode," Hinata said, as if reading Hanabi's mind. "You need to stay very still and concentrated in order to merge both modes, for they will refuse to become one."

"Hey, if you did it, that means it can be done, right?" Hanabi confidently replied. "But don't worry, I'll prepare while I'm not battling so I can have it down by the time the time to fight comes."

"Good," Hinata nodded in approval. "Lastly, I'm going to pass you this jutsu that will be very useful. You'll be able to use it once you reach the highest level of Tenseigan Chakra Cloak with Senjutsu. The name is Avatar of Kalika."

Hinata spent a couple hours explaining Hanabi the details of the jutsu. However, what were a couple hours in their shared mental dimension was only a few minutes in the real world. By the time she

snapped out of her trance, the others have already finished packing everything up.

"Ready to go, Hinata?" Shisui asked.

"Yes," Hinata said. "There's no time to waste."

And thus, the group made their journey back to Earth. Hinata was hoping that nothing bad would happen before her arrival, and that Hanabi wouldn't need to use the Avatar of Kalika. However, she was unable to shake a bad feeling off of her body, as if a threat even greater than Toneri or Obito was about to fall upon her friends and comrades.

She prayed such bad feeling didn't come to pass.

Author's Note: And thus, Hinata's character arc comes to an end. Toneri represented the complete opposite of all what Hinata stood and fought for, so his defeat at her hands made the more sense to me than being beaten like Naruto, as in canon.

Another thing I never liked about Toneri was how he was spared at the end (with Hinata even offering him to return with them to Earth. Like, what the fuck, girl? This guy kidnapped your sister, mindraped you into being his lover and attempted to commit planetary genocide. We all know you're pretty kind but everything has a limit). And after all the shit he did, both in this fic and in canon, he deserved to die. Besides, the series hardly did anything with him after that. So yeah, Toneri doesn't get to live here.

While I said that this is the end of Hinata's character arc, it doesn't mean that she isn't going to appear anymore. She will play a major role in the final arc, though it will be a few chapters until we see her return. She still can get a lot of mileage out of the Perfect Tenseigan Chakra Cloak and the Avatar of Kalika.

Speaking of which, now you know the meaning behind the statue with the horns and the four arms. I hope you liked it, because you'll see it more times once Hinata gets back to fighting.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Well, hope you enjoyed this chapter. As usual, make sure to leave your thoughts on it (or just say that you liked it if you don't feel like writing something long) in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Reinforcements Arrive

Author's Note: And now that the Moon mission is finally over, we return to Earth to see how the Alliance will respond to the First Division's defeat. Enjoy:

Chapter 114:

Reinforcements Arrive

or

Meeting Daddy Again

Land of Fire, shortly after the Tenseigan Energy Vessel was destroyed

After linking up with the Medical Division, the Second Division rushed through the forests of the Land of Fire in order to reunite with the A's First Division, who suffered a defeat at the hands of the Akatsuki army. The news that among those reanimated were Nagato, a Rinnegan bearer, and Fugaku Uchiha, a Mangekyo Sharingan bearer, sent the message that Akatsuki was done playing around, and that they would show their true power.

The charge was led from Tsunade on the ground, while Kurotsuchi was flying above them. Tsunade had ordered the rest of the medics to mingle with the ninjas of the Second Division, so they would be surrounded by people that could protect them at all times (the fact that tsunade didn't need to be protected was left unsaid, and nobody contested it). And for a certain pink haired medic, choosing her the ninja that would protect her wasn't a hard choice.

"It's good to fight together again, isn't it, Sasuke-kun?" Sakura asked Sasuke, smiling a little. "And not just the two of us. Karin and Shizune-sensei as well. The whole team fights together again!"

Karin was running behind them, giving the pinkette enough space to she could share a moment with her boyfriend before the impending battle. Shizune was a few rows behind her students. Still, Sasuke didn't appear to enjoy Sakura's company much, given the Uchiha's sour and silent mood, his onyx eyes aimlessly looking into the distance.

"Hn," was Sasuke's only reply. The Uchiha sounded even more sullen than usual. Something that Sakura did not appreciate.

"A grunt? That's all what you have to say at the chance of the two of us finally fighting together since this cursed war began?" Sakura angrily asked.

This seemed to snap Sasuke from his crestfallen trance, blinking a couple times, before looking at Sakura. He averted his gaze, looking somewhat ashamed. "I... sorry, Sakura. I didn't want to offend you. It's just that... I'm not in the best of moods right now."

"I have noticed. Wanna share it with me? If there's something bothering you, it's better if you take it outside your chest before the battle begins," the pinkette advised him.

After a pause, Sasuke nodded. "I don't know if you heard, but they said that one of the zombies in the army we're about to face is that of my father, Fugaku Uchiha."

Of course, that's all what Sakura needed to hear. She gasped, covering her mouth with her hands in horror. "Oh my goodness! No wonder you're behaving like that! I'm so sorry, that was super insensitive of my part!"

"It's okay. Only the higher ups were aware of the details of the First Division's defeat," Sasuke said.

Such contradiction was immediately caught by the medic kunoichi. "Only the higher ups? Then how do you know it?"

"Because Itachi and I have been tasked with taking our father down. Since we both have Mangekyo Sharingan and Susanoo, they think we're the better suited to deal with him," Sasuke explained. "Not that I like it, but I can see their logic."

"Why don't they let Tsunade-sama fight him? With her Rinnegan she could defeat Fugaku easily."

"Because Tsunade-sama has been tasked with an even bigger threat: Nagato, the former Akatsuki leader, has been revived as well," Sasuke replied.

"Nagato too?" Sakura asked in shock. "Well, in hindsight, it was obvious that he would be among those reanimated. Between him and your father, no wonder the First Division lost. Given the number he made on Konoha, I hope Tsunade-sama is able to deal with him swiftly."

"Me too. Maybe then she can come by and give us a hand with our father," Sasuke dourly noted. "Even if I hate the idea of depending on a single person to save us all the time."

"I might not be Tsunade-sama, but I'll be there for you-"

"No," Sasuke cut her, much to her surprise. "No offense, but if what I heard is true, you won't be able to help us much against our father. And I can't fight and protect you at the same time. I need all my focus for this fight, and that can only happen if I know you're away from him or Nagato."

Sakura opened her mouth, ready to protest. To claim that she was no damsel in distress that needed to be coddled. However, she was able to pick that Sasuke was having a lot of trouble staying focused given who he was going to fight, and he didn't need having to worry about her on top of that. So Sakura chose to swallow her pride.

"It's okay, Sasuke-kun. I'll make sure not to get in the way of your fight," Sakura replied.

For a brief moment, Sakura thought she saw Sasuke's lips curving into a smile.

"Thanks. I'm glad you understand," Sasuke said, nodding. "I promise we'll fight together once this is dealt with."

"Guys, get ready," Karin, who had been silent all this time, spoke for the first time. "I'm sensing a lot of chakras in turmoil a few hundred meters ahead. We're approaching the First Division and the Akatsuki army."

Her two teammates nodded, and mentally prepared to enter the battlefield.

...

From her vantage point in the sky, Kurotsuchi had a perfect view of the battleground before her. Patches of multiple colors mixed with white patches, as flashes of orange, blue and white crossed the battlefield as jutsu were traded between enemies, the earth cracking, craters being opened in the ground, and unfortunate trees being taken down as collateral damage.

While it was impossible to tell apart one ninja from another, it was easy to identify some people by the sheer destruction they were causing. She easily recognized a white blur blitzing through a mass of White Zetsu as her fellow Kage A. Among the reanimations, the two that HQ had warned them about were easy to spot: a large black skeletal figure cutting a swath of destruction among the allied ninjas revealed Fugaku Uchiha's position. And a large group of allied ninjas being blown into the air as if they were ants carried by the wind told her where Nagato was.

"Well, there they are," Kurotsuchi said, as she tapped her earpiece. "Tsunade, do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Tsuchikage. Did you find our targets?" Tsunade's voice replied.

"Yep. Fugaku Uchiha is on the top left flank. Though I'm sure you'll be able to see it once you get closer to the battlefield," Kurotsuchi said. "And Nagato is on the center on the battlefield, currently moving towards the bottom left."

"Got it. Any other targets of interest?" Tsunade asked.

Kurotsuchi took another glance at the battlefield, to see if there were other targets that merited a quick termination, when she saw several greenish-yellow projectiles flying towards her from the ground.

"SHIT!" she yelled, as her hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Kurotsuchi exhaled a wide stream of fire that quickly incinerated the corrosive projectiles aimed at her. Looking down, she saw what she believed were Sniper Zetsu, taking aim at her.

"Kurotsuchi? Kurotsuchi!" Tsunade yelled. "Everything's okay? I saw what you did!"

"Some asshole Sniper Zetsu wanting to bring me down. Better take care of them before they become a bigger hassle," Kurotsuchi said, as she flew down.

"Understood. We're going to enter and join the main group," Tsunade said.

...

Back on the ground, while still on the move, Tsunade addressed the troops.

"Alright everyone, we're about to link with the First Division! I want you to spread, find whoever's having trouble, and help them! Once they're safe, push back, understood?" she yelled, not waiting for a response. "There are two targets, both reanimations, that have been deemed as critical: the first one is Nagato Uzumaki, Akatsuki's

former leader. I will face him down myself, and I'll try to push him away from the main group to reduce collateral damage. I don't want to see anybody that's not a Kage getting close to our fight, understood? If I'm overwhelmed and need help, I'll ask for it!

"The second target is Fugaku Uchiha. This one has been tasked to Itachi and Sasuke Uchiha to deal with. Again, don't provide any unsolicited assistance, wait for them to ask for help should they need any, or else you might get in the way."

Sasuke felt a bit uneasy upon hearing that. It's not that she said that they were on their own, but the message that taking Fugaku down depended on them was clear.

"That's all. Stay frosty, and do your best!" Tsunade finished.

Soon, the Second and Medical Divisions reached the first, joining the ensuing battle. There were many group of allies ninjas fighting White Zetsu and reanimations, most of them losing. Sasuke felt the urge to help a nearby group with Itachi appeared besides him.

"Everybody have their mission, and we have ours," Itachi said.
"Follow me, I have located Father."

A knot formed on Sasuke's stomach upon hearing those words, but remained silent and followed his brother's lead. Said knot became tighter and tighter as they crossed the battlefield, ignoring the many fights happening around them, until Sasuke's Sharingan caught sight of a man he hadn't seen in almost half his life.

There he was, Fugaku Uchiha., in the middle of breaking an Iwa ninja's neck. A Konoha ninja tried to flank him, but Fugaku turned around and made eye contact. The poor Konoha ninja was paralyzed as the Sharingan Genjutsu took hold of him, his life ending shortly after Fugaku jammed a kunai onto the poor guy's neck.

The deaths happening in front of him allowed Sasuke to push his feelings for his reanimated father aside, at least for the time being,

and answer the call to action. He made several hand seals before taking a few shuriken from his ninja tool pouch, and after imbuing them with lightning chakra, tossed them at his father.

Fugaku noticed the attack, his eyes widening upon seeing where the electrified steel stars came from. Still, despite being startled, his body reacted on his own, deflecting or dodging most of the shuriken, with one of them scratching his cheek.

"Scattering Crows Jutsu!"

Suddenly, black filled Fugaku's vision as a dozen crows flocked around him, cawing angrily and pecking him. Despite the pain and his obstructed vision, he was still able to grab Itachi by the wrist before he was about to slap an explosive tag on his back, and hurled him at Sasuke before the younger Uchiha could assist his older brother. Fortunately, both Sasuke and Itachi managed to get back on their feet just before Fugaku got rid of the crows.

"Guess I was being too hopeful thinking that would work and we could end this fight quickly," Itachi muttered, mildly frustrated.

"Trust me, nothing would make me happier," Sasuke bitterly agreed.

Once Fugaku finally recovered, he turned at the Uchiha brothers, his expression still surprised.

"Itachi. And... Sasuke, is that you?" Fugaku asked. "My, you have grown so much..."

"I guess I did," was all what Sasuke thought to say in response.

"I'm glad that you see that you two are still alive and well," Fugaku sincerely said. "I saw many of our clansmen reanimated by that lowly snake. I was told that besides you two, only Shisui survived."

"That's correct," Itachi replied. "For a time, between him and the two of us were the whole Uchiha clan."

Fugaku looked disheartened. "Three people... our once mighty clan... reduced to three members."

A scowl developed on Sasuke's face. "Yeah, and there's nobody to blame but you. You led our clan to its self destruction!"

Fugaku's expression wilted under Sasuke's glare. "I guess I did. I'd say I'm sorry, but nothing that I say or do will undo such a costly mistake. Worse, I'm forced to end even more innocent lives for the sake of another man's ambition."

"And just like eight years ago, it will be me who will have to put you down for good," Itachi said.

"It will be us," Sasuke corrected, as he took a step forward.

"Before we begin, a question," Fugaku said. "I have been told this already, but I need to hear it from your mouths. Itachi, given that you killed me, I presume you have the Mangekyo Sharingan?"

"Your guess is right," Itachi said. "That's why we were tasked to fight you."

"You too, Sasuke?"

The youngest Uchiha didn't say anything, just looked to the side.

"Good," Fugaku said, as his own Sharingan morphed. "Otherwise, I doubt you'd stand a chance against me then."

...

"Ningendo!"

With a swift hand move, Nagato pulled the soul out of the unfortunate Kiri ninja's body, and let it go, killing it instantly, before casually tossing the corpse aside. He turned around, and looked at the rest of his foes, keeping their distance and fighting stance, but clearly too scared to attack the redhead after what they just saw.

"If you don't plan to attack me, then I suggest you to go away and fight somebody else," Nagato advised them.

"W-We can't do that man!" a ninja from Ame replied, trying to keep the stutter out of his voice. "We can't just win this war by running away from our enemies!"

"But can you win it by dying pointlessly against an enemy that outmatches you?" Nagato asked, as he raised an arm. Said arm opened multiple compartments up, each holding a missile, before firing them forward.

The Allied ninjas braced for the worst.

"Shinra Tensei!"

A shockwave seemingly out of nowhere pushed the incoming missiles back, and still had enough force to do the same with Nagato, who was able to stay on his feet. A newcomer landed between Nagato and his opponents with a loud crash, raising a small cloud of dust and dirt.

"Stand back, I'll take care of this guy," the newcomer, Tsunade, ordered the other ninjas. "And tell the others to not to get close to us until I request for help!"

"Understood, Tsunade-sama!" a Konoha ninja said, unconsciously making a head bow, before turning at his comrades. "You heard her, guys! Let's find somebody else to fight!"

Nobody made any objections, and leaped away, leaving the Slug Sannin alone with the former Akatsuki leader.

"So, Nagato," Tsunade began. "We meet again. Far too soon after our last encounter, if you ask me."

"I'm not here out of my own free will, you know," the Uzumaki replied. "Given what you just did... I assume you have one of my eyes under

that patch?"

"Did you expect that we weren't going to use your eyes against Akatsuki? Even if I didn't get this eye on a whim, it's an invaluable tool in a fight against Akatsuki," Tsunade explained.

"And the other?"

"Unfortunately, your pal Obito, with some internal help, snatched it," Tsunade said. "We wanted to summon the Demonic Statue and force it to throw the Tailed Beasts up, but the Uchiha bastard bonded with the Statue first."

"Hence this war," Nagato said, nodding. "What about Konan? Is she okay?"

"The girl's fine, kid. She's fighting alongside us. You know, to make up for her past crimes and all that. Time will tell if it's enough or not," Tsunade replied.

Nagato was going to say something, but his body suddenly stiffened for a second, before he started making hand seals. "Tsunade, watch out! Summoning Jutsu!"

Nagato slammed his palm into the ground, producing a large burst of smoke, and from the smoke, a giant ox with Rinnegan eyes emerged, charging at the blond Sannin while letting out a loud moo. The giant bovine lowered its head, trying to gore the Slug Princess with its horns. The Sannin, however, caught the animal by its horns, and using her monstrous strength, stopped it on its tracks.

"Summoning Jutsu! Summoning Jutsu! Summoning Jutsu! Summoning Jutsu!"

Nagato was covered by several bursts of smoke, as he summoned the giant multi headed dog, a giant panda, a giant centipede, and a giant chameleon with a snake for a tail.

"SHIT!" Tsunade cursed. *"He's going to summon every possible animal linked to the Rinnegan so I can't summon any! I need to summon some myself!"*

Gathering her strength, Tsunade pushed the charging ox backwards while she jumped in the opposite direction, biting her thumb and making five hand seals as fast as her hands allowed her to.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

She felt how a giant rhino was summoned to her presence.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

A giant bird with a large, jagged beak and deformed limbs took off to the sky.

"Summoning jutsu!"

An gigantic lobster came to her aid.

She stopped, feeling that there were no more animals she could call. From the Rinnegan's summoning ability, at least. She still had the slugs, but she didn't want to summon Katsuyu until she had no other options.

"Good job, Tsunade," Nagato praised, even if his voice was stoic and unemotive. "It would have been a shame if you let me summon all the animals of the Rinnegan."

With a wave of his hand, Nagato commanded his summoned creatures to attack, Tsunade doing the same. The rhino clashed against the ox in a duel of horns, the centipede engaged in a fight with the giant bird, and the panda went to face the lobster. Which left the multi headed dog and the chameleon with no one to fight but Tsunade herself, and launched themselves at her.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Tsunade cast a hand forward, releasing a powerful shockwave at the two incoming animals, pushing them backwards, toppling every tree they hit as they stumbled back. She then launched herself at Nagato, and reared her fist back.

"Shinra Tensei!"

This time, it was Tsunade who found herself at the receiving end of a gravitational blast, and was lunged backwards as if she was a fly being swatted away by a gigantic hand. Still, she managed not to lose her balance and land on her feet, skidding across the grass, leaving two furrows on the ground while raising a cloud of grinded dust and blades of grass.

The Sannin was thinking about her next move when all of sudden, Nagato was besides her, looking at her with a stony expression. He then grew two additional pair of arms and used them to immobilize the Sannin.

"I hope you can break out of this hold, because you can imagine what I'm going to do now," Nagato said, as he moved one of his original hands towards Tsunade's head.

Tsunade, however, wasn't afraid. "An impressive hold, indeed. Too bad I have the perfect counter."

And just like Nagato did, Tsunade also grew two additional pair of arms, which she used to break Nagato's hold. The Uzumaki wisely jumped backwards before the Slug Princess had the chance to hit him in close quarters.

"Hmph. Thanks to both having the Rinnegan, the two of us have the same ability. We seem to be at an impasse," Nagato observed.

"Then again, I do have the advantage of experience with the Rinnegan, not to mention a body that doesn't get tired or run out of chakra."

"And I have more experience in general by virtue of being a couple decades older than you are," Tsunade rebutted. "Not to mention all the abilities I have that aren't related to the Rinnegan."

"Let's hope that will be enough to put me down for good, Tsunade. I don't wish to continue fighting for a cause I don't believe for. Enough innocents have died by my hand."

...

"TAKE THIS!"

Sakura delivered a combo of a straight punch and a roundhouse kick towards a trio of Zetsu clones that leaped at her, resulting in them being sent away flying.

"Sakura-san, be careful to your left! One is going to ambush you from underground!" Neji, fighting other Zetsu near her, warned.

And indeed, Sakura felt light tremors on the ground, before another White Zetsu clone burst from underground, his fingers extended as claws ready to eviscerate her. The pinkette, however, was ready and smashed the brass knuckles she was wielding into his face, blowing his head up into multiple chunks of white flesh.

"Thanks a lot!" Sakura told Neji, flashing a quick smile. "So, how are they doing?"

Neji's aimed his vision to his back, where Shizune and Karin were. The two women were sitting on the floor, with her legs crossed and eyes closed, and a bunch of clones around them, acting as bodyguards, preventing the Zetsu from getting close, just like Sakura and Neji were doing as well. The Hyuga prodigy could see the nature energy being drawn into their bodies, mixing with their chakra.

"I say they're still halfway done," Neji told her, as he stabbed his two fingers into the side of a Zetsu clone, before slamming his palm into his face.

Sakura groaned. "Just lovely."

Unfortunately for the two young Sages, Naruto's method of creating two clones and sending them away wouldn't work here. With so many battles taking place across a vast battlefield, there were no places where they could hide a clone without being attacked by a White Zetsu or a reanimation. So they had no choice but gather nature energy themselves in the middle of the battle, and let some clones and their comrades protect them until they were done.

This made protecting them an extra hard job, since not only they couldn't be harmed, they couldn't even be disturbed. Plus the defenders didn't have space to fall back to if they were pushed back by the enemy.

While Sakura and Neji protected them from the front and the clones from the flanks, Lee, Tenten and Gai were protecting them from the rear guard.

"Watch out, a big one incoming!" Neji warned again.

Sakura felt the ground rumble before seeing a Zetsu Brute charging at them, tossing friends and foe alike to the sides if they were caught in his way.

"Yeah, hard to not see that one coming," Sakura said, taking a step forward. "I'll meet him headlong."

"YOU'RE DEAD!" the giant Zetsu hollered.

Sakura merely smirked, as she made several hand seals. "Earth Release: Mud Trap!"

The ground in front of the Zetsu Brute turned into a patch of brea, and the moment the large creature brought one of its feet down, it was stuck there, followed by the other. The giant creature struggled trying to get his legs out of the sucking mud. However, while he did

that, he didn't notice Sakura rushing at him, her fist rearing backwards.

"Huh?"

"I think what you wanted to say it's 'I'm dead'," Sakura said, before smashing her fist into the chest of the monster, blowing a hole and sending it flying backwards out of the mud trap.

Far from being intimidated, two more Zetsu brutes charged towards Sakura and Neji, letting out roars of anger in an attempt to intimidate their opponents. Sakura weaved the same sequence of hand seals she did before.

"Earth Release: Mud Trap!"

This time, the pinkette poured more chakra into the jutsu, creating a pool of mud much larger than before. Despite this, the giant Zetsu anticipated Sakura's move and leaped above the trap of brea, landing on the ground with a loud thud, before resuming their charge, one of them reaching the pinkette before the other.

"Die, Konoha scum!" one Zetsu brute said, raising his arm above her. "Wood Release: Thorn Hammer!"

Wooden spikes grew on the Zetsu's large forearm before he brought it down. Sakura, who was ready to block the attack, was forced to jump back instead, let she be shredded by the spikes. The hit opened a crater on the ground, sending small rocks and pebbles in every direction.

"Shit, this guys give the impression of being all muscle and no brains, but they can catch you off guard if you aren't focused, and have access to a lot of elemental jutsu," Sakura inwardly cursed, as she landed on her feet. And much to her horror, she saw the second mutant Zetsu charging at her. "Shit!"

"Eight Trigrams: Palm Spear!"

A blue and green blur dashed in front of Sakura, and saw Neji leaping at the Zetsu Brute and slamming his palm into his face with so much force, not only it broke his momentum, but it pushed him backwards.

"Nice save," Sakura thanked Neji. "A new move?"

"Yes. It uses the speed granted by the Celestial Gates to add more power to a palm strike. Simple in concept, yet effective in results," Neji said.

"Not as effective as it may seem," Sakura said, looking at the Zetsu, holding his face in pain, but not looking that worse to wear.

"Guess I still need to polish it," Neji said, as he narrowed his eyes at the two giant Zetsu.

"And done!" Shizune said from behind. The leader of the Medical Squad jumped to her feet, and slipped into a battle stance. Her eyes were golden instead of the usual onyx, and had pink fang-like marks running down her cheeks.

"Oh, thank goodness," Sakura said in relief. "Now we only need to protect Karin until she's done."

"Good job, guys, let me handle this," Shizune said, as she took a step forward. "Focus on making sure Karin's unperturbed."

"Understood, Shizune-sensei!" Sakura said, as she and Neji jumped back.

The Zetsu Brute Neji had struck his face had already recovered, joining his partner as the two of them stomped towards Shizune. The medic-nin's confident stance didn't go unnoticed to either of them.

"So, you think you can beat us on your own?" one of the Brutes said. "Don't make us laugh!"

"You know, it's not wise to underestimate an opponent," Shizune told them.

"You're the one who's underestimating us!" one of the Zetsu said, as both arms started to grow wooden spikes. "Wood Release: Thorn Hammer!"

Unlike Sakura, Shizune didn't move, and raised her hands to block the hit, expertly grabbing one of the spikes on each hand in order to stop the attack. The black haired woman was pushed backwards a little, but otherwise the attack had no effect on her. The giant Zetsu's ugly face grimaced in anger upon realizing that this small woman was his equal in strength.

"What the...?" he asked.

Shizune smirked. "You aren't familiar with Sage Mode, are you? One of its perks is enhanced strength. I may not be as strong as Tsunade-sama, but I'm not that far from her. But guess the hardened skin makes up for it. And another thing... !"

The earth rumbled as the other giant Zetsu, displaying a deceptively high level of speed, flanked the black haired Sage and tried to smash her. But as he got close, Shizune spun the Zetsu in the direction the second one came, slamming him against the other.

"... is that Sage Mode grants me sensing abilities, so you won't be able to catch me by surprise," Shizune said, wiping her hands, before making several hand seals. "Now, let's see how do you like senjutsu-enhanced elemental ninjutsu! Sage Art: Water Release, Water Exploding Gun!"

Shizune aimed her index fingers at each of the Zetsu Brute, and fired a small water bullet from each of them. The bullets embedded itself into the Zetsus' bodies, before they exploded into a massive torrent of water, destroying the artificial creatures from the inside out.

"Wow!" Shizune beamed, looking at the result of her jutsu. "It's even better than I even expected!"

...

On one of the highest branches of one of the highest trees of the battlefield, a spiraling portal appeared, Obito emerging out of it. That branch was the perfect vantage point to oversee the battle. So far, it appeared to be pretty even, with no side winning ground over the other. Then again, he could see some battles where the Alliance was clearly winning. It could snowball into a defeat for Akatsuki.

Of course, not if Obito had anything to say about it. He dropped down to ground level, and pulled a scroll from under his robes.

"Alright, Madara, you always loved to talk about this shit back in the day. Let's see if it's as strong as you claimed it was," Obito said, as he unfurled the scroll on the ground, revealing a circle made of seals. He made several hand seals, and slammed his palm inside the circle.

The seals began to glow, and the ground around him began to shake.

...

Gai, Lee and Tenten continued protecting Karin by keeping the incoming enemies at bay. So far, none of them proved to be much of a match for the members of the Close Combat Squad.

"Okay, I'm done!" Karin said, jumped on her feet. Her normally red eyes were now golden, with spiral-shaped red marks around them.

"Excellent! That will give us more freedom of movement!" Tenten said. "It's kind of annoying having to stay in the same place all the time."

"Yeah, thank you guys for covering my back! Don't worry, I'm now ready to return the favor, and then some! Let's find an opponent worthy of-" Karin suddenly shut up, as her face grew pale.

"Karin?" Neji asked, walking to her girlfriend. "Is everything okay?"

"A MASSIVE amount of chakra is gathering in that direction!" Karin said, pointing to zone of the forest at the far end of the battlefield.

Neji activated his Byakugan, and directed his sight into the direction Karin pointed. He was also taken aback by what he saw.

"Hey, Neji, Karin? What did you guys find?" Tenten asked.

Suddenly, the ground started to shake, and the trees in the zone Karin had pointed out went down like dominoes, and from the forest, a gigantic creature emerged, probably fifty meters tall. It was humanoid, with the appearance of an ogre, and looked to be made of green wood. Coiled around it was a serpentine dragon, made of the same material. The wood giant began to advance towards them.

"What... what the hell is that!?" Tenten screamed.

"A Wood Giant," was Gai's response, his eyes fixed on the incoming green colossus.

"You... you saw that thing before, sensei?" Lee asked.

Gai shook his head. "Not seen one, but heard about it. One of the First Hokage's most powerful jutsu. It was able to match Madara's Susanoo."

"Wait... does that mean that the reanimated First Hokage is here!?" Lee asked in shock, looking around.

Karin closed her eyes, and expanded her senses. With Sage Mode, her sensing ability was even greater than before, and in no time she was able to scan the entire battleground, as well as several square

kilometers worth of area around it. Her analysis done, she shook her head.

"I tried to locate a source of chakra similar to that monster, but I didn't find any," Karin explained. "That thing appeared on its own."

"Well, that's a relief. But let not drop our guards, it could be a trap," Neji reminded them.

"We need to fetch Tsunade-sama. I'm sure she'll be able to deal with this monster in no time," Tenten suggested.

"I don't think that's going to be an option," Karin replied. "I'm sensing her right now. She doesn't seem to be close to done with Nagato. By the time she's done, Kami knows how much death and destruction that thing can cause."

"Well, it's a good thing we have you, Karin-san," Lee said, smiling.

"Yeah, it's a good- wait, what?" she asked, turning at him in puzzlement, and a little dread. "Why do you say that?"

"You're a Sage, right? You must now possess a power beyond any normal ninja. Thanks to Sage Mode, Naruto was able to defeat the Fourth Mizukage and Pain. I'm sure you'll be able to beat that creature!" Lee said, sounding naively encouraging.

Karin looked at the incoming monster, and grimaced. Even with Sage Mode, she doubted she could beat such a powerful foe. She then felt a hand being placed on her shoulder.

"What my teammate failed to tell you is that, while we hope your new power will be instrumental in bringing that creature down, we will fight alongside you," Neji's voice reassured. "Nobody expects you to go against that thing alone."

Karin looked at her boyfriend, nodded and smiled, her confidence restored a little. "Alright, let's go then!"

...

"Okuninushi!"

Fugaku Uchiha's body rippled and flickered briefly in a surreal way, before dashing forward, delivering an horizontal wide swipe with his katana at his two sons. The four negative afterimages going after him mimicked his move, but delivered the swing from different angles and positions, resulting in a storm of brutal swipes that the Uchiha brother were barely able to block.

"So that's Okuninushi," Sasuke said, as he thought in a way to counter such a powerful ability. "Shisui wasn't exaggerating, it turns normal attacks into deadly blows."

"Shisui? How does he know about this jutsu?" Fugaku asked, confused. However, the answer soon popped in his mind. "Wait, Asuma told me Danzo had looted my eyes. I presume Shisui fought against him?"

"Yes, Gai and Shisui fought against him, and used such ability to great effect," Itachi explained.

"Did they defeat the bastard?" Fugaku asked.

"Danzo is indeed dead, if that's what you want to know," Itachi replied. "Too bad they didn't find a way to overcome that jutsu."

Fugaku was about to say something, when his expression went from angry to worried and surprised. "Itachi, Sasuke, watch out!" Fugaku warned, as his hands started to fly through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Fugaku exhaled a fireball at the Uchiha brothers, which dodged it by quickly sidestepping in opposite directions. However, the afterimages also exhaled more fireballs at them, forcing the two younger Uchiha into the run. Sasuke hid behind a tree, while Itachi used a nearby

boulder as cover. Explosions reverberated around them as fire spread among the forest.

"Itachi!" Sasuke yelled, as he started to make hand seals. "Let's end this fight the same way we defeated the guy with the Plasma Release! Fire Release: Burning Edge! Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Sasuke unsheathed his katana and shoto at the same time, the former being covered in flames, the latter crackling with electricity. He then jumped out of his hiding spot, and dashed towards Fugaku.

"Sasuke, no! Wait!" Itachi cried.

But Sasuke was already charging headfirst towards his undead father. Fugaku merely made more hand seals.

"Fire Release: Greater Firewave!"

Fugaku and his afterimages exhaled conical streams of fire from their mouths, which quickly merged with each other, forming an advancing wall of flames, charring the earth below, quickly engulfed Sasuke between the flames.

"Sasuke!" Itachi yelled, trying to frantically find his brother.

Much to Itachi's relief, when the flames died down there was a burned log where Sasuke had been. And Sasuke was now behind Fugaku, ready to strike his back with two elemental weapons. However, two of Fugaku's afterimages turned around and parried the attacks just in time, before a third one tried to strike the youngest Uchiha. Sasuke, however, was able to dodge it and jump backwards.

"Nice one, son. You managed to slip past my guard and attack me from behind. And using two elements at once isn't something people without the proper Bloodline Limit are able to do," Fugaku praised. "You certainly grew into a very skilled and powerful ninja. I wish I was able to see your potential before."

"Would seeing my potential would have changed your mind regarding your idiotic insurrection?" Sasuke sneered at him, his Sharingan flashing with anger.

Fugaku visibly saddened. "No. I don't think it would have. I was blind back then."

"There was a time in which there was nothing I would have wanted more than finally being acknowledged by you, father. Being worthy of the name Uchiha," Sasuke said, tightly gripping his weapons. "But now, even being the best of the Uchiha means nothing."

Whirring noises alerted Fugaku of the shuriken flying at him. The former Uchiha patriarch easily deflected them with the help of his afterimages. Sasuke saw the perfect opportunity to attack.

"Double Elemental Release: Plasma Beam!"

Crossing his flaming katana with his electric shoto, Sasuke fired a beam of flames coated in electricity at Fugaku. The Uchiha father jumped away, and the beam hit the spot where he was standing, resulting in a large explosion. Even if he managed to avoid said explosion, two of his afterimages were destroyed in it.

"Good job, Sasuke! If what Shisui told me also applies here, it will take him some time to replace the lost afterimages!" Itachi said, as he moved to attack as well. "Meaning that now's the time to strike!"

"I'm afraid you won't have the chance," Fugaku said, as he was surrounded by a large black spectral ribcage, which expanded into the upper half of a large skeleton, followed by said skeleton being covered in muscle, then skin, and lastly an armor of some kind. Two blades appeared on each the chakra construct's hands.

"Susanoo already? Well, I wasn't expecting this to be easy," Itachi said, as he replied in kind, his red Susanoo forming around him. He did notice, however, that Sasuke hadn't activated his. "Sasuke?"

"I'm... okay, just give me a second!" Sasuke replied, sounding doubtful, flinching as his purple Susanoo started to form.

"He hasn't overcome the visions yet," Itachi realized. "But sadly, we don't have the luxury to fall back on other jutsu. The few things that can beat a Susanoo is another Susanoo! Please Sasuke, stay strong! This will end soon, I promise,"

...

As the green colossus advanced, Allied ninjas fled from it, lest them be crushed under the wood giant. Unfortunately, some of them weren't fast enough and were trampled by the wooden construct, as well as many White Zetsu clones. Though, while some ninjas fled, others tried to slow down the gigantic monster with their elemental ninjutsu.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

"Lightning Release: Thunder Spear!"

Fire bolts, powerful water blasts, lightning bolts, boulders and blades of wind flew towards the wooden giant, chipping away small bits and pieces of its body, but so far it didn't appear to make much damage to its body. The creature seemed to notice the ninjas below it, as it looked down at them. Despite its expressionless face, everybody felt prey to a feeling of overwhelming dread.

Feeling that was amplified a hundredfold when the wood giant raised a hand, and clenched its fingers into a fist, and brought it down at a deceptively fast speed. The fist crashed against the ground, cracking the ground as it was made of cheap plastic, sending large chunks of rock everywhere, flinging both Allied ninjas and Zetsu clones in every direction, and producing a huge tremor that shook the entire battlefield.

The only ninja close enough to the monster unaffected by such destructive display of strength was flying above it, watching in shock and some horror the display.

"So that's Hashirama's Wood Golem..." Kurotsuchi said, glaring at the monster. "So powerful, Hashirama only summoned it against his greatest foes. Not even the Second Tsuchikage was able to beat it. Still, I can't back up from this fight. I might be one of the few people here who can match that beast's power," she said, as she started making hand seals. "Dust Release: Atomic Dismantling Jutsu!"

Kurotsuchi clapped her hands together, and brought them apart, creating a transparent energy cube with a core of white light. She thrust her hands forward, sending the cube towards the green giant. The Wood Golem, however, noticed Kurotsuchi's attack, as the serpentine dragon wrapped around its body moved towards the incoming attack, and opened its jaws, releasing a blaze of strange greenish-yellow flames, prematurely detonating the attack.

It then lunged upwards, trying to catch the Tsuchikage between its jaws, making the young Kage to fly upwards in order to avoid it.

"Shit! That thing has more tricks than mere size and strength!" Kurotsuchi cursed.

Taking advantage of the giant golem focusing on Kurotsuchi, the ninjas from down below launched another barrage of elemental attacks, causing some superficial damage to the beast, which showed no reaction. At first at least, given that he prepared another devastating attack as it raised its fist again. All humans present paled at what was going to happen.

"Oh fuck! I need to stop it before he causes another massacre!" Kurotsuchi said, as her hands blurred through hand seals while diving at the monster. "Earth Release: Weighted Boulder Jutsu!"

Once again, the serpent dragon tried to trap her between its jaws the moment it got close, but Kurotsuchi already expected this and was

able to expertly dodge it. The first obstacle overcome, she latched onto the golem's raised fist. The spot Kurotsuchi grabbed turned to stone, and the effect started to spread, petrifying the giant's arm. The golem didn't seem to notice as it prepared to bring its fist down.

"Shit, I have no time to petrify the whole arm!" Kurotsuchi realized, as she slammed her fist onto the petrified arm, shattering it into small rocks and pebbles, before flying away, as the dragon head tried to roast her with its breath of green fire.

...

Down below, there was a single but loud cheer the moment Kurotsuchi managed to avoid the monster from attacking.

"All hail Tsuchikage-sama! We all live thanks to her!" an Iwa ninja fervently shouted.

"Let's attack now that that monster is reduced to just one arm!" a Kiri ninja shouted.

"Do not make any risky moves! That thing might have lost one arm, but it's far from harmless!" a Suna ninja advised.

That moment, the earth started to shake as the Wood Golem began to move. Though, much to their confusion, not towards them to attack again, but towards a nearby cluster of trees. It bent down, and uprooted a large tree with its remaining arm.

"I think one doesn't need a lot of imagination to know what does he plan to do with that tree," Neji said, as he glared at the one armed monster.

"Don't worry, if he plans to chuck that tree at us, I'll kick it back at him!" Lee loudly declared. "Gate of Opening, Open! Gate of Healing, Open! Gate of Pain, Open!"

"Lee, wait! Don't rush like that before knowing what the enemy is going to do!" Tenten advised him, as he gripped his shoulder. "Look!"

In fact, the Wood Golem didn't appear to get ready to throw the tree, or even use it as a weapon. Instead, it brought it to its face... and after opening its mouth, it swallowed the tree whole, much to everybody's confusion. The confusion was turned into shock as vines started to emerge from the stump where its arm used to be, interlacing with each other until they formed a new forearm, and then a new hand. The burnt marks and holes the previous attacks had made on its body were also filled with new wood, restoring the giant back to normal.

Everybody looked at what happened in the deepest of stupors.

"Just..." Karin said, trying not to fumble her words. "... what the hell was THAT!?"

"As a being made of wood, it seems it can heal itself by consuming trees," Neji pointed out, even if that much was obvious. "And given the amount of trees in the area, he has plenty of food to heal itself."

"And it's not that we are going to destroy every tree in the vicinity, are we?" Tenten asked.

"Then what are we going to do?" Lee asked.

"It isn't obvious? Is an enemy has the ability to heal itself, you have to beat it in one blow, so it doesn't have the chance to do so!" Gai energetically said.

"Unfortunately," a new voice began, prompting Karin and Team Gai to turn around, revealing to be Shizune, with Sakura behind her. "That's not something that we can do against an enemy of such power."

"Not even with Karin-san and you being Sages?" Lee asked.

"Sage Mode gives us a lot of power, yes," Shizune agreed.

"But I don't think it will be enough to beat that thing," Karin finished, pointing at the now advancing Wood Golem.

"No, maybe she can," Sakura said, pointing upwards.

The others looked at where she was pointing at, and saw the Tsuchikage, flying around the green wood construct, trying to stop the golem with jutsu of fire and lava, to little effect.

"I learned that the Tsuchikage got Dust Release from her grandfather and predecessor. It's an elemental combination that can reduce a target to dust instantly. If we slow that thing down, maybe she'll be able to finish it in one blow," Sakura suggested.

Everybody seemed to ponder for a moment Sakura's suggestion. While risky and with low chances of success, it was the most sound plan to take that monster down. Neji was the first one to speak up his mind.

"I think she already tried to do that, but the dragon coiled around its body kept intercepting her attack," the Hyuga prodigy said. "I think it's paramount we remove that dragon if we are to succeed."

"Wood is a combination of Water and Earth Release. Meaning that lightning would be the best element to harm that creature," Shizune suggested. "We should gather any Lightning Release user we can find and have them be the bulk of the attack."

"Meanwhile, the rest of us could attack from multiple directions in order to confuse it, or at the very least, prevent it from moving deeper into the battleground," Gai added.

"A sound plan. Alright, let's go!" Shizune said, as she and the rest of her comrades rushed towards the giant made of wood.

Author's Note: Nothing much to say this time. After the change of scenery to the moon, we return when we left it last time, more specifically, just after the defeat of the First Division. They got now reinforcements to turn the tide of the battle in their favor, but, it will be enough?

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on the chapter! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Battling Giants

Author's Note: Okay, some people complained in the reviews that I made the Wood Golem too small, being only fifteen meters in height. After thinking about it, I realized that those complaints had some merit, and went back to the previous chapter and changed it to fifty meters instead. One of the reasons behind the change is that fifteen meters would be indeed too small for the golem to eat whole trees.

Well, now that that's out of the way, enjoy the new chapter:

Chapter 115:

Battling Giants

or

TIMBER!

"Here it comes!"

The Wood Golem had one of its arms rised, hand clenched into a fist, and quickly brought it down. Expecting what was going to happen, every ninja quickly jumped away in order to put as much distance as possible between them and the green colossus. The fist came down with the force of a thousand hammers hitting a sheet of wood, once again opening another crater, cracks spreading everywhere, chunks of rock flying in every direction.

This time, however, almost no Allied ninja was caught in the localized earthquake, most of them managing to come out of it unscathed.

"NOW! It's time to attack while it's wide open!" somebody called out.

"Let's go, Karin!" Shizune said, as she rushed forward while making hand seals. "Sage Art: Water Release, Water Exploding Gun!"

"Sage Art: Earth Release, Tectonic Fury!"

Dozens of elemental jutsu flew towards the now wide open golem. Shizune fired several water droplets at the giant monster, exploding into torrents of water that opened small craters on it, while Karin pulled a gigantic boulder from the ground below and chucked it forward. The golem, however, managed to recover faster than they anticipated, and with a couple of well timed punches, managed to shatter the gigantic rock the redhead had conjured.

Taking advantage of the golem's predicament, two Konoha ninja, shrouded in green auras, were going for a different approach, though.

"Lee, let's aim for the legs!" Gai said, as he and his protégé rushed forward. "Try to aim for the joint!"

"Understood, Gai-sensei!" Lee replied. The two green clad ninjas leaped forward, and delivered a brutal flying kick to the Wood Golem's shin. "Double Leaf Whirlwind!"

"Sakura, Tenten, let's not stay behind!" Neji said, rushing forward as well. "Aim for the other leg!"

"Right!" Tenten said, before making several hand seals in order to imbue her body with lightning chakra, then she pulled out two swords, aimed them forwards, and started to spin. "Lightning Release: Raging Blade Drill!"

"Cherry Blossom Impact!" Sakura focused as much chakra as she could into her fist, forming a blue flaming aura around it, and punched the giant monster in the other shin as hard as possible.

"Eight Trigrams: Palm Spear!" with the additional speed boost provided by the Celestial Gates, Neji slammed his palm into its shin

as hard as he could.

The damage done to the golem's forelegs didn't go unnoticed. There was a sound of wood breaking, and some cracks appeared on the construct's shins, and much to everybody's surprise, the golem stumbled back, and even threatened to fall on its back. However, in the end, it regained balance.

"Not good," Gai said, almost in a whisper, as he narrowed his gaze at the gigantic creature. "Everybody, fall back!"

Knowing that the golem was about to counterattack, every ninja that could heard Gai did as he commanded, and even those who didn't just went with the flow and put distance between themselves and the giant monster again.

In response, the giant golem violently slammed a foot down, creating yet another quake accompanied by a rain of rocks and boulders, forcing the allied ninjas to fall back once again. The golem then uprooted another tree, and swallowed it whole in no time. Not only it regenerated most of the damage taken, but even slightly increased its size.

"Shit, we were so close!" Karin lamented.

"And it seems that it can grow from eating trees as well," Sakura.

"We need to bring that thing down. Or at the very least, stop it from moving," Tenten suggested, before looking at Karin. "Karin, do you think you could do that with your chakra chains?"

"I don't know," the bespectacled girl replied, as she looked at the golem with apprehension. "The only time I tried to restrain something so big was when we faced that other half of the Nine Tails, and back then I had help of people with Wood Release that could subdue it."

"But you are a Sage now. I presume that has to count for something," Neji said,

"I guess it does," Karin said. "Still, the chakra of that thing is ridiculous. Binding it it's not going to be easy."

"Nobody said it's going to be. But we believe you can do it, Karin," Neji assured her. "We just need that thing not to move for a few seconds, so we can take it down for good."

"Hey, what's doing?" Lee asked.

Everybody looked at their giant enemy, and much to their shock, it started making hand seals.

"The hell!? That thing can use ninjutsu!?" Sakura cried, shocked and angered.

The golem finished the hand seal sequence, and clapped his hands together. The very next moment, a few serpentine dragons similar to the one coiled around it sprouted from its body, albeit smaller in size, and letting out roars, lunged at the Allied ninjas as their neck/bodies extended, before they finally detached from the golem's body.

The wood dragons broke through the already shattered ground as if it were water, sending small rocks and pebbles everywhere, while trying to catch the Allied ninjas between their jaws, slam them with their snouts, or crush them with their bodies. This caused the allied ninjas gathered around the golem to spread even further in order to avoid the attack.

One of them went straight towards Karin, almost as if sensing that she was one of the most dangerous foes present. It was right, of course, as the redhead was about to show.

"Oh, my jutsu hurt your master even more than the others, right?" Karin said, as she leaped back, dodging a bite from the wood dragon. Her hands started to fly through hand seals. "I can assure you that this is going to hurt just as much! Sage Art: Earth Release, Tectonic Grip!"

As the wood dragon continued its chase, rocks and pebbles scattered around began to quickly gather together, taking the shape of a giant hand. Once formed, the hand grabbed the serpentine dragon by its midsection, stopping it on its tracks. The dragon started to thrash, letting out loud screeches, but was unable to break free.

"Okay guys, I have this one down! Burn this tree to ashes!" Karin yelled.

Karin's request was quickly replied in the form of a barrage of multiple elemental jutsu coming from the many nearby ninja around her. Blazes of fire, streams of water, blades of wind, lightning bolts and chunks of rock all collided against the dragon's head, blowing it up completely. The rest of the body withered and disintegrated into rotten pieces of wood almost instantly.

Meanwhile, Shizune was dealing with one of the other dragons, both dragging its attention to her, as well as trying to blast it with elemental ninjutsu.

"Sage Art: Water Release, Water Exploding Gun!"

Shizune fired multiple bullets of hypercompressed water from her fingertips. However, the serpentine dragon expertly zigzagged around her attacks, managing to dodge them, with the resulting water explosions merely soaking it.

Shizune was about to prepare her next attack when she felt the earth shake. The ground below her feet cracked open as the dragon's tail broke the surface, and tried to smack the black haired medic-nin, who leaped away, narrowly avoiding the hit.

"It hid its tail underground in order to catch me off guard. Even if they're merely wood constructs, these things have a mind of their own," Shizune noticed, before her feet touched the ground once again. The dragon tried to smash Shizune under its tail again. "That won't work a second time!"

Despite its superficial intelligence, the wood dragon wasn't aware that Shizune's Sage Mode granted her enough strength to catch its tail just before it could hit her. Shizune then gathered all her strength, and hurled the dragon back at the Wood Golem.

"Go back to your daddy!" the black haired Sage yelled.

Sadly, her aim wasn't as good as she was hoping, and missed the Golem by a large margin. The wood dragon crashed against a nearby tree, which was toppled down by the impact. Fortunately, the impact was strong enough to break the serpentine creature in several pieces.

Despite the fact that two of its serpentine dragons had been destroyed, the others managed to keep the rest of the Allied ninjas busy, and taking advantage of their predicament, the Wood Golem advanced once again, the ground shaking with each of its steps. Even with the remaining wood dragons, the rest of the ninjas fell back. That's it, the rest minus one.

Karin stood there, defiantly staring at the incoming colossus. Though aside from determination, her face also appeared to be pensive, as if coming up with an idea.

"Karin?" Sakura asked, upon seeing that the redhead didn't move. "Karin, what are you doing? Come on, we need to get away from that thing."

"I have an idea," Karin said, her eyes fixed onto the approaching giant. "It's kind of risky, but if it works, we'll have a good opportunity to destroy that thing in one hit."

"What? What idea- HEY, WAIT!" Sakura yelled, hurring after Karin, who started to sprint towards the golem. "What are you doing!? Are you insane!?"

"You don't have to follow me!" Karin replied. "Though I could use a bit of your help doing this!"

"Sakura, Karin! What are you two doing?" Shizune yelled. She was going after them, but unfortunately another wood serpent got in her way. "Dammit!"

As Karin and Sakura ran, the earth shook more and more violently with each step the golem took, no doubt the tremors being worse because they were getting close to it. Though Sakura could observe that the footsteps of the wooden construct were becoming deliberately heavier.

"Karin, I think that thing noticed us, and it's trying to stop us!" Sakura warned the redhead.

"What makes you think that?" Karin asked.

The golem delivered another stomp, this one with enough force to crack the earth even further, and send a rain of boulders and rocks towards the incoming kunoichi. The two of them managed to nimbly dodge the incoming chunks of rock, and use their chakra enhanced strength to destroy those they were unable to dodge.

"Well, that wasn't as bad as I thought," Sakura said.

"HA! That's the best you have, you oversized vegetable doll?" Karin taunted.

It seemed the golem heard the two kunoichi, because the next stomp carried much more power. It produced a shockwave that spread outwards in a circle, tearing the ground apart, sending the two kunoichi flying into the air.

"WHOA!" the two of them said at the same time.

"Regain your balance! We're almost there! We can't let this thing stop us!" Karin said, as she managed to land on her feet on the unstable land. She then jumped from one flying chunk of rock from another, followed by Sakura.

"I still don't know what the hell do you plan to do!" Sakura protested, following the redhead.

"You'll see shortly! Almost there!" Karin said, her feet touching the ground again. "Now rush forward and don't stop!"

"Karin! We're getting close to that thing's feet!" Sakura urged, panic seeping through her voice.

"I know! Use a mud jutsu to make sure it doesn't stomp the ground again!" Karin told her.

Even if she wasn't sure of the plan, Sakura started to make hand seals. "I'll need to put quite a lot of chakra into it to trap that thing. And even then, it won't last for long!"

"I only need a few seconds! If you can buy me that, I can do the rest myself!" Karin said.

Sakura reluctantly nodded, finished her seal sequence, and slammed both palms into the ground.

"Earth Release: Mud Trap! Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

That moment, the ground between the golem's feet turned into mud. A tiny patch at first, but it quickly spread outwards, forming a large brea pit, deep enough for the golem to sink its feet into. It tried to break out of the trap, but the mud restrained its movement. Sakura's second jutsu manifested in a series of large rocks appearing above the pit of mud and falling onto it, creating a pathway that Karin could use to cross without being trapped.

"Well done, Sakura! Now get over here!" Karin told her, as she rushed under the golem's legs, hopping from one rock to the other, until she reached the other side. And once she was at an appropriate distance, she made her move. "Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Multiple chakra chains shoot from Karin's chest, guts, arms and hands, small at first, but growing in size as they moved towards the golem. The chains wrapped around the arms, legs, body and the serpentine dragon coiled around its body. The redhead then grabbed all the chains, and using chakra enhanced strength in combination with the senjutsu enhanced strength, gave a mighty pull.

The golem, who was trying to remove the chains clinging to its body, was pulled backwards a little, but nowhere near enough to make it fall on its back. The wood colossus managed to pull the chains back, forcing Karin to direct chakra to her feet in order to stay stuck to the ground.

"Karin, hold on!" Sakura said, as she crossed the mud pit through the rocks she had created. "Help is on the way!"

Sakura quickly rushed towards Karin, and helped the redhead to push the golem down. However, even with the two of them combining their strength, it wasn't enough to topple the mighty green monster.

"It's too big!" Sakura said, as she continued to pull. "The rest need to push it from the front, so we can pull it from behind!"

"Hopefully the others will realize what we are doing!" Karin said.

The rest of the ninjas fighting the golem had fell back in order to escape from the shockwaves and tremors caused by its stomps. Fortunately for Karin, it happened to be the case, since Neji was observing the two kunoichi with a mix of interest and fear through his Byakugan. At first he didn't know what they were trying to accomplish, but once Karin released her chains, it was crystal clear.

"Neji? What are they doing?" Gai asked.

"They aren't trying to topple that thing on their own, are they?" Tenten asked.

"That's exactly what they're doing," Neji said, his eyes still fixed on them. "But they're unable to do it on their own."

"Then what are we waiting for? We should help Sakura-san and Karin-san! Especially now that that monster has been stopped on its tracks!" Lee said.

"Lee is right! Come on, we can't let this opportunity pass!" Gai enthusiastically agreed. "Everybody, let's go!"

Following Gai's lead and rallying cry, the nearby Allied ninjas all charged forward once again, firing elemental jutsu, while others leaped at the golem and struck it with all their might. Shizune, thanks to her senjutsu enhanced strength, and Gai and Lee, thanks to the Celestial Gates, were able to deliver quite the blows to the mighty golem, who started to tumble back.

While this happened, Karin and Sakura continued pulling the golem down from behind, and their efforts, with the help of the other Allied ninjas, finally paid off, as the golem lost its balance, and started to fall down on its back.

"Yes! We did it!" Karin said, as she looked in triumph at the toppling figure of the Wood Golem. However, she noticed that Sakura wasn't besides her anymore, but was running away like crazy.

As a shadow loomed over her while growing larger, it dawned upon Karin that the golem was about to fall right on top of her.

"SHIT! WAIT FOR ME!" Karin cried, as she run away as fast as she could.

The golem's back hit the ground -fortunately, Karin was able to escape in time, with a couple seconds to spare- once again producing a shockwave that made the whole earth tremble. That moment, Kurotsuchi flew down and started to bark orders.

"Quickly! Destroy the wood dragon wrapped around its body!" the Tsuchikage urged. "Before it gets back on its feet!"

"I'm on it!" Lee said, as he ran across the golem's body, rushing towards the dragon. The wooden serpent noticed both Lee and its intentions, as it tried to snap him between its jaws, but the green clad Special Jonin was too fast. Channeling as much chakra as he could through his body, Lee made his move. "Konoha Great Whirlwind!"

Lee jumped and delivered a spinning roundhouse kick that pretty much shredded the dragon's head into tiny bits of wood.

"Yes! Well done, Lee!" Gai cheered.

Not wasting any time, Kurotsuchi started to make hand seals, before clapping her hands together. "Everybody, move away from the golem, or else you might be turned into ashes! Dust Release: Atomic Dismantling Jutsu!"

Kurotsuchi brought her hands apart, summoning a cube of white light. She threw the cube at the fallen giant, and this time there was nothing to intercept it. Pouring as much chakra as she could, Kurotsuchi enlarged the cube of light until it covered the whole golem. There was a bright flash of light, and the cube disappeared. Where the golem once lied, there was now nothing but a rectangular shaped mark.

"Yes! The golem is no more!" a Kumo ninja cheered.

"All hail Tsuchikage-sama! It was her who sent it into the oblivion!" an Iwa ninja said.

"Hey, two Konoha kunoichi helped as well! Don't leave them out!" a Konoha ninja protested.

Before it could escalate into something uglier, Kurotsuchi intervened.

"Enough!" Kurotsuchi yelled. "We might have defeated a mighty foe, but this battle is far from over! We can celebrate later, now find some more enemies to kill!"

The Tsuchikage's orders had the intended effect, and soon most of the Allied ninjas dispersed across the battleground, in order to put an end to the remaining enemies.

"Commander," Neji called, as he walked towards Kurotsuchi. The Hyuga had his Byakugan fixed on her. "Are you okay? You may act tough, but I could see that you expended quite a lot of chakra on that one jutsu."

"I know, but I need to keep a brave face. The troops can't see their commander look weak," Kurotsuchi said. "It would be bad for their morale."

"It would be worse if they saw you die," Shizune interjected. "Come on, let me patch you up. I can do something to curb your exhaustion for a bit."

The Tsuchikage wanted to protest, but the rational part of her told her that she should listen to the black haired medic-nin. Sighed in defeat, the young Kage floated down towards Shizune.

...

As the battle against the Wood Golem happened, in another part of the battleground another fight was also making the ground tremble. Not because any of the combatants were as big as the aforementioned golem -though they were bigger than a normal human, that's for sure- but because whenever their blades clashed, the power behind each of the strikes faced against each other produced a shockwave that made the floor quake.

Two chakra constructs, one vibrant red, the other pitch black, with the shape of the upper half of humanoids encased in heavy armor. Itachi's was wielding a sword made of yellow flames on one hand,

and a shield in the other, while Fugaku's was wielding two long katanas on each of its hands. So far, they did nothing but trade blows, but Fugaku was able to parry every one of Itachi's strikes, much to his frustration.

"I can't see any gap in his defense that I can exploit," Itachi said, his Sharingan carefully analyzing every centimeter of his enemy. *"Even if I already defeated Father once, the situation changed too much. Any advantage I might had over him is long gone."*

"Itachi!" Sasuke shouted. The elder brother looked at Sasuke, who didn't summon his Susanoo. "Let's attack from afar! The two of us together!"

"Sasuke, why aren't you using Susanoo as well?" Fugaku asked, the same question crossing Itachi's mind. "I thought you had the Mangekyo Sharingan!"

"I don't need it to beat you!" Sasuke spat back, though Itachi doubted his younger brother could back up that claim. "Come on, Itachi!"

Itachi nodded. The shield on his Susanoo disappeared, and its now empty hand summoned three spinning magatama linked by a circular thread, which were launched towards Fugaku's Susanoo as if they were a shuriken.

"Yasaka Magatama!"

"Amaterasu!"

Sasuke ignited the magatamas with his jutsu, forming a ring of spinning black flames. Fugaku's Susanoo brought its katanas together, merging them into a double bladed sword, and started to spin it as fast as it could. The double sword spinning raising a powerful wind, but that wasn't the move's purpose. Instead, the spinning blade served as an improvised shield that deflected the flaming magatamas, sending them away.

The chakra katanas caught fire, but Fugaku solved that problem by simply tossing them away, dispelling them and letting the black flames to fall on the ground, before instantly generating two new katanas, and joining them together into a new double blade.

"Dammit, no effect," Sasuke cursed, as he flinched, clearly fighting to stay on his feet.

"He has problems even with just Amaterasu. No wonder he refuses to use Susanoo," Itachi noted, as he worriedly looked at his brother. "Sasuke, are you okay?"

"Don't worry about me! Focus on the enemy in front of us!" Sasuke snapped.

Sasuke wasn't merely trying to distract Itachi from his issues, as Fugaku was preparing to attack. The black Susanoo raised its double sword above its head, and started to spin it again. A powerful tornado started to form around Fugaku's Susanoo, but the Uchiha brothers doubted that once again the wind was the attack.

And their assumptions turned out to be right when the black Susanoo tossed the spinning double blade at them.

"Sasuke, behind me!" Itachi cried.

Sasuke thankfully moved behind Itachi's Susanoo. As the spinning double blade flew towards them, raising powerful winds, Itachi quickly resummoned the Susanoo's shield on its left hand, and put it between itself and Fugaku, parrying the blow. The double blade continued spinning, grinding against the shield, resulting in a shower of sparks spreading everywhere. Eventually, both the shield and the double blade were sent flying away in different directions.

"Not even the Yata Mirror was able to completely nullify an attack of such power," Itachi lamented. *"This is going to-"*

"Itachi, watch out!" Sasuke cried.

Itachi's Sharingan registered Fugaku and his Susanoo moving to close combat distance, both blades coming down from different angles for a devastating strike. The elder brother only had time to raise his Sword of Totsuka in order to parry both blows. Still, his Susanoo was unable to absorb the force behind the double strikes, and was pushed backwards.

"Itachi!" Sasuke repeated, before turning his eyes towards Fugaku. The youngest Uchiha formed hand seals as fast as he could before unsealing a Fuuma Shuriken, which was instantly imbued with both electricity and fire. He tossed the shuriken at the enemy Susanoo, while making more hand seals. "Double Elemental Release: Plasma Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

The flying star of steel, fire and lightning replicated itself a dozenfold, just before they all crashed against the black and red Susanoo, resulting in several explosions of fire and electricity. Sasuke was hoping that all the chakra he had spent on that jutsu was worth it, but when the smoke dispelled, he was disappointed to find that the damage done was lesser than what he expected. Fugaku's Susanoo had some missing chunks of armor, but that was about it.

"An impressive attack, son," Fugaku praised. "The last time I saw you, you were barely able to use the clan's signature jutsu. Yet now you're able to use two elements at once."

"Now you realize of my potential, don't you?" Sasuke bitterly replied. "One can go far when you have a willing teacher or mentor."

"Unfortunately, such attack won't be of help in the long run. If you expect to defeat me, you should use Susanoo," Fugaku told him. "Your brother can use it, why can't you?"

"This has to be a joke. Even in death, you can't help but compare me to him," Sasuke replied, his eyes flaring with anger.

"It is not my intention to put you down, but in this situation, it's inevitable," Fugaku began, his stare hardening. "If you can't use

Susanoo, then you can't help your brother. Worse, not only you aren't helping him, but you're forcing him to protect you while he fights me. You're nothing but a distraction to him."

"SHUT UP!" Sasuke roared, a purple aura flaring around his body, followed by his Susanoo forming and taking shape.

" This is bad. Father's words only made Sasuke even more unbalanced. Now he uses his anger to maintain his Susanoo, but that won't last long," Itachi worriedly thought. *"I need to end this fight as soon as possible!"*

Itachi poured more chakra into his own Susanoo. Itachi started to float as his Susanoo's lower half developed, first the bones of two legs, followed by muscle and skin, and finally armor. Fugaku, however, showed that his skill with Susanoo was at least on par with his eldest son's, and Fugaku's Susanoo also reached the full armored humanoid stage.

Sasuke's Susanoo didn't reach that stage.

"So, it's going to be you and me, son," Fugaku bitterly said, as a memory came to his mind. "Like our last encounter."

"And just like in our last encounter, I shall be the one to come out on top!" Itachi said, as his Susanoo stomped forward.

...

Meanwhile, apart from the rest of the battles, Tsunade and Nagato continued their duel, each of them aided by the animals they were able to summon, many of them locked in a duel of their own, while Tsunade fought Nagato, his multi headed dog and his chameleon. Nagato was forcing Tsunade on the defensive by showering her with missiles generated by the Asura Path. Taking advantage of her predicament, the chameleon opened its mouth, ready to snatch the Sannin with its tongue.

Tsunade, however, already expected this and extended her hand towards it.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

The giant chameleon was yanked towards Tsunade by an invisible force, and the moment it was close enough, Tsunade sank her fist inside the reptile's flesh. The punch was hard enough to undo the summon.

"Yes! One vermin less-"

Tsunade was interrupted when she saw the giant multi headed dog ready to pound her. Unable to use the Deva Path again, the blond Sannin was forced to jump back. And it was that moment when Nagato choose to strike, as his hands weaved through hand seals.

"In your current predicament, you can't avoid this attack," Nagato announced, as he finished his jutsu. "Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

Nagato motioned his arms in a wide arc outwards, creating several crescent shaped blades of wind, which flew towards the airborne Tsunade. Unable to use the Preta Path while she was moving, Tsunade did the only thing she could: call one of her summons for help. Said help came in the form of the giant bird, who dived down and shielded Tsunade from the wind blades with its own body. Not only had Nagato's jutsu enough power to cause enough damage to dispel the summon, leaving a cloud of smoke behind, but there were still a couple of blades of wind left that continued their way towards Tsunade. The blond woman braced herself as the attack connected, leaving deep gashes on her left arm and right side. Blood quickly began to pour from them.

"Heh..." Tsunade said, as she quickly brought one hand to the side, where the worst wound was, and started to heal it. "You managed to land a pretty good hit. Not bad, kid."

Nagato didn't say anything. That moment, the earth started to rumble, forcing Tsunade to jump away once again, a second before the giant centipede broke through the floor, sending rocks and pebbles flying in every direction.

"As famed as a medic you are, you won't have the time to heal your wounds," Nagato said, sounding like he was warning her.

"Kid, one doesn't get to be the best medic who ever lived if I was unable to heal myself while fighting," Tsunade retorted, sounding almost offended, as her feet touched the ground, her healing uninterrupted. "There's more to being a medic than mere medical knowledge."

"Let's hope you can back up those words with actions," Nagato said, remaining still.

That moment, both the centipede and multi headed dog rushed her. Fortunately, she could sense that her lobster had defeated Nagato's giant panda, unsummoning it. She mentally ordered the lobster to come to her and help her deal with the animals harrasing her. Unfortunately, lobsters weren't exactly known for their speed on land, and it wasn't close to her.

The first one to attack was the centipede, who slammed its head against Tsunade. She almost felt her body jumping away on her own, but she realized that was what the enemy was expecting, and instead of dodging it, she stopped healing herself and took the attack head on, grabbing the centipede by its mandibles. The dog then moved to attack the apparently defenseless Tsunade. "Apparently" being the key word, as with a mighty heave, Tsunade hurled the giant arthropod against the large canid, sending the two of them rolling aside.

Tsunade wasted no time and continued healing her injured side, and that moment, she could feel the rhino she had summoned being destroyed by Nagato.

"Shit, there goes another of my animals. Guess Nagato decided to focus on them while I'm busy, so he can overwhelm me with numbers," Tsunade thought, realizing the redhead's plan. "Now I only have one animal left."

Speaking of which, the giant lobster finally managed to reach her position. And just in time, as the centipede and the multi headed dog were back on their feet, and ready to attack again. The dog charged first, its many heads barking furiously, but it was intercepted by the lobster, who tackled it away. That still left the centipede to deal with Tsunade.

"Basho Ten'in!"

Of course, there was also Nagato himself, as the redhead reminded her through his actions. Tsunade was yanked from her position and hurl into the air towards Nagato. The centipede attacked in tandem, ready to eviscerate the Sannin between its jaws. Tsunade, however, was far from helpless, and cast her right hand towards the giant arthropod.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The gravitational push not only hurled the giant centipede back, but it also propelled Tsunade backwards, away from Nagato and the rest of his beasts. Nagato, however, wasn't going to give Tsunade any time to breathe, and his hands quickly flew through hand seals.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Nagato expelled a huge conical shaped torrent of water from his mouth at the still airborne Tsunade. The Slug Princess, however, wasn't impressed.

"I saw what you were doing there, but it won't work this time!" Tsunade said, just as she landed with a loud boom, the ground cracking beneath her high heeled shoes, seconds before being

engulfed by the incoming torrent. She raised a single hand forward, which started to glow with a white light. "Gakido!"

Through the power of the Preta Path, Tsunade absorbed the water jutsu, converting it back to pure chakra and adding it to her own reserves.

"Not bad kid, but you miscalculated!" Tsunade gloated.

"I can assure you, I did not," Nagato calmly replied.

That moment, Tsunade felt the earth rumble. Her one visible eye widened upon seeing the giant ox charging towards her, while letting out a loud bellow. Tsunade panicked, as she was still absorbing Nagato's jutsu, and thus couldn't move. She tried to absorb it as fast as she could, and finished just when the ox was on top of her. Tsunade jumped back to avoid being gored by the giant beast's horns, and even if she was able to dodge the horns, she was hit by one of the animal's legs, which send her flying, until she crashed against a tree, who promptly snapped in two.

Fortunately, despite her age, the Slug Sannin was resilient enough to withstand such a powerful hit. She could felt a couple broken ribs, though.

"Oh boy, this is going to hurt so bad tomorrow," Tsunade lamented, as she started to heal herself as fast as she could. And to make matter worse, she felt the last of her Rinnegan summons being defeated by Nagato and the rest of his animals. Tsunade was now alone while Nagato still had the multi headed dog, the centipede and the ox. "Well, shit."

"Tsunade," Nagato called. "Even with the Rinnegan, you're no match for me. I suggest you mimick the same thing the Raikage did, and run away before I take your life. I don't want more innocents on my conscience."

"Touching, but you know I can't do that," Tsunade replied, as she got back on her feet.

"You can't let your pride to get in the way. Orochimaru knows you have my other Rinnegan, and wants it for himself," Nagato said, sounding more worried. "Obito already has the other Rinnegan, you can't let this one fall in the wrong hands."

"Let me assure you that your concerns have been taken into account, and that no Akatsuki lackey, either willing or unwilling, will take this eye from my socket," Tsunade replied. If she could keep him talking, she could buy more time to heal herself. "Plus, I'm the only one capable of taking you down. You're too dangerous to let other people join this fight."

"You shouldn't be afraid to risk the lives of your comrades for the sake of defeating me," Nagato insisted. "I'm among Orochimaru's most powerful reanimations. Defeating me will deal Akatsuki a big blow."

"Like I said before, you don't have anything to worry about," Tsunade said, as she wiped some blood from her arm with her finger, and smeared it on her palm. "You WILL be defeated."

"Excuse me if I'm not that convinced," Nagato dryly said, as his remaining animals converged to him. "I have two Rinnegan eyes, while you only have one, not to mention that I'm more experienced wielding its power. All your summons have been destroyed, while I still have some at my side. So far, it appears that this fight will be solved in my favor."

"Good point. But you see, I have a little something that you don't have. A certain summon that's going to tip the battle in my favor," Tsunade said, as she made five hand seals. "Summoning jutsu!"

Tsunade slammed her hand into the ground, making Nagato and his animals to tense up, bracing themselves for whatever Tsunade was going to summon. When the initial burst of smoke dispelled, there

was a small slug at Tsunade's feet. The slug quickly climbed Tsunade, and perched herself on the Sannin's shoulder.

"You ready, Tsunade-sama?" the slug asked.

"Indeed. You can begin now, Katsuyu," Tsunade said.

"That was your ace in the hole?" Nagato asked blankly. "I was aware you have a summoning contract, but I expected you to summon something bigger to counter the animals still under my command."

"Don't judge an opponent based on her size," Tsunade said, as she closed her eyes. That moment, blue marks appeared around her eyes, and when she opened them, they were golden instead of their usual hazel. "Or else you might get a nasty surprise!"

Tsunade quickly dashed towards Nagato, but the redhead reacted just in time, raising a hand towards her.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Tsunade was once again blown away by an invisible force, though unlike the other times, it did little harm to her. Meanwhile, Nagato jumped backwards while ordering his beasts to attack her at once.

"So, you have Sage Mode. Given that Jiraiya-sensei and Naruto had it, it shouldn't be a surprise," Nagato commented.

"Of course. I wasn't going to be the only one in my family to be left out," Tsunade said, as she regained balance, eyeing the giant animals charging at her.

"Good. That might give you an edge against me. After all, it was what allowed Naruto to beat me," Nagato said, looking now a little more hopeful.

"Oh, you have no idea, kid," Tsunade said, making the ram seal.

"Sage Art: Gracious Deity Gates!"

Suddenly, massive red torii fell from above on top of the giant animals, pinning them to the ground, leaving them completely immobilized. Several torii also fell on Nagato, but the undead ninja, being smaller and much faster than the lumbering animals, was able to dodge them expertly. Despite Tsunade's new power and his own unwillingness to fight, his body would continue fighting towards the very end.

"Do you like that? My grandfather created that jutsu!" Tsunade said.

"Now you proved to be more dangerous than initially assessed, I will be forced to use my most powerful abilities," Nagato said, as he cast an arm upwards. "Chibaku Tensei!"

Nagato shoot a gravity core the size of a marble into the sky, which quickly began to pull chunks of rock, tree branches, dirt and everything it could attract in order to form a satellite.

"On no, you won't! Not that shit again!" Tsunade shouted, as she leaped into the forming planetoid. The memory of how she almost lost Jiraiya -not to mention Konoha's potential destruction- due that jutsu was still fresh in her mind. She let the gravity core pull her into the forming planetoid, but once she was there, she resisted the pull and punched her way to the core.

Konan had explained to her in detail how every Rinnegan jutsu worked. The Chibaku Tensei was a sphere of superconcentrated chakra that generated a powerful gravitational field in order to form a planetoid. In order to disable that jutsu, the sphere of chakra needed to be destroyed.

Despite the enhanced endurance and resistance provided by Sage Mode, it was increasingly hard to dig her way to the core when more and more rocks were being blasted onto her body. Still, she was able to reach it relatively quickly. She placed her hand onto the core before more rocks could be pulled.

"Gakido!"

Using the Preta Path, Tsunade absorbed the gravity core, disabling the jutsu. The rocks that had been gathered to form the satellite quickly fell to the ground. Rather than fall, though, Tsunade took advantage of her position in order to leap at Nagato, who once again raised a hand to defend himself.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Tsunade was once again blasted backwards. However, she then grew another pair of arms, and fired the hands from those arms like they were missiles, while remaining connected to the forearms through cables. Tsunade's detached hands latched onto Nagato's shoulders just as she touched ground, before reeling the cables in, pulling Nagato towards her. And, after reaching close combat distance, she placed a hand on his forehead.

"Don't worry kid, this will be over soon," Tsunade empathically said. Nagato didn't say anything, he merely smiled. "Ningendo!"

Tsunade pulled Nagato's soul out of his artificial body, and let it return to the afterlife, where it belonged. Without a soul, Nagato's body quickly crumbled into a pile of dust and paper bits, revealing the corpse of the unfortunate victim Orochimaru had used to revive the redhead. The blonde Sannin let out a sigh of relief.

"Okay, one less headache," she said to no one in particular. She turned around, and run back towards the bulk of the battle. "Time to put an end to this."

...

At the same time Tsunade fought Nagato, Itachi and Sasuke continued their duel against Fugaku. Or more especificaly, Itachi and Fugaku fought each other within their respective Susanoo, while Sasuke watched impotently.

Itachi had proved in the past to be a superior swordsman to his father, and he believed that that would translate to the fight between

Susanoo, only to find out how wrong he was. He didn't know why - but suspected that the fact that Fugaku was a remotely controlled reanimation had something to do with it-, but Fugaku's Susanoo moved much faster than Itachi's, and its blows were delivered with far more dexterity, attacking with quick, wide swings that were difficult to parry and pushed Itachi's Susanoo back.

Fueled by rage, Sasuke managed to bring his Susanoo to its armored form, but was unable to reach the full form. Still, deciding that it was better than nothing. A purple chakra bow appeared between the Susanoo's hands, and fired multiple arrows at Fugaku's Susanoo. But much to Sasuke's frustration, the black Susanoo parried them expertly with its double sword, almost making it appear as if it wasn't even paying attention to Sasuke. In a certain manner, it wasn't.

"Dammit!" Sasuke cursed, as his Susanoo wavered, his rage no longer being able to sustain the chakra construct, as the anguish and despair he felt over the idea of accidentally killing Naruto washed over his being, making him fall to his knees. "It's no good... I can't use the Mangekyo Sharingan... and without it, I can't help Itachi! Useless! Useless!" he shouted, slamming his fists against the ground.

He raised his gaze, and saw, unsurprisingly, Itachi being pushed back even further by Fugaku. This seemed to snap Sasuke from his brief pity party and return to his sense.

"No, there's no time to whine. Mangekyo Sharingan or not, I need to find a way to help Itachi," Sasuke said, as he got back to his feet and ran towards the two chakra giants. "Or else father's going to kill him!"

Itachi's Susanoo was struggling more and more against Fugaku's vicious attacks. Even if Sasuke couldn't harm Fugaku directly, if he could provide some distraction, it would buy his brother some seconds to breathe. His hands flew through seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a fireball towards Fugaku's Susanoo, which had its back turned on him. The fireball hit its mark, but it didn't appear to cause enough damage. Undeterred, Sasuke breathed more fireballs, all of them hitting its mark. This time, they had the intended effect, as the black and red Susanoo turned around, its ugly visage focused on the youngest Uchiha.

"Sasuke, what are you doing!?" Fugaku called. "Get away from here!"

"Shut up, father!" Sasuke yelled back. "I will help Itachi no matter what!"

Sasuke didn't stop, and continued shooting fireballs at him. This time, Fugaku's Susanoo either moved aside to dodge them, flying into the sky until they were no longer seen, or blocked them with his double bladed sword, as it stomped towards him.

However, the youngest Uchiha had already accomplished what he set to do. Fugaku was no longer focused on Itachi, which gave him some much needed time to regain his force, and launch a surprise attack from Fugaku's back. However, much to his shock, Fugaku's black Susanoo sidestepped, allowing Itachi's red Susanoo to stumble forward, before the former delivered a brutal kick to the later, making Itachi's Susanoo fall to the side.

"That was careless on your part, Itachi," Fugaku said, sounding half disappointed and half worried.

"ITACHI!" Sasuke yelled, as he rushed towards his fallen Susanoo.

Unfortunately for Sasuke, Fugaku didn't forget about him.

"Sasuke, run!" Fugaku warned him.

He winded up the arm holding his double blade, before he tossed it at Sasuke. The youngest Uchiha could do nothing but stare at his incoming doom, his Sharingan allowing him to see the deadly blade

coming at him almost in slow motion, but still not slow enough to dodge it. Then, there was a red blur, and Itachi's Susanoo suddenly appeared between Sasuke and the flying blade, parrying it with the sword of Totsuka. Unfortunately for Itachi, his weakened Susanoo was unable to absorb the force Fugaku's double blade carried, and was blown backwards, falling on its back.

"Itachi... !" Sasuke shouted again, this time his voice sounding weaker. His eyes shifted from Itachi's wrecked Susanoo, to Fugaku's incoming one. Once again, a feeling of despair took hold of his body, as an horrible realization dawned upon him: not only he wasn't even able to provide assistance to Itachi, but his presence was a distraction, forcing his older brother to protect him and take hits aimed at Sasuke.

Is this how it was going to end? After all his training, battles, experience... was this his end? Being killed alongside his brother by the raised corpse of the father that neglected him? Just because he wasn't able to overcome the trauma of awakening the Mangekyo Sharingan?

Rage flooded once again. Though, unfortunately, it wasn't the kind of rage one could channel into strength, for Sasuke himself was the target that rage. He hated himself for allowing this to happen.

" You're so focused on getting over the side effects of the Mangekyo Sharingan, that you can't see the path in front of you. Take a look at what your brother and Shisui did. They overcame their trauma of the Mangekyo Sharingan not because they aimed to do that, but as a side effect of setting a different goal. Try to emulate them. Set a goal. And you'll see how in the end, you can leave that moment behind."

Suddenly, Sakura's words from days ago echoed inside his head. Sakura... even if it was a bitter consolation, Sasuke was glad that his girlfriend wasn't there to see him. Not only because he didn't want her to witness his demise, but because he didn't want her to see him in such a sorry state of mind.

" Sorry, Sakura. I did try to follow your advice, but I was unable to," Sasuke mentally replied.

" Don't say your goodbyes so soon. I know it takes more than this to get rid of you, Sasuke-kun."

" Sakura? Is that your voice I'm hearing in my head?" Sasuke replied. "Or am I'm going insane now? I know the Mangekyo Sharingan can drive someone insane. It happened to Obito."

" Am I the real Sakura? That doesn't matter. What matters is what are you going to do now. It's not too late. You can still unleash the true power of your eyes, Sasuke-kun. You're not thinking clearly."

" No, I'm not," he admitted . "Facing father again... it awakened in me feelings I thought that left behind. How cold he was towards me. How he always forced me to live under Itachi's shadow. How when he finally warmed up to me it was because he had a disagreement with Itachi. And how he led our entire family to its doom for a mad quest for power."

" Not the best moment to overcome the trauma of awakening the Mangekyo Sharingan. But not an impossible task either. You should have done this before, but you can still do it now. There is still time."

" Always the optimist. Sorry, but I don't think I can set up a goal right now," Sasuke bitterly replied.

" Yes. Yes you can. Tell me, Sasuke-kun, what do you want?"

" It isn't obvious? I want to master the Mangekyo Sharingan so I can help Itachi, and don't be a goddamn dead weight he has to risk his life to protect!" Sasuke mentally shouted.

" No, that's not what I mean. What do you want, Sasuke-kun? What do you want to do with your life? What's your reason to be a ninja? What do you fight for? Every action you take, every fight you enter,

every enemy you slay... what's the purpose behind those? What do you wish to achieve?"

" I... I want..." Sasuke began, as the ground shook, Fugaku's Susanoo dangerously approaching with each step. "I want to be a strong ninja. So I can protect what little family I still have. So I can make them feel proud of me."

" Good! What else?"

" I want... to clean the Uchiha name. The Uchiha Insurrection will be something that history will never forget, but I want future generations of Uchiha to be unburdened by such tragedy caused by their shortsighted ancestors. I want future generations of Konoha ninja to look at us again like they did in the past, with awe and admiration."

" Yes! But there's more, isn't it?"

" I want to be happy. I want my family to be happy. I want to see Shisui and Shizune-sensei's children to grow up into strong ninjas so they can look at them with pride. I want to see my brother happy after how much he suffered for me and for the village. I want to tell my girlfriend how much I love her, and that I'm looking forward to the future we have together..."

" Splendid! But I can still feel there's something else left..."

" Yes," Sasuke thought, as he got back on his feet. He could slowly feel how the despair and anguish slowly disappeared, being driven away by steel hard determination and burning hot righteous anger. His body felt lighter as the weight of the burden he carried since that fateful day was lifted from his shoulders. He glared at the incoming Susanoo. The pattern of his Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan formed on his eyes, as a purple aura surrounded him. "I want to find the one responsible for all our misery, the one that started this war... AND MAKE HIM PAY FOR IT!"

Purple light exploded around Sasuke, as his Susanoo formed around him. Skeleton, muscle, skin, and armor. And then legs. His Susanoo then grew in size until it almost matched Fugaku's. A sword appeared on its right hand, while an hybrid between a bow and a shield appeared on its left wrist.

"So... you finally did it," Fugaku said, his lips curving into a small smile. "Your Susanoo looks impressive."

"Just wait until you see it in action!" Sasuke said, as he commanded his Susanoo to advance forward.

Once again, Fugaku was forced to fight one of his sons. Sasuke managed to land few good early hits, but once Fugaku got a taste of Sasuke's Susanoo's fighting style, he was able to block and parry the youngest Uchiha's blows, and return them in kind. Eventually, Fugaku gained the upper hand, and just like he did with Itachi, pushed Sasuke back with a series of devastating blows with his double blade.

"I'm afraid that your second wind won't be enough to match me, son," Fugaku said, as he struck the purple Susanoo, making it fall on its back, producing a tremor. The black Susanoo raised its double sword over its head, before it brought it down.

However, Sasuke's Susanoo wasn't struck. All of sudden, Itachi's red Susanoo was between the two of them, parrying the blow with the sword of Totsuka.

"Maybe not. But between the two of us, we'll be able to beat you!" Itachi said, as he pushed the enemy Susanoo backwards. Sasuke's Susanoo got back on its feet. "You okay, Sasuke?"

"Yeah! Let's go!" Sasuke said.

Now finally fighting together, the two brothers fought their father. One would attack, forcing Fugaku to parry the blow, and before their father had the chance to counterattack, the other would strike at him,

forcing him back. With this tactic, they locked their father on the defensive, depriving him of a way to attack them.

"Keep going Sasuke! Sooner or later, we'll be able to find an opening good enough for a killing blow!" Itachi encouraged.

"Yes!" Sasuke replied.

This time, the two of them brought their swords at once, which Fugaku blocked with the help of his double bladed weapon, struggling against the two brothers.

"Yes, between the two of you, you might have a chance at beating me," Fugaku said. "Unfortunately, this Susanoo isn't at its strongest level. I can still bring it to its perfect form."

Suddenly, Fugaku's Susanoo grew in size again, becoming broader and one head taller than Sasuke and Itachi's. The chakra construct developed a pair of feathered wings on its back, and an ugly mask resembling a tengu. A katana appeared on each of his hands, and merged them together by the handles, creating an even larger double blade.

"I hope you're prepared for THIS!" Fugaku said, as his Susanoo moved to attack.

The Perfect Susanoo moved forward, delivering a powerful blow with its double sword. Itachi's Susanoo took a step forward, and raised its shield to block it. Fugaku was undeterred and kept pressing the attack, forcing Itachi to fall back as he blocked the strikes with his shield or parried them with his blade. Then, all of sudden, Itachi jumped backwards and moved aside, dodging the attack.

"Huh?"

Purple filled Fugaku's vision as he saw Sasuke's Susanoo aiming an arrow at him. Sasuke let loose, and fired a purple bolt of chakra. Fugaku's Susanoo deflected the bolt expertly, but Sasuke fired more

arrows in quick succession, forcing Fugaku's Susanoo backwards as he parried them, swinging its double blade.

"Yasaka Magatama!"

Itachi reminded Fugaku that he was still in the fight by firing several red magatama-shaped projectiles. Fugaku tried to deflect them as well, but his Susanoo was still reeling from Sasuke's onslaught, and was unable to block all of them. The magatamas exploded upon contacting, pushing the black Susanoo backwards.

"Not bad. Nice teamwork there," Fugaku praised. His Susanoo managed to regain his balance, and gripping his double sword, its blades started to glow with chakra. "But watch out! You still haven't seen what this Susanoo is capable of! Susanoo: Earth Piercing Heavenly Blade!"

Fugaku's Susanoo stabbed one end of its double blade into the ground, releasing a conic underground shockwave forward, tearing apart the earth as it traveled, sending rocks and chunks of earth everywhere.

"Sasuke, behind me!" Itachi yelled.

As Sasuke hid behind his brother, Itachi channeled more chakra into his Yata Mirror, which increased in size, and slammed it into the ground. The underground shockwave clashed against the shield, producing a huge explosion. However, even if the explosion managed to crack the shield, it protected the rest of Itachi's Susanoo.

"Sasuke, now!" Itachi said.

"You don't have to tell me!" Sasuke replied.

Sasuke's Susanoo jumped from behind Itachi's, and started firing purple chakra arrows at Fugaku's Susanoo. The Perfect Susanoo flapped its wings, and jumped into the sky.

"You won't evade me!" Sasuke shouted, as he started to make hand seals. "Susanoo: Infernal Release, Black Burning Arrows!"

Sasuke continued firing arrows at the airborne Susanoo, except this time they were coated in the black flames of Amaterasu. However, despite its huge size, Fugaku's Susanoo was fast and nimble enough to dodge all of them, and the arrows disappeared into the sky.

"Itachi, I have a way to end this fight for good," Sasuke said. "But we need to bring him back to ground level. I suppose you can't reach the Perfect Level?"

"I'm afraid not," Itachi replied, looking upwards. Fugaku's Susanoo was flying in circles above, them, like a bird of prey ready to strike its unsuspecting prey. "But I don't need to in order to bring him down!"

Then, much to Sasuke's surprise, Itachi undid his Susanoo.

"Itachi? What the hell are you-"

"I can't reach him with my Susanoo active. But I'm light enough for yours to throw me at father's Susanoo once its close enough. If I can latch onto him, then I can bring it down."

Sasuke looked at him, as if judging his idea. His face was a stony mask.

"Very well then," Sasuke said, as he commanded his Susanoo to pick Itachi up. "Just be careful."

"Watch out, here it comes!" Itachi warned.

And indeed, that was the moment Fugaku had decided to swoop down at them, raising a powerful gust of wind as he flew dangerously close to the ground.

"Now!"

With all his might, Sasuke hurled Itachi at the incoming Perfect Susanoo. Itachi's own Susanoo started to form around him, starting with the ribcage, but before it could properly develop, the hand of Fugaku's Susanoo extended forward and caught him between his fingers, shattering it, before flying back into the sky.

"You had a good plan, son. But you should remember that, even if I couldn't hear you from above, the Sharingan allows me to read your lips," Fugaku said in a chastising tone, watching his son struggle inside the giant chakra construct's grip. Blood started to trickle from Itachi's mouth. "I'm sorry son, I didn't want it to end like this."

"You have many reasons to be sorry, father," Itachi said. "But my death won't be one of them."

Itachi closed his eyes, and all of sudden, an explosion of light came from the former Clan Heir, blinding Fugaku. The former Uchiha Clan Head screamed as his eyes were seared by the burning light, made even worse by the enhanced vision provided by the Sharingan. The Susanoo unwittingly released Itachi, dropping him.

Itachi then wiped some blood from his mouth, and made hand five seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Itachi thrust his bloodied hand down, producing a burst of smoke, and from the smoke, a giant raven emerged, braking Itachi's fall.

"You shouldn't trust your Sharingan so much, given that it failed to see the flashbang I hid in my hand," Itachi whispered to himself. "Fly above him!"

The giant black feathered bird obeyed, and placed itself and Itachi above the still blinded Fugaku. Itachi's eyes morphed into his Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan form, as he aimed his vision at Fugaku's wings.

"Amaterasu!"

Black flames erupted around Fugaku's Susanoo's wings, consuming them almost instantly. Without wings, the so called Perfect Susanoo plunged towards the ground below, crashing with a thunderous boom.

The Impure World Resurrection's regeneration quickly healed the damage to Fugaku's eyes, allowing him to see again. Despite being wingless, the rest of his Susanoo was still in one piece. He'd only need to pump more chakra in order to regrow its wings and take to the sky.

"This is the end, father," Sasuke said.

Fugaku turned to see his son's purple Susanoo, its sword raised towards the sky, and its left hand coated in a mass of lightning.

"Sasuke? What are you going to-"

Fugaku was interrupted by a thunder. Looking up, he saw that the sky was covered in dark storm clouds. He could see the flash of light produced by lightning jumping from one cloud to another. It was then followed by a draconic figure made of pure lightning emerging from the clouds. Just what kind of jutsu was that?

"Susanoo: Kirin Lightning Blade!"

Suddenly, Sasuke's Susanoo rushed forward, its blade still raised. A powerful lightning fell from the sky, landing on Sasuke's Susanoo's blade, acting as a lightning rod, supercharging it with electricity, before the electrical blade was brought down.

Fugaku's Susanoo manifested once again its double bladed sword in order to parry the strike. However, it proved to be useless as Sasuke's attack cut through his defense as if it was made of butter, before striking the Susanoo itself. All the energy stored in the blade

was released at once resulting in an explosion of white light that disintegrated Fugaku's Susanoo, as well as Fugaku himself.

Of course, being a reanimation, not even disintegration was enough to put Fugaku for good, and the bits of paper and dust he was reduced to quickly gathered and formed, regenerating his body. And once he was finally regenerated...

"Urk!"

... the Sword of Totsuka pierced his back, and went through his body, emerging from his chest.

"It is done," Itachi said. "Now I will seal you, father. And once Impure World Resurrection is undone, I'll release your soul into the afterlife."

"I... thank you, son," Fugaku said. "Thank you."

"Is there anything you want to say before I seal you?" Itachi asked.

"Since you're giving me the chance... yes," Fugaku weakly said. "Itachi... I'm sorry for the way I treated you. For what I forced you to do that night. I can't imagine what your life has been after that. Still, I'm proud to see that you become such a strong and loyal ninja, and that your conviction hadn't wavered since the last time I saw you."

Sasuke, his Susanoo no longer active, was now walking towards the two. He hadn't completely heard what Fugaku was saying, but he was able to read his lips. He walked closer, imagining, or at least hoping, that his father would have some last words for him.

"Sasuke," Fugaku said. "Come closer."

Said hope turned out to be true. "I'm here, father."

"Sasuke... I'm sorry the way I treated you too. How I wasn't the father you deserved to have. I tried to excuse myself by saying that being a Clan Head didn't leave me enough time to spend it with you, but we both know that that's a lie. I can't imagine either how the

repercussions of my ill fated insurrection affected you, given that you were so young. But... I'm very happy and relieved to see the fine young man and ninja you turned out to be. I couldn't ask for a better son, Sasuke. All I ask you now is to follow the same path you're walking right now. You and your brother will be the ones to give the Uchiha Clan back the honor I made it lose. I love you, son."

"I... I love you too, father," Sasuke said, as his eyes started to get wet. He mentally chastised himself for getting so emotional, but he struggled to fight the tears back.

Itachi took Fugaku's silence as his cue, and sealed him completely inside the Susanoo's gourd.

"Hey, brother," Itachi said, as he walked towards Sasuke, the red Susanoo fading into nothingness. "Are you okay?"

"No," Sasuke replied. "But I will be."

"This fight had to be very hard on you, Sasuke," Itachi said, placing a hand on his shoulder, and slowly pulled him into a hug.

"Is this what you felt when you had to fight all of our clansmen eight years ago?" Sasuke asked.

"More or less. Though I think it was worse back then," Itachi told him. "After all, our clansmen were living people back then."

There was a moment of silence, as the two brothers stood there, motionless. After a minute, Itachi spoke again.

"I believe the battle is still going on," Itachi said, finally breaking the hug. "Now that we're done with this, we should go with the others, and help them."

"Agreed. But..." Sasuke's voice wavered. "Just give me a second."

Itachi smiled at him. "Of course."

Thanks to Sasuke's Kirin, the dark storm clouds around them started to disperse, allowing light to flood the forest around them. And as the Uchiha brothers looked at the shining sky, they could feel how the emotional wounds that had been there since that fateful night eight years ago were finally beginning to close.

Author's Note: And thus, with Sasuke finally learning to forgive himself and mastering the Mangekyo Sharingan, his character arc finally comes to an end. Gotta say, thinking how he was going to do it was a bit of a pain in the ass, mostly because I'm not that confident writing for Sasuke. I hope that it wasn't too corny. And to clear any potential confusion, no, the voice Sasuke heard wasn't Sakura talking to him via telepathy, but a part of Sasuke's subconscious which happens to sound like Sakura, since she's been the one trying the hardest to make sure Sasuke forgives himself. Oh well, I'm glad I can finally put that behind me.

Some people might be a bit upset that Mikoto wasn't featured. Originally I was planning to have Mikoto be part of the battle, but I discarded her for two reasons: the first being that, lacking a Susanoo, wouldn't contribute much to the fight. And second, I felt that her presence was a little redundant, and that Fugaku was just enough. You may say that I could have her fight somebody else, but then her fight wouldn't have much emotional weight behind it and she'd feel like a wasted character. So seeing no winning options, I simply choose not to use her.

Even if not as emotionally charged, I hope you guys also enjoyed the resolution of the battles with Nagato and the Wood Golem.

Next chapter, the aftermath of not just this battle, but the battle the First Division lost as well. In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter, regardless if

it's a long or a short one. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Embers

Author's Note: After the last chapter, this story has now more than two million pageviews! Wohooooo! I never imagined that I'd write a story with more than one million, much less two. Thanks a lot to all of you guys, you made it possible.

Now, onto the next chapter:

Chapter 116:

Embers

or

Some rest at last

Undisclosed Location, a few days before the present time

"There he is!"

"Don't let him escape!"

"Be careful, that guy can kill you in one hit if you let him!"

Jugo was a man that, above all things, appreciated the quiet and calm.

Calm that he was denied due to being born with a Bloodline Limit that brought his most primal, animalistic, and downright violent impulses to the forefront, transforming him into a sadistic monster, both on the inside and the outside. His only hope was to seclude himself on a cave and pray that nobody would get close to him, since he didn't want to have more blood on his hands.

That's it, until a certain white haired man arrived, an Otogakure ninja by the name of Kimimaro Kaguya. Not only did Kimimaro managed to subdue Jugo when he succumbed to the rage and the violence of his curse, but introduced him to Orochimaru, a man who promised to help Jugo if he allowed the man to research his genes. Naturally, Jugo accepted.

Jugo spend most of his time under Orochimaru locked inside a cell, not that he would have wanted anything else. From time to time, Kimimaro would visit him and tell him about the missions the last member of the Kaguya clan completed. Then, one time Kimimaro requested Jugo to accompany him to a mission, to capture some old ninja from Iwa. Kimimaro almost lost his life to the dreaded Itachi Uchiha, but in the end, the mission was a success, and Orochimaru only lost one man to the enemy.

Then, Kimimaro visited for what he felt would be the last time in a long time, to tell him about the war that was going to happen. The days following that, silence reigned. The base was almost entirely empty, devoid of any activity. The only visits he received were the Oto ninjas who brought him food and water twice per day.

Until one day, the silence was no more. He could hear screams, shouts, metal clashing against metal. He was then released by an Otogakure ninja, and his words made no sense.

"There has been a revolt! They outnumber us! You have to help us!" the Oto ninja cried.

Those were his last words, as the man was then slain, much to Jugo's surprise, by another ninja also wearing Otogakure's uniform. So, these people would dare betray Orochimaru-sama? He would make them regret it.

At first, Jugo had no trouble beating the ninjas who tried to fight him, only needing a smidge of his curse to even the odds and stay at a comfortable advantage. Then, *she* showed up. And with a few jutsu, she showed that he wasn't a rival to her. The orange haired man

decided that the best thing he could do was to escape and find either Kimimaro or Orochimaru-sama, and warn them about the betrayal among their own ranks.

So that's how he found himself running away from men that by all accounts should have been his comrades, but were now his enemies.

"Earth Release: Mud Trap!"

Suddenly, the ground beneath Jugo's feet turned into a pit of mud, breaking his escape, as he started to slowly sink. This trap would stop most ninjas, but most ninjas weren't Jugo. Activating his curse, Jugo grew several tube-like appendages on his back. Said appendages fired jets of chakra, propelling the orange haired man upwards, allowing him to escape.

Escape which was also short lived as the ball end of a kusarigama wrapped its chain around his ankles, making him drop to the ground. Growling, Jugo pulled the chain, and the hapless ninja with it, towards him, before slamming his fist on the man's face, sending him flying backwards. He didn't know if the man was dead or not, and frankly he didn't care.

More traitors landed around him, weapons drawn. They were cutting his escape, but not for long. All he need was-

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Too late. Multiple wooden roots broke from the ground beneath him, and quickly wrapped themselves around his body and limbs, immobilizing him completely.

"Well done," the jutsu caster, a young white haired woman in an Otogakure uniform, said as he landed near them. She walked towards Jugo, and smiled. "Now he won't escape."

Jugo growled at her. "We always knew that there were traitors among our ranks. But you, Orochimaru-sama's own daughter, to be one of them, is beyond shameful."

Hebiko's face morphed into a mask of fury, stomped towards Jugo, and slapped him across the face. "Traitor!? You think I'm a traitor!?" she screeched. "It was our beloved father who abandoned his son and my brother to Konoha! Then he promised me that he wouldn't rest until he was back with us, but he lied! He lied to me, and lied to him!"

"You were the one who killed Kabuto, right?" Jugo asked, as he now realized who was behind the silver haired medic-nin's mysterious death. "You now lash at Orochimaru-sama by killing people he considers valuable."

Hebiko turned around, and seethed. "I'm done with Orochimaru. I want him to pay for his betrayal, to lose everything he has and cherish. Though my reasons behind killing him were more pragmatic rather than emotional."

"Then what do you want to do with me?" Jugo asked.

Hebiko turned around, and gave him an unnerving smile. "You're a bargaining chip. Wood Release: Blooming Garden!"

That moment, flowers started to grow on the roots that were immobilizing Jugo. They reached maturity in a few seconds, and upon blooming, showered the orange haired man with glittering yellow pollen. The moment he inhaled that pollen, Jugo fell deeply asleep. Tentatively, Hebiko released Jugo from the restraining roots, and he fell to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Yes, he wouldn't move in quite some time.

"It is done. Bind him, and cover him in chakra suppressing seals. I saw him in action, and while he lacks finesse, his raw power is impressive," Hebiko ordered. Two of her men were already picking

the unconscious Jugo up, and dragged him away. "Then burn this place down. We're already done here."

"Yes ma'am!" the rest of the ninjas say.

"Once we finish this task, what are we going to do next?" one of her ninjas asked. "Where are we going?"

"To the Ninja Alliance HQ," Hebiko said. "It's about time to get my brother back."

...

Land of Fire, Nighttime, present time

After the battle was over, Division Commanders A, Kurotsuchi and Tsunade ordered their troops to find a suitable place for a base camp. The first order of business was to attend the wounded and gather the dead. The second order of business, naturally, was to report HQ of the result of their battle. The three of them were now inside the Communications Tent, with Ino Yamanaka being the one linking their minds to those in HQ.

" *Congratulations for your victory,*" Jiraiya's voice said, sounding satisfied. "*This will bring us one step closer to put an end to this war.*"

A grumbled, clenching his fist. "This wasn't much of a victory if we needed no less than three divisions to break their advance."

"I'm afraid I'll have to give it to the big guy," Kurotsuchi agreed with a nod. "We've been winning most of the battles, but I have this feeling that Akatsuki is just playing with us. The quality of the reanimations have been increasing with each passing battle. I'm afraid of what are they going to throw at us next."

"Tsunade and her Rinnegan were of much help this battle, but she can't be in every battle at once," the Raikage concluded.

" I see your point. We're suffering many casualties," Jiraiya's voice said, as Shikaku's image flashed in their minds for second. A tear dropped from Ino's eyes hidden by the psychic enhancing helmet. "But so is Akatsuki. We destroyed many of their Zetsu Clones, as well as their reanimations."

"But Orochimaru can replace the reanimations we kill, can't he?" Kurotsuchi asked.

" Technically yes, but I'm afraid it won't be that easy," Jiraiya replied. "Impure World Resurrection needs a living sacrifice to reanimate somebody, and I presume Orochimaru isn't in position to kidnap people to kill. Also, according to our research of the jutsu, the piece of DNA used to revive the intended target is consumed by the jutsu, and I'd bet the royalties of my Icha Icha series that Orochimaru used most of his available DNA of the deceased ninjas to create this batch of zombies. The fact that we haven't seen any of the zombies we previously destroyed support this claim."

" Still, to let such line of thinking drop our guard when we don't have hard evidence to sustain it would be beyond foolish," Chiyo's voice chimed in.

"Relax, nobody said anything about dropping our guard," Tsunade replied, rolling her eyes. "If anything, I'd say that things will get even harder from this point onwards. There are many ninjas that Orochimaru could have resurrected but we haven't seen yet. Like former Kages."

" Did Orochimaru resort to do that in the past?" Ao's voice asked.

" Indeed. When he attacked Konoha a few years ago, he had brought the First, Second and Fourth Hokages with him," Jiraiya explained. "The fact that he was able to resurrect my former apprentice is especially troublesome, given that his soul should be sealed inside the stomach of the God of the Dead."

"And now that he has a much greater mastery of the jutsu, he will resurrect them, as well as more Kages to bolster Akatsuki's forces," A said.

The Raikage clenched his fist even harder when he realized that his late father, the previous Raikage, would be among those resurrected. The Third Raikage was one of the strongest ninjas Kumo ever produced, being more than a match for the Eight Tails, and needing an army of ten thousand Konoha and Suna ninjas fighting him for three days straight until he finally died of exhaustion.

He wondered if he'd be able to fight his father if his worst fears went to pass. He heard how Fugaku Uchiha, who was among the reanimations that contributed to his previous defeat, had been fought and destroyed by his two sons. He didn't want to imagine what those two kids had to feel while they were fighting that mockery of their deceased father.

Then there was also the Copy Ninja Kakashi, who also had to put down his own father, the White Fang, as well as the father from Takigakure's young leader. And of course, the father of the Yamanaka girl that was now linking their minds with HQ, the one who had scanned his mind looking for the jinchuriki's hideout.

"By the way, I have bad news," A interceded. "During my division's battle with Akatsuki, a reanimation of what I've been told was the former Yamanaka Clan head," Ino flinched upon hearing that. The fact that her father was still out there tormented her. "Managed to ambush me and scan my mind. Despite my best efforts, he was able to pry from my mind the location of the three jinchuriki."

"What!?" Tsunade said, almost screaming, turning at him.

" *These are grave news indeed,*" Onoki's voice said.

" *Raikage, you know that island. What are Akatsuki's chances of finding it?*" Jiraiya asked. His tone was firm, but the Raikage could tell that there was worry in his voice.

"I'd say null, since I gave explicit orders to move the island daily to minimize the chances of being found," A replied. "But if they have those flying Zetsu looking for it from the sky... I'd say they do have a chance to find it."

"That would explain why we saw so few flying Zetsu lately," Kurotsuchi said, placing a hand under her chin. "They must be using them to scour the skies. I think we should send reinforcements to the island."

"No. If we do that, Akatsuki might follow them and find it even faster," A countered.

"I agree with the Raikage," Jiraiya said, "I'll send a messenger toad to tell them to keep their eyes open, and to expect a potential attack. Anything else you might want to tell me?"

"Oh yes, there's something more," Kurotsuchi said, before looking at Tsunade. "And given that Tsunade is with us, she may offer some insight on the subject."

Upon hearing this, Tsunade raised an eyebrow.

"What is it, granddaughter?" Onoki's voice asked.

"Today Akatsuki send a new weapon against us. Not a new kind of Zetsu or reanimation but... a colossal creature made of wood," Kurotsuchi said. "I heard some Konoha ninjas called it a 'Wood Golem', and is related to the First Hokage."

"A Wood Golem?" Onoki's shocked voice said. *"Good grief!"*

"I take you're familiar with the creature. And that it's not good news," Kurotsuchi said.

"Yes. The Wood Golem was my grandfather's most powerful jutsu that didn't involve Senjutsu," Tsunade said. "It's powerful enough to

match any Tailed Beast in combat. And you say that you fought against one?"

"Well, not me alone. I had hundreds of other ninjas backing me up. Some of them Sages, from what I've been told," Kurotsuchi said. "But if it wasn't for Dust Release, I don't think we would have been able to put that thing down for good."

"This begets a question," Jiraiya interceded. "HOW did Akatsuki managed to summon a Wood Golem?"

"It isn't obvious? Somebody among Akatsuki's ranks with Wood Release created it," A replied. "After all, both Obito and those Zetsu monsters have the cells of the First Hokage."

"Is not that simple," Tsunade said, shaking her head. "Like I said before, the Wood Golem was one of my grandfather's most powerful jutsu. No other Wood Release user in Konoha, either born with it like my youngest daughter or gained it through artificial means like Tenzo or Rin Nohara were able to replicate a jutsu of such scale."

"Indeed. That's like saying that any Water Release user should be able to flood a coast city with a tsunami," Jiraiya agreed.

"It is as we feared," Chiyo's voice was heard. "Akatsuki hasn't even deployed their most powerful assets yet. I'm sure that wasn't the only giant golem they have in reserve."

"Did any of our scouts find the location of Akatsuki's base?" A asked.

"Unfortunately, we didn't," Jiraiya replied. "We do know that at the very least, Orochimaru has to be relatively close to his reanimations if he wants to directly control them."

"Some of our best sensors are working on it, but given the jutsu's range, it leaves us with quite a vast area to search," Ao's voice interceded.

"Let's hope Naruto and Fu can finish their training soon," Tsunade said, letting out a sigh, her arms crossed. "Not only are they in danger, but I'm afraid we're going to need them in the front lines."

"Yes. I'd say that Akatsuki has yet to do their worst," Kurotsuchi said, shaking her head.

"Fortunately, our casualties are lower than Akatsuki's, plus we still have the Fourth Division completely fresh," Jiraiya replied, trying to sound positive. *"So, anything else you need to report?"*

The two Kages and the one Sannin looked at each other, but none of them said anything.

"No, we believe that's all," A said.

"Very well then. In that case, let's wrap this meeting up. Go and have some rest," Jiraiya said.

Ino undid the mental link, and everybody left the communications tent.

...

As with every other aftermath of a victorious battle, the mood around the Allied Forces was that of celebration. Many ninjas were sitting around bonfires, sharing meals, chatting with each other, and having a good time, as they enjoyed the feeling of surviving another battle, and that the fact that with each victory, the war'd end was a little closer.

Not everybody was in the mood for celebrations, though. As with every battle, many ninjas lost their lives. And those who died in the line of duty had friends and loved ones, some of them who were also part of the same division. And while many learnt of their loved ones' deaths after the battle, others were unfortunate enough to see their friends and family dying before their very eyes.

Such was the case of Shikamaru Nara. After he saw his father being gutted by the zombie of Fugaku Uchiha, the now Nara Clan Head remained strong for the sake of his friends and comrades, and pushed his feelings of sadness and sorrow away, and continued to do so until reinforcements arrived.

Though, now that the immediate threat was finally over, Shikamaru didn't have to repress his feelings anymore. That's why he looked for a place away from the large crowds, sat down, and cried his eyes out, until his eyes could shed no more tears. It made him realize something: when Inoichi died so many years ago, he thought he could understand how Ino felt, given that both he and Choji were pretty close to her dad. However, now that it was his own father who died, he realized it was much worse.

"Hey."

Shikamaru looked up, a bit startled, since he wasn't expecting anyone to find him there. Then again, if there was someone who could that, that was his Jonin-sensei Asuma.

"Oh... hey," Shikamaru greeted back.

"Do you mind some company?" Asuma asked, noticing Shikamaru's reddened eyes. "It looks like you need it."

Shikamaru didn't say anything. He did want to be alone, but the rational part of his brain told him that talking to a friendly face would do him good. The young Nara nodded, and the Sarutobi Jonin sat besides him.

"First of all, let me tell you I'm very sorry," Asuma said, placing a hand on Shikamaru's shoulder. "Even before taking you under my wing, I was close with your dad. He was a great man. He didn't deserve to die like that. He didn't deserve to die in this war, either."

"Just like how Ino's dad didn't deserve to die in the Uchiha insurrection, along with many others," Shikamaru said, letting out a

mirthless chuckle. "You know, I should have expected this. I mean, we're ninjas, death is part of our job description. You hear missions going wrong and ninjas dying all the time, but those are people you don't know, and you think it's never going to happen to you... until it does."

"We might be ninjas, but we're also human," Asuma told him. "Feeling sad for those who left us behind is only natural."

"I know..." Shikamaru said. "You know, I'm happy that Choza was assigned to that Kumo secret island, away from the battles. At least one of us will still have a father when all of this ends."

"Also, why are you here, all on your own?" Asuma asked. "Given what you're going through, you should share how you feel with your friends. I'm sure they'll make going through this much easier."

"I didn't want to bother them... and I didn't want them to see me like this," Shikamaru replied, his voice almost a whisper. "Plus... I wanted to be alone."

"Yes, I can understand that feeling," Asuma said, nodding. "But in my own experience, that's never good. You have wonderful friends, Shikamaru. Friends who are in this very same division. Don't push them away when you need them the most."

"Your own experience?" Shikamaru repeated, as the gears in his brain started to turn, and quickly realized whom he was talking about. "Oh, right, Biwako Sarutobi..."

"My mother, yes. She died the night the Nine Tails attacked, though ironically, she wasn't killed by the beast, but by that damn Uchiha traitor," Asuma said almost in a growl, his hand clenching into a fist at the memory. "And I wasn't the only one who lost family or friends that day. My wife also lost her father. Kakashi lost his sensei."

"Iruka-sensei also lost his parents that night," Shikamaru remembered.

"Yes. This life is far from easy," Asuma said. "That's why relying on others when we're at our lowest moments is so important. The pain didn't go away in an instant, and in a manner of speaking, it never went away. But my friends and remaining family made that pain a little less unbearable."

"There you are!" a new voice said.

Shikamaru raised his eyes, and saw Ino and Choji approaching him. While maybe not bad as him, the two of them looked like they also did their own share of crying.

"Shikamaru... what are you doing here?" Choji asked.

"Asuma-sensei?" Ino asked.

Asuma didn't say anything, and merely nudged Shikamaru. The young Nara got up, and took a step towards his teammates.

"I... sorry guys..." he felt like crying some more, but his reddened eyes were completely dry. "I just wanted to be alone..."

"No, it's... it's okay..." Ino said. "I felt the same way when... when my dad died."

Then, without any warning, Choji pulled Shikamaru into a hug, hug that Ino joined in as well.

"Hey man... just so you know... we're here for you, okay?" Choji asked, tears streaming from his eyes.

"You were there for me when my dad died, and I'll be here for you as well," Ino added, crying as well.

"Yeah! We're the Ino-Shika-Cho! As long as we have each other, nothing can stop us!" Choji said, trying and failing to reel in his tears.

"I... thank you... thank you guys..." Shikamaru replied, his voice quivering.

...

Meanwhile, at other side of the camp, while a member of the Koniha 15 was mourning the death of his father, another reunited with his.

"Father," Neji said.

"Neji!" Hizashi said in surprise, rushing to greet the young man. Hikari was slowly walking behind him, leaving the man enough space as not to intrude with the reunion. "My son! I'm so glad to see you're okay! How have you been?"

"I've been good, father. Despite the constant danger, I never felt myself in danger." Neji reassured him. He then looked at Hikari, and bowed. "Hikari-sama."

"Come on Neji, you can drop the honorific already. I'm not the Clan Head anymore. 'Aunt Hikari' would be fine," the woman said.

"I'm sorry Hikari-sama, I mean, aunt," Neji replied, bowing again. "Even if I treasure being free from the yokel of the Caged Bird Seal, there are some habits that are a bit hard to break. Anyway, I can see that the two of you have been doing good. You don't appear to have any kind of visible wound."

"Physical, maybe. Our wounds are more internal, boy," Hizashi said.

"Your father and I were forced to fight the undead reanimation of my late husband," Hikari said, as she averted her gaze.

A frown developed on Neji's face, as he clenched his fist. "Of course. Hiashi-sama was a formidable ninja. It's only logical that Orochimaru would decide to recruit him for his army of abominations. I trust you dealt with him?"

"Yes. My brother returned where he belonged," Hizashi said. "Still, fighting him was a harrowing experience."

"There were many of our clansmen that that traitor raised as his undead slaves," Hikari said, her face contorting into an angry grimace. "Not only Akatsuki was responsible for the greatest blow our clan ever suffered, but now they have to reopen old wounds and rub salt into them."

"This war is unlike any other ever fought, indeed," Hizashi said. "Akatsuki is not only using brute force, but they expect to demoralize us by forcing us to fight our late loved ones. We must not fall to such cheap tactics."

Hikari let out a weary sigh. "I know. But it's easier said than done."

"You weren't the only ones fighting a loved one. I heard that Sasuke and Itachi Uchiha had to fight their father," Neji told them. "I managed to catch some of the fight through my Byakugan, and I can confirm that they were the only ones capable of fighting him on even terms."

"Poor kids. They didn't deserve that," Hizashi said, shaking his head. "Let's hope they don't have to go through such horrible experience again."

Neji couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "I must say, I wasn't expecting you to show so much sympathy to the Uchihas. Did Natsu getting close to Itachi changed all your perception of them?"

"Itachi Uchiha helped evacuate our weakest clan members during the Akatsuki's invasion of Konoha. We owe him a lot," Hizashi explained.

"Plus, we know that neither him, nor Sasuke or Shisui are like the rest of his clansmen who betrayed the village for power," Hikari added.

"Too bad there's still one Uchiha left that's a rotten apple," Neji replied, reminding his father and aunt of Obito.

"Indeed. But thankfully, his days of undermining Konoha will soon come to an end," Hizashi said. "Not only is he's losing more and more troops with each battle, but he also lost the puppets from that Toneri man."

"Really?" Neji asked.

"There were reports from a couple battlefields of the puppets suddenly stopping working all of sudden," Hizashi explained. "And we haven't seen any more since those news arrived."

"Then that means that Hinata's mission was a success," Hikari said, placing her hands over her heart. "Hopefully she will come back to us soon enough."

"And with her help, the war will end even sooner."

...

"There you are!"

Choji was a bit startled by the girl shouting behind him, but when he turned around and saw Karui walking towards him, he smiled.

"Hey, Karui!" he said, waving at her, as he walked towards her as well, meeting the Kumo Kunoichi in the middle.

"So..." the redheaded kunoichi began, rubbing her arm, looking a bit uneasy. "... how is your friend?"

"You mean Shikamaru?" Choji asked. Karui nodded. The Akimichi heir's expression understandably saddened a little. "Not too good. But that's as expected. He saw his dad being killed in front of him. That's not something he's going to recover from soon. Though he said he's going to make an effort in order to keep his head in the war."

"Poor guy. It has to be tough, to repress his feelings like that," Karui replied, as she and Choji started to walk together towards nowhere

in particular. "But maybe that's how he chose to honor his father's memory. I still remember when the news of B-sensei's capture of Akatsuki reached us. Both my teammates and I were so devastated... and I decided that the best we could do is to continue with our jobs to the best of our ability for that same reason, albeit in our case we were lucky he turned out to be alive."

"Shikaku was Konoha's Jonin Commander, and he took his job pretty seriously, so yeah, I can believe that that's what he'd want Shikamaru to do. At least, as long as the war continues," Choji said, sounding downtrodden.

"So, where is he? I don't know him much, but I want to give him my condolences," Karui sympathetically said.

"Um, he said he felt tired and went to his tent right now in order to sleep," Choji told Karui, who deflated a little.

"Well, he isn't going to get much sleep with all the noise going around us," Karui said, looking around to all the celebrating ninjas around them, as well as the multitude of bonfires.

"Eh, besides his intellect and strategical skills, one of Shikamaru's biggest talents is being able to sleep pretty much anywhere and anytime," Choji replied, making the redhead chuckle a little. He then sobered up a little. "We better let him rest. He might feel a little better tomorrow."

"If I don't see him, please give him condolences on my behalf," Karui requested.

"Will do," the Akimichi replied.

There was a moment of silence. Then, Karui began to think about something Choji had said earlier, and asked: "Were you and your friend's dad close?"

"Yes. Our clans have been pretty close to each other, as well as Ino's clan," Choji began. "And thus, Shikaku was not just like an uncle, but like a second dad to me and Ino."

"I've never heard of three clans being that close to each other," Karui noted. "Or at least, being so close yet still remain relatively independent."

"Yeah. I know our clans are something of an aberration. Before the time of the villages, some clans would make alliances here and there, but never permanent or even long term. Our clans, though, became so close upon realizing how our unique jutsu worked so well with each other," the Akimichi Clan heir explained.

Karui looked pensive, as if analyzing Choji's words. "Well, I kind of understand that. After all, clan unity was the foundation of the ninja villages. Yours started earlier than the rest."

"Though, speaking of clans, and now that I think about it... I don't think you ever told me your last name," Choji told him.

"Oh. Well, I do have a last name, but in Kumo, we don't give them much importance, so we don't use them that often. Mostly for legal matters and stuff like that," Karui told him.

"That's... pretty odd," Choji said.

"That's how Kumo rolls. The first Raikage wanted to make sure that his ninjas were Kumo ninjas first, everything else second, as a way to create unity and avoid clashes between the clans that formed the fledgling village, so he wanted to downplay clan identity in favor of village identity," Karui explained.

"Heh, I don't think if such thing would have flown in Konoha. The clans that formed it, mine included, were very proud of their name, history and identity," Choji mentioned.

"Well, people didn't nod and happily accepted such thing at first. The original clans that formed the nascent Kumo were like that as well, if history books were anything to go by," the redhead continued.

"That's why the first Raikage, in order to set example, not only did he give up his clan name, but his own name as well, and merely adopted the name 'A', as a symbol of being a servant of Kumo first and foremost. The following Raikages did the same as well."

"Wait, so your Raikage isn't really named 'A'?" Choji asked. "Well, it makes sense, having a single letter for a name is kind of dumb."

Karui couldn't help but giggle. "I see. I'll tell my teammate T what do you think of her name."

"W-wait! I said that without thinking!" Choji sputtered, as he shook his arms wildly. "I mean, one letter names can be kind of cool... !"

"Relax, silly," Karui said, chuckling a little. "I don't plan to tell her anything. But yeah, thanks to our first Raikage, one letter names became kind of common in our village."

"Still, I better watch my tongue from now onwards. I'd hate to accidentally insult one of your friends," Choji sheepishly said.

...

Despite the recent victory, both for the Ninja Alliance and on a personal level, Sasuke wasn't in the mood for parties. That's why, instead of joining the others in their celebration of their recent victory, the youngest Uchiha decided to stay on a place away from the main camp, albeit not too far away, for cautionary reasons. Finding a not too tall tree, Sasuke climbed it and sat on one of its highest branches, and looked at the starry sky.

After so long, he finally did it. He had mastered the Mangekyo Sharingan. No matter how many times he used it, he wasn't forced to relieve that horrible moment from his past. The complete powers

of the Uchiha were now at his disposal. And all he had to do was to follow the advice from his pink haired smartass of a girlfriend.

"She's never going shut up when I tell her about it," Sasuke chuckled good naturedly.

However, even then, dark thoughts managed to push their way into his mind. Had he realized the key to mastering his power sooner, maybe he should have been able to complete some missions that ended in failure. The fight against Akatsuki to stop them from capturing Yugito being chief among them.

"Had that battle gone differently, maybe Akatsuki wouldn't have been emboldened to start a war with only five Tailed Beasts. Not to mention that we would have one more perfect jinchuriki among our ranks," Sasuke said in realization. However, Sasuke then did something his past self would have never done: pushing those negative thoughts away. "No! There's no use in lamenting about the past. All that I can do is make sure the future is better. I can't obsess over a single issue, that's why I was unable to master the Mangekyo Sharingan."

"You should latch onto that train of thought. It would do you a lot of good," a new voice said. "In fact, I'd say it's doing you a lot of good."

Sasuke turned around, and saw his Jonin-sensei perched on the same branch. She then sat beside him. "Do you mind some company?"

Sasuke merely shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

"I heard about your battle against the reanimation of your father. Itachi-kun and you did a pretty good job," Shizune said. "And you managed to master your Mangekyo Sharingan just in time. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, sensei," Sasuke replied, averting his gaze so his teacher wouldn't see the faint blush across his face.

"So, what are you doing here all by yourself?" Shizune asked. "I'd figured out you'd be with Sakura. Or with Itachi."

"Sakura is helping Tsunade watching over some injured in grave condition. I think her shift will end in a couple hours," Sasuke said, before a scowl developed in his face. "And Itachi is with *Natsu*."

Shizune flinched upon hearing how Sasuke practically spat the name of Itachi's almost-girlfriend. "Wow. You're not that fond of that girl, are you? I'm glad that you were okay with me dating and later marrying your cousin."

"Not you too..." Sasuke groaned.

"Yeah, Itachi already told me you aren't that fond of the girl," Shizune said, giggling a little.

"If you're going to tell me that I'm being irrational and petty, save it," the Uchiha scoffed.

"While you ARE being irrational and petty, I'm going to tell you that," Shizune said. "I know it's just a phase, and that you'll eventually learn to accept that your brother has the right to love someone like you and Shisui have."

"Whatever."

Shizune's smile didn't falter. "Anyway, let's talk about something more positive. Like your victory today. Did it make you feel good?"

"It felt like... like a door of my past that had been opened for years has finally been closed," Sasuke replied. "Seeing father after so many years wasn't a pleasant experience, much less being forced to fight against him. But now that I did, I feel... liberated."

"The Uchiha Insurrection left many wounds that took very long to close," Shizune agreed with a nod. "What most people don't realize is that the remaining Uchiha were just as hurt as the rest of Konoha."

"Hearing father saying that he regretted what he did helped. As well as the fact that at least we got to say goodbye to each other, unlike that time," Sasuke said, letting out a sigh he didn't know was holding. "It would have been nice if I had the same chance with mom but... on the other side, I would have hated seeing her as a other undead slave of Orochimaru."

"Many people are being forced to fight deceased loved ones," Shizune said.

"What about you, sensei? Are you afraid that Orochimaru might raise from the grave a deceased loved one?" Sasuke asked. Then again, he couldn't think in anybody that Shizune could consider precious that wasn't still alive. "Now that I think about it, I don't think you ever told us about your family other than Tsunade."

"Because, for a good part of my life, Tsunade-sama was all my family," Shizune replied. "My parents died on a mission when I could barely speak, and before Tsunade-sama took me under her wing, it was my uncle Dan who raised me. In case you don't know, Dan was Tsunade-sama's former lover. He tragically died during the Second Ninja War. It was his death who prompted Tsunade-sama to abandon the village and become a vagrant."

"Was he strong?" Sasuke asked.

"Very," Shizune said with a nod. "There were talks that, once the Second War was over, he'd succeed the Third as the new Hokage. But alas, it couldn't be, and it wasn't until Minato took the hat that Sarutobi-sama retired. Not that his retirement lasted that long."

"A powerful ninja with potential to cause emotional damage to our two best medics. Then surely Orochimaru brought him back from the dead," Sasuke stated.

Despite the possibility, Shizune remained unperturbed. "I think I may jinx it, but I don't think there's anything Orochimaru has to throw at us that can take us down for good."

"You seem awfully confident in us," Sasuke noted.

"How can I not be, after seeing the amazing work you did today?" Shizune smiled at Sasuke. "Especially now that you're stronger than ever."

Strong. Yes. That word resonated in Sasuke's mind. After awakening the Mangekyo Sharingan, Sasuke felt powerful. But his control of said power was very little. Not anymore. Now he felt truly strong. Because the burdens of the past weren't slowing him down anymore. Yes, he felt he could take down any enemy.

Fate, however, would take Sasuke on that statement soon.

...

Ninja Alliance HQ, Land of Fire, Next Day

Iruka Umino had never been in a war before. The closest thing to an actual battle he had been in was the night the Nine Tails attacked Konoha, and the night the Uchiha Clan rebelled. Two nights that would never forget, no matter how much he tried. So of course, the idea of being deployed to a war didn't appeal to him in the slightest, even if he was ready to lay his life down for the sake of his village.

So, when he was assigned to the Ninja Alliance HQ Defense Platoon -because of his skill with defensive and barrier ninjutsu-, to say he was happy was an understatement. Of course, he didn't voice those thoughts out loud, he didn't want to appear like a craven to both his fellow Konoha ninjas and the ninjas from other villages he was working alongside at the moment.

Then again, it has been almost a decade since Iruka had been an active ninja the strict sense of the word. Shortly after being 18, Iruka was asked to fill a temporal position as a teacher at the Academy. While reluctant at first, he grew to love the job, to the point that he applied to become a full time teacher. Even if Iruka continued

training and honing his skills on his own, he saw very little combat during that period.

So, needless to say, Iruka was glad that that he was assigned to a position that, even if the possibility of being attacked was there, it was quite small.

The explosions that rocked the entire area made the teacher realize that a small probability doesn't mean zero.

"We're under attack!" an Iwa ninja cried.

This managed to alert all the ninjas inside the building, who poured outside of it, kunai, shuriken and other weapons ready. From the forest around the place, ninjas wearing Otogakure uniforms leaped into the ground, weapons ready as well.

"The thick of Akatsuki's army have been the White Zetsu clones. But Orochimaru still has his own army of ninjas," Iruka thought, pulling out a kunai, joining the fray. *"I guess his plan is to attack the brains of the Alliance so the rest of the divisions lack any tactical support and intelligence."*

"How the hell didn't our sensors notice enemy ninjas getting so close to our base?" an Ame ninja protested.

"Who knows! Now shut up and keep fighting!" a Kiri kunoichi replied. "We need to push them back!"

Suddenly, the ground started to shake, and a giant snake burst from the floor, sending the poor ninjas that were standing on that spot flying in multiple directions. The snake then opened its huge jaws, and more Oto ninjas poured from its mouth.

"Guss that explains how they were able to evade our sensors," Iruka bitterly said.

"Damn! A giant snake means that Orochimaru is here!" a Konoha ninja cried. "Hokage-sama! We need your help!"

"Don't call for the Hokage, you idiot!" Iruka chastised his fellow Konoha ninja. "Don't you realize that maybe that's what the enemy wants?"

"Orochimaru isn't the only one who's able to summon snakes," a feminine voice said. "Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The earth started to shake again, and this time, multiple wooden roots grew around them, forming a small forest almost instantly. The Allied ninjas leaped away as soon as they could, but others weren't fast enough to do so, and found themselves trapped when multiple vines and branches wrapped around them.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Bloom!"

Flowers started to grow all over the wooden trees and vines, and upon blooming, sprayed a yellow powder into the air.

"Try to hold your breath!" Iruka warned, as he covered his mouth and nose with his forearm.

Unfortunately, the warning came too late, as most of his companions inhaled it, and soon fell to the ground, weirdly enough, the Otogakure ninjas were able to stand inside the clouds of pollen, yet they didn't look any worse for the wear.

" *The balaclavas!*" he thought in realization. "*They must have air filters inside-*"

Unfortunately for the teacher, he didn't realize of the Oto ninja sneaking behind him, until he slammed his elbow onto his neck, knocking him out cold.

The battle was over. All the allied ninjas had been neutralized. The commander behind the attack, Hebiko, walked across the small

battlefield, examining and nodding in approval of the work her and her men had done. She stopped a few meters in front of the gates of the Allied Ninja HQ. Nobody else had exited the building after the initial wave of defenders poured from it. Probably because they thought she was trying to lure them to a trap or something.

Not that she was going to give them any choice, of course.

"Jiraiya! Come outside and show your face!" Hebiko yelled. "These ninjas are still alive! If you don't show up, I'm going to start killing them one by one!"

Fortunately, the artificial human didn't have to wait long for the white haired Sannin to exit through the building's front gate, hands in the air, trying to ease her into not doing anything rash.

"Here I am. There's no need for blood to be spilled today," Jiraiya said in a conciliatory tone. His eyes then fixed upon the young woman's face. "What do you want, girl? Or better said, what does Orochimaru want?"

Hebiko bristled upon hearing the name of her creator, however, she was able to rein her more wild impulses in before she could lose her composure. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes here.

"I'm not working for that man anymore," Hebiko seethed. "I'm here of my own volition. I want to-"

"Earth Release: Rock Prison!"

"What the-?"

After a quick tremor, large rocks burst from underground, slamming into Hebiko and the Otogakure ninjas, trapping them inside stone cocoons, leaving only their heads visible. They struggled to break free, but the rocks were too solid.

"You think you can waltz in here, harm our ninjas, and make demands to the Supreme Commander?" a gruff voice was heard coming from above.

Hebiko looked up, and saw an old man floating above her. Despite his small size and somewhat comical appearance, she could feel the power that irradiated from his small form.

"Nice timing, Onoki," Jiraiya thanked the former Tsuchikage, who nodded in return. "Make sure the unconscious ninjas are brought inside and tended over. From this point onwards, I can continue by myself."

"Don't get too cocky. Or lower your guard," Onoki said in an almost chastising tone. "I'm aware this girl has some connection to you, but don't let that blind you."

Ignoring the Tsuchikage, Jiraiya walked towards the clone of his daughter.

"Release me at once!" Hebiko protested, as she continued to struggle to break free.

"I think not. It isn't much better to talk like this? I'm usually not that keen on hostage situations. Unless I'm the one keeping the hostages," Jiraiya said. "Now, you said that you were no longer working for Orochimaru. Care to elaborate about that?"

After struggling some more, Hebiko decided to finally gave up. Sighing, she looked at Jiraiya in the eye, glaring daggers at him.

"Orochimaru abandoned my brother to Konoha. He promised that he would rescue him, but he has made no attempts to do so. I want him back," Hebiko told him.

Jiraiya let out a mocking laugh. "And you thought that if you came here and kidnapped a bunch of our ninjas, I'd trade him for them?"

"I might be young, but I'm not a fool. I only made this to make you come out," Hebiko replied. "I brought actual bargaining chips for you. One that can help you end this war."

This, naturally, drew Jiraiya's attention. "Okay kid, spill the beans. What is it? If I deem your information worthy, I may release your brother."

"Sorry, but no. First of all, release me. I won't negotiate with you if I'm unable to move or defend myself," Hebiko demanded.

"You take me for an idiot? I do that, and you either try to kill me on the spot, or run away," Jiraiya said, crossing his arms. "If there's something Orochimaru excels at, that's being a master of escape. And I'm sure you surely picked up a couple things from him."

"Your brats already defeated me. Am I that threatening to you?" Hebiko mocked.

"I already made many mistakes because I underestimated my enemies. I'm simply being cautious. But I think we can reach a compromise," Jiraiya said, before biting his thumb and making several hand seals. "Summoning Jutsu!"

Jiraiya jumped back, and slammed his palm onto the ground, producing a burst of smoke. From the smoke, a giant toad wielding a shield and a sasumata appeared. Jiraiya then channeled chakra into his fist, and slammed it against Hebiko's stone prison, shattering it.

"Try anything funny, and Gamaken here will make you into his snack," Jiraiya threatened, pointing his thumb at the toad. "Now start talking. For your sake, don't make me regret my decision."

Hebiko started rolling her shoulders. "I have to admit, you're far harsher than I expected."

"Were you expecting a different treatment?" Jiraiya asked. "You might look like my daughter, but you aren't Kaida. And as much as it

pains me, you are still loyal to Orochimaru."

"I'm not!" she protested, without realizing that she had yelled. She took a deep breath in order to calm herself down.

"What about those ninjas?" Jiraiya asked, nodding at the Otogakure ninjas around them. "How are they following you if don't work for Orochimaru anymore?"

"They no longer work for him either. I convinced them to follow me instead," Hebiko said. "Orochimaru has his way with words and know how to pick people that would see him as their savior. But once you show them proof of how Orochimaru really is, their loyalty isn't as unshakeable as the bastard expected.

"Now, a token of good faith. These are gifts with no strings attached."

Hebiko snapped her fingers, and more Otogakure ninjas hidden among the trees jumped into the open. One carried a giant scroll, while others were holding what appeared to be an unconscious orange haired large man. Jiraiya paid no attention to the latter, but had an idea of what the large scroll was.

"Is that...?"

"The Forbidden Scroll that a Konoha deserter stole during the Uchiha Insurrection and gave it to Orochimaru?" Hebiko finished, as if reading the Sannin's mind. "The one and only. Well, that might not be accurate anymore, given that Orochimaru probably made copies of it. But I thought you'd appreciate having it back."

"That's... an attentive gesture. Thank you," Jiraiya said. His voice, however, made no effort to hide the fact that that wasn't going to be enough. Still, that wasn't the only thing the cloned woman brought. He finally looked at the unconscious man. "Who is that guy?"

"His name is Jugo. We believe him to be the last member of his clan. He possesses a Bloodline Limit that allows him to draw nature

energy and use it to undergo a body transformation. Doing so, however, renders him insanely violent as long as the transformation lasts," Hebiko explained. "And before you ask what does he has to with anything, Jugo's DNA is the basis behind Orochimaru's cursed seal."

That, naturally, drew Jiraiya's attention. Even if they had means to destroy the Cursed Seal now thanks to Hinata and Hanabi, the chance of learning how it worked was too good to pass. Not to mention that it would deprive Orochimaru from branding more innocent people with that seal. Plus, having a way to remove it that didn't involve Hinata or Hanabi would be a nice plus.

"A very valuable asset indeed," Jiraiya said with a nod.

"And like I said, these two gifts come with no price tag attached. A symbol of my good faith," she insisted.

"I see. If these aren't your bargaining chips, then what you plan to give me in exchange of your brother has a much greater worth, am I right?" Jiraiya asked. "Okay, let's hear it."

Hebiko smirked, almost expecting that question. "I know where Orochimaru is hiding."

Silence.

Jiraiya fixed his eyes on hers, as if trying to peek into her very soul. Hebiko, meanwhile, continued smirking, as if knowing that she was the one holding all the cards. After a few moments thinking, the Sannin decided to make his counter move.

"If what you're saying is true," Jiraiya began. "Then I can simply have you captured and your mind scanned by a Yamanaka, right?"

"First, yes, what I said is true. Second, you're really bad a bluffing," Hebiko mockingly replied. "You have my brother under your custody. You should already know that Orochimaru carved into our skulls

protective seals that prevents our minds from being scryed. Otherwise, Orochimaru wouldn't have abandoned my brother so easily."

"You bring a valid point," Jiraiya replied. "Then again, how do we know that the information you have is genuine?"

"You don't know. You'll have to trust me. Then again, it's not that I didn't try to prove I can be trusted, right?" Hebiko replied.

"Your gifts were very nice, but you introduced yourself by attacking my ninjas. That doesn't spell trust to me," Jiraiya rebutted.

"That might be true, but none of them are seriously injured, much less dead. I knew I wasn't going to make a good impression with bloodshed." Hebiko answered back. "However, you shouldn't think about it that much. You win nothing by keeping my brother prisoner, Orochimaru has no use of him. And you could end this war much sooner if you take Orochimaru out of the picture. I'd do it myself, but I'm not strong enough, not by a long shot, to pose a credible threat. So far, only a Kage level ninja can be a match for him. Hell, not even one, you might need a few. Anyway, what's going to be?"

Jiraiya looked at the young woman, trying to discern if she was being truthful or not. He could tell, though, that he desperately wanted her brother back. And her anger at Orochimaru seemed genuine. The Snake Sannin wasn't somebody that thought people working under him were human beings worthy of consideration. This was a man who indirectly killed almost fifty babies in his attempt to reproduce Wood Release.

Wordlessly, Jiraiya pulled out a small, empty scroll, and started writing something. After a couple minutes, he summoned another toad. This one, however, was a palm sized red toad wearing goggles.

"Kosuke, go to Konoha and give this to Ibiki Morino, from Torture & Interrogation," Jiraiya said, as he handed the scroll to the toad. "Tell

him it's an urgent matter."

"You got it!" the toad said, before disappearing in a poof of smoke.

Jiraiya then turned at the silver haired woman. "It's done. I sent orders for your brother to be released and be returned here."

Hebiko narrowed her eyes. "I won't reveal Orochimaru's location until I see him."

"I wasn't expecting you to," Jiraiya said, as he turned around, and walked towards the HQ building. "Now excuse me while I do some preparations."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Ask Tsunade-hime to come back," Jiraiya said. "I'm going to need her in order to make sure that snake doesn't escape."

Author's Note: And thus Hebiko makes her move, thankfully moving the plot a little forward! And yeah, it was her who killed Kabuto. Those of you who said Zetsu guessed wrong, sorry.

A lot of writers have expressed having difficulties writing for Juugo in fanfics where Hebi/Taka doesn't exist, and I'm no exception. Karin is an Uzumaki, and to a lesser extent can be used to flesh out Kusa, while Suigetsu has a strong ties to Kiri and the Seven Swordsmen through his brother. But Juugo has almost nothing to work with, given we hardly know anything about his past or background. And while I did try to include him in the story and give it a role, nothing worked. So yeah, that was me trying to write Juugo out of the story in a not too inconspicuous way.

Despite being his Jonin-sensei, I don't think I've written that many moments between Shizune and Sasuke, so let's try to fix that, shall we? Plus, hey, I'll take any excuse to write more

Shizune, because she's a joy to write, and is able to play an excellent foil to a lot of characters. It makes me sad to see how very few writers bother with her at all.

Hope you also enjoyed another moment of Choji and Karui bonding a little more. I'm going to take any chance I can get to flesh out these two and their relationship.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Well, as you can see, we're heading into the meat of the war. Next chapter, we'll see Rasa's Fourth Division fight (and about time, because they haven't had their chance to shine yet, while the Second Division had two so far). In the meantime, leave your thoughts on this chapter on a review. No matter how long or how short, reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Sandstorms

Author's Note: Well, here we are. After 17 chapters of war, the Fourth Division is finally getting some love. Enjoy:

Chapter 117:

Sandstorms

or

Battles of Gold and Silver

Ninja Alliance HQ

A couple hours after the attack led by Hebiko, calmness reigned once again in the Ninja Alliance HQ. The Allied Ninjas had already been healed from any injury by the medics, and the summoned animals were no longer there.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for Tsunade to arrive at the HQ building, given that the campsite of the First and Second divisions hadn't been stationed that far away. Naturally, the Slug Sannin tensed up upon seeing several Otogakure ninjas standing around, but given that Jiraiya, as well as many other Allied ninjas were also there, and they weren't fighting, she decided not to do anything rash.

"Here I am, Jiraiya. The message said that it couldn't wait," she then eyed at the balaclava wearing ninjas. "Do you mind explaining what the hell's going on?"

"Yes, I imagined you'd have a lot of questions, seeing what's going on." Jiraiya said, before motioning to a white haired young woman clad in Otogakure uniform, minus the balaclava. "Hime, meet Hebiko. Hebimaru's sister. She claims she no longer supports Orochimaru, and wants to help us."

Tsunade raised an eyebrow, and glanced at the clone of her daughter. Hebiko just stared back, her expression unreadable.

"I assume she isn't helping us out of the goodness of her heart," Tsunade said.

"She asked her brother to be released into her custody," Jiraiya explained. "She returned the stolen Forbidden Scroll, and handed us a man with a Bloodline Limit that's the source of Orochimaru's cursed seal. And given that she claims to know where that bastard is hiding, I decided it's a small price to pay."

"I see. And are you sure that this brat isn't taking us to a trap?" Tsunade asked, eying the white haired clone suspiciously. "While those gifts you said she brought were nice, maybe Orochimaru is done with them and doesn't need them anymore."

"I know, but this is too good an opportunity to pass," Jiraiya said. "Besides, I already know what to do in case it happens to be a trap."

"Supreme Commander, somebody's coming!" a ninja warned. "From the south!"

Everybody turned in the direction the watchman had said, and saw a burly man in a black trenchcoat jumping from one tree branch to another. Jiraiya smiled.

"Ah, Ibiki Morino is here. He came earlier than I expected," Jiraiya said, watching the head of Torture and Interrogation dashing towards them. Behind him were several masked ANBU, two of them carrying a restrained white haired man. In no time, Ibiki's party landed in front of the group.

"Greeting, Hokage-sama. Here's your special delivery," Ibiki said.

"Thank you. You arrived here pretty quickly. Good, because with the matter at hand we can't afford to waste any time," Jiraiya said with a nod.

Hebiko's eyes widened upon seeing her brother, though she was smart enough not to rush him. She merely walked towards him slowly.

"Hebiko?" Hebimaru asked, noticing his sister for the first time. He smiled widely. "Oh Hebiko, I knew you wouldn't abandon me!"

Hebiko smiled back. "Orochimaru may abandon you, but I never will as long as I'm alive," she said, before turning at Jiraiya. "He doesn't appear to be injured, and he definitely isn't a fake. Alright, release my brother, and Orochimaru's location will be yours."

"Not so fast, girly," Jiraiya said. "I'm not going to release this guy until you give us the location first."

A scowl developed on Hebiko's face. She clenched her fists as she prepared to give the Hokage a piece of her mind, but upon seeing her brother again, she forced herself to calm down. She was so close to get him back, she wasn't going to let anybody, not even herself, to ruin her chance.

Grumbling, she pulled a scroll under her flak jacket, and tossed it at Jiraiya. The Hokage caught it with one hand, and unfurled it. It was a map of the Elemental Nations. There was a mark on the top part of the cape between the Lands of Sound and Waterfall. Jiraiya deduced that's where Orochimaru was hiding.

"I never thought he would be that far away from the battlefields. If he's really there, then we would have never found him," Jiraiya thought, worry growing with each second. *"What is the range of that jutsu to allow him to stay that far away?"*

"You already have what you wanted. Now release my brother!" Hebiko demanded.

Jiraiya closed the scroll, and nodded at Ibiki. The ANBU quickly undid all the restrainings and removed the chakra suppressing seals

that stopped him from using jutsu. Hebimaru quickly rushed towards her sister, the two of them greeting the other with a hug.

"I'm... I'm so glad to be with you again. And to be out of that horrible cell," Hebimaru whispered.

"It's okay, brother, it's over," Hebiko said, patting his back.

The clone twins broke their hug, and Hebiko turned at Jiraiya. "You kept your word. For that, you have my thanks. I wish you luck brining down Orochimaru. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I can't help you anymore. Come on brother, let's leave this place."

Hebiko and Hebimaru leaped away, followed by the rest of the Otogakure ninjas, leaving the Allied ninjas alone. Meanwhile, Jiraiya, Tsunade and the rest of the Allied ninjas went back to the HQ building.

Jiraiya immediately broke the hopefully good news of how he had traded one of his prisoners for Orochimaru's potential location to the rest of his advisors.

"Those are good news, indeed," Chiyo said with a nod. "If we can take that man out of the war, Akatsuki will lose their strongest assets."

"Indeed," Onoki said with a nod. "First, we'll need to form a strike team out of our best ninjas. May I suggest-"

"Sorry, Onoki-san, but no such team will be formed," Jiraiya interrupted him. "Only two people will go and confront him: Tsunade-hime and myself."

"What?"

"You can't be serious!"

"Just two people...?"

"I know, I know!" Jiraiya said, raising his hands in self defense, hoping to calm the others down. "I know it sounds harebrained-"

"Beyond harebrained," Chiyo remarked.

"-but it's the best possible plan, for a multitude of reasons. "Jiraiya began. "First, Tsunade-hime and I have been his teammates for years. We know him and how his mind works better than anybody. And we're both Sages. We're the best suited to fight him. Second, Orochimaru is a master of escape. If he learns that we located him, he will move to somewhere else. That's why the team going after him has to be as small as possible, in order to minimize the chances of him fleeing. Plus we need our best ninjas on the battleground."

"We also need you here, Supreme Commander," Ao interjected. "The reason you were given such position was so you would coordinate the war effort. What are we going to do in your absence?"

Jiraiya looked around, as he was trying to think of a potential substitute. His eyes then landed on the former Tsuchikage. "Onoki, given that among all of us, you're already a veteran with three wars on his belt, so you're the most fit for it, I hereby name you acting Supreme Commander as long as I'm busy hunting Orochimaru down."

Onoki smirked a little, "Heh, things must be serious if you, a Konoha ninja, is relinquishing your position to an Iwa ninja."

" *Temporarily* relinquishing my position," Jiraiya insisted, as he narrowed his eyes.

"Sure. I'm past the age of having lust for power. Don't worry, you can count on me," Onoki said with a nod.

"Going back to your previous point," Chiyo intervened. "Even if it's just the two of you, Akatsuki has many spies and watchers. The chances of you being spotted are still there."

"Yes, but if it's the two of us, he won't run away. Because Tsunade has something Orochimaru desires more than anything else," Jiraiya said, turning towards his wife.

Even if nobody said anything, the answer was obvious: the Rinnegan. Tsunade, however, didn't appear that convinced. She walked towards her husband, and began to whisper him.

"Jiraiya, you already used the Rinnegan as a bait to lure an enemy out once, and look what happened," Tsunade told him, sounding a little upset. "Do you want to take that risk again?"

"The situation is different this time. I may be using the Rinnegan as bait again, but as a bait that can punch back. Come on princess, we could beat Orochimaru ourselves even if you didn't have that Rinnegan," Jiraiya insisted, the volume of his voice matching hers. "This is an opportunity too good to pass."

Tsunade sighed. She wanted to exercise more caution, but she knew that caution wouldn't win the war or save potential lives, only decisive actions would do that.

"Alright. We'll do as you say," Tsunade agreed.

"Excellent! We better head out immediately. We'll take a few days to reach Orochimaru's hideout," Jiraiya said. "And the sooner we take him down, the sooner this war will come to an end."

...

A couple days later, Land of Lightning

It seemed that, after numerous attempts at breaking into the Land of Fire, Akatsuki had directed their latest attack into the Land of Lightning. Rather than crossing underground through the Land of Frost like they did in previous battles, this time they decided to use a coastal invasion. Given that neither the Zetsu clones nor the

Reanimations needed to breathe, they walked through the sea floor until they arrived at the coast.

Fortunately, Rasa's Fourth Division was in the area to put a stop to their advance. They managed to arrive just in time to stop them from tainting the Land of Lightning with their presence. The Fourth Kazekage and the division's foremost ninjas were at the front, looking at the incoming mass of enemies.

"So far, mostly White Zetsu, and a few reanimations here and there," Rasa observed. "It seems Akatsuki lost those Moon Puppets for good."

Darui, who was besides him, clicked his tongue. "Dammit, I'm seeing a familiar face there."

Rasa turned at the Raikage's right hand man, and raised an eyebrow. "A friend or family of yours?"

"Eh, not exactly," Darui said, pointing to a pair of undead Kumo ninjas waddling through the water. They were tall and imposing, and completely identical, if it wasn't for the different colors of their headress-like hairs. "Those are Kinkaku and Ginkaku, two of Kumo's most infamous ninjas. They're as powerful as they're sadistic."

"Just lovely," Rasa said, rolling his eyes.

"Orochimaru has a vast knowledge of every village's best ninjas. That man's far from a dullard," Darui noted.

"Any idea on how are we going to beat them?" Rasa asked, sounding a little exasperated.

"Like I said, they're strong, skilled, and are used to being overwhelmed by numbers," Darui explained. "Fortunately, I'm very familiar with them and their fighting style. I feel I can take one of them down, but I can't match the two of them together, so I'll need strong backup, commander."

"How about if we separate them?" Rasa suggested.

"Many people already tried that in the past, it rarely worked. In fact, they will expect it," Darui replied, making the Raikage to curse something under his breath. "Fortunately, we have no shortage of powerful ninjas here." Darui replied.

"My three children are also Sages as well. But I'd wish I didn't have to waste them on a couple of enemies when there are so many to beat," Rasa complained.

"They're getting closer. Sorry, but we have to fight them now before they get close to the coast," Darui said, as he took a step forward. "With your permission, I'll deliver the first strike. I have the perfect jutsu for it."

"Alright, I'll prepare and-" Rasa said, before something in the sky caught his eye. "Hey, what's that?"

"YAHOOOOOOO!" a scream was heard from the sky above, as an artificial looking white bird swooped down. Riding it was a man with long blond hair wearing an Akatsuki cloak. "Missed me, you bitches?"

And Deidara didn't come alone. An horde of Flying Zetsus trailed behind him. Soon the air was filled with a cacophony of flapping wings and hollering.

"Darui-san, change of plans!" Rasa said, as golden started to pour from the canisters attached to his belt. "Whatever you were planning to do, aim to that guy in the sky!"

"Got it!" Darui replied, as his hands weaved hand seals as fast as he could. "So dull. I was planning to start with the Black Panther, but that won't work on an aerial opponent. Anyway, try this on for size! Storm Release: Laser Circus!"

Darui brought his hands together, their index and middle fingers aiming upwards. A sphere of white energy formed around his fingers, before it exploded outwards into a multitude of beams towards Deidara and the flying Zetsu. Alongside Darui, many ninjas in the first line of defense also fired elemental jutsu into the fire, however, most of them missed their marks, since the winged Zetsu proved to be too nimble.

Darui's jutsu fared a little better. The energy beams hit Deidara's giant clay bird, as well as many of the Zetsu surrounding him. However, the blond Akatsuki member managed to jump before his aerial mount went down, and summoned an even larger dragon made of clay.

"Heh, not bad, hn," Deidara said, as he fed the mouths in his hands some explosive clay. They quickly chew it, before being spat in the shape of small birds. "You're not bad with explosions and destruction. But you're nothing but an amateur compared to me! Now taste my art!"

Deidara waved his arms outwards, releasing a flock of small clay birds. Then, all of sudden, there was a chain of multiple bursts of smoke, and the clay birds had multiplied tenfold. They spread out, and dived at the ninjas below them, detonating when they touched the ground, producing a chain of explosions that killed any ninja that was caught directly in them, and sent flying those lucky enough to survive the initial blast.

"Everybody, move forward! I can make a path with my art!" Deidara commanded, as he prepared another salvo of explosive clay birds.

"Commander, those explosions created breaches in our formation!" Darui told Rasa. "What are your orders?"

"Shit!" Rasa cursed, as he formed a shield of golden sand.

"Everybody, fall back! We need to regroup and rebuild our ranks!"

...

Ninja Alliance HQ

As the Fourth Division fought Akatsuki, Ao and other sensors were monitorizing the battle. The eyepatch-wearing Kirigakure ninja frowned upon seeing how badly the battle had begun.

"Flying Zetsu. It's been a while since we had to deal with those pests," Ao thought. "Onoki-sama, the Kazekage's division is having troubles with the Akatsuki! Apparently, they've been surprised by a battalion of winged Zetsu, and they've been forced to abandon the coast and fall back into the mainland. Should we deploy our air force?"

The old Iwa ninja frowned deeply. It didn't take long for a difficult battle to present itself as soon as he was given temporary command. Fortunately, Onoki wasn't a newcomer to this kind of situations, as his more than half a century of experience could attest.

"How big this Zetsu battalion is?" Onoki asked. "It is as big as the other times?"

"No. I appears to be at half the numbers this time, Onoki-sama," Ao told him.

Onoki grumbled something, looking pensive. After a few moments that felt longer than they were, the former Tsuchikage opened his mouth. "This smells like a trap. That clone brat already proved that our location is more vulnerable than it looks. Maybe they want us to send our air force to face them, and then send the other half to another target."

"Still, we can't afford to lose ground to these criminals," Chiyo intervened. "We should send at least some of our flying forces to reinforce our positions in the coast."

"It sounds reasonable, but we can't just-"

"Onoki-sama, the Akatsuki Deidara is leading their air force!" Ao announced, interrupting the former Tsuchikage.

Onoki's face contorted into a mask of unbridled anger. "WHAT!?" he roared. "SEND OUR AIR FORCE! ALL OF THEM! I WANT THAT BASTARD DEAD BEFORE THE END OF THE DAY, YOU HEAR ME?!"

Silence followed the Tsuchikage's out of nowhere outburst, as those present wondered if there was more to Deidara besides being a mere Iwa misssing-nin. Ao was among them, but he simply nodded and carried his orders. "Send a note to the Ninja Allied Air Forces! Move towards the designated coordinates!"

...

Back in the Land of Lightning coast, as the defenders were pushed back into the mainland, while Akatsuki's forces rushed in, and engaged the Allied ninjas in hand to hand combat. Meanwhile, Deidara led the Flying Zetsu into attacking the Allied ninja from above.

While the Zetsu merely swooped down and tried to slash a ninja with their sharp talons, Deidara dropped a cluster of explosives towards the densely packed zones, not caring that some Zetsu were caught in the blast, leaving both friend and foe as charred corpses, or sending them flying into the air. Many times the Allied Ninjas tried to bring him down with ranged jutsu, but the blond was fast enough to avoid them.

"Sorry, your earth bound losers!" Deidara laughed as his dragon dirbbled between a stream of fire and a barrage of rocks. "But you won't stop me from sharing my art! A battle is the perfect blank canvas for me to use!"

Deidara dropped another salvo of explosives, resulting in another chain of blasts. When the smoke vanished, there were more Allied Ninjas and White Zetsu either dead or injured. Among them,

however, there was also a large dome of ice, with several cracks on it. The dome then quickly fell apart into multiple ice shards that quickly melted, revealing Haku, Kurenai, Yakumo and Hotaru.

"Nice work, Haku," Kurenai praised her student, as her eyes fixed on the flying Deidara.

"Should we go after him?" Haku asked her sensei. "I believe that, until the Air Force arrives, we're the only ones able to deal with him."

"I will deal with that psychopath myself," Kurenai said. "I need you to stay here and watch over Yakumo."

"As you say. Still, I can't help but feel worried that this opponent might be too formidable," Haku insisted. "After all, we did fight him together the last time, and proved to be a match to our combined power."

"I'm aware of that. Don't worry, I'll ask for help if I feel overwhelmed," Kurenai said with a nod, as her hands weaved hand seals. "Still, given that I have fought him quite a few times, I think I can defeat him this time around. Wind Release: Riding the Hurricane!"

A tornado developed under Kurenai's legs, pushing her into the air as it grew, allowing the Genjutsu mistress to fly into the air, and went to meet Deidara. Both Hotaru and Yakumo were watching the jutsu in awe.

"Whoa... I didn't know Kurenai-sensei knew how to fly!" Yakumo said.

"Yeah, that's sure some jutsu!" Hotaru agreed.

"Naruto was the one to invent that jutsu," Haku corrected them. "He taught it to both Kurenai-sensei and myself, since Hinata-san can fly on her own. Unfortunately, I can't use it since it consumes chakra to keep it active, and my reserves aren't that big."

"Anyway, we can talk about that later. There's a battle we need to win," Haku urged the girls.

...

In another part of the battlefield, the Gold and Silver Brothers, Kinkaku and Ginkaku, were laying waste to the Allied ninjas with a combination of brutal taijutsu and ninjutsu. None of the attackers were even able to land a hit on them.

"Lightning Release: Golden Spear!"

Yellow lightning appeared around Kinkaku's hand, which condensed into the shape of a spear. Swinging his elemental weapon in wide arcs, Kinkaku parried the blows and ranged jutsu Allied ninjas sent his way, while at the same time stabbing and slashing those who were close to him.

"Wind Release: Silver Swords!"

Two swords made of wind appeared on Ginkaku's hand, and when the silver haired brother swung them, they released blades of wind of powerful cutting power, slicing through rocks and human meat alike.

"This rubbish is hardly worth the effort, Kinkaku," the younger brother said.

"Indeed, Ginakaku," the older brother agreed. He then stabbed his lightning spear into the ground, releasing a barrage of lightning bolts through the earth in every direction, shattering the earth, and electrocuting the unlucky Allied ninjas caught in the area of effect.

"But keep fighting! Maybe we may find somebody worthy of us among all these rabble!"

"Water Release: Great Water Wall!"

Suddenly, the two brothers found themselves about to be crushed by a gigantic wave of water rushing towards them. However, they were

fast enough to jump away the moment the wave came crashing down, and skidded on the rushing water skillfully. However, that water attack was merely a distraction for the true ambush.

"What the...?" Kinkaku asked, noticing golden glittering in the air.
"Gold...?"

"Brother?"

"Magnet Release: Golden Sand Coffin!"

Suddenly, a mass of golden sand formed around them, and started to swirl. Kinkaku was fast enough to jump away, but his silver haired brother wasn't, and was quickly trapped inside a cocoon of golden sand.

"Ginkaku!" the golden haired man yelled.

"Darui, go!" a voice said.

He didn't have time to mourn his brother's fate, as a dark skinned kumogakure ninja wielding a wide cleaver crackling with electricity leaped at him. Kinkaku parried the attack with his lightning spear. They traded blows with one another, until Kinkaku's lightning spear succumbed to Darui's fast and powerful, shattering into a thousand golden sparks. Kinkaku disengaged his foe, and jumped backwards.

"Not bad," the Kazekage said, as he landed besides Darui. "We got one of them, at the very least."

"It would have better if we dealt with the two of them in one swift strike, but this will have to do," Darui replied, as he eyed at the golden haired man. "Just one of them is quite the dull opponent for the two of us."

"Who are you calling dull, you disrespectful brat!" Kinkaku yelled, as he pointed an angry finger at him. "Do you have any idea of I am?"

"I don't think there are any Kumo ninjas who don't know you two, Kinkaku-sama," Darui said in a tone that was somehow a mix between mocking and respectful. "But right now, who you are doesn't matter. All that matters is that you're a threat to the Ninja Alliance, so sorry, but you're going down."

"I might not be from Kumo, but I got good intel on you," Rasa added. "And with your brother gone, you have no chance to defeat us."

"Oh? You think so?" Kinkaku asked, grinning widely as if he knew something Rasa and Darui ignored. He then opened his mouth wide, and regurgitated what appeared to be a large red and white fan.

Darui's visible eye widened upon seeing the fan. "Is that...?"

Rasa also tensed up, guessing that such thing wasn't a mere fan.

"Coil of Wind!"

Kinkaku swung his fan, releasing an unbelievably powerful gust of wind that blew not only Rasa and Darui back, but many of the ninjas and White Zetsu clones close to them. And more importantly, it destroyed the sand prison Kinkaku was trapped in, leaving him free to move again. Wasting no time, he quickly jumped back towards his brother, while Darui and Rasa got back on their feet.

"Shit!" Rasa cursed. "That thing was strong enough to undo my Golden Sand Coffin from that distance?" the Kazekage growled.

"That's the Banana Palm Fan, a legendary tool that it's said to be created by the Sage of the Six Paths himself," Darui began to explain. "By merely swinging it, it can create an extremely powerful and wide elemental attack, of any of the five basic elements."

"That sounds like a lot of trouble," Rasa said.

"And if Kinkaku has the fan, then..." Darui trailed off.

Indeed, the now released Ginkaku produced a strange white broadsword whose corners were shaped like flames, a large gourd, and a rope that glowed with a golden light, tied to that gourd. Then, as if it had life of its own, the rope wrapped itself around Kinkaku's free arm.

"... of course they have the other three tools," Darui said, his eye narrowing at them.

"Let me guess, something I should worry about?"

"Short answer, yes. Sorry if I don't give you any details, but it would take far too much time we don't have, commander," Darui replied. "For the time being, all you need to know is this: don't let that rope touch you."

"Understood," Rasa replied.

Kinkaku and Ginkaku both grinned, and prepared to attack.

"They tried to separate us, Ginkaku," the older brother said.

"Indeed, Kinkaku. I didn't like that," the younger brother replied, baring his teeth. "Not in the slightest."

"Neither did I. I say, let's give them a taste of their own medicine!" Kinkaku slammed the Banana Palm Fan into the ground. "Coil of Earth!"

The jutsu manifested into a row of rocks as large as one story houses bursting from underground towards Rasa and Darui, forcing the two living ninja to jump into different directions to avoid the attack. And before he could even land, Ginkaku was already on top of him, sword raised. Darui was able to block the blow, but not the brutal roundhouse kick following it, which send him crashing against the ground.

And while Darui struggled against Ginkaku, Rasa had to deal with the golden haired brother.

"Magnet Release: Golden Sand Shuriken!"

Grains of golden sand gathered in front of Rasa, taking the shape of shuriken, which flew towards the undead ninja. Kinkaku's mouth twisted into a grimace.

"I don't like you. No one has the right to use gold against me, much less some Sunagakure desert cockroach!" Kinkaku roared, as he swung the fan again. "Coil of Fire!"

The fan produced a massive cone of flames that quickly melted Rasa's golden shuriken, forcing the Kazekage to jump backwards in order to avoid the fiery attack. He felt a chill travel down his spine as Kinkaku grinned at him. And unfortunately, he was so focused on his enemy that he didn't notice Darui flying towards him, until the Kumo ninja crashed into the Kazekage.

"They're yours, brother!" Ginkaku shouted.

"Good job Ginkaku!" Kinkaku said, as he rushed towards the fallen duo, who got back on their feet as fast as they could. The golden rope around his arm uncoiled, and he swung it against them as if it was a whip. Rasa and Darui were hit before they could jump away. "Bind and draw out, Golden Canopy Rope!"

Rasa and Darui felt like something was traveling their throats and forced itself out of their mouths, and much to their horrors, they looked what appeared to be their very souls.

"My turn! Curse them, Seven Star Sword! Record the, Crimson Gourd!" Ginkaku said, as he cut a piece of their souls with his large cleaver, and finally, said pieces were absorbed into his gourd.

Two words appeared on the flat side of the Seven Star Sword:

DULL

SAND

"Well... shit," Darui cursed.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, the Sand Siblings were fighting against an horde of advancing White Zetsu clones, some of them who were rushing towards Temari. The blonde kunoichi smirked, and wounded her fan back.

"Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Swinging her fan in a wide arc, Temari produced a powerful gust of wind that blew them away, aside from making several deep cuts into their flesh. She turned around to face another potential group of attackers, when something in the sky caught her eye; it wasn't those flying Zetsu or Deidara, but several greenish-yellow projectiles, leaving a trail of dust of the same color, flying in an arc towards them.

"Temari, watch out!" the Suna kunoichi heard Kankuro calling.

Tamotsu, Kankuro's puppet that carried a large shield, landed besides Temari, and covered her with its shield, its seals glowing with a blue light as chakra activated them.

"Mechanical Great Light Shield Block!"

The glowing seals projected a blue cone of chakra that protected Temari just in time for the acid spore missiles landed upon her. The projectiles harmlessly crashed against the shield and disintegrated.

"Nice save," Temari thanked her brother, as she looked at the direction the projectiles had come from. Even if they were hard to notice among the large crowd of enemies, the blond kunoichi could see several Zetsu clones whose right arms were several vines

braided around each other, ending in a large flower. "Those bastards brought some snipers as well to pick us off from the distance."

"Then we better get rid of them!" Kankuro replied, while he was directing the Sasori Puppet with his other hand, making it burn some of the Zetsu clones with its palm-mounted flamethrowers. "Gaara, you come with us?"

The readhead was also fighting the artificial cloned creatures, burying them in sand, or slicing them with blades of sand. However, only part of his attention was in this battle, as most of it looked at how Kurenai was engaging Deidara in an aerial fight. Even if Gaara's face was as stoic as ever, anger was growing within him as he remembered the last time he faced the Iwa missing-nin. That battle costed him his village's Tailed Beast, and almost his life.

"No. I saw another enemy more worthy of my attention," Gaara said, as a sandstorm started to form around him, and he started to float as a cloud of sand started to form under his feet. "I'm sure you will manage without me."

Just when Gaara was about to leave, both he and his siblings were caught by a powerful wind that threatened to pull them away. The Sand Siblings directed chakra to their feet in order to attach themselves to the ground.

"What the hell's going on?" Kankuro asked.

Following the directing of the wind, Temari found the answer. "Over there!"

There was a giant animal, probably a summon, vaguely looking like an elephant with orange fur, huge tusks, and the legs of a feline predator. Its mouth was open wide, creating a suction force in the form of a strong, continuous wind that pushed the Suna ninjas towards its mouth. And rising on the head of the animal was an black haired old man with a scarred chin and a Sharingan on his left eye.

"What the hell's that thing? A summon?" Temari asked, as she stabbed her folded war fan into the ground for anchoring herself better.

"And who the hell is that guy?" Kankuro asked, as he forced his mind to recall if he ever saw him in the past. "Wait, is that a Sharingan?"

The man on top of the vacuuming summoned animal started to make hand seals.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

Just as the orange animal closed its mouth, stopping the suction force, multiple wooden roots emerged around the Sand siblings, threatening to trap them.

"The fuck!?" Kankuro loudly yelled. "Who the hell is that guy!?"

"Gaara!" Temari called, ignoring the puppeteer's question.

The readheaded nodded, and waved his hand. "Sandstorm Shield!"

A tornado of sand formed around the trio of Suna ninjas, protecting them from the incoming wooden vines. They grinded against the sandstorm, grinding against it in an attempt to bypass it, but found themselves unable to. That didn't stop the jutsu's caster, who made a hand seal and pumped more chakra into the attack, summoning even more wooden vines from the seemingly barren desert land.

That moment, the man flinched, and noticed that the air around him was starting to become colder at a rapid pace. Stopping the jutsu, he jumped away.

"Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

Multiple giant spears made of ice formed above the summoned animal and its rider, before they fell down, hitting the animal and undoing the summon, but failing to impale the man.

"You were right, Yakumo-san. That's Danzo right there," Haku said, as he and Yakumo landed besides the sandstorm.

Danzo turned around, and fixed his eyes on Yakumo, making the girl flinch a little. His expression, however, was as stoic and emotionless as ever.

"Akuma. So you're alive," Danzo commented. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Yakumo! My name is Yakumo!" the girl angrily protested. "Don't even dare to call me by that horrible codename ever again!"

"Just as I feared. So, you turned your back on me and Root. After everything we did for you," Danzo replied. He looked around, as if he was trying to assess the situation. "Then again, given what's going on, I doubt that either Konoha or any of the ninja villages is going to survive this conflict."

"Do you underestimate Konoha that much, Danzo?" Haku asked, sounding visibly angered. "Do you really think it's going to go down that easily?"

"Konoha used to be great when the Senju brothers ruled it. But they made the mistake of letting Hiruzen take the reins of leadership," Danzo said, as he started to make hand seals. "Wind Release: Vacuum Sphere!"

Danzo spat several bullets made of compressed air from his mouth at Haku and Yakumo, who were forced to jump in different directions in order to avoid the attack. The Ice Release user started to make hand seals.

"First of all, let's neutralize that Sharingan. Water Release: Hiding in the Mist Jutsu!"

Haku took a deep breath, and released a huge cloud of mist from his mouth. The mist engulfed the entire area, engulfing the three

combatants, leaving them blinded.

"If you hope to defeat me, you'll need more than such a basic trick," Danzo replied, as he started to make hand seals. "Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Danzo exhaled a powerful gust of wind from his mouth, quickly pushing the mist away, leaving the battlefield the same as a moment ago. While Danzo could see Haku, Yakumo was nowhere to be seen. This didn't seem to faze the leader of Root in the slightest, who continued to make hand seals.

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Wooden vines and roots emerged from underground, wiggling and lashing angrily as if they were alive. However, rather than lunging at Haku, they all wrapped around the undead Root ninja, immobilizing him completely.

"How-?"

"Well done, Yakumo!" Haku said, as he started to form more hand seals of his own. "Ice Release: Breath of Winter!"

Haku took a deep breath, and releasing a huge cloud of frigid fog, covering the ground in a thin layer of ice as it spread and moved towards Danzo. However, the former leader of Root was far from defenseless. Even if he was restricted, he was able to pull a kunai, and throw it in front of him. His Sharingan caught his reflection on the blade for a fraction of a second, but that was enough to cast a genjutsu that was reflected at him. Said genjutsu overrode the one Yakumo put him into, breaking the illusionary restraints, and jumping away before Haku's jutsu could freeze him completely.

"What?" Haku asked in shock.

Yakumo reappeared besides him, just as surprised. "How... how did he managed to break...?"

"Don't forget who trained you to use your power, girl," Danzo said to the brown haired kunoichi, his voice cold as Haku's ice. "You wouldn't think I'd pick a thing or two about how to counter it just in case? Even if I had the mistaken belief that all my agents were completely loyal to me, I always made sure to have a way to counter their abilities in case they turned against me."

While only appearing once every couple generations, the Kurama Clan's brand of genjutsu was one of the most feared Bloodline Limits who ever existed, given not only was it a genjutsu that could cause bodily harm to the victim, but it was impossible to break using conventional genjutsu dispelling techniques. Not even the Sharingan or the Byakugan were enough to counter it.

But alas, while normal means didn't work, it wasn't impossible to break. Given that genjutsu affected the chakra of the mind, Danzo came up with an idea to counter it: use Yamanaka mind jutsu to alter his own mind in order to shield himself from said genjutsu, or at least lower its effects on him. And luckily for Danzo, one of his elite and most trusted agents, Fuu, was a member of the Yamanaka clan. In no time, the two of them came up with a series of ways to use the Yamanaka's jutsu to undo Yakumo's genjutsu.

Of course, Danzo was smart enough not to share such information with anybody. He was tempted to kill Fuu in order to leave no loose ends, but in the end he decided against it. Fuu was one of his most effective minions, and replacing him wouldn't be easy.

Yakumo's face twisted into a grimace of anger. She clapped her hands together. "You think so? Let's see how well you do against this then! Demonic Illusion: Hellscape!"

From Danzo's perspective, the entire battleground burst into flames, with the sky turning red with black clouds, as earth had turned into Hell itself. Danzo could feel how the air's temperature raised instantly as the fires spread around. Still, his expression was unfazed.

"An impressive jutsu, Akuma. I always wondered what our enemies felt when they were caught inside one of your illusionary traps, and now I can experience it myself," Danzo said, before nodding. "I made a truly outstanding job with you."

"Is that pride I'm sensing? I thought you believed that ninjas shouldn't have emotions," Haku retorted. "Misplaced pride, may I add."

"Am I being prideful? Perhaps. It's not that my current predicament can get any worse," Danzo said, his voice remaining stoic. "Then again, I'm going to make the most of a bad situation, and use this fortuitous encounter to punish a traitor to Root."

"You're welcome to try, you decrepit monster!" Yakumo defiantly replied.

...

" *This has to be a punishment for my extreme foolishness in life,*" Harusame bitterly thought.

That was the only explanation the bespectacled Kirigakure Jonin could come up with for his current predicament. One moment, he was trying to extract the Six Tails from his precious student, then there was darkness, and then he was among the living again, only he was unable to control his body, and was forced to fight against what appeared to be a coalition of all five Great Villages and some minor ones, alongside more deceased ninjas raised as zombies - Harusame recognized a few he knew they were dead- and an army of weird plant like, chalk skinned humanoid creatures with green hair, called White Zetsu clones.

And as much as he tried not to fight, he was unable to. His will wasn't strong enough to reclaim control of his body.

"Sealing Art: Mark of Thunder!"

Harusame slammed his hand into the ground, and a lot of circular sealing patterns started to spread around him, glowing with a white in intermittenet patterns.

"Watch out, don't step inside the circle of seals!" Harusame warned. If he couldn't control his body, at least he'd try to minimize the damage he was forced to commit. "If you do-"

"AAAAAAAGGH!"

The screams of many ninjas who didn't hear him filled the air, as they stepped on the seals accidentally or didn't see them form, causing the seals to produce an electrick discharge, shocking their bodies into paralysis. Their screams didn't end there, as many nearby White Zetsu clones took advantage of the situation, and moved for the kill.

Harusame sighed, lamenting the more deaths he was being complicit. "I'm sorry, I just-"

He was interrupted when he saw multiple bubbles headed into their general direction. The White Zetsu merely stared at them dumbly, while Harusame's eyes opened wide in shock, and felt his legs forcing him to jump backwards.

"This jutsu... !"

The bubbles glowed with a blue light, before they detonated, obliterating the Zetsu.

"There's no doubt. It was his jutsu. He must be here!" Harusame said.

Fortunately, whoever was controlling him agreed with him and decided to take him towards the caster of that jutsu.

...

A few moments earlier

While this wasn't the first fight Hotaru had been in, it was her first big battle for sure. Still, she decided that she shouldn't bite more than she could chew, and stick to fighting enemies that weren't too strong, like those White Zetsu clones.

"Time to use these jutsu I developed. This is for you, sensei," Hotaru whispered, as she took Utakata's old bubble, and blew several bubbles while infusing them with chakra. "Water Release: Explosive Bubbles!"

The bubbles flew towards a group of White Zetsu who just had felled several Allied ninjas, and detonated. The explosion obliterated them.

"Yes!" Hotaru cheered. But her cheers turned into an "eep!" when several kunai flew from the resulting cloud of smoke, forcing her to jump back in order to avoid them.

A man emerged from the cloud of smoke, a Kirigakure middle aged ninja wearing glasses. "You, girl!"

"Me?" Hotaru asked.

"That jutsu! Where did you learned it?" the man asked.

"It's a jutsu my sensei used to use. I copied it by watching him," Hotaru replied, taking a defensive stance. "Why do you want to know?"

"I used to have a student who had a similar jutsu. Using bubbles to fight isn't something many ninjas use," the old man replied. "Was your sensei a tall, slim man, with brown hair, a bang covering one of his eyes? Named Utakata?"

"Yes, that was him!" Hotaru replied. "You know about him?"

"Yes, I did. Far better than most," the man replied, now sounding sorrowful. "My name is Harusame, and I used to be Utakata's sensei."

"H-Harusame?" Hotaru repeated, as her eyes grew wide. She remembered that name. Once Utakata started to opening up to her, Utakata revealed that the reason behind his defection was how his sensei betrayed him, and tried to remove the Tailed Beast inside him for some unknown purpose. "Then why-"

"Watch out, girl, I'm going to attack!" Harusame interrupted her, as his hands started to fly through hand seals. "Water Release: Water Wall!"

Hotaru didn't just stay there and waited for the attack to hit her. She blew more bubbles as she spun around her heels. "Water Release: Bubble Barrier!"

The bubbles merged around her into a single, giant bubble that held Hotaru inside, just when Harusame expelled a torrent of water from his mouth. The torrent hit the protective bubble, but despite its apparent frailty, it managed to hold the attack back, before it burst.

"Well done, girl. Utakata trained you well" Harusame said, as he pulled a kunai and dashed towardsa Hotaru.

The blond haried woman parried the attack with the bubble pipe, which, like the bubbles it blew, proved to be far sturdier than it looked.

"Thanks. Utakata was a great sensei," Hotaru said, as she pushed Harusame back, and delivered a powerful kick to his stomach, making him tumble backwards. "The best sensei I could ever have."

"Where is he now?" Harusame replied, as he regained his balance. He didn't miss how Hotaru was talking in past tense, and he was fearing the worse.

"Unfortunately, he is no longer with us," Hotaru replied, as her hands flashed through hand seals, before blowing more bubbles. "Killed by the very same people who plunged the world into another war! Water Release: Dancing Bubble Flight!"

More chakra-charged bubbles flew towards Harusame. The undead Kiri ninja pulled out several shuriken with one hand while making one handed seals with the other hand. "Lightning Release: Lightning Shuriken!"

Harusame threw the electricity imbued steel stars towards the incoming bubbles. However, when they were about hit them, they moved as if they had life on their own, dodging the attack. The bubbles homed into the undead ninja, forcing him to retreat. He threw more kunai and shuriken towards the bubbles, but they kept moving around, dodging and evading his attacks.

"What's with this jutsu? Uta-kata never had anything like this!"
Harusame thought, as his body moved on his own. *"Maybe this girl is strong enough to beat me?"*

One bubble managed to land on his leg, blowing it up, stopping him on his tracks, and allowing the rest of the bubbles to reach their target, resulting in a chain of explosions.

"Did I get him? Yes!" Hotaru cheered, pumping her fist into the air. However, when the smoke from the explosions dispelled, all that was there was a charred log. Hotaru's face dropped. "Of course, there's no way a newbie like myself is going to take down Uta-kata-sensei's Jonin-sensei."

"Unfortunately, you're right," Harusame's voice said from behind her. Hotaru quickly turned around, and adopted a defensive stance. "I know it must not be the best moment to ask, but understand I have no other opportunity to ask this: did your sensei tell you about me? About what happened between us?"

Harusame pulled several kunai and threw them at Hotaru. Hotaru grabbed her bubble pipe and used it to deflect them as well as she could.

"Yes! He told me you wanted to extract the Tailed Beast inside him!" Hotaru replied. "He never understood why did you betray him!"

Harusame sighed, looking between sad and ashamed. "No wonder he reacted the way he did. It might not look like it, but I was trying to help my student. The Six Tails... I knew how much of a burden it was for him. I was afraid that he wouldn't be able to carry it. That's why I wanted to relieve him from that burden."

"Help him? How?" Hotaru yelled. "Extracting the Tailed Beast would have killing him!"

"I know! That's why I spent years researching a way to extract a Tailed Beast without killing the host!" Harusame replied. His excitement, however, was brief. "But looking back, I think I was blinded by my enthusiasm. I couldn't even tell if the extraction method would have worked as intended. Guess it was a good thing I was the one who died and not him."

Then, all of sudden, Harusame burst into a puddle of water.

"A clone? No!" Hotaru looked around, trying to find the real one.

"Water Release: Water Dragon Bullet jutsu!"

Hotaru was alerted by a roar, and out of nowhere a serpentine dragon made of water attempted to ram into her from one of the flanks. Hotaru jumped backwards, dodging the initial onslaught. However, the dragon twisted its body and charged its head at her again, forcing the blond kunoichi to be the one onto the defensive.

"Water Release: Bubble Dome!"

Hotaru blew more bubbles around herself, which merged into one large bubble, just in time as the dragon slammed into her. Even if the bubble didn't break, the dragon carried enough force to move it, slamming it against a tree. The force of the impact caused the tree to topple, and Hotaru's protective bubble burst. Fortunately, the Kiri kunoichi was barely hurt.

"You're strong, girl. Ukatata had trained you well," Harusame said, as he landed in front of her. "But I'm afraid his training won't be enough to defeat me. Fall back if you wish to live. Or return with reinforcements. My student is dead, and I can't help but feel it was my fault. I don't want his student's death on my conscience."

Hotaru's first reaction was to protest, to tell that man not to underestimate her. But then she remembered Ukatata's last words to her:

Live. Enjoy life to its fullest, don't be chained by the past, and make sure that when your time comes, you can look back and smile knowing you have no regrets.

Hotaru gritted her teeth as she fought tears. As much as she didn't want to, she couldn't risk her life against this man. If she died, then Ukatata-sensei's sacrifice would have been in vain. She reached into her ninja tool pouch, pulled out a smoke bomb, and used the ensuing cloud of smoke as a cover to fall back from the enemy.

...

Meanwhile, high into the air, Deidara and the flying Zetsu continued their assault on the Allied ground forces.

"You can run, you cry, but there's no escape from my art!" Deidara hollered as he prepared yet another salvo of clay bombs.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Suddenly, Deidara's clay dragon was hit by a powerful gust of wind, causing him to lose balance and drop all his clay explosives to the ground.

"Everybody down there, vacate the area! Those are bombs!" a female voice said.

Deidara turned around, his one visible eye angrily narrowing at the one who dared to get in the way of his art, and much to his growing rage, it was the same raven haired Konoha ninja that had been a thorn to his side lately. She was no longer wearing that red shirt with the white bandage-like dress, but a standard Konoha uniform.

"You again! The goddamned genjutsu bitch!" Deidara yelled, glaring at the floating Kurenai.

"How rude," she said, rolling her eyes, but smiling at the thought of making the missing-nin so mad. "Though, I can assure you that that wasn't a genjutsu."

"Oh really? Well- hey, wait a second," Deidara said, finally noticing something. "How the hell are you flying on your own? Is that another genjutsu?"

Kurenai smirked in a taunting manner. "Perhaps. Why don't you come and find if I'm real or not? If you can trust your senses, that's it."

"Release!" Deidara made a hand seal while sending a burst of chakra through his body in order to cleanse any illusion placed on him. Kurenai was still floating in front of him. "So you're real after all. Well, even if you know how to fly without the help of the ice girl, you aren't a match for me if you're alone!"

Deidara thrust both hands forward, releasing several clay insects that flew towards the genjutsu mistress. Kurenai was forced to fly away. She grabbed a handful of shuriken from her ninja tool pouch, and tossed them at the incoming clay creatures, nailing them with complete accuracy, causing them to prematurely explode.

A shadow alerted Kurenai of a threat coming from above. Looking up, the genjutsu mistress saw Deidara's dragon above her, just in the moment it spat a ball of clay at her.

"Die already!"

Kurenai was able to move away just in time to avoid the explosion. The clay dragon, however, continued its assault, firing more explosives at the escaping genjutsu mistress, her ears ringing from enduring the loud noise of the explosions going off so nearby. While he was able to dodge all of them, she was hit by the shockwave of one that blasted dangerously close to her, sending her tumbling towards the ground.

"Haha, yes! Direct hit, bitch!" Deidara cheered, before laughing maniacally. "Now do me a favor and splat against the ground below!"

Kurenai tried not to panic at the thought of her impending death. She knew she only had a few seconds to restabilize the Riding the Hurricane jutsu before she could hit the ground, and she had to do it as she was tumbling downwards.

"*Come on, come on, you can do it!*" Kurenai thought, as she tried regain her stance as she pushed more chakra downwards. "*This can't be my end!*"

"Yeah, die-WHAT THE HELL?" Deidara screamed.

That moment, Kurenai's fall was stopped when her back hit something with a round surface. Something that was floating in the air, and slowly moved upwards. It was soft to the touch, but surprisingly solid. And strangely enough, it was wet to the touch.

"A... bubble?" Kurenai asked. It was then when she noticed that she was lying on top of a large bubble.

"Thank goodness I was able to catch you in time," a new voice said. Kurenai turned around, and saw that Kiri ninja friend of Haku. Hotaru, she believed was her name. She was also flying, sitting on top of another large bubble. "Kurenai-san, right?"

"Yes, I'm Kurenai," the genjutsu mistress said. "Thanks for the save. I owe you one."

"You're welcome," Hotaru replied, smiling at the Konoha Jonin. She then directed her eyes towards Deidara, riding on his clay dragon, and said smile turned into a frown. "Akatsuki. The same people who captured my sensei and those like him. Even if that man didn't do it personally, I feel like I'll be avenging Utakata-sensei if I help you take him down."

"Your help is appreciated. I thought I would be able to defeat him on my own, but guess I was over my head," Kurenai admitted. She then jumped off the flying bubble, and reactivated her flying jutsu. "Wind Release: Riding the Hurricane!"

Hotaru once again blew several bubbles from her pipe after making several seals.

"Water Release: Water Bubble Drift!"

The bubbles started to float around, quickly growing in size until they reached the same size as the bubble the blond kunoichi was standing on.

"You think you can beat me with mere bubbles!?" Deidara yelled, feeling insulted. "Don't you dare to mock me or my art!"

Deidara tossed a couple of explosive insects at Hotaru. The Kiri kunoichi quickly jumped from the bubble just a second before the clay insects detonated, destroying it. Fortunately, the bubbles she had created served as perfect platforms for her.

"I might not be able to fly like you or Kurenai-san, but I can keep up with you two in the air!" Hotaru boldly claimed. "Ready, Kurenai-san?"

Kurenai nodded and smiled confidently. "Ready as I'd ever be," she said, before shooting Deidara a look of determination. "It's about time we end the career of this so-called artist."

...

"Magnet Release: Golden Tsunami!"

"Coil of Water!"

Rasa summoned a torrent of golden sand to bury the Gold and Silver brothers under it, however, with a wave of the Banana Fan, Kinkaku summoned a torrent of water. Both attacks clashed, neither of them overpowering the other, but did its job in stopping Rasa's attack.

"Damn! No matter what I try, that damned fan counters it with an elemental jutsu!" Rasa mentally cursed. *"I should ask for help, but if the men see their commander struggling with a single enemy..."*

Darui and Ginkaku were trading blows as they moved across the battlefield, landing on the surface of the impromptu miniature sea Kinkaku had summoned with the Banana Fan. The silver haired man was now using the Seven Star Sword as if it was a normal sword, engaging Darui in a duel of blades. While Darui so far managed to keep up with the undead ninja, he knew it was a matter of time until he grew exhausted and made a mistake.

"You're not bad, brat!" Ginkaku said, his sword locked against Darui's. "But if you're the best Kumo can currently offer... I must say that the village must have gone to shit after we died!"

Darui narrowed his one visible eye, the anger of Ginkaku's insult giving him a brief but vital energy boost to push the undead ninja back, and switch to some genjutsu. "You'll be sorry for saying that! Lightning Release: Black Thunder Blade!"

Darui's broadsword started to crackle with black electricity, before tossing it at Ginkaku. The silver haired man merely smirked, and when the blade was close to him, he parried it with the Seven Star Sword, tossing it away.

"Nice try kid, but-"

"Storm Release: White Tiger Thunder Fang!"

Darui brough his hands together, releasing a mass of lightning bolts that flowed like water, all flying towards Ginkaku, before they merged, taking the shape of a tiger. The tiger lunged forward, letting out a roar, as it pounced towards the undead ninja. Ginkaku, however, wasn't fazed, as he simply jumped away in time to dodge the attack.

"No matter what you try, you wont-HUH?"

Much to his surprise, he saw the cleaver covered in black electricity flying towards him as if it had life on its own. He was fast enough to parry the attack once again, sending the sword away. However, while he was doing that, he didn't see the elemental tiger twisting its body and pouncing towards the undead ninja once, again, sinking its claws and fangs onto his body, piercing it. No blood was spilled, but dust and paper bits.

Darui calmly walked towards the now immobilized Ginkaku as his cleaver returned to him, casually catching it by the handle.

"I'm sorry I had to be so rough, but I hope at least I made you change your opinion on Kumo," Darui began.

"That sword... how did you...?" Ginkaku asked, as he uselessly struggled against the white tiger. Electricity coursed through his undead body, keeping it paralyzed.

"Black Lightning. You already died long before the man who invented this variant of Lightning Release rose to prominence," Darui explained. "More powerful than normal lightning, as well as more malleable and easy to direct. The trade off is its heavier chakra cost and not being as fast. But once you master it, it's invaluable. Now, I'm sorry to tell you this, but your time in this world is over. You will be sealed, and then permanently destroyed."

Ginkaku was going to open his mouth, when something caught his attention. A huge smirk spread across his mouth, something Darui noticed, which caused the young Kumo Jonin to tense up.

"You say you're sorry?" Ginkaku asked, sounding almost excited.

"Yes, I am. People say that I apologize a lot, but I can't help it," Darui continued. "Because yes, I'm truly sorry to see-"

"CAPTURE HIM, CRIMSON GOURD!"

Suddenly, the Crimson Gourd tied to Ginkaku's waist began to suck Darui in, much to the Kumo ninja's shock.

"What? But I didn't say-!"

Darui wasn't able to finish what he was saying, and was sealed inside the gourd. With him out of the picture, the elemental tiger keeping Ginkaku down quickly broke down into a thousand shatters of gliteering sparkles, releasing him. Ginkaku got back on his feet, and looked at the Seven Star Sword.

"Heh, who would have guessed," Ginkaku chuckled.

Where there was once written the word "DULL" now it was replaced with "SORRY".

...

Meanwhile, as those fights took place, the Sand Siblings were still inside the sandstorm Gaara had created in order to shield them from Danzo's attack. Despite Danzo had stopped attacking them, the Kazekage's youngest son had kept the storm active.

Unperturbed, the three siblings were sitting cross legged, with their eyes closed, completely immobile and silent. Or they were, until Temari got back on her feet.

"Okay, I think I'm done," Temari replied. "I hope you guys don't take long. I can sense dad's in trouble."

"I'm done too!" Kankuro replied, getting up as well. "Gaara?"

Gaara didn't say anything. He merely opened his eyes, which were now golden instead of teal. Dark blue marks that resembled Shukaku's body marks were around them. He then got up, and looked at his elder siblings: their eyes were also golden, with Temari having oval-shaped teal marks around theirs, while Kankuro's marks were angular and crimson.

"Yes. I have entered Sage Mode as well," Gaara replied. With a wave of his hand, he commanded the sandstorm to stop. "Let our enemies cower in fear at the sight of our new powers."

Author's Note: You know, at first I wasn't going to use Kinkaku and Ginkaku, given that their only role in the manga is obviously to provide Tobi with Nine Tails chakra to resurrect the Ten Tails, but in the end I decided to include them, since they're powerful ninjas with unique abilities that lend themselves for fun fights. Speaking of which, regarding the words of the Seven Star Sword... truth be told, I don't know how often Rasa says the word "sand", but given that it's the name of what he uses to attack, as well as his village, I felt it made sense. Originally, his word was going to be "gold" for similar reasons, but in the end I changed to "sand". And poor Darui, the same event that saved him in the manga bit him in the ass here.

While writing this chapter, I was SO GLAD that in the end I didn't make Yakumo as prominent as I originally intended, because "unbreakable genjutsu so powerful it makes the brain believe it's real" is such an OP ability that writing fights for her would have been a major hassle. Thanks a lot to DryBonesKing, who helped me to come with the idea of using Yamanaka mind jutsu to counter Yakumo's normally unbreakable genjutsu.

Given that the chapter ends with Gaara and his siblings about to use Sage Mode for the first time, there's something I'd like to say about it: some people in the reviews have complained about how I'm making Sage Mode less special and unique by

giving it to so many people. Thh thing is... it is really such a bad thing? You see, one thing I like about Sage Mode is that it's a power-up that's not tied to the genes, as it's so common in Shonen genre, such as with the Super Saiyan or the Sharingan and all its evolutions. And thus, it can be used to keep other characters relevant power-wise, and give them new abilities. So yes, I'm willing to make Sage Mode less unique if the payoff is making many interesting characters strong enough to be relevant during the endgame.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

I hope you enjoyed the first part of the battle. While you wait for the second one, don't forget to drop a review, no matter how long or how short, I love them all! Reviews make me really, really, really happy.

Children of the Sand

Author's Note: Well, here it is, the last chapter of 2020. Consider it an earlier Christmas present. Enjoy:

Chapter 118:

Children of the Sand

or

Sibling Quarrel

Land of Lighting

"Hey Kinkaku, are you dealing with these worthless worm?" Ginkaku said, as he landed besides his brother.

"I am. He's more resilient than I thought," Kinkaku replied, as his black eyes looked on the angry Rasa mockingly. "Say, did you kill your guy or...?"

"Sealed him," Ginkaku said, as he patted the gourd tied to his belt. He let out a loud chuckle. "Hehehe, you're not going to believe what happened, brother! But I assure you, you're going to laugh so hard...!"

Rasa's eyes looked at the gourd. *"So, Darui is inside that thing. Is he still alive? Anyway, I better try to snatch it out of him. Even if I can't save Darui, at least I'll stop that guy from sealing me in as well."*

"Hey, Kazekage! Think fast!" Kinkaku shouted, as he waved his Banana Fan. "Coil of Fire!"

The Banana Fan produced a huge wave of flames. Rasa leaped backwards as he motioned both his arms in an arc. A tide of golden

sand burst from underground, quickly flowing forward in order to meet the advancing wall of fire. While the golden barrier managed to hold the fire for a few seconds, the gold quickly melted into a large mound of liquidified metal, allowing the fire to continue unimpeded.

And if that wasn't bad enough, Ginkaku was running parallel to the fire at a breakneck speed, ready to sink the Seven Star Sword into Rasa's soft flesh.

"Sage Art: Magnificent Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Rasa felt something latch onto several parts of his body -they felt like chakra threads- before he was pulled backwards by a colossal force. As this happened, somebody blew an extremely powerful gale. The gale clashed against the wall of fire, the two elemental forces struggling. However, the wall of fire was unable to overcome the blast of wind, and soon Kinkaku saw the fires he had summoned pushed back against him.

"What!?" the golden haired brother asked in shock. "Coil of Water!"

While Kinkaku summoned a torrent of water to nullify his own attack, Ginkaku suddenly found himself about to be buried by a tsunami of sand -normal sand, not the golden kind that Rasa was using- forcing the silver haired sibling to fall back and regroup with his older brother.

"Father, are you okay?"

Rasa looked back, and found himself staring into his oldest son's eyes, which were golden for some reason. Gaara and Temari soon joined him, their eyes also golden as well.

"I'll live," he replied. "The color of your eyes and the scale of your attacks... is that Sage Mode?"

Temari smirked. It was rare the occasion where their father praised them, so she was going to savor the moment. "Yeah, this is it. That

trip to Konoha was quite productive for us, huh?"

"Did you find any intel on the enemy, father?" Gaara asked, his face stoic as ever. "We only saw a part of your battle, but I can tell the opponents are formidable ones."

"Their chakra is really potent," Kankuro added. "And it feels oddly familiar."

"You're right, these enemies are like nothing you ever faced before," Rasa began. "The guy with the golden hair, Kinkaku, has a fan that allows him to cast barrages of any of the five elements. And don't touch the glowing rope wrapped on his other arm. If you do, Ginkaku, the other brother, will use that sword to take a piece of your soul and store it inside that gourd."

"You will be cursed, and if you say your most used word, he'll absorb you into that gourd," Rasa continued explaining. "Darui got himself caught. I don't know if he's still alive, but you should try to get that gourd back to see if we can release him."

"Understood, father," Gaara said with a nod. "Leave them to us."

Kinkaku and Ginkaku watched how Rasa fell back while his children took a step forward. Ginkaku snarled in anger.

"What the hell!? You think you can escape from us and let a trio of snot nosed brats do your job!?" the silver haired ninja roared. "Come back here and fight us like a man!"

"Pipe down, Ginkaku," the older brother said. "There's something off about that trio of brats. Don't drop your guard."

"Whatever. Let's make mincemeat out of them. Kinkaku, make an opening with the Banana Fan!" Ginkaku asked.

Temari quickly prepared her war fan, while sand burst around Gaara. Kankuro readied Tamotsu and Sasori, while unsealing from a scroll a

third puppet, one that was covered entirely by a long dark brown cloak with a hood.

"If these guys are as strong as father say, I'll use Sairen as well," Kankuro said, shooting multiple threads from a single finger to bind and control the newest puppet.

Kinkaku prepared to attack. "Let's see your little fan stop mine this time! Coil of Earth!"

The golden haired brother waved the Banana fan once again, unleashing a row of huge rising rocks towards the Sand Siblings. Kankuro and Temari leaped into opposite directions, but Gaara remained immobile. He then thrust his hand forward, and torrents of sand started to merge into an orb in front of him.

"Sage Art: Magnet Release, Sand Bullet Storm!"

The orb fired hundreds of sand bullets at huge speed, each bullet carrying destructive power inversely proportional to their size. The minuscule sand projectiles shattered the row of rising rocks as if they were soft sandstone, forcing Kinkaku to jump back.

"Well done Gaara!" Kankuro said, as he moved Sasori towards the leaping brother. "Sasori will take care of him!"

Sasori's gut compartment opened, revealing a thick metal cable ended in an harpoon-like head wrapped around a pole. The cable fired, its harpoon stabbing itself into Kinkaku's chest. Before Kinkaku had any time to react, Sasori rocketed after him, displaying two poles at the back of its hips, with blades that started to rotate as chainsaw blades. Each of the blades cleanly cut each of Kinkaku's arms. Lastly, Kankuro fired two chakra threads from his index finger, pulling the arms back, letting them fall behind him. The arms quickly dissolved into a pile of dust and paper bits, which returned to Kinkaku in order to regenerate, but the weapons remained there.

"Kinkaku!" Ginkaku cried, upon seeing his older brother deprived of his weapons. He turned at his closest opponent, who happened to be Temari, and snarled at her. "You will pay for that, Suna trash!"

Temari merely smirked, basking herself in her enemy's anger. "Somehow, I find that unlikely. Wind Scythe Jutsu!"

Temari swung her fang, releasing a single, yet massive crescent-shaped blade of wind towards the silver haired brother. Ginkaku parried the wind blade, which exploded into a burst of wind that expanded in every direction, pushing him backwards with such force, his fingers lost its grip around the Seven Star Sword.

"Great! Now, I'll use Sairen to get the last tool!" Kankuro said, moving his third puppet.

Sairen pulled out a large bow from under its cloak. Seals around it started to glow with a blue light, as a string of chakra formed between the ends of the bow. Sairen then pulled the string in quick succession, firing large arrows made of chakra at Ginkaku. The silver haired zombie tried to dodge them, but some of them found their mark. And one of them in particular managed to break the rope that tied the Crimson Gourd to Ginkaku's belt.

More chakra threads shot towards Ginkaku, some snatching the flying sword, and the other pulling the Crimson Gourd from him.

"And that's all!" Kankuro said, as he caught the Crimson Gourd, while letting the Seven Star Sword fall behind him with a clang. "Let's see what they do without their weapons!"

Kankuro then opened the Crimson Gourd, which quickly spat Darui out. The Kumo Jonin stumbled for a bit, before he fell on one knee.

"Whoa, there!" Kankuro quickly went to help Darui, helping him back on his feet. "You okay, man?"

"Y-Yeah," Darui said, as his sense of balance slowly came back. "Thanks for rescuing me. And sorry for allowing myself to get caught."

"Eh, don't sweat it," Kankuro said with a shrug. "Listen, we just disarmed those assholes. Take their fancy weapons away while we seal them."

"Uh, you might have disarmed them, but they're far from harmless," Darui warned Kankuro. "In fact, they now will-"

Darui was interrupted when the Sand Siblings suddenly sensed a very familiar chakra. A kind of chakra they knew belonged to Naruto. But the source of said chakra wasn't Naruto, but the Gold and Silver brothers. And much to their shock, they saw how an aura of red burning chakra started to spread around their bodies.

"Hey Ginkaku," Kinkaku growled. "I don't know about you, but I'm really pissed at these brats."

"I'm with you, Kinkaku," Ginkaku replied, sounding just as furious. "Let's paint the sand with their blood and guts!"

...

"Wood Release: Wood Clone Jutsu!"

Wood growths started to form around Danzo's body. Said growths took a humanoid shape as they grew in size, turning into perfect replicas of Danzo, jumping around him and forming a circle. Yakumo's Demonic Illusion: Hellscape was still active, still, the wooden clones moved without difficulty through the burning battlefield. Yakumo and Haku both took a step back, as they adopted defensive stances.

"Such cruel irony, that when I have all the chakra to bring the potential of my body modifications to the surface, I have to do it to destroy the village I helped to build and defend," Danzo lamented.

"Consider it your personal hell!" Yakumo shouted, not offering any sympathy to the former Root leader, as she started to make several hand seals. "Demonic Illusion: Army of One!"

Multiple Yakumos suddenly appeared around the original and Haku. Outnumbering the Danzo clones two to one, they quickly engaged the wooden dopplegangers. Haku took the opportunity to launch an attack, as his hands blurred through hand seals. "Ice Release: Crushing Glacier!"

Haku slammed his foot down, creating a row of rising large chunks of ice with very sharp edges in Danzo's direction. Danzo replied with a jutsu of his own.

"Wind Release: Greater Vacuum Wave!"

Danzo took a deep breath, exhaling a blast of super compressed air that crashed into the coming ice, shattering it into hundreds of shards, though without the power to completely plow through the jutsu and reach Haku. However, much to Danzo's initial surprise, the ice shards stayed still mid air, before they flew towards Danzo as if they had life of their own.

"It shouldn't be surprising, given who your Jonin-sensei is," Danzo calmly said, as the tomoe of his Sharingan started to spin. "But such weak tricks will be useless against me."

The shards all vanished into nothingness, the illusion unable to continue under the mighty watch of Danzo's stolen Sharingan.

"The illusion did its job," Haku's voice replied. "Ice Release: Demonic Crystal Ice Mirrors!"

Suddenly, multiple floating mirrors made of ice formed around the original Danzo. The mirrors were placed in a way that it looked like a dome, leaving the undead ninja no room to escape. Every dome reflected Haku's image.

"An impressive jutsu," Danzo praised. "Not only you have a rare Bloodline Limit, but the talent to use it. It's a pity Jiraiya watched you so closely, or else I would have made you into a Root agent. With my guidance, I could have brought all your potential to the surface."

"I already have two teachers. And I doubt that either you or one of your associates could have done half the job they did with me," Haku replied. "Normally I try to purge myself of negative emotions such as anger and hatred in order to fight properly. But in your case, given how much damage you caused to Konoha, the village you were supposed to protect... I think I'm going to indulge into some anger."

"Then that will be your doom," Danzo replied.

Haku didn't say anything, and started to jump from one mirror to another, moving at such a speed the naked eye is unable to follow, throwing senbons at Danzo the extremely brief instants he was outside of the mirrors.

Danzo managed to parry many of the senbons with a kunai, but despite his Sharingan, he was unable to stop all of them and many others found their mark. Not that it mattered, as the moment the regeneration kicked in, they were pushed out of his body.

"An impressive jutsu. But your little needles won't damage this body in the slightest," Danzo replied.

"I know. I was just testing you," Haku said from within the mirrors, as a pair of ice swords appeared on his hands. "Let's see how well you do against this."

Haku attacked again, delivering slashes with speed and precision. Once again, despite his Sharingan, Danzo was able to parry only half of his strikes. Every time Haku slashed Danzo, even if it was a superficial scratch, ice would start to grow over the wound. After several strikes, half of Danzo's body was covered in frost.

"With all that frost, it should be nearly impossible for him to move," Haku thought, as he prepared for the final strike. "Now all that's left is to encase him into a block of ice and add some chakra suppressing seals."

However, as Haku prepared to attack, he noticed something odd: Danzo had lost all his color, his skin, hair and clothes taking a very dull shade of brown, almost as if he was made of...

"A Wood Clone?" Haku asked aloud, as he stepped out of the mirror. "It's Naruto-kun's tactic. How can I have been fooled by a move that I've seen hundreds of times?"

However, Haku's self directed anger was forced to take a backseat when the Land of Water native realized that, if Danzo left a decoy, Haku wasn't the target, but Yakumo. Worried, he stopped channeling chakra into the mirrors, allowing them to dissolve into nothingness, as he rushed towards where he last remembered seeing Yakumo.

"Yakumo-san, watch out! Danzo escaped my mirror prison! One of those clones is actually him!" Haku warned her.

"Got it!" Yakumo replied with a nod. "Don't worry, he won't catch me off guard! I'm almost done with his clones! One of them has to be the real one!"

"Fools," Danzo's voice said, albeit it didn't come from any of the clones. "Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Multiple wooden vines burst around Haku, wrapping themselves around the Konoha ninja's body before he had time to react, pinning his arms to his body, and leaving him immobilized.

"You thought I was going after the girl," Danzo said. "Yet you never thought that I could be using her as a bait to make you drop your guard. You and the other ninjas in your generation have power and skill unlike any other, but lack discipline and a cool mind."

"Haku-san!" Yakumo shouted, as he formed a hand seal.

Danzo's head turned around, his Sharingan glinting red. "Don't even try to put me under a genjutsu. It won't work."

Yakumo took a step back, and adopted a defensive stance. Danzo made a hand seal, summoning more vines around Haku that would stop other ninjas from helping him from the outside. Ignoring the now secured Haku, the former leader of Root took a step forward.

"Given that you're the last members of two clans with powerful Bloodline Limits, Orochimaru prefers if I catch you alive," Danzo told her. "Consider yourselves lucky."

Then, Danzo dashed towards Yakumo before she could cast another genjutsu or ninjutsu attack, and engaged her in close combat. Even in his old age, Danzo never neglected training and was a force to be reckoned with. And now that Orochimaru had returned him his youth, his physical capabilities were at his peak. Very few ninjas could match Danzo in sheer hand to hand combat.

And Yakumo wasn't a ninja made for direct combat. Thanks to Tsunade's treatments, her body became strong enough to endure the physical hardships of being a ninja, but taijutsu was still by far her biggest weak point. While she was fast and nimble, Danzo would only need one good hit in order to crack her bones and leave her completely hopeless.

"Ice Release: Crushing Glacier!"

Danzo turned around too late to see a row of huge sharp edged chunks of ice rising in his direction, before one of them slammed into his gut, and sent him flying backwards, landing on his back.

"Ice Release: Crystal Bird!"

Haku breathed out a massive gust of cold, frigid air. The air condensed into solid matter, taking the shape of a large bird. The ice

bird then flew towards the still downed Danzo, crashing into his body. The resulting explosion of frost and cold air encased Danzo's body inside a block of solid ice, leaving only his head and shoulders exposed.

"What...? How...?" Danzo asked, unable to repress his shock. "I had pinned you down! And I made sure nobody could release you from the outside!"

"'From the outside' being the key words," Haku replied, unable to repress a smug smirk. "I managed to break out from the inside."

"How? Even if you can make seals with one hand, I immobilized both your arms!" Danzo replied.

"Easy. Yakumo-san helped me," Haku said. "See, she used a genjutsu on me to make me think that my arms were free, allowing me to make hand seals. In reality I was unable to, but my brain believed I did and my chakra network reacted accordingly, allowing me to use my ninjutsu without hand seals."

"That genjutsu from before... I wasn't the target. No wonder I didn't feel anything," Danzo said in realization.

"Good job, Yakumo-san. Now, let's seal him for good," Haku replied. Yakumo nodded, as the two of them walked towards the frozen man.

Unfortunately for them, Danzo still had one ace under the hole. His lone Sharingan changed shape into a more complex pattern

"Okuninushi!"

Suddenly, two negative colored translucent Danzo copies jumped from his body, lunging at Haku and Yakumo, startling them and forcing them to jump back as they attempted to parry the sudden attacks. Other two replicas appeared besides Danzo, and shattered the ice keeping him prisoner, releasing him once again.

"It just doesn't end with this man, does it?" Yakumo irritably grumbled, as she parried a blow from a Danzo afterimage with a kunai.

"So it seems. Come on, we have to keep fighting. We've been close to beating him before, I know we can do it," Haku reassured her.

Yakumo nodded, and the two of them resumed the battle against the former leader of Root.

...

Meanwhile, in the air, Kurenai and Hotaru continued their fight against Deidara. The blond Akatsuki looked at the genjutsu mistress floating in front of him, and the Kiri kunoichi standing on a floating bubble near her. He fed the mouths inside his palms explosive clay, which they began to chew.

"Once again, you show that you're unable to beat me on your own, you genjutsu bitch!" Deidara said, before his mouth hands spat more clay figurines shaped like birds. "Your shitty illusions have nothing on my wonderful art!"

Deidara threw the bird clay figure forward, which started to flap its wings as it flew towards Kurenai. The Akatsuki member made a hand seal, and a dozen more clay birds appeared around the first one. Hotaru, however, was ready to act.

"Don't worry, Kurenai-san, I got this!" Hotaru said, as she made several hand seals. "Water Release: Bubble Prison!"

Placing her lips around the mouth of Utakata's pipe, Hotaru blew a flurry of small bubbles, which slowly flew to intercept the clay birds. However, as if they had a brain of their own, the birds easily flew around the bubbles, dodging them.

"What?" the Kiri kunoichi asked in shock.

"Those things can move autonomously! Don't try to intercept them with slow moving projectiles!" Kurenai warned her, as she flew away from the incoming clay birds, while making several hand seals.

"Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

Kurenai exhaled a wide cone of wind that pushed the incoming bird backwards, some of them detonating. However, many others managed to avoid exploding prematurely, and continued their flight towards the genjutsu mistress. The raven haired woman, sensing how her chakra levels dropped to half her full reserves, decided that she couldn't continue relying on Riding the Hurricane, and cancelled it while landing on one of Hotaru's bubble platforms.

"Hotaru-san, see if you can create more of those bubbles to move around!" Kurenai said, as she pulled several kunai from her ninja tool pouch. "I'm afraid I won't be able to fly on my own anymore."

"Got it!" Hotaru replied, as she started blowing more of said bubbles.

As more bubbles formed around them, Kurenai jumped from one to another, infusing the kunai with her chakra for added power, and tossing the chakra-charged weapons at any of the birds that flew towards her, making them to explode prematurely, engulfing the area into a huge cloud of smoke. Kurenai jumped out of the cloud of smoke, landing on a bubble platform.

"Hotaru-san, this Akatsuki is a ranged specialist! We need to get close to him in order to have any hopes of victory!" Kurenai told her.

"Understood! I'll make sure all the bubble platforms stay close to him!" Hotaru replied.

"Good luck with that! My clay dragon is not only a devastating weapon, but also serves as an excellent aerial mount!" Deidara boasted, and to prove his point, he made his dragon dive, before flying up again, while doing several spins. Hotaru's bubbles tried to keep up with the clay creature's speed, but had a hard time doing so. "What do you think about that, hn?"

"Your pretty aerial tricks won't help you defeat us," Kurenai defiantly replied.

"Oh really? In that case, how about THIS trick, hn? I remember it gave you quite the trouble the last time!" Deidara said, as he started making hand seals. "Explosion Release: Explosive Clay Hive Queen!"

The clay dragon spat a blob of clay, which burst into a cloud of smoke. And from said cloud of smoke, the familiar view of a large giant insect with a disproportionately large abdomen emerged.

"Hotaru-san, watch out! That thing can create explosive insects of its own!" Kurenai warned.

And to prove Kurenai right, the Clay Hive Queen spat several balls of clay that quickly took the shape of small insects, which quickly buzzed off towards the two kunoichi. Hotaru prepared her pipe.

"Don't worry, Kurenai-san, I've got this!" Hotaru confidently said, as she started to make hand seals. "Water Release: Water Bubble Prison!"

Hotaru blew another flurry of bubbles towards the incoming insects, but once again, the insects easily dodged the slow moving bubbles, and continued their flight towards Kurenai and Hotaru. When they reached them, they latched onto their bodies, and detonated before they could remove them from their skin. High pitched screams filled the air as the two women were engulfed by a chain of explosions.

"Ha! Yes, take that, you bitches! Heh, that was so easy..." Deidara said, basking in his victory. That's it, until a thought dawned upon him. "... too easy, now that I think about it."

The Akatsuki then made a hand seal, and send a burst of chakra through the rest of his body. And much to his frustration but none to his surprise, he saw the cloud of smoke slowly vanishing into nothingness, replaced by his Hive Queen and explosive insects

being trapped inside of bubbles. And while Hotaru was there, Kurenai was nowhere to be seen.

That's it, until he noticed a shadow being cast over him. Deidara looked up, and saw Kurenai leaping at him from a bubble platform, kunai in hand.

"Shit!" he yelled, as he tried to make his dragon fly away.

But too late. Kurenai landed just behind him, and as Deidara turned around to face her, she tried to plunge her kunai into the Akatsuki's chest. Deidara managed to catch Kurenai's wrist with one hand, and when the Genjutsu mistress tried to punch him with the other, he also grabbed her other wrist with his free hand. The two of them struggled against the other for a bit, until, there was a crunching noise.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!" Kurenai screamed, as blood started to pour from her wrists.

"HA! Did you forget how I create my art?" Deidara mocked, grinning savagely. "Having mouths in the palms of my hands can be quite useful, don't you think?"

Kurenai changed strategy, and started to kick Deidara instead, aiming for the groin. But much to her surprise, she didn't get the reaction she was expecting. Hell, it almost appeared as if he wasn't even feeling any pain at all.

"Don't tell me you're actually a woman," Kurenai grimaced, as an inopportune flashback of her mistakenly believing that Haku was a girl when she first met him played in his mind.

Deidara's grin widened. "Oh, it's even better than that!"

Then, Deidara lost all color, both his hair, skin and clothes turning grayish white, the same kind of shade as the clay dragon they were standing on. Kurenai's lost all color on her face when she realized

that she was immobilized by an explosive clone. Said clone started to glow as it began to gather and accumulate chakra. The Genjutsu Mistress tried even harder to break its grip, but to no avail.

"Kurenai-san!" Hotaru's voice called from besides her. "Water Release: Water Severing Wave!"

Hotaru expelled a thread of super compressed water, severing the arms of the clone, and releasing the raven haired woman. Kurenai jumped with a few seconds to spare before the clone exploded. Hotaru then blew into her pipe as if it was a blowgun, firing a single water blob at Kurenai. When the water bullet was just below her, it suddenly turned into another platform bubble, breaking her fall.

"Ow..." she whined, as she rubbed her pained, blood covered wrists. "Thanks for the save, Hotaru-san."

"Thank me later, we still have to beat that guy!" Hotaru replied.

That moment, Deidara -presumably the real one- emerged from the cloud of smoke produced by the explosive clone, riding on his dragon, who apparently, was undamaged from the blast.

"I'd like to see you try!" Deidara hollered. "I saw you fight and now that you need to weave seals in order to cast your thrice damned genjutsu! Try to make hand seals with your wrist like that!"

Rather than being intimidated, Kurenai merely smirked confidently.

"Perhaps I don't need to make hand seals to make my illusions, Akatsuki," Kurenai replied. "Take a look behind you."

Despite knowing it was a trick, Deidara turned around, and much to his shock and anger, he saw a small army of Allied ninja, all riding flying animals, mostly insects such as bees and beetles, but there were some birds and even a bat as well. He wasn't that surprised - he had heard the Allied Shinobi Force had an air force- but didn't

believe that they managed to arrive to the battle in such a convenient timing.

His first instinct, naturally, was to try to dispel the genjutsu Kurenai put him under, even if he couldn't recall when that happened.

"Release!"

A burst of chakra waved through his body, disrupting his chakra network. But the aerial army remained there, in place.

The next confirmation that it wasn't a genjutsu came in the form of the Flying Zetsu. A second ago, they were busy harrasing the Allied ground forces -they already learned through the hard way not to get close to Deidara, as the mad bomber wasn't one to care about collateral damage- and immediately took off and went to meet the new enemy in battle.

"What the...?" Deidara said, as he narrowed his eyes at something that caught his eye.

Because among the ninjas riding giant flying animals, there was one who appeared to be flying on their own. A blue haired individual carried by large wings that appeared to be made of hundreds of sheets of paper.

"No way... no fucking way!" Deidara yelled.

"What's wrong? What did you see that caused you so much distress?" Kurenai asked in a mocking tone. Hotaru was with her, helping wrap her wrists with some bandage she carried.

However, Deidara was no longer paying attention to the Genjutsu Mistress nor Utakata's former apprentice. Because the winged ninja, ignoring the Flying White Zetsu fighting the rest of the Allied Air Forces, split from the group and flew towards him. And as the winged ninja flew closer, Deidara could identify her.

"Konan... !" Deidara screamed. "The fuck are you doing fighting with the enemy!?"

"Greetings, Deidara," Konan said in her usual stoic tone, seemingly ignoring his rage and indignation. "After so much time, we see each other again."

"Don't try to win me with pointless politeness!" Deidara roared. "You fucking traitor!"

"I'm no traitor. I was always loyal to Nagato and his vision of a better future," Konan replied, now sounding indignant herself. "And such vision can't hope to happen with Akatsuki under Obito's rule. Only Naruto Uzumaki and his friends and allies can take us to a better tomorrow."

"Spare me your bullshit! Do you think that you can just quit Akatsuki like that!?" Deidara roared, his nostrils flaring with anger.

"Yes," was her answer, delivered in a tone that made her intentions and convictions clear. "And given that my former enemies show me mercy and the chance to redeem myself for my sins, I shall show you the same courtesy. Leave this corrupted version of Akatsuki, Deidara. There's still time to do the right thing."

"HA! You think that, after you and your boyfriend strongarmed me into joining your little club, I'm going to let you betray us and walk away unscathed? Well, THINK AGAIN!"

"A regrettable answer. But not an unexpected one," Konan said, as her wings expanded. She then looked at Kurenai and Hotaru, both standing on a platform bubble a few meters below Deidara. "You no longer have to deal with this man. Leave him to me."

Wordlessly, Hotaru nodded and commanded the bubble platform to float down back to the ground.

"You think you and your little origami figures can take on my art, hn? HA!" Deidara yelled, as his clay dragon shot a clay projectile at Konan.

The former Akatsuki member quickly evaded the explosive missile, which detonated a few meters behind her. Deidara's dragon continued firing explosive projectiles at Konan, but the bluenette dodged them expertly. Soon the air was filled with the loud thunderclaps of explosions and the black clouds of smoke they left behind, but Konan was never harmed. That's it, until one of the explosions caught her too close, and burned a little of her left wing, making her to tumble down.

"Haha, yes!" Deidara said, as she threw more clay figurines at her. "Now disappear already!"

Several birds made of explosive clay left Deidara's hand and dived at the falling Konan. Upon seeing them, Konan wrapped her wings around herself, forming a barrier of paper. The moment the birds hit her improvised shield, it was engulfed by a chain of explosions.

"And BOOM! Traitor gone!" the blond Akatsuki cheered, as he looked down at the clouds of smoke below him. "Though being part of my art was too good of an end to-"

Deidara was then alerted of a weird noise coming from below. Tiny wings, like those of a bird, flapping. But not just one or two, but actually hundreds. Then, much to his shock, a swarm of hundreds upon hundreds of origami butterflies emerged from the cloud of smoke, gathering in front of him. The paper swarm split in two, revealing Konan, completely unharmed.

"I already experienced your art before, and it's just as disappointing as it is now," Konan said, narrowing her eyes at the blond. "Now, let me show you a taste of what my little origami figures can do."

Konan motioned her arm forward, and the swarm of origami butterflies launches itself at Deidara. After letting out a curse, the

former Iwa nin quickly turned his dragon around and made it fly as fast as it could, with the paper swarm trailing after him. Deidara sent more explosive clay figurines towards the paper menace.

"Burn already!"

Multiple explosions burned many of Konan's paper butterflies, but many more emerged from the resulting cloud of smoke, almost if Deidara's attack didn't have any effect on it. He continued flying around, but the butterflies were restless.

"Paper Chakram!"

Deidara saw how a large ring made of razor-sharp papers flew towards his dragon at a breakneck speed. He tried to maneuver it in order to dodge it. However, he was too slow, and the paper weapon sliced a piece of the clay dragon's wing. With its wing damaged, the dragon could no longer fly in a stable manner, and it spiraled down, until it crashed against the ground. The impact threw Deidara from the dragon's back, and landed painfully on his back.

"S-Shit..." he cursed, as he pushed the pain away and tried to get back to his feet.

However, as he did, the butterflies finally reached him, and started to latch onto his body. Soon, he was completely encased inside a cocoon made of paper, completely immobile. Looking up, he saw Konan looming over him, staring at him with eyes full of contempt.

"I wanted to offer you the same opportunity it was offered to me, but I should have known that you would reject it," Konan began. "You're nothing but a sadist with a twisted and sick fascination with destruction. The world will be a better place without you."

"Fuck you... you b-bitch!" Deidara said, as he tried to spat a glob of blood at her. "I'm an artist!"

Konan merely frowned. "And now, you're going to die. So tragic, the end of an artist," Konan made a single hand seal as she narrowed her amber eyes at Deidara. "But rest assured, Deidara, at the very least, I'll make your demise into a work of art."

Konan's statement was followed by yet another chain of explosions, resulting in loud bangs and bright flashes of fire, followed by a cloud of smoke. And when the smoke dispelled, there was nothing left of Deidara.

Akatsuki had lost another of its members.

...

The Sand Siblings watched in awe the sight before them. A few moments ago, the Gold and Silver brothers looked like any other human, but with the cracked skin and black eyes of the reanimations. Now, they were larger, covered in a deep dark red thick chakra cloak, with five tails of chakra forming behind them, the tail in the middle being much larger than the other two.

"That's... that's the Nine Tails' chakra..." Temari said, trying to make sense of what she was feeling. "How do these two guys have the Nine Tails' power?"

"That's an irrelevant question," Gaara interjected. "What we should ask ourselves is what are we going to do to beat them now that they revealed such a power."

"Okay... maybe these two guys aren't going to be as easy as we thought," Kankuro nervously mentioned.

Temari shot her brother an annoyed look. "You think so!?"

It wasn't just the physical appearance that had changed. While the Sand Siblings could feel the hidden power behind the chakra of the Kumo Missing-nin thanks to their Sage Mode, now that power wasn't

hidden anymore. It was the difference between seeing a lake of still magma inside a crater, and watch it erupt from a volcano.

"Enough. I don't want a discussion at such an inopportune time," Gaara told his older siblings in a firm tone. "The enemy is a formidable one, but we can beat them. A pale copy of the Nine Tails' powers won't be enough to bring us down."

"Is that a challenge, little ginger?" Kinkaku -or Ginkaku, it was hard to tell them apart in their transformed state- asked, his claws digging into the ground.

"It's a statement," Gaara replied, unfazed.

Suddenly, the ground around Kinkaku exploded as he dashed towards Gaara, leaving a trail of dust behind, ready to smash Gaara's head between his enlarged, clawed arms. However, Gaara's sand proved to be just as fast, getting in the way between the two, forming a thick barrier. Said barrier also grew multiple spikes of compressed sand, but they were unable to pierce the chakra cloak.

Temari choose that moment to attack, and leaped in front of Gaara.

"Sage Art: Wind Release, Hands of the Wind God!"

Temari swung her war fan, producing a powerful tornado that, even if it blew the sand away, it also elevated Kinkaku into the air. The pseudo-jinchuriki trashed wildly trying to remain on the ground, but without nothing to anchor himself to, his efforts were useless. Fortunately for him, an anchor was going to be available.

"Kinkaku!" Ginkaku shouted, as he shot his largest tail towards his airborne brother. It seemed that Ginkaku could enlogate that tail at will. "Grab onto me!"

Kinkaku was snapped of his fury, and mimicking his brother's moment, also enlogated his largest chakra tail towards the ground. Both tails wrapped around each other. Ginkaku then dug his hands

into the ground in order to anchor himself to it, successfully stopping his brother from being carried away from the wind.

"Great job, Ginkaku!" his older brother praised.

"And that's not all, runts! Now watch this!" Ginkaku said, as he heaved the tail holding his brother down.

"Everybody, move!" Gaara warned, as he and his siblings jumped back in opposite directions, while watching in horror how the airborne Kinkaku was brought down like a giant hammer.

"CRIMSON METEOR!"

Ginkaku slammed Kinkaku into the ground, making the earth shake with a booming thunderclap. The ground exploded when the elder brother hit it, the resulting shockwave opening a large crater into the ground, with many cracks appearing around it and slowly spreading around, and sending waves of dirt, dust and mud into every direction.

"Shit, the force behind that hit..." Kankuro said, trying to keep his balance from the still shaking earth. "If we were hit by that..."

"Not even Sage Mode would have allowed us to survive," Gaara coldly stated.

"So we better keep our guard at all times! We might have the power to beat them, but the reverse is also true!" Temari warned her little brothers. "Plus they have much more battle experience than us!"

When the clouds of smoke and dirt vanished, Kinkaku was standing in the middle of the newfound hole in the ground, looking unscathed despite the powerful impact.

"Heh, that was fun, Ginkaku. We never went all out since that chump Tobirama," Kinkaku laughed.

"Hey, Kinkaku, don't you think it's my time to have some fun?"
Ginkaku said, echoing his brother's laugh.

"I do think that, Ginkaku," Kinkaku said, his emonic grin widening, as his white glowing eyes fixed on the sand siblings. "You brats are going to enjoy this."

Then, while the two brothers were still bound together by their tails, Ginkaku curled himself into a ball, with his tails wrapped around his body, while Kinkaku started to spin on the spot, dragging Ginkaku in a circle. He continued spinning at an incresingly high velocity, to the point that Ginkaku was no longer dragged through the ground but carried through the air. The spinning speed continued to increase, and a tornado started to form around them, with powerful gusts of wind reaching the Sand Siblings.

"SPINNING CRIMSON MORNING STAR!"

Then, much to their shock, Kinkaku started to move towards them as he continued spinning.

"Temari, Kankuro, attack at once!" Gaara ordered, as he moved his arms forward, commanding it to attack. "Wind Release: Multiple Sand Bullets!"

"Red Secret Move: Puppet triad!"

"Wind Release: Great Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

Gaara's sand gathered above him into a single, massive blob, before it fired a barrage of sand missiles. Kankuro made the Sasori puppet to fire a barrage of kunai, while Sairen fired a multitude of chakra arrows from its chakra bows. Temari swung her fan, releasing a powerful wind current. The three attacks merged together into a single, destructive force, aimed for the incoming brothers...

... and were unceremoniously deflected away by the powerful spinning force Kinkaku was generating.

"What the hell!? They shrugged off some of our best moves like they were nothing!" an angry Kankuro protested.

"That's like that Hyuga defensive jutsu they have. The Heavenly Spin I believe it was called," Temari noticed.

"Does that jutsu has a weak spot, or a way to break it? Something that we can use?" Kankuro asked.

"The uppermost part of the spinning dome is the most vulnerable spot. However, with the protective winds they're generating, an attack from above would be impossible," Gaara said, as his eyes studied the incoming brothers. Then, he dropped to one knee, and slammed his hand onto the ground. "They're also vulnerable from an attack coming from below."

As the Kumo brothers moved towards them, they didn't notice that the ground started to shake. Then, a stream of sand shot from underground as if it were a geyser, sending Kinkaku, and by extension, Ginkaku, into the air, hollering and screaming profanities. Gaara waved his arms, and the sand surrounded the flying brothers, ready to encase them in a gigantic sand prison. He then clenched his hands into fists.

"Sand Coff-"

However, both Kinkaku and Ginkaku roared in unison, letting out a powerful chakra pulse that repelled the sand away as if it was the shockwave of an explosion.

"Quickly, while they're still mid air, aim for their tails!" Gaara told his siblings. "We have to stop them from using those combo attacks against us!"

Kankuro and Temari nodded.

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

"Mechanical Light Arrow Shot!"

Temari swung her fan again, this time generating several crescent shaped blades of pressurized wind, while Kankuro's hooded puppet fired a large, thick chakra arrow. Both attacks hit on the pseudo-jinchuriki's tails in the part where they were wrapped around each other, breaking their physical connection, a few seconds before they landed on the ground.

"Now, to separate them," Gaara said, as he slammed both hands into the ground. "Great Sand Barrier!"

From the middle point between Gaara's hands, the former jinchuriki of the One Tail unleashed a row of rising sand pillars, bifurcating the field, and forcing the two brothers

"Kinkaku!" Ginkaku shouted.

"Forget about me! Let's tear these brats apart! We don't need the other to do such a thing!" Kinkaku replied, as he started to run on his fours towards the Sand Siblings, leaving a trail of dust behind. Sensing what his brother was doing, Ginkaku also rushed forward.

"Here they come!" Temari said.

"I know. Temari, prepare to block Kinkaku. Kankuro, you take on the other one," Gaara commanded.

"Understood," Kankuro replied, as he put himself to Gaara's right, while Temari took the left flank. "What are you going to do? Do you have a plan?"

"Yes, I do have a plan," Gaara replied. "Albeit it hinges on them not being allowed to work in tandem against us again, so try your best to keep them separated."

"Leave it to us!" Kankuro said, mmaking several hand motions to move his puppets. "They won't see what hit them!"

Kankuro's three puppets moved towards the incoming Ginkaku, with Tamotsu in the middle, its shield already prepared to block, and Sasori and Sairen a little behind it to its sides. Ginkaku, however, wasn't going to take the obvious bait.

"You think you're the first puppeteer I fight?" Ginkaku roared, as he continued running on all fours. "If you think I'm going waste any time with your little toys, you must not have a brain inside that ugly head of yours!"

"So cute. He thinks he has a chance," Kankuro chuckled, as he made a hand seal. "Sage Art: Maelstrom Shield!"

Tamotsu's shield opened up in four sections, revealing a multitude of sealing patterns under its primary shell. The seals started to glow with a blue light, and the air in front of it started to twist and swirl, as if reality itself was being teared apart.

Despite Ginkaku was trying to steer away from Tamotsu, but no matter what he did, it felt like he was being railroaded into running straight towards the shield bearing puppet. He stopped on his tracks, snarling angrily.

"I don't know what trickery is this, but it won't work!" Ginkaku said, as he raised his face while opening his jaws. Energy particles started to gather above it, forming a dark red sphere of Tailed Beast chakra. "Tailed Beast Ball Barrage!"

Ginkaku caught the energy ball inside his mouth, before spitting it in the form of multiple chakra blasts, sailing in arcs above the puppets towards Kankuro. However, much to Ginkaku's surprise and anger, the chakra bolts all altered their course so they would fly into Tamotsu's shield instead. The attack landed, resulting in a chain of explosions. However, when the smoke from the blasts dispelled, Tamotsu was there, its shield unscratched.

"Oh yeah, ranged attacks aren't going to work either," Kankuro replied. "That's why the jutsu is called 'Maelstrom Shield'. It will draw

everything to it. Avoiding it is impossible."

"If I can't avoid it, then I shall smash through it!" Ginkaku roared, the berserker pseudo-jinchurikin no longer caring that he might be playing into the puppeteer's hands, as his growing rage clouded his mind. He quickly reached Tamotsu and raised a clawed hand to tear it to shreds.

Kankuro smirked.

"Mechanical Light Shield Counter Blast!"

All the energy from Ginkaku's claw swipe was absorbed and gathered into an orb of energy at the middle of the shield. The energy of that orb was released in the form of a conical chakra blast, hurling the pseudo jinchuriki backwards, skidding against the ground.

"And that's not all!" Kankuro said, as he started to make move hand and finger movements. Sasori opened several compartments around its body, revealing various weapons; Sairen removed its cloak, revealing its full appearance: a puppet with streamlined humanoid appearance. It then pulled a second chakra bow, and combined it with the first, forming an X shaped bow with two chakra strings that crossed in the middle. It pulled the two strings, generating four chakra arrows. "Sage Art: Black Secret Technique, Performance of the Warring Puppets!"

Sasori fired a multitude of kunai, senbon and shuriken from its body mounted weapons, some of them on fire, others coated in poison, others with explosive tags attached to them. Sairen let loose, firing its four chakra arrows at once, flying in an arc towards Ginkaku. When they reached their highest point, they split into dozen of smaller chakra arrows, and they arced down towards the undead ninja. The barrage of steel and chakra projectiles, engulfing him inside a chain of explosions.

...

While Kankuro dealt with Ginkaku, Kinkaku, at the other side of the sand barrier, fought Temari. Like his brother, he let the animalistic feelings overwhelm his body and mind, and start running on all fours towards the Suna kunoichi. So far, the only thing inside the older brother's mind was pure, unadulterated anger and hatred.

"Wind Release: Great Wind Protective Wall!"

Temari swung her war fan, creating an extremely powerful gust of wind in order to push the incoming Kinkaku back. The pseudo-jinchuriki, however, avoided it by quickly digging underground.

"He can use Earth jutsu as well?" Gaara asked.

"So it seems," Temari said, as her eyes darted to the ground.
"Normally I'd be worried, but thanks to Sage Mode, I can sense exactly where he is."

Temari then folded her war fan, and raised it above her head while running forward. A blue aura started to form around the fan as Temari channeled chakra through it.

"There!"

Temari slammed her folded fan into the ground as if it was a club. Between Temari's Senjutsu-enhanced strength and all the chakra she had been channeling into the weapon, the impact managed to crack the earth, opening a hole, blowing chunks of ground and dirt away, and more importantly, forcing Kinkaku out into the open.

"SHIT!"

"Gaara, try to catch him while he's airborne!" Temari yelled.

"Understood," Gaara said, as he waved a hand.

Part of the sand forming the barrier shot towards Kinkaku in the form of a powerful stream. However, the eldest of the Gold and Silver Brothers wasn't going to go down so easily. Kinkaku opened his

jaws, and energy particles started to gather in front of them, taking the form of a dark red sphere of chakra. After a couple seconds, Kinkaku's jaws closed around the sphere.

"Tailed Beast Lightning Cluster!"

When Kinkaku opened his jaws again, a torrent of red lightning bolts came from it, blasting the wave of sand, which allowed him to hit the ground safely and continued forward. The attack didn't run out of fuel just yet, as he continued to breathe more bolts of destructive chakra from his mouth.

"Wind Release: Wind Wall!"

Temari blew her fan, this time downwards in a vertical motion, creating another wave of wind in order to stop the incoming the incoming beast shaped man. However, despite the powerful wind, Kinkaku was able to remain anchored to the ground thanks to the claws at the end of his fingers, and continued his advance even if it was at a slower pace.

Then, they all heard a series of explosions from the other side of the sand barrier. The three of them could feel how Ginkaku's chakra weakened considerably. Kinkaku stopped on his tracks, looked between shocked and outraged.

"Ginkaku! No!" the golden haired brother shouted.

Kinkaku lowered his body, and after a couple seconds, leaped into the air, easily going over the sand barrier. Spikes of sand grew over the barrier in an effort to catch him, but he was too high.

"Okay, I wasn't expecting he could do that," Temari said, admitting how amazed she was. "But I guess that we should have seen it coming."

"It is of no consequence," Gaara calmly said. "Kankuro has been able to incapacitate the other brother, and this one has already fallen

into my trap."

"He has?" Temari asked, confused.

"Yes. Now let's hurry, we need to help our brother."

...

Back to Kankuro and Ginkaku, the younger brother had now reverted to his human form, the Senjutsu-enhanced bombardment being too much for him to handle. Aside from his chakra cloak, he had lost both legs and an arm. He could feel them slowly regenerating, as well as his chakra, but not fast enough before stopping Kankuro from sealing him.

"GINKAKU!"

With a loud boom, Kinkaku, still in his chakra cloak, landed near the fallen Ginkaku. Perhaps his older brother could buy the silver haired man enough time to regenerate.

"Ginkaku! Who did this to you!?" his brother roared. Looking around, he saw Kankuro, as well as his three puppets he was controlling through many chakra threads. "You! It was you!"

Kankuro smirked. "I always love when somebody recognizes a work well done."

Kinkaku didn't take just jest kindly. As his rage reached new heights, his chakra cloak burned brighter, his body grew in size, and moving his head back, he let out an extremely loud roar. He then started to rush towards Kankuro on all fours, his footsteps leaving smoking holes in the ground, and a trail of fire behind him. The Sage Puppeteer gulped, and hoped that Tamotsu would be able to withstand this onslaught as it did with the younger brother.

"Temari, now!" Gaara's voice said.

"Sage Art: All Encompassing Vortex!"

Temari landed in front of Kankuro, and blew her fan a single time, producing an extremely powerful hurricane. In his feral state, Kinkaku didn't even think in attaching himself to the ground like he did before, and was elevated into the air. As the hurricane kept growing, it also managed to suck the fallen Ginkaku in.

"Time to end this," Gaara said, as he held out an open hand towards the hurricane. The sand barrier broke apart into a shapeless mass of sand, and Gaara directed it towards the hurricane, wind and sand merging into an intense sandstorm. "Kankuro, Temari, prepare the sealing tags!"

"You got it!" Kankuro said, as he and his sister got ready.

Gaara then closed his open hand into a fist. "Imperial Sand Burial!"

Suddenly, the raging sandstorm stopped, and all the sand condensed into a solid structure shaped like a pyramid, falling to the ground with a loud thud. As soon as it did, Temari and Kankuro rushed towards it, and slapped many chakra suppressing sealing tags around it. Chains of sealing symbols spread from the paper tags, covering the pyramid entirely.

The three Sages could sense how the chakra of the two brothers receded, until they could no longer sense it.

This fight belonged to the Sand Siblings. And soon, the rest of the battle going around them would follow.

Author's Note: You know, one thing I didn't like about Kinkaku and Ginkaku is that they relied too much on the Sacred Tools to fight, and had no jutsu or ability they could call their own, that's why I had them lose them so relatively quickly. I also thought I could expand a little more their abilities as pseudo-jinchuriki, given that Kinkaku only goes on a short rampage before he's sealed away. Anyway, I hope you liked my version of their fight.

Say, did you like the bullshit I came out with Yakumo helping Haku to use ninjutsu without hand seals? Yeah, stuff like that is why I'm so glad I didn't end up making her part of the regular cast. That ability of her is way too OP.

And boom goes Deidara! Man, it's amazing that the guy managed to survive so damn long into the story. While I wanted to keep him alive for longer than canon did, I wasn't planning it to be so long. But I just couldn't find the right moment to off him, so he ended up outlasting more important members like Kisame or Toneri. Oh, and some people, as well as the TVTropes page, wondered how he was recruited into Akatsuki since Itachi never joined them to begin with. It was Pain and Konan themselves who brought him into the fold. And unlike Itachi, who used genjutsu to defeat him, you can bet Pain was a lot more... forceful.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Guess we'll see each other again next year. I wish you guys a Merry Christmas and happy holidays, and above all else, to make out of this cursed year alive. See you in 2021!

And of course, don't forget to leave a review with your thoughts on this chapter. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Sandstorm Subsides

Author's Note: First of all, Happy New Year, my dear readers! Let's hope 2021 turns out to be at least an improvement over 2020.

So, due how many people have Sage Mode in this fic, there's some confusion over who has it and who hasn't (many readers mentioned they were under the impression Kurenai was a Sage), so here's a list of all the current Sages: Naruto, Jiraiya, Tsunade, Hinata, Hanabi, Shizune, Shisui, Asuma, Karin, Rin, Gaara, Kankuro, Temari, Fu and Mei.

Now, enjoy the next chapter:

Chapter 119:

The Sandstorm Subsides

or

The Tutorial is Over

Turtle Island

As it was usual for Naruto after he befriended the Nine Tails, the blond Jinchuriki was at the edge of the shore of the island, trying to master the Tailed Beast Ball. Turns out, his hypothesis was correct, and spinning the ball like with the Rasengan helped stabilize the volatile chakra of the Nine Tails. However, while it made it easier, it didn't mean that it solved the problem, since Naruto still had trouble to master the jutsu completely.

The blond had lost count on how many times he had tried just today, but he had a feeling that he was close to it. He was using his two arms to hold the sphere, as well as four additional arms made of

golden chakra to keep the sphere stable and the rotation going. It seemed that this time he was going to do it.

"Come on... come on... !" Naruto said, as beads of sweat trickled down his neck, his golden-red eyes fixed on the sphere of chakra, expecting to destabilize and blow up at any moment.

But the moment never came. The sphere was stable. The fast rotation held the chakra in place.

" **Heh, guess you finally did it, brat,**" Kurama praised his host. **"Not a true Tailed Beast Ball of course, but an acceptable facsimile you can rely on until you master the real thing."**

"Thanks. I guess," Naruto replied. Even then, he still was unsure about when the grumpy Fox's compliments were genuine or mocking.

" **Now throw it, and see the effect,**" Kurama told the blond.

Naruto nodded, and careful not to stop the rotation, he brought his arms back, before tossing the Tailed Beast Ball into the ocean. The sphere traveled in a wide arc for a couple hundred meters, until it crashed into the water, producing a decent sized dome-shaped explosion.

" **Not bad, brat. For the first time, definitely not bad,**" Kurama said.

"Hey yo, Naruto, that was a pretty neat Tailed Beast Ball! It seems that you finally surpassed that wall!" a voice said behind him.

Naruto turned around, and saw Killer B standing there, arms crossed, with his lips curved into a small smirk.

"Heh, thanks," Naruto said, rubbing the back of his head. "Though, Kurama said I still have a long way to go until I can master his chakra completely."

"Hey, no worries, getting used to Tailed Beast Chakra takes some time. Just keep training like you've been doing, and you'll be fine!" Killer B rapped. "I myself had to do a lot of wait until I was able to turn into Number Eight! So don't worry, you'll get there, and in the meantime, prepare."

"Though, now that you mention it, it's been a while since the last time I tried the Tailed Beast form. Hey Kurama, you think that with all the progress I've made I can do it now?" Naruto asked.

" I find it unlikely, but there's no hurt in trying," Kurama said, with a shrug. ***"No hurt for me, of course. It will probably hurt a lot for you."***

Naruto felt like saying something, but decided not to dignify that with a response. Instead, he clapped his hands together and focused his chakra. Thinking in the form of the Nine Tails, the chakra cloak started to grow, first in the form of a shapeless glob, then, little by little, it started to take the form of the fox, first growing arms and legs, then the head, then nine stubs that would grow into the nine tails. Or that was the plan, because the chakra construct fell apart halfway transformation.

"Dammit!" the blond yelled, as he punched the sand. "I thought I was going to do it this time!"

"Like I said, you're still not ready, the Nine Tails chakra ain't steady! But worry not, the chakra of number nine will be fine in no time!" Killer B said. "Though, I must ask, is there anything that makes you worry? You're pushing yourself hard, there's no need to hurry."

"There is, though, There's a war out there, and the sooner we finish our training, the sooner we'll be able to help them," Naruto said, as he looked into the horizon. "People from our villages are dying every second, fighting a war to protect us. I don't want more people to die than those who did already."

Killer B sighed, but nodded, understanding where the blond came from. "Listen, Naruto, I know what you mean. Wars are ugly, they are never clean. It's a sad reality we have to face, sometimes ninjas die so others don't have to take their place. If we just go out now we'll play into Akatsuki's hands, by staying here we protect our homelands."

" *Heh, wish you were this responsible when I asked you not to fake your own death to go on a vacation, B,*" Gyuki intervened, making his host frown, and getting a chuckle out of Naruto.

"Shut up, Number Eight, I didn't ask for your opinion! B needed that vacation, he ain't nobody's minion!" Killer B protested.

Naruto shook his head. "I don't think that's the problem. I think I'm already used enough to Kurama's chakra, especially after all this training," Naruto explained. "But when I try the Tailed Beast Form... I don't know, it feels like I'm missing something. How did you manage to achieve the Tailed Beast form?"

B seemingly grew pensive, as he placed his hand under his chin.

"Jinchuriki are two being sharing a single body, the two need to agree, or the result will be shoddy. If you want to get the job done, the key to that is to work as one!" Killer B explained.

"Work as one, uh?" Naruto replied, trying to make sense of B's explanation. *"But Kurama and I are already working as one. We became friends, and he allows me to use his chakra freely... it is because we aren't close enough?"*

His heart was starting to hurt. Naruto decided to leave that for later.

"By the way, where is Fu? I don't see her," he asked.

"She finished her training, she said she was tired. Headed into the jungle, playing with the animals there gets her all fired," Killer B

explained. "And I believe you should take a rest too, you won't make any progress if you're exhausted, get it, fool?"

Naruto let out a sigh of defeat. "Okay. I'll cut my losses and celebrate that I sorta managed to master the Tailed Beast Ball."

Killer B nodded, and the two jinchuriki walked out of the beach. Still, Naruto wasn't going to take any days off. He had a feeling in his gut that he needed to master the power of the Nine Tails as soon as possible. He would need it to face the war's final challenge.

And he wasn't wrong.

...

Fourth Division's Camp Base, Nighttime.

Soon after Kinkaku and Ginkaku's defeat, the Sand Siblings quickly moved to incapacitate other Impure World Resurrection zombies, who proved to be far less challenging than the Gold and Silver Brothers. This caused the tide of the battle to quickly shift in the Alliance's favor, and the Akatsuki, realizing this, ordered the White Zetsu to retreat and their reanimations to be recalled.

Unfortunately, one of the reanimations that was successfully recalled before it could be sealed away was that of Danzo's, meaning that they'll have to deal with the crafty old man again.

After their resounding victory, Rasa ordered his troops to move back to the coast and build their base there, with better defenses this time in order to better avoid a future possible attack by the enemy by sea. By the time they were done, night fell over them, and the Allied ninjas sat around bonfires in order to enjoy a well deserved meal.

Rasa, as the commander, had the duty to report the result of the battle to the Ninja Alliance HQ, thanks to a Yamanaka clan member linking their mind via telepathic jutsu.

" Good job protecting the Land of Lightning, Kazekage," Onoki congratulated the brown haired man. "Especially given the caliber of the reanimations you and your men had to face against."

"Thanks. It wasn't an easy task, I can assure you," Rasa replied.
"Those guys were tough. And that was before they revealed their hidden power."

" The Gold and Silver brothers were pretty high in our list of potential future reanimations. I find a bit odd that Orochimaru waited until now to send them," Onoki chimed in.

" If Orochimaru is sending his heavyweights now, that can only mean two things," Chiyo intervened. *"Either Akatsuki is nearing their endgame and is preparing for one final push, or they're getting desperate. Neither of them foresee good things for us, but I wish it was the latter's case."*

" By the way, how were you able to subdue those two monsters, Rasa?" Onoki inquired. *"I fought them in my prime, and they gave me one of the hardest fights in my life."*

"Thankfully, my children picked up quite the useful skill from the Supreme Commander's son when I sent them as part of the relief group to help Konoha reconstruct after it was attacked by the Akatsuki," Rasa explained. "Sage Mode. I'd say that right now, all three of them are far stronger than I am."

" A father should always feel proud when a child surpasses him, Kazekage," Onoki replied.

" These recent developments are surely making me rethink my stance on alliances with other villages," Chiyo mused. *"Given the results..."*

" Continue with your report, Kazekage," Onoki told him.

Rasa nodded, as he continued. "Other notable reanimations we had to deal with was Danzo Shimura," Rasa continued. "Unfortunately, he escaped."

"Danzo was also in the list among the most likely candidates to be brought back," Ao intervened. *"The Supreme Commander added him to the list himself."*

"By the way, when you requested the help of the air force, it was mentioned that Deidara was leading them," Onoki intervened. *"What about him? Did he escape again? Or was he killed or captured?"*

"Ah, the man who kidnapped my son," Rasa replied, sounding sour. "Yes, he was taken down. By that ex-Akatsuki woman. Nothing would have made me happier than killing that bastard myself, but I do appreciate the irony of his demise coming at the hands of one of his fellow Akatsuki."

This seemed to please Onoki. *"Good, good. The world is a better place now that that traitor is no longer among the living."*

"Still, I wouldn't put past Orochimaru to revive him as well," Chiyo said.

"We haven't had any signs of Kisame being revived after his death. Then again, he might have been keeping them as a reserve force for an emergency," Ao stated.

"It's a possibility. Though something that troubles my mind is that I feel Orochimaru hasn't revealed his best assets yet," Rasa said. "According to what the Supreme Commander told me, when Orochimaru first attacked Konoha, he brought back its past three Hokages. Given that he's now proficient in the jutsu enough to resurrect hundreds of ninjas of great power... it seems suspicious that he hasn't deployed any previous Kage against us."

"The quality of the reanimations increases with each battle. I assume we will see former Kages very soon," Chiyo said.

" *Let's hope we're ready for when such moment arrives,*" Onoki noted. "*Anything else to say, Kazekage?*"

"Nothing at all," Rasa replied.

" *Very well. In that case, let's conclude this report here. Expect a convoy with supplies in the next hours,*" the acting Supreme Commander said.

Rasa nodded, and the mental link was broken.

...

Kurenai, her two students Haku and Yakumo, as well as Hotaru, were sitting on benches across a bonfire, enjoying their meals after a rather harsh day of battles. Despite the victory, though, the mood was a little somber, because among other things, none of the four ninjas present had managed to beat the enemies they faced, either because they managed to flee, or because they needed additional help to deal with them.

The mood didn't go unnoticed by Kurenai, who decided to try to cheer them up a little. "Well, another day, another victory for the Ninja Alliance. We're a little closer to the definitive end of the war now."

"I guess so," Yakumo said. "It would have been nice if we got to capture and seal Danzo, though. That old bastard will show up again, and cause more misery."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Yakumo," Kurenai said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Even in his old age, Danzo Shimura was one of the strongest ninjas Konoha ever produced, being close in power and skill to our very own Third Hokage. Not to mention all the body modifications he had, such as Hashirama's cells or Fugaku Uchiha's Mangekyo Sharingan. The fact that you and Haku managed to hold your own against him was really impressive."

"Not to mention that he was familiar with your Bloodline Limit and devised a way to counter it," Haku added. "The deck was stacked against us, yet we prevailed."

"Wait, Danzo knew how to counter your jutsu?" Kurenai asked in shock, leaning forward. "I thought Yakumo's genjutsu could only be countered with more genjutsu!"

Yakumo looked a little upset, not happy with having to talk about Danzo's accomplishments, especially since they were about neutralizing her. "Well, since my Bloodline Limit affects the victim's minds even more than normal genjutsu, so he thought about using Yamanaka mental jutsu to create shields inside his mind in order to repel or undo my illusions."

Kurenai never felt so dumb in her life. It was so simple, yet so brilliant. How is that nobody thought about that before? Had she asked a Yamanaka for help to deal with Yakumo when she was struggling to keep her powers under control, perhaps a lot of lives could have been saved, and Yakumo wouldn't have to go through several years of hell under Root as one of Danzo's human puppets.

"Yakumo, I'm so sorry!" Kurenai said, shaken by guilt. "Had I thought of that, a lot of tragedies could have been averted."

Yakumo grabbed Kurenai's hand, and smiled at her. "It's okay, sensei. It's in the past."

"But... your parents could be alive! And you could had a normal life!" Kurenai continued. "Had I been a better sensei and ninja, none of this-"

"Kurenai-sensei, stop," Yakumo told her, shaking her head. "Like I said, it's in the past. I might hate Danzo, he might be many things, but stupid isn't one of them. Quite the opposite, in fact. Plus, Danzo was always compiling information on how to neutralize enemies, both already existing, and potential ones like me at the time. He was very good at that."

"I... okay, I'll stop, for now," Kurenai agreed, though Yakumo frowned a little at the last part. "We have a war to win, and I can't afford to let anything distract me. None of us can."

"That's a good mindset to have. The next batch of enemies we'll have to fight against will be even stronger than these ones," Haku pointed out.

"Yeah, the reanimations are getting tougher and tougher. The one reanimation I fought against, a Kiri ninja named Harusame, also kicked my ass," Hotaru said a little bashfully. "Then again, he was Uakata-sensei's Jonin-sensei, so I had no business fighting him at all. Then I went to help Kurenai-san with that Akatsuki and... the results were the same."

"It's very hard to fight an airborne enemy when your means to flight are rudimentary at best," Kurenai replied with a nod. "Had I have Haku's assistance, like the last time we fought him, we would have brought him down for good."

"The important part is that Deidara did meet his end today. The fact that it wasn't at your hands wasn't important," Haku stated. "A job done is a job done, no matter how or who did it."

"Guess that's something Zabuza would say, hm?" Kurenai mentioned.

"Yes. Pragmatism is a must in the life of a ninja. Even without Zabuza-sama's guidance, it's a lesson I could have learned over time myself," Haku said. "Unlike your battle, our job wasn't finished, meaning that Danzo will eventually come back."

"Though, it's not that what happened today was anything new," Hotaru pointed out. "I did hear that Mei-sama's division was only able to nail about half of the reanimated swordsmen."

"You may be right. But Orochimaru won't have the element of surprise if he uses the same reanimation more than once," Kurenai

mentioned. "Reanimations can't get any stronger than they were when they died, can they?"

"I'm not really sure, but I'd say they aren't," Hotaru guessed. "Not that they weren't strong as hell to begin with."

"What I mean is, we fought them, we know what jutsu they have. Perhaps not all of them, but many of them," Kurenai began.

"Meaning that we can come up with a counter strategy in order to fight back against them the next time they show up. It's an advantage they have that we should capitalize."

"The ones who fought against Danzo the most were Shisui-san and Shizune-san. Shisui-san isn't here, but Shizune-san is. Perhaps we could ask her about what abilities Danzo used against her and Shisui-san when they fought him in the Valley of the End," Haku began.

"And I guess Mizukage-sama must know something about Harusame, given that he was the Jonin-sensei of one of Kiri's jinchuriki," Hotaru said, resting her chin under a finger. "Plus-"

Suddenly, Hotaru grew very quiet, and her eyes became wide as plates. The Kiri kunoichi looked as if she just saw a ghost. Or something worse.

"Hotaru-san?" Haku asked, a little worried. "Are you feeling well?"

Hotaru didn't reply, at least at first. The blond girl needed a few seconds to snap back to reality and process Haku's words. "Huh? Oh, yes, yes, I'm fine! Very fine!"

"Are you sure?" Kurenai asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because the way you're acting... that does not suggest that you're fine at all."

"I may be a little shaken from the battle. This is my first battle after all," she quickly said, as she stood up. "I think I may need to take a walk in order to clear my mind out."

"Okay..." Yakumo said. "Just do what you think is best for you, Hotaru-san."

The Kiri kunoichi then left the bonfire, leaving the three Konoha ninjas alone. All of them shared looks of worry.

...

Meanwhile, in another bonfire, Gaara, Temari and Kankuro were also having dinner, and talking among each other. Naturally, their mood was much brighter, given their victory over the Gold and Silver brothers.

"We just defeated two of Kumo's most infamously strong ninjas," Kankuro began, overflowing with excitement. "Who actually killed Konoha's Second Hokage. Who were immortal and had infinite chakra. And we beat them! Without breaking a sweat!"

"I wouldn't dare to say 'without breaking a sweat', Kankuro," Gaara told his older brother. "Even if we beat them, the Gold and Silver brothers proved to be formidable adversaries. Had not be for Sage Mode, I doubt we would have beaten them, even before they used the power of the Nine Tails they had within them."

"Come on Gaara, try to enjoy the victory we had today," Kankuro said. "This is going to look great on our record sheet!"

"Strange as it sounds, I'm with Kankuro here," Temari interjected, much to the puppeteer's surprise. "Those two psychos had to be among Orochimaru's strongest reanimations. The fact that we beat them not only means that we deprived the enemy from two of its strongest assets, but that we can take almost anything Akatsuki throws at us."

"That sounds awfully a lot like tempting fate, sister," Gaara replied. "There is always a stronger opponent waiting to cross path with you. As long as this war lasts, we should remain vigilant."

"Well said, son," a new voice said.

The three siblings looked up, and saw their father, the Kazekage, walking towards them. Though when he arrived, he didn't sit with them.

"Father," Gaara said. "Did you finish your briefing with the HQ?"

"Yes, thank goodness. I preferred to have to deal with Jiraiya. The way that old midget questions me gets on my nerves," Rasa said in a low voice, gritting his teeth. "Let's hope Jiraiya comes back from his trip soon."

While the news of the attack on the HQ, as well as Jiraiya and Tsunade going on a mission to kill Orochimaru was a strict secret for obvious reasons, with only the Division Commanders and other high ranking members of the Alliance being aware of it. Though, given their status, the Sand Siblings were among those few privy of the secret.

"Did you get any update on how their mission is going?" Temari asked, in a similar low voice.

"Not at all. Then again, I doubt they're sending messages telling us how close they are to the target," Rasa said. "If there's a target to begin with."

"Bummer," Kankuro said. "Let's hope they can end this soon enough. Depriving the enemy of all the reanimations at once would make this war end in a jiffy."

"We can't put all our hopes on something that comes from such an unreliable source," Rasa said. "I'm afraid we'll have to win the war the old fashioned way. Still, given the display of power you three did today, it gives me hope that we can end this with less casualties than I initially feared."

"I hope you are not upset because we defeated an enemy you weren't able to beat, father," Gaara said, cautiously eyed his progenitor and military leader.

"In another time, I would have been. Now... not in the slightest," Rasa said, letting out a sigh. Then, he walked towards the bench they were sitting at, and sat besides them. "That Sage Mode is sure something."

"I know, right? I wish we had that when Deidara and Sasori ambushed us that time. We would have kicked their asses so hard...!" Kankuro said, grinning maniacally, making punching motions.

"Speaking of which, I did heard that the Akatsuki, Deidara, had been killed. By that other Akatsuki, no less," Temari said.

"I still wish I was the one to put an end to that man's life, but I'll be content with the thought that he got his just punishment and won't be able to hurt more people again," Gaara said, nodding a little.

Temari started to mentally count, as her mouth moved without making any sound. "So... with Deidara out of comission, and Kisame also killed by the Mizukage... and given that the Moon Puppets stopped working a few days ago, Toneri must had bitten the dust... the only Akatsuki members still alive right now are Obito and Orochimaru."

"The two most dangerous members," Gaara said, nodding. "Taking them down will be much harder than the others."

"Fortunately, Orochimaru is already living on borrowed time, if what we know is true. No matter how powerful he became, there's no way he can stand to the Supreme Commander and Tsunade-sama as they are now," Kankuro confidnetly said.

"Yes, I'm sure their Sage powers will bring them a swift victory," Rasa agreed, before letting out another sigh. "If I knew the true power

behind Senjutsu, I would have sent you three to Konoha long before I did."

"What about you, father? Wouldn't you want to learn how to use this power as well?" Gaara asked.

"I would. But my position as Kazekage leaves me little time to do much training. And from what you guys told me, it took a lot of days of intensive training until you got down the basics," Rasa replied.

"You can always take a few days off," Kankuro suggested, before his face scrunched into a frown. "Now that I think about it, I don't remember seeing you taking any days off."

"That's because I didn't," Rasa said. "Others might do it, but I can't stand the thought of leaving the village in somebody else's hands when I can do the job. I couldn't wait for the Kage Summit to end for that very reason."

"Well, maybe you should. At least when this war is over," Temari said.

Rasa turned at Temari as if she had grown a second head. "Have you lost your mind? That's when the village is going to need me the most!"

"Okay, I give up," Temari said, throwing her hands into the air. Kankuro groaned, while Gaara stayed silent. "We only wanted you to unwind and maybe spend some time with the children you barely raised, but whatever."

This seemed to have some effect on Rasa, who was taken aback, and started to rethink of what he just said.

"I'm... sorry," he began, sounding like saying that word strained him. "I know I've been far from the best father. But once this is over, I'll try to make it up to you. I remember when I almost lost all three of you,

and one of the things I regretted the most was not being there for you while you were growing up."

"You mean it?" Temari asked, narrowing an eye at him.

"Yes," Rasa said, looking at them with genuine pride. "I know I don't say this very often, but... I'm very proud of the persons and ninjas you've grown into. And you did it without my help. I'm sure you three will lead our village to a great future once I'm no longer here."

Surprisingly, Gaara smiled. "Thank you, father. We will continue making both you and our village proud."

...

Konan, as per usual, was alone. Often deliberately avoiding the rest of the ninjas she fought alongside with. She knew trying to fraternize with them was an exercise in pointlessness who would only lead to strife and conflict, the last things the Ninja Alliance needed right now.

Fortunately for her, despite being widely known as a former Akatsuki member, nobody sought her out. Nobody tried to attack her, kill her, or even verbally berate her. They probably understood that doing so wouldn't end well for any of the parties involved. Or didn't understand that, but knew they could get into trouble with the high command, given that Konan was a very valuable asset.

Until now, that's it.

A small square of paper appeared between the bluenette's fingers, and turning around at an impossible speed, she tossed it at the feet of her stalker, who yelped in shock, while jumping in the air.

"I don't know what are your intentions," Konan said, amber eyes narrowing at the other ninja, a girl with blue eyes, blond hair, and a prominent forehead, wearing a Kirigakure uniform. "But approaching me was a mistake."

"Perhaps," the Kiri kunoichi said, fear disappearing from her eyes as her blue gaze met Konan's amber. "But I felt it's something I had to do. Though, first, answer me this: do you know who I am?"

Konan scanned the Kiri kunoichi from head to toe, her face remained frozen in a neutral expression. The bluenette finally spoke.

"You are the partner of the Jinchuriki of the Six Tails. Nagato and I battled you, as well as Naruto and two of his companions, on Nagi island a few months ago," Konan said. The Kiri kunoichi appeared to be surprised that Konan remembered her. "I don't think I ever learned your name."

"My name is Hotaru," Hotaru said, her voice quivered a little in an attempt to sound firm. "And the jinchuriki you and your partner *kidnapped* and *murdered* was Uta-kata. He was a person, not just some container for a Tailed Beast."

"And let me guess, you are planning to avenge his death at our hands," Konan replied, as she turned her back at Hotaru. Her tone was factual, and there wasn't a hint of mockery or regret. "If you feel you must do that, wait at least until the war is over. Then again, you might have to fight other people over the right of ending my life. My stay in Akatsuki created quite a few enemies, not without reason."

"I don't plan to kill you," Hotaru replied, as her hands clenched into fists. "I know of your power, and I know you could kill me without putting any real effort."

"Then why are you here? Do you want me to apologize to you? To tell you how much I regret having a hand in Uta-kata's death, as well in the deaths of all the people Akatsuki killed, either directly or indirectly?" Konan asked again. "I have no problem doing that, but it won't bring Uta-kata back. It won't even relieve your grief in the slightest either."

"I know that already. I'm here... because I wanted to ask you something," Hotaru said, fighting back the tears that formed at the

corner of her eyes, as the memory of her beloved sensei's last moments played in her mind. "Why? Why did you do it? What were you expected to gain?"

"I thought every ninja was briefed about Akatsuki's plans and motives. Or don't you even know why are so many villages fighting for the jinchuriki of two villages?" Konan asked.

"I know Akatsuki's motives," Hotaru said. "But I want to hear them from your mouth. A member, who was directly involved in Uzakata-sensei's demise. A member who used me as a bait to force him to sacrifice himself for my own sake. I want you to tell me what were you thinking exactly when you and your partner were fighting us."

Konan turned around and started to walk away. "This is a waste of our time-"

"It's not for me!" Hotaru yelled, as she walked towards Konan, grabbed her by the arm, and forced her to turn back at Hotaru. The former Akatsuki member didn't resist. "It's not for me."

"Why?" Konan asked. "Shouldn't it be easier if you simply saw me as some kind of irredeemable demon?"

"Because I know you aren't a demon," Hotaru replied. "Today, you saved my life and Kurenai-san's life. That Iwa Akatsuki was on the verge of defeating us, but you fought and killed him before he could finish the job. You even offered him a chance to leave Akatsuki."

"I was offered the chance to atone for my sins, and my sins aren't smaller than Deidara's. He deserved just as much," Konan said. "But I know what awaits me once the war ends and I'm no longer useful. I'll spend the rest of my days inside a cell. Perhaps that's why Deidara didn't want to leave Akatsuki. He knew that he would only have a life if Akatsuki won. Though I find that just as unlikely. Obito would probably dispose of him once he was no longer useful."

"Yet you're here. Fighting to undo your wrongs, even if you know that you won't evade the punishment for your crimes," Hotaru pointed out. "A truly evil person... a person like that wouldn't do that. So I want to know what drove a person like you to commit the crimes you did, to bring misery to so many people."

Konan looked at the younger woman with skeptical eyes. Still, she decided that there was no harm in humoring her.

"In that case, you better sit down. The story is not a short one."

Konan started to tell her tale: how she and Yahiko found Nagato. How all three of them were found and trained by Jiraiya, after the latter found about Nagato's Rinnegan. The foundation of Yahiko's Akatsuki. The Third Ninja War. Hanzo and Danzo. Yahiko's death. Finding Obito. Nagato's transformation into Pain, the birth of Pain's Akatsuki. The jinchuriki hunt. The Invasion of Konoha. And lastly, the confrontation with Naruto, followed by Nagato's death.

"From the day we were born, Nagato, Yahiko and I were surrounded by death. We lost most of our loved ones at an early age. Then the two of us lost Yahiko. And we... we wanted that to end. We wanted to create a world where no kids would lost their parents before they knew how to talk and walk, because ninjas were forced to fight and die in wars started by other people.

"Have you ever been so consumed by despair, that you'd do anything for it to end? For somebody to reassure you that things would get better? That there was more to this world than pain, loss and suffering?" Konan asked. "I would have killed myself a long time ago, if not because Nagato told me that the best way to honor Yahiko's death is to live and create a world that would make him proud."

"Would Yahiko be proud of all the people you killed? Of all the suffering you brought into this world?" Hotaru asked.

"I know he wouldn't," Konan said, her voice being firm. If Hotaru was expecting her question to shake Konan, she failed. "It took Naruto fighting us again to make us realize the error of our ways. However, my convictions hasn't changed. I still want to create, or help to create, at least a world better than the one I had to live in. That's what keeps me going. That's my 'reward', so to speak.

"Well, you asked me about why I do the things I do, both in the past and in the present, and I answered it in the most honest way possible," Konan said. "Is that all, or is there something else you also want to ask me?"

"No, that's all," Hotaru said, letting out a sigh she didn't know she was holding. "I... I don't think I'll ever forgive you for what you did."

"I don't expect you to," Konan said. "I killed somebody who was precious to you, and you hate me for it. The cycle of hatred isn't something everybody can break. I know that better than most people."

"However, listening to you made me understand quite a few things. About you, about the world... about the ninja system currently in place..." Hotaru said, as she sat up. "All my life, I wanted to be a ninja. But I never had a solid reason for me to want such a thing. If I am to stop more people to lose their loved ones like I lost Utakata-sensei... then I need to stop people like your younger self from becoming people like your present self."

"Yes... it would have been nice if there were more people like you and Naruto when I was your age," Konan said sadly.

Deciding the conversation was over, Konan started to break down into a multitude of paper sheets, which folded themselves in the form of origami butterflies, all flying away, leaving Hotaru alone.

"Well, that didn't went as bad I as feared."

Or, at least, she thought she was alone. Startled by the sudden voice coming from behind, Hotaru yelped and turned around in shock, seeing Haku appearing out of nowhere, as he dispelled the genjutsu that kept him hidden.

"Haku? You... you've been there the whole time?" Hotaru asked.

"I had to. When we saw you going after Konan, somebody had to make sure you didn't do something stupid," Haku explained.

"Kurenai-sensei wanted to go herself, but she thought that I was the better choice, given that we knew each other for longer."

"Wait... you realized that the reason I reacted that way was Konan?" Hotaru asked, incredulous.

Haku stared at the blond kunoichi flatly. "We're ninjas, Hotaru-san. Kurenai's a full Jonin, and I'm a Special Jonin despite my young age. We both noticed Konan walking past our bonfire, and the way you reacted to it."

"Then why didn't you guys say anything, and acted like nothing happened?" Hotaru asked.

"Do I need to repeat myself?" Haku asked, sighing a little. "Besides, we wanted to give you a chance and see if you were able to restrain yourself. And I'm glad to see that our faith in you wasn't misplaced. Sorry for spying on you like that, I can imagine some of the things you said weren't meant for privy ears."

Hotaru visibly deflated. "No, it's okay, it... it doesn't matter anymore. Sorry if I worried you guys. I felt I needed some closure on Utakata-sensei's death, and thought that facing his killer would bring it to me."

"Did it bring the closure you sought?" Haku asked.

"A little," Hotaru said. "You know, the saddest part is... Konan isn't a bad person. Under different circumstances, I think we could have

gotten along..."

"In a way, I understand what she went through," Haku said. "I also grew up in a country torn by war and hatred, and that hatred deprived me of my parents. However, I was found by Zabuza-sama, and then I met Naruto, Hinata and Kurenai-sensei. While Konan... was found by Obito."

"Then let's make sure such thing won't happen again," Hotaru said with renewed determination. "First, let's end this war. And then, we will make sure to create a new world. One where the circumstances that led to Akatsuki's creation will never happen."

"Yeah, let's," Haku said with an approving nod. "You know, I'm sure that if Utakata-san could see you now, he'll be proud of the ninja you've grown into."

Hotaru smiled in return. "Yes. I will create a world that will make my sensei proud."

...

Mountain Graveyard

"Well, another defeat. And on top of that, we just lost Deidara," Obito grumbled, as he walked back and forth through the cave both he and Orochimaru were using as a base of sorts. "Your reanimations are proving to be *such a huge help*," he snarled.

This time, Orochimaru didn't keep his friendly façade, and met Obito's glare with one of his own. "The Ninja Alliance is proving to be more resilient than either of us predicted. Though, if the course of the war is going so badly on our end, imagine how little you would have accomplished with your army of Zetsu clones and the few Akatsuki members left."

"And that fool Deidara got himself killed. By Konan no less," Obito said, clenching his fists as rage filled his body at the thought of that

traitor. "I'm going to make sure that bitch's death is slow and painful. Nobody crosses me and lives to tell the tale."

Orochimaru felt tempted to say something, but decided that riling Obito up even more would be counterproductive. Instead, he decided to try to calm him down.

"Things aren't as bad as you think, Obito-kun. You can still grow more Zetsu clones. And I can summon again the reanimations that have been destroyed," Orochimaru suggested. "As long as I round up a few hundreds of people to use as sacrifices, that is. We can recover from our losses much faster than the Ninja Alliance can. If this become a war of attrition, they will inevitably lose."

"We can't afford to reach that point, Orochimaru. This is a race against the clock. We need to catch those three jinchuriki and feed their Tailed Beasts to the statue as soon as possible," Obito insisted.

Orochimaru raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware that we were working under a timetable. Obito-kun, is there something you are hiding from me?"

"As if you didn't hide secrets from me either," Obito said. "You're older than me, didn't you hear the saying that the life of a ninja is measured in secrets, and that the moment they have none, their life ends?"

"Yes, I probably heard it before you were even born. I'm very old, after you so sagely noted," Orochimaru replied. "But I'm asking because this secret may affect me as well. I'm sure you'll understand my concerns, Obito-kun."

Fotrunately, before the argument could escalate any further, Zetsu - the original one- emerged from the ground. Strangely enough, he was smiling.

"Hey boss, good news!" the white half happily said.

"The only news I would consider good is that the Flying Zetsu have finally located that moving island the jinchuriki are hiding at," Obito humorlessly said.

"Well, you're lucky then, because that's exactly what we were coming to tell you!" the black half said. "One of the flyers has already latched onto the turtle, and is releasing spores that can only be tracked by other Zetsu."

"We can find them, and they have no way of realizing that their position has been compromised," the white half added with glee.

"Well, it seems that this farce of a war can finally reach its end. Let's cancel all our offensives, and move all our forces to intercept the island," Obito said, now sounding more content. "Make sure none of the jinchuriki escape."

"If we do that, the Alliance will find about us and they'll move to intercept us, like they've done every time we tried to get behind the enemy lines," Orochimaru suggested. "I thought that would be obvious. No wonder we're losing the war if our leader is such a poor tactician."

Obito's good mood evaporated. His glare pierced Orochimaru. "What do you suggest we do then, oh mighty strategic genius? Your record when it comes to war against Konoha is far from spotless."

"This is what we'll do: we'll continue waging war against the Alliance in order to make them think that nothing has changed, and while their attention is focused elsewhere we'll send a small team of reanimations to infiltrate the island and kidnap the jinchuriki," Orochimaru said. "I have several reanimations in reserve who are both powerful fighters and have the right skillset to shut down a jinchuriki."

Obito wasn't convinced. "A small team might not be enough. What if the ninjas stationed there just keep them busy while the jinchuriki escape? We'll lost all the advantage we have now."

"I already planned for that, and devised a contingency plan," Orochimaru assured confidently.

Obito let out an exasperated sigh. "Very well then. If this is our best chance, proceed."

Orochimaru grinned widely.

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Next Morning, Turtle Island

A boat slowly sailed through a sea covered in a very dense fog. It was manned by several White Zetsu clones, since they were the ones who knew where to go. There were also several cloaked people on board as well, but they didn't appear to be part of the ship's crew.

Soon, a large silhouette could be seen in the distance. What appeared to be a large being covered in spikes. The White Zetsu at the helm smirked wickedly.

"Land ho," a the helmsman said.

Naturally, this drew everybody's attention, who quickly moved to the prow of the ship in order to see their target. One of the cloaked figures clicked their tongue.

"We took too long. The sun is already rising," he complained. "I think it would have been better if we managed to catch them at night."

"Eh, it's more fun that way. I want to get my hands dirty," another cloaked figure said.

"I think that, from this point onwards, you guys can go on foot," another White Zetsu said.

"I'm sensing a very powerful barrier surrounding the island," one of the cloaked figures, who had feminine voice, said. "They'll know

we're there the moment we set a foot there."

Another cloaked figure took a step forward. He pushed his cloak back, revealing to be the last member of the Kaguya Clan. "It doesn't matter. Even if we lose the element of surprise, they can't send reinforcements nor ask for help of any kind. They're doomed to perish against us."

Kimimaro then jumped out of the ship, and the seven other cloaked figures quickly followed him, using chakra control to walk on water. Two of them were lagging behind the main group, though. One of those cloaked figures glared at the other one through his glasses.

"To think that Orochimaru-sama would make me work alongside you..." one of the cloaked figures said, gritting his teeth clenching his fists.

"I'm not happy with my lot in undeath either," the second figure said in a raspy male voice. "Complaining about it won't solve anything. Though, this is nothing new to you, Kabuto. You were a servant of Orochimaru in life, and continue being so in death."

"Shut up, Danzo!" Kabuto snapped. "You ruined my life! You made me kill the only parent I ever knew and loved! My only consolation is that somebody also put you in your place!"

"Hey, the shitheads on the back, pipe down, you morons!" another cloaked figure shouted, a flash of red hair visible under the hood. "We don't need to draw even more attention than what are going to!"

"While I may be bound to serve Orochimaru, I do not wish for his plans to succeed, so I don't have to follow your orders," Danzo calmly replied back.

"Enough, Tayuya," Kimimaro said. "We're close. Jirobo, Kidomaro, Sakon and Ukon, go ahead and scout the area for us. We will follow you then."

The reanimated members of the Sound Five nodded and quickly went forward, leaving the other five figures behind.

"You know they're going to get annihilated, right?" Tayuya asked. "Those morons are too weak to deal with whatever ninjas are escorting the jinchuriki, much less the jinchuriki themselves."

"I know. Like I said, they are merely scouts. Though if they can annoy the enemy, the better. I'm not expecting them to win this battle for us," Kimimaro said, as he turned his head back and looked at another of the cloaked figures behind him, a woman. "Orochimaru-sama provided us with an specialist for such a task."

Author's Note: Man, the more I write Konan, the more I like her character. It pisses me more and more the fact that Kishimoto killed her so soon in such a cruel way in canon when, apart from being one of the biggest badass ladies of the franchise, she has such a deep character that makes her a treasure trove for deep and philosophical moments.

Funny thing about that moment with Konan and Hotaru: it was completely unplanned. In fact, the two of them ending up on the same battlefield was pure coincidence on my part, and in fact, I was a bit worried that this chapter was going to end up being way too short. Then I realized that I had one of the killers of Hotaru's beloved sensei and companion in the same division as her, which in my mind they were BEGGING for a scene together. A scene I hope you enjoyed reading as much as it was for me to write.

And with this chapter... the first part of the War Arc concludes, and the second part begins! The side characters already had ample time to shine, and from now onwards, the plot will move at a much more steadier pace. The next chapter, the story will focus once again on Naruto, Fu and Killer B as Akatsuki launches an attack on the Turtle Island!

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

I hope you're excited for the next part of the story as much as I am. What will be the result of the raid on the Turtle Island? While you wait for the next chapter, leave your thoughts on this chapter (and if you feel like it, predictions for the next) in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Attack on Genbu Island

Author's Note: What is this? An update way ahead of schedule? Yep, that's exactly what it is. As many of you know, I don't upload new chapters as soon as finish them (or better said, as soon as my betareader checks them), but I try to keep many chapters written in advance so I can keep a regular updating schedule. However, given that, as of this writting, I'm currently writting the second to last chapter (chapter 132), I believe that I can now update this story far more often without worrying about running of already written chapters. Aren't you guys happy?

We're into the home stretch now, people. To quote a certain Star Wars movie, this is where the fun begins. Enjoy:

Chapter 120:

Attack on Genbu Island

or

Teenage Ninjas on a Turtle Escape from Mutants

Genbu the Turtle Island, early in the morning

As it was usual for them, Naruto and Fu woke up as early as the sun started to rise in the horizon, bathing the giant turtle pretending to be an island in light, slowly driving the shadows away.

With a loud yawn, Naruto woke up, stretching his muscles as he started to climb out of his sleeping bag, placed at the base of a large tree. The rustling noises he was making, coupled with the increasing sunlight, woke up Fu as well, who was sleeping at the other side of the tree.

"Hey, Fu, you awake?" Naruto asked, as he started to change into his usual clothes.

"Morning, Naruto," Fu's voice came from the other side of the tree, still sounding a little drowsy. Naruto imagined she was changing as well. "And yep."

A few minutes later, the two jinchuriki were now fully changed, and after placing their sleeping bags on their respective backpacks, they started to walk towards Killer B's house. The jinchuriki of the Eight Tails liked to wake up early as well, since watching the sunrise filled him with inspiration to write songs. Or so he said.

"So, ready for another day of training?" Naruto asked.

"Yeah. But I'm more ready for breakfast," Fu said, laughing a little. "I feel way hungrier since I started working on mastering Chomei's chakra."

"Really?" Naruto asked, raised an eyebrow. "Because I feel like eating the same as normal."

"Your bodies are getting used to our chakra, which is way more potent than your puny human chakra," the Nine Tails chimed in. **"Hence it makes you consume more energy than usual, which translates into a greater appetite."**

"But I don't feel anymore hungry than I usually do," Naruto pointed out.

There were a large flock of birds who flew into the sky, cawing loudly, as if flying away from a predator. Fu found it a bit odd, but Naruto paid them no mind.

"Because I don't think it's physically possible to eat more than you usually do," Kurama snarked. **"Honestly, I'm surprised you don't look like an Akimichi, given that you eat like one."**

"Hey, I'm still in a growing-"

Naruto was suddenly silenced by a golden arrow piercing him with such force, it hurled him backwards. The suddenness of the moment was so great, the green haired girl needed several seconds to process what just happened.

"Naruto-"

"Earth Release: Earth Mausoleum Dumpling!"

Suddenly, a huge shadow was cast over Fu, and much to her horror, the Taki kunoichi saw an absurdly large boulder flying at her. She barely have any time to mutter a curse before said boulder buried her into the ground, producing a loud booming noise.

Two ninjas landed on the area, one of them on top of the giant rock that had crushed Fu. They were wearing the same uniform consisting on a beige tunic with an all white Yin-Yang crest on it, a large purple rope serving as a makeshift belt, and black pants. But the most eye catching element about them was their inhuman appearance: they both had dark red skin with cracks running through it, black eyes with yellow irises, and one had multiple warts on his body, and the other had six arms and three eyes.

They were Jirobo and Kidomaru, two members of the Otogakure elite squad known as the Sound Five. They had died alongside Sakon and Ukon more than three years prior, but walked among the living again thanks to Impure World Resurrection.

"And done!" Jirobo laughed. "This was such an easy job. And Orochimaru-sama made it appear as if we were going to struggle."

"I hope you didn't kill her," Kidomaru said, looking at the giant rock with a bit of worry. "I know jinchuriki are tougher than usual, but you went a bit overboard. We might be dead already, but Orochimaru-sama will torture us into insanity if we fumble this mission."

"Nah, she's still alive. I can feel her chakra," Jirobo said. "What about you, huh? That arrow was pretty brutal."

"I deliberately avoided any vital spots. He should be wounded but fine," Kidomaru assured. "Anyway, I better go fetch him before-"

"What the-?" Jirobo said, as he was almost thrown off balance.

He could sense how Fu's chakra was skyrocketing, while an incredible force pushed the giant boulder upwards from above. Jirobo was forced to jump down, and much to his astonishment, he saw Fu climbing out of the hole she had been pushed into, while carrying the giant boulder above her head as if it weighed nothing. She then tossed the boulder into the air, when it disappeared among the clouds, while she pierced Jirobo with an anger filled glare.

"I don't know who the hell you are. Or *what* the hell you are," Fu seethed, taking notice of Jirobo's monstrous appearance. "But that was a mistake. You're going to need something more than a little pebble to crush me."

Jirobo was intimidated at first, and took a step back, but upon reminding himself that he was immortal, he held his ground and adopted a fighting stance.

"So, you're strong, and have a bit of muscle, so what? You can't beat us no matter how hard you try!" Jirobo fired back. "And I can crush you with a force much greater than that boulder! I'm going to smash you so badly, you're going to wish for me to grant you the mercy of a quick death!"

"Oh really? Well then, I'm going to punch you so hard that... uh..." Fu began, as she tried to come up with a good one liner. Meanwhile, in the distance, Jirobo's boulder fell into the sea, making a huge splash. "I'm going to punch you so hard, that you'd wish I didn't punch you so hard!" Fu replied, proud of her awful, awful comeback.

"Ha, I'd like to see-"

However, before Jirobo could finish his line, Fu crossed the distance separating them in an instant, and delivered an uppercut with all her strength, raising a gust of wind in every direction. The uppercut send Jirobo flying into the sky, disappearing into the clouds as well, but unlike the boulder that Fu had thrown either, he wouldn't fall back into the planet, but go into orbit.

Kidomaru watched the whole exchange in horror, as he realized just how outclassed he was against this enemy.

"Shit, I'm out of here!" Kidomaru said, as he started to run away. "This game's difficulty level is way above my pay grade!"

However, Kidomaru didn't go too far, as a hand of golden chakra caught him, and pulled him back again. The six armed zombie saw Naruto, enveloped in a bright golden shroud of chakra, the chakra making one of his arms disproportionately large. Naruto was holding the arrow Kidomaru shot at him on the other hand.

"I knew this was familiar," Naruto said, as he shattered the hardened wax arrow on his hand. "So Orochimaru decided to bring you losers back to life? Innocent dying is always a tragedy, but the fact that people have to die to bring scumbags like you back..."

"You know him, Naruto?" Fu asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. This guy and some of his friends who worked for Orochimaru tried to kidnap my little siblings three years ago," Naruto said. "He and three more died, but other two survived, and then went to help Orochimaru with Roshi's kidnapping. Still, these guys were an okay challenge for us when we were Genin and newly minted Chunin, but compared with the power we have now... I almost feel insulted."

"What are we going to do with him?" Fu asked.

"We can't kill him. As in, we literally can't, these reanimations are immortal, they regenerate endlessly," Naruto explained. "The best

solution would be to immobilize and seal him. Though given that you sent the other guy into outer space, you think you can do the same to this one?"

"Maybe, but if immobilizing is an option, I do have a simpler solution," Fu said, before pointing all of her ten fingers at the restrained Kidomaru, and shoot chakra threads at him. The chakra threads quickly covered his body, encasing him inside a cocoon that completely restricted his movement. "And done! Can you make some chakra suppressing seal?"

"In my sleep," Naruto said, as he placed the cocoon on the ground, while placing a hand on top of it. A seal was formed, followed by chains of sealing symbols that wrapped themselves around the cocoon, securing it completely. "This guy won't go anywhere."

"Good," Fu said with a nod. "Though... how did this guy got here? Wasn't this place supposed to be super safe so Akatsuki wouldn't find us?"

"That's... a rather troubling thought," Naruto said, as he directed his gaze towards a cluster of trees. "Perhaps those guys over there can provide us with some answers."

...

Naruto wasn't looking at some random cluster of trees. That's where Sakon and Ukon, also in their second cursed seal forms, were hiding, overseeing Jirobo and Kidomaru, ready to strike in case they needed the twins' help. But upon seeing how easily the jinchuriki had taken the two Oto reanimations down, the remaining two turned around and ran away. The thought that Orochimaru was allowing them to abandon their mission didn't even cross their minds.

"Shit, this is too much for us! Why the hell Kimimaro thought in sending us against such powerful targets?" Ukon asked.

"Who cares? Just shut up and run!" Sakon chided.

"DOUBLE LARIAT!"

Suddenly, the twin reanimations felt their necks being slammed by a pair of dark skinned muscular arms, sending them tumbling backwards, where two other people quickly restrained them.

"Sorry, but this place is for my vacation, no one can enter here without my invitation!" a dark skinned man wearing sunglasses and a Kumogakure uniform said. They realized he was Killer B, the third jinchuriki on the island. The ones restraining them were clones of him as well.

"Hey, B-sensei!" Naruto said, as he and Fu landed besides him. "You found the other two!"

"You knew we were there?" Ukon asked. "How? You are not a sensor!"

"Funny thing about this mode," Naruto said, as he closed and opened his hand. "But something I noticed that I can do when I'm using the Kurama Chakra Cloak is that I can sense people's negative emotions. At least when they aren't too far away from me. So yeah, trying to use stealth against me is useless unless you can hide your killing intent."

"There's a more important question. How did you find this place? The turtle island leaves no trace," Killer B interrogated.

"I don't think that's important right now. It seems these guys aren't the only ones who came here. Akatsuki knows about this place, and we're under attack right now," Naruto said. "Come on, we need to seal them and find the rest!"

"Seal, you say? Leave it to me, then lead the way," Killer B made a hand seal. "Sealing Art: Octopus Hold!"

The Killer B clones restraining Sakon and Ukon turned into blots of ink that completely covered the Oto reanimations, before hardening

into pitch black cocoons. Naruto was about to put chakra suppressing seals on them, but it wasn't necessary as seals appeared on their own.

"You know fuinjutsu too? Neat," Naruto asked, clearly surprised, but if his smile was anything to go by, pleased by said surprise. His smile disappeared, as he reminded his fellow jinchuriki of the situation at hand. "Though, I'm sure there are more people in the island, and much stronger than these guys."

As if on cue, all three of them could hear the sound of several people running towards them. Fu and Killer B tensed up, but Naruto was oddly relaxed.

"Calm down, they aren't enemies. Didn't you just hear what I said?" Naruto asked.

And indeed, soon they saw a group of Konoha and Kumo ninjas in front of them, including the likes of Yugao, Hayate, Tenzo, Choza and Motoi, with the Third Hokage leading the group. All of them looked ready to battle.

"I've sensed some intruders! I can't believe that they got past me and got so far into the island!" Yugao said, sounding panicked. "Are you guys okay?"

"Yep. Nothing we couldn't deal with!" Fu replied, flexing a bicep for added emphasis.

"I believe the enemies you just beat were a mere scouting force. Orochimaru wouldn't risk his strongest reanimations like that," Hiruzen pondered. "However, that brings us to the troubling conclusion that Akatsuki has found the location of this island."

Motoi looked as if he had been struck by lightning. "But... that's impossible! No one has ever been able to track this place!"

"They could if they had a mole among us," Choza suggested.

Naruto, however, shook his head. "If there was a mole, I would have sensed their ill intent. In all the days I've been here training in the Kurama Chakra Cloak, I didn't sense such thing."

"Maybe they did, if they had aerial scouts," Hayate interceded, before coughing a couple times. "Still, wondering how the island was found was irrelevant. This place is no longer safe. We need to evacuate Naruto-san, Fu-san and B-san to somewhere else before-"

Naruto, Yugao and Hiruzen tensed up, quickly adopting fighting stances, followed by everybody.

"Yugao-san? Hokage-sama? Naruto-san?" Tenzo asked. "Did you sense more enemies?"

"Yes," Hiruzen said, frowning. "In greater numbers, and much stronger than the ones Naruto-kun and Fu just beat. And some of them have chakra that feels... oddly familiar."

"Hey..." Fu said, as she was trying to listen to something. "Do you guys hear that?"

"Hear what?" Naruto asked. That's it, until he started to hear the sound as well. It was a familiar sound, one that, for some reason, did not bring pleasant memories.

"A flute..." Fu said.

And then, Naruto finally realized why the sound was familiar, and why he didn't like it.

"Guys! Watch out! We're about to be put under a genjutsu! Dispel it before it takes hold!"

Naruto quickly brought his hand together, forming a hand seal, ready to send a burst of chakra through his body, but much to his frustration, he was too late. He watched in horror how his hands started to melt into a disgusting mass of liquid flesh, soon followed

by the rest of his arms. He fell to the ground when his legs also turned into jelly.

The blond jinchuriki saw in horror how the rest of the ninjas around him fell to the ground as well, unable to fight the dreadful genjutsu. Following that, he sensed more enemies landed around them in a circle.

"That's it? That's all it took to bring a former Hokage and three jinchuriki down?" a voice asked. It sounded distorted, but it felt familiar to Naruto.

"Don't underestimate them, Kabuto. The genjutsu won't last long," another voice said, this one sounding raspier.

The intruders continued talking among themselves as they approached the fallen ninjas, probably to immobilize and restrain them. Meanwhile, Naruto was forced to see how his body continued to melt.

"Come on, come on... Sakura and Haku were able to break out of this genjutsu on their own," the blond reminded himself. "Yeah, they're genjutsu specialists and I'm not, but given the amount of power I have now, breaking out of a genjutsu should be a cakewalk!"

Naruto continued to try to break the illusion with nothing but his force of will, as he tried to disrupt his chakra the best way he could. Somebody watching would say that his efforts were doomed.

Until the illusion broke. Naruto's body returned to normal. He was able to move freely once again.

"Uh? Hey, I did it!" Naruto thought in joy.

"Like hell you did!" Kurama scoffed. ***"You have me to thank for saving your sorry ass! Again!"***

" Wait... were you who undid this genjutsu? Are you able to do that, Kurama?" Naruto asked.

" Did you forget the best way to break a genjutsu? If you can't disturb your own chakra yourself, you need a partner to do it for you," Kurama explained. **"So you're welcome. And before you ask, yes, this means that as long as you have me covering your back, no genjutsu will affect you."**

" Really? Whoa, thank you!" Naruto excitedly said.

" Now take advantage of the fact that they still think you're harmless to sneak a sucker punch," Kurama suggested.

Naruto didn't need to be told. Like a golden missile, he leaped to his feet and launched himself forward, slamming his first into the nearest cloaked figure. The force of the blow pulled the figure's hood back, revealing to be a middle aged man with a cross scar on his chin, and, surprisingly enough, a Sharingan eye. That was a familiar face, but Naruto could swear that he had saw that man somewhere else.

"He broke the genjutsu!" another of the cloaked figures said, as he and the others quickly leaped back. He removed his cloak and tossed it away, revealing himself to be Kimimaro Kaguya, who quickly went into his Cursed Seal Second Stage.

Naruto could see that Fu and Killer B had also broken out of the genjutsu, probably the same way Naruto did, and quickly freed the others as well. Soon, the entire group was back on their feet, ready to fight.

"I can't believe this is the second time such thing happens!" the voice of a woman screamed, as Tayuya, already in her Second Stage Cursed Form as well, joined Kimimaro and the reanimations. "What's with you fuckers resisting genjutsu like that!?"

"Don't act surprised, it had already happened before," Kimimaro said, before looking at Danzo, who was already back to his feet.

"Danzo!"

Despite not wanting to follow that order, the former leader of Root started to make hand seals. Or better said, his body did so without any input from his part.

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

Suddenly, the earth started to shake, and large green wooden roots emerged from underground, causing the Konoha and Kumo ninjas to disperse.

"Watch out for the Wood Release!" Hiruzen said, his Adamantine Staff already smashing the nascent wooden vines into splinters. "It can bind Tailed Beast chakra!"

"It must be the reason as for why he was brought here," Tenzo said, using his own Wood Release techniques to counter Danzo's. "He must be the one tasked with the mission to subdue and catch the jinchuriki."

"Taking him out should be our main concern then!" Motoi suggested.

"While what you say is technically true, my former subordinate, your assesment couldn't be more wrong," Danzo said, as his eyes darted towards the last cloaked figure, the one still hooded. "I'm not the one who's supposed to catch the jinchuriki. She is."

That moment, the last hooded figure uncovered herself to reveal a woman wearing an elegant, almost regal white dress, with a passing resemblance to Tsunade. Her cracked skin and black eyes betrayed her nature as a reanimation. She had red hair, neatly combed and styled into two buns, with two sealing tags hanging from said buns. There was also a small, diamond shaped purple mark on her forehead, similar to Tsunade's seal.

Nobody seemed to recognize that woman, except one person: Hiruzen Sarutobi, who looked aboslutely crestfallen.

"Mito-sama... " he said, his eyes full of sadness. "No... not you too..."

"Saru? Is that you?" Mito said, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes a little. "You look so old..."

"Indeed, I am old. Yet, due sad irony, you now look much younger than the last time I saw you," Hiruzen replied.

"It's good to see that at the very least, you're still alive. Unlike this idiot of my apprentice," Mito said, casting a glare at Danzo, who didn't even react. "No need to explain, Danzo had already told me all I need to know regarding the situation we found ourselves in."

"In that case-"

"Watch out!" Mito suddenly said, her eyes open wide in shock. "Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Mito threw her hands forward, and three chakra chains shot from her, one from each of her palms, and another from her chest, phasing through her clothes without destroying them. The chains quickly wrapped themselves around the necks of Naruto, Killer B and Fu. The moment the chains touched Naruto, his golden chakra cloak vanished. Fu and Killer B tried to call the power of their Tailed Beasts, but found they were unable to.

"What the hell!?" Fu said, as she tried to remove the chakra chain from her neck.

"I can't access number eight's chakra, this ain't cool! This redheaded lady is making me look like a fool!" Killer B protested, as he tried to cut the chains with one of his blades.

"They're an Uzumaki secret jutsu!" Naruto said, struggling to get free as well. He was able to break free from Karin's chains, but these ones were way sturdier. "They can bind chakra just as good as- ACK!"

Mito gave a mighty pull, dragging the three helpless jinchuriki towards her.

"And it's done!" Kimimaro said. "Cover Mito while she takes the jinchuriki away!"

"And you think we're going to let you?" Tenzo replied, as he started to make several hand seals. "Wood Release: Laughing Monk Jutsu!"

Three hands made of wood emerged from the ground below, and wrapped their fingers wound Mito's chains in an iron grip, stoping the Uzumaki reanimation from going any further, and allowing Naruto, Fu and B a small respite. They were, however, still unable to access their powers.

"The chains! Destroy those chains!" Tenzo called.

The Kumo and Konoha ninjas quickly went to do what Tenzo had called, while the reanimations and two Oto ninja quickly prevented them from doing so, forcing the jinchuriki's esocrts to engage them in combat.

Kabuto then rushed towards Tenzo's wooden vines, his hands glowing as he readied his Chakra Scalpel to cut them down. However, before he could get any closer, he was stopped by Hayate, whose own chakra blade parried Kabuto's scalpel.

"As long as we're here and we can fight, you won't take Naruto, Fu or B away from this island," Hayate said, locking eyes with the undead silver haired ninja.

"You don't get it, do you? You already lost!" Kabuto said, as he delivered a strike with his other hand, forcing Hayate to step back. "Akatsuki knows the existence of this island and how to locate it, no matter how much it moves! There's no safe place for the jinchuriki to go!"

"It doesn't matter!" Yugao said, as she joined the fight with a katana thrust, relieving some pressure from Hayate, forcing Kabuto to deal with her as well. "We will protect them no matter what!"

"You can't even protect yourselves!" Kabuto replied, as he was slowly driven away from the main battle by Yugao and Hayate.

Meanwhile, Choza decided it was his time to intervene. He brought his hands together as he began to mold chakra.

"Butterfly Mode!" a pair of chakra wings that looked like those of a butterfly appeared on the redhead's back, as he started to lose weight. "It seems that for this fight, we can't afford to go for anything less than our very best! Butterfly Bullet Bomb!"

Choza clenched his hand into a fist, which was quickly surrounded by a fiery shroud of blue chakra, while dashing forward towards Mito Uzumaki, still trying to pull her chains from Yamato's wooden bindings. Danzo, however, wasn't going to let him. He made several hand seals.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Wall!"

Danzo slammed his hands on the ground, erecting a large wall of solid stone between Choza and Mito. However, the Akimichi was far from fazed.

"A little wall isn't going to stop THIS!"

Choza brought his chakra-charged fist forward, completely obliterating the wall Danzo had erected, and producing a powerful gust of wind that blew away the chunks of rock and earth in pretty much all directions. The shockwave of the hit managed to hit Mito, but not with enough force to make her undo her chakra chains.

However, Choza's attack did manage to open a clear path to Mito, a path that Hiruzen was able to use. Displaying an incredible speed for

a man his age, Hiruzen rushed forward, unsealed a Fuma Shuriken, and threw it forward while making several hand seals.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!" the lone Fuma Shuriken were now a dozen. "Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullet!"

Hiruzen exhaled a massive stream of fire in the direction of the shuriken, coating them in a cloak of flames, while also burning the wooden Danzo had created. Mito, however, refused to let go of the jinchuriki, as she started to make hand seals of her own.

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

Mito exhaled a truly massive cone of water towards the incoming shuriken, not only dousing the fires, but the power of the water stream pushed them aside.

"Give up, Hiruzen. No matter how strong you are, you are not a match for sensei," Danzo said, as he traded blows with Choza.

Hiruzen, however, smirked, and made more hand seals. "You always had an habit of underestimating me, Danzo. Earth Release: Earth Crushing Jaws!"

Hiruzen slammed a single palm into the ground, and under Mito's chains, a dragon made of solid rock emerged, its jaws closing around the chains, snapping them instantly, causing them to dissolve into nothingness. The moment that happened, the jinchuriki could feel the block on their powers wasn't there anymore. Naruto and Fu activated their chakra cloak and armor, respectively, while Killer B generated several tentacles from his back, wrapping a tentacle around the waist of each of his fellow jinchuriki, and using other three to spring himself back.

"The jinchuriki are free! Protect them! Make sure the woman with the chains nor the man with the Sharingan and Wood Release get close to them!" Motoi said.

"No! Let us fight!" Naruto insisted. "We're the strongest here! We have the best chances at beating them!"

"Mito, make sure they don't escape!" Kimimaro ordered.

Mito had no choice but to obey. She made several hand seals. "Sealing Art: Rift between Heaven and Earth!"

Mito slammed her hand into the ground, generating a circular sealing array that expanded outwards several hundred meters in a matter of seconds. Then, the sealing array started to glow, generating a chakra dome, leaving everybody trapped inside of it.

"WHOA!" Naruto said in shock, as he gawked at the gigantic shield around them. "Just... how powerful is that woman?"

"That's Mito Uzumaki, brat," Kurama chimed in. "The First Hokage's Wife, and my first jinchuriki. She might not be as strong as her husband, but she's not somebody to be underestimated. A master of both fuinjutsu and elemental ninjutsu. "

A scowl developed on Naruto's face. "Of course. I should have expected that she would be among those revived by Orochimaru."

"Wait..." the fox said, sounding uneasy. **"Don't you feel...?"**

"You, the kid named Naruto," Mito said, noticing Naruto in his Kurama Chakra Cloak. "Given that you possess half the Nine Tails' power, I'm going to assume that Kushina-chan is dead."

"Yes. She died the day I was born," Naruto told Mito. "She was my mother."

"I see," Mito said, as she directed her gaze down, looking crestfallen. "Makes sense. Only an Uzumaki can hold the power of the Nine Tails. I see you attained some degree of mastery over its power."

"I did. And his name is Kurama, by the way. He isn't an 'it'," Naruto punctualized.

"What? The fox has a name?" the Uzumaki woman asked, tilting her head in confusion. "Anyway, that's not important. The important part is for you to defeat me. Only then you'll be able to undo my barrier jutsu and escape this place. However, it won't be easy. Orochimaru revived me because I have the right skillset to deal with you."

"Not to sound arrogant, lady, but between Fu, B and me, there's no way you can-WHOA!"

Naruto was taken aback when he was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of power, and the next second, Mito burst into golden light, her body shrouded in a chakra cloak similar to Naruto, only with a more orange hue rather than a yellow one.

"I don't know how, but Akatsuki has bound my body with the half of the Nine Tails in their possession," Mito explained. "There's a black nail made of a material I don't know jabbed in the back of my neck. I sense that's what binds the fox's power to this body. Remove it, and beating me will be much easier."

" B, I think you should go all out here. This woman was already serious trouble before she revealed her full power," Gyuki advised.

"I got it, Number Eight, I think it's time to throw around our weight!" Killer B rapped, as he started to grow into his Tailed Beast form. As he transformed, he noticed the barrier Mito had erected, and an idea crossed the rapper's mind. **"Hmmm... that barrier looks rather steadfast. Wonder if it can survive one of my blasts!"**

Once he transformed fully, Killer B opened his jaws and started to gather chakra inside a sphere for a Tailed Beast Ball. Unfortunately, this wasn't unnoticed by the enemy. Danzo, who was fighting Choza, disengaged the Akimichi and moved to stop Killer B.

"I'm afraid I won't let you do that," Danzo said, as he started making hand seals. "Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Danzo summoned a huge wooden dragon that quickly wrapped itself around Killer B's huge form, its jaws clamping around his mouth, aborting the Tailed Beast Ball, and leaving him completely immobilized.

"Don't worry, sensei! I'll save you!" Fu said, as her six wings appeared on her back, and quickly flew towards the immobilized Tailed Beast. Her hands quickly morphed into giant blades shaped like the pincers of a stag beetle. "Time to cut some bad weeds!"

"Jinchuriki of the Seven Tails, watch out!" Mito warned her, as she cast a hand upwards.

Multiple chains shot into Fu's direction, forcing the Taki kunoichi to change the course of her flight in order to dodge them.

"Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shiiiiiiiit!" Fu yelled, as she tried to dodge the chains as best as she could, while deflecting those she couldn't with her organic blades, a situation that was already familiar for the young woman. "Man, I'm getting flashbacks to the Chunin Exams!"

"I'll take care of her!" Naruto said, as he pulled out his Wind Blade, generating a blade of white chakra as he channeled his own. He noticed the blade was longer and shone brighter than he usually did. "Heh, I can't wait how strong this thing is when I use Tailed Beast Chakra to fuel it!"

Unfortunately for Naruto, Mito still had another hand that she aimed at him, shooting more chains, forcing the blond to parry the chains with his wind blade, while jumping back. He bit his thumb, and made several hand seals.

"Okay, I think we are going to need additional help," Naruto said, before slamming his palm into the ground. "Summoning Jutsu!"

There was a huge burst of smoke, and once the ensuing cloud dispelled, Naruto was sitting at the top of a green skinned toad with a pair of huge swords at his back.

"Gamahiro! See that woman over there with a glowing chakra aura similar to mine?" Naruto asked, pointing at Mito. "Help me take her down!"

"You got it, Naruto!" Gamahiro said, as he unsheathed both of his katanas, and leaped towards Mito. He brought one of his katanas down, but the Uzumaki reanimation was able to dodge the blow.

"You're a toad summoner too?" Mito asked. "I guess you were trained by Jiraiya of the Sannin, weren't you?"

"Right on the money," Naruto replied. "He's my adoptive dad. Oh, I just realized! Since Tsunade is my adoptive mom, that makes you my adoptive great-grandma!"

"I wish you didn't tell me that. Now you're making me feel even worse, knowing that not only I'm fighting a fellow clan member, but the son of my beloved granddaughter," Mito sorrowfully said.

"... oops. Sorry," Naruto sheepishly apologized, before his determined expression returned. "Though it's any consolation, you won't be able to harm either me nor my friends. I'll make sure of that."

As Naruto continued to fight Mito, Fu was finally free and started to cut the wooden roots keeping Killer B prisoner. Danzo tried to get in the way, but Tenzo and the Third Hokage got him busy. Kimimaro, who was fighting Choza, noticed this, and realized that something needed to be done. That moment, Tayuya landed besides him.

"Hey, great leader, this shit ain't working!" the redhead said. "What are we going to do? Orochimaru-sama is going to skin us alive if we return empty handed!"

"That's why such thing won't happen," Kimimaro stated. "Tayuya, let's use the level three cursed form. We'll need it to fight enemies of this caliber."

Orochimaru had been able to improve his cursed seals to the point that their users could unlock another transformation. It increased the user's powers even further than the first two levels combined did, but it also put a huge strain on the body and had a moderate risk of causing a fatal organic failure. However, the two last original living members of the Sound Five knew it was a gamble they needed to take.

A dark purple aura surrounded their bodies as they started to mutate even further. Tayuya's body started to elongate in an unnatural manner, while her legs merged into a single limb, with the appearance of a tail that seemed to form part her lower body. Multiple legs started to grow to her sides, giving her the appearance of a giant centipede with the upper half of a human body instead of a head. Tayuya's arms also grew longer, splitting into two, with the upper pair of arms ended in long bone blades, and the lower pair ended in long hands.

Meanwhile, Kimimaro started to grow in size as well, his muscles swelling as spiked bone plates started to form around his body, forming a natural armor. His head lost its humanoid shape, and gained a reptilian appearance, with a pair of twisted horns growing from his temples, and two curved fangs coming from his lower jaw.

"Oh yes, this shit feels incredible!" Tayuya said, basking in her newfound power. "To think that I've been afraid of using this power!"

"Let this be a lesson to never doubt Orochimaru-sama's power," Kimimaro said, as his eyes laid on Choza, Tenzo and the Third Hokage. "Now, time to teach said lesson to our enemies! Dance of the Seedling Fern!"

Kimimaro slammed his hands onto the ground, and a field of bone blades burst from underground, in the direction of the three Konoha

ninjas. Hiruzen and Tenzo jumped aside, but Choza instead decided to hold his ground. The moment several bone blades burst from underground ready to impale him, he reared his fist back, and delivered another devastating punch, shattering the bone blades before they could even reach him.

"Is this all you have-ACK!"

"Dance of the Clematis: Flower!"

In less than a second, despite his hulking form, Kimimaro was able to cross the distance between him and the Akimichi Clan Head, and impale him with a giant drill made of bone. Choza opened his eyes wide in shock, before life left his body.

"CHOZA!" Hiruzen yelled, as he quickly rushed towards Kimimaro, wielding the adamantine staff.

Hiruzen engaged Kimimaro in a close combat duel, the last member of the Kaguya Clan trying to impale the old Hokage with his bone blades, but Hiruzen was able to parry and dodge them expertly despite his advanced age. And while he did manage to land a few good hits, none of them managed to break Kimimaro's bone plates, no matter how much anger he used to power his strikes.

"Not even the Adamantine Staff is making a crack! The bones he generates outside of his body may be more fragile, but that armor is as sturdy as the hardest of steels!" Hiruzen angrily thought, as the desire to make Choza's killer pay ate him from the inside. *"No... I must fight with a calm mind. I can't fight just to avenge a fallen comrade. The jinchuriki... we have to protect them!"*

However, Hiruzen's concentration was disrupted by the sound of a flute. The same flute Tayuya used to put them under a genjutsu. And indeed, upon looking at the direction the music was coming from, he saw the redhead, now in the form of some sort of human/centipede hybrid with long arms ending in claws, playing the flute while she

used her many bladed legs to cut down the wooden vines Tenzo was using to attack her.

"Tenzo, fall back!" Hiruzen said, as he jumped back while sending a pulse through his chakra network in order to disrupt it. "Do not let her put you under that genjutsu!"

Too late. Hiruzen saw in horror how Tenzo fell to his knees, unable to do anything as the music trapped him inside a illusionary hellscape. Tayuya was ready to impale him with several of her bladed limbs.

"NO!" Hiruzen said, as he tossed the Adamantine staff at Tayuya, hoping to hit her in time.

But much to his horror, Kimimaro jumped in, and kicked the staff away before it could reach the mutated Oto kunoichi. Tayuya then stabbed Tenzo multiple times, putting an end to his life.

" Hey old man, get out of the way! Killer B is ready to slay!" the voice of Killer B in his Tailed Beast form boomed. Hiruzen turned around, and saw that Fu had finally released the Kumo jinchuriki from its wooden bindings, who was charging forward.

"Do your worst, B-san," Hiruzen said, as he moved to the side, in order to leave the eight tailed behemoth much needed space.

Killer B then sent all his tentacles to smash the two mutated Oto ninjas, who dodged them the best way they could. Kimimaro jumped from side to side, and while Tayuya couldn't jump in her new form, she was able to quickly crawl away from the giant limbs trying to crush her.

" You think you can evade me as long as you aren't still?" Killer B rapped. **"You need something more than that to counter my skill!"**

The two Oto ninjas seemed to forget that Killer B also had two arms on top of his eight tentacles, and closing a hand into a fist, he

slammed it into the ground. He missed, but the shockwave he created was so big, Kimimaro and Kaguya were sent into the air, where they were unable to avoid the tentacles from wrapping around their bodies, leaving them immobilized.

" **Gotcha!**" he cheered.

"You got shit!" Tayuya screamed back, as she sank some of her bladed limbs onto the tentacle's flesh, while Kimimaro sprouted multiple bone spikes from his body.

Despite the piercing pain, Killer B managed to keep a hold of them.

" **You know how to cause pain, but not enough to make me strain!**" Killer B said, as he flung Kimimaro and Tayuya into the air. **"Now prepare to meet your end, your punishment for attacking my friends! TAILED BEAST BALL!"**

Killer B quickly charged a Tailed Beast Ball inside his mouth, before swallowing it, and releasing it in the form of a destructive wave of chakra. The wave engulfed Kimimaro and Tayuya, who were reduced to ashes in a matter of seconds. The wave still had enough power and momentum to smash into the barrier Mito had created, albeit it was unable to crack a hole in it.

" *The barrier... we need to destroy that barrier...*" Hiruzen thought, as he looked back. He could see that Naruto and Gamahiro were fighting against Danzo, who had summoned his Baku, while Fu and some of the Kumo ninjas were dealing with Mito, who had created several Shadow Clones to assist her. "B-san, I know how we can undo that barrier in order to let you, Naruto-kun and Fu-san to escape! But in order to do so, you have to distract Mito-sama!"

" **Distract the golden lady. Consider it done,**" Killer B said, as he shrank, turning back to his human form. "Maybe if we focused on her first we would have won."

Killer B unseathed the seven swords strapped to his back, tossed them into the air, and grabbed them with his arms, legs and mouth, much to Hiruzen's astonishment.

Meanwhile, thanks to Naruto and Gamahiro's teamwork, the ninja and the giant toad managed to cause enough harm to Danzo's Baku in order to dispel it. Unfortunately, Gamahiro didn't notice how the real Mito had slipped out of the fight with Fu and the other ninjas, and was sneaking towards him.

"Sealing Art: Unsummoning Jutsu!"

"What...?" was all Gamahiro could say, as a circular sealing pattern appeared around him, followed by the green toad disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

"Gamahiro!" Naruto shouted.

Before Mito could engage Naruto, Killer B intruded into the fight, then rushed towards Mito, leaped into the air, and let out a loud "Wheeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Mito's attention was naturally drawn to the incoming attacker, and jumped back in order to avoid the swords that were raining upon her. Fu, having noticed Mito getting away from her, realized where the real one was, and locked onto her once again. She tried to capitalize on Mito's predicament, and tried to gore her with a mantis blade she had turned one of her arms into, but Mito generated a blade of water in order to parry it.

"Damn, this old lady is good!" Fu said, as she pushed against Mito, but the Uzumaki woman held her ground.

"Did nobody tell you that calling a lady old is extremely disrespectful?" Mito replied, sounding genuinely offended.

"Eh, I'm somebody who tells things like they are?" Fu said with a shrug, before turning her other arm into a scorpion claw, and tried to

slash her.

"Wind Release: Vacuum Blade!"

Fu was reminded that Danzo was still part of the fight when several shuriken shrouded in wind chakra flew towards her. Fu was forced to jump back and fly into the air in order to dodge them. Meanwhile, B engaged Mito again, the two of them trading blows in close combat, though it was quite obvious that Killer B had the upper hand. Meanwhile, Naruto was preparing his next move: With the help of several chakra arms, Naruto was holding a large dark purple spinning sphere of chakra on his hands.

"B-sensei, watch out!" Naruto said, as he rushed towards Mito. Killer B saw his fellow jinchuriki and nodded, before jumping away, leaving Naruto a clear way for his fellow Uzumaki. "I'm sorry, Mito-baachan! Tailed Beast Ball!"

Mito jumped back, and made a hand seal. More chakra chains shot from every part of her body, but rather than sending them towards her enemies, she wrapped them around her own body, forming a metallic protective cocoon, just in time before Naruto slammed his improvised attack against her. The ensuing explosion shattered the chains instantly, and Mito was hurled backwards, bouncing on her back several times. Her body was wounded, but not enough to stop her from continuing the fight, and said wounds were quickly healing.

However, Naruto had already done what Hiruzen wanted. He landed besides Mito, while a pair of his Shadow Clones freed Fu from having to fight Danzo. Hiruzen pulled a paper tag and slammed it onto Mito's back.

"Sealing Art: Void Touch Seal!"

The seal on Mito's back started to glow with a blue light, before it was consumed in a flash of blue fire. The next second, the chakra dome that kept them imprisoned started to flicker, before it broke down into chakra bits that disappeared into nothingness.

"Yes! Good job, Old Man Hokage!" Naruto praised.

"Unfortunately, it won't be long until Mito-sama is able to cast another barrier, so you should take advantage of that and flee this island!" the Third Hokage said, as Mito quickly jumped to her feet, and prepared to attack. "I'll stay here and hold these zombies back as long as I can!"

"What!? No way we can let you do that!" Naruto protested. "If we fight together, we can win! I know it! We have three jinchuriki on our side!"

"Naruto-kun, this battle right now is meaningless!" Hiruzen said, as he parried with the Adamantine Staff a flurry of chains Mito shot at him. "Akatsuki knows of this place, meaning that keeping you three on this island is no longer a safe option! You need to go back to the continent and head to the Ninja Alliance HQ! Now it's the safest place for you three!"

"But you will die if we leave you here!" Naruto protested.

"Don't underestimate me, Naruto-kun. I have been the Hokage with the longest reign for a reason," Hiruzen said, smirking at the blond. "Now go! Choza and Tenzo died protecting you! Don't make their sacrifices meaningless!"

"But-"

" **Brat, he's right,**" Kurama interrupted. Naruto clenched his fists in anger. **"I know you don't like it, but deep down, you know what you have to do."**

"What are you doing, standing there like an idiot? Go!" Hiruzen yelled.

This seemed to snap Naruto from his trance, as he directed his eyes towards Fu. "Fu! We're leaving! Take me and B-sensei out of this place!"

"What about the others!?" Fu shouted back.

"We will be fine! The most important thing is to ensure that Akatsuki doesn't get their hands on you!" Hiruzen shouted, as his hands flew through hand seals. "Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Hiruzen exhaled a massive stream of fire towards Mito. The Uzumaki woman's answer came in the form of an equally impressive water jutsu. However, despite the elemental advantage, it was unable to push Hiruzen's fire jutsu back, ending in a tie.

Fu nodded, and dived towards the ground, grabbing Naruto and Killer B's hands with her own, and flying into the sky, using the clouds as a cover. Hiruzen sighed in relief upon seeing that the jinchuriki were safe for the time being.

"'We will be fine'?" Danzo repeated, as he finished destroying Hiruzen's Shadow Clones. "You shouldn't have lied to the jinchuriki like that, Hiruzen."

"I didn't lie to them. We will be fine as long as we manage to keep them safe," Hiruzen replied, as he started to make hand seals. "Earth Release: Earth Dragon Bullet!" A large dragon head made of mud formed in front of Hiruzen, and fired a barrage of mud projectiles at Mito, while the Third Hokage made more hand seals. "Fire Release: Fire Dragon Bullets!"

Hiruzen exhaled a huge stream of fire, igniting the mud balls and turning them into fire blasts. Mito replied in the form of more hand seals.

"Sealing Art: Iron Curtain!"

Mito stomped her foot down, generating a line of sealing symbols in front of her. The seals started to glow, producing a purple wall of chakra that easily blocked Hiruzen's combo attack.

"Okuninushi!"

Hiruzen saw his former friend, now undead puppet, dashing towards him, wielding kunai shrouded in wind chakra, with four negative colored afterimages following after him. Danzo delivered a series of quick swipes that were replicated by his afterimages with the same amount of power. Hiruzen blocked each of them with the Adamantine Staff, but was unable to stop Danzo from putting him on the defensive.

"You know you can't win, Hiruzen. Why aren't you trying to escape with your life?" Danzo asked, as he continued his assault. "Mito-sensei and I are reanimations. No matter how long we fight, we will never get tired. Not only are you a regular human, but you're long past your prime. This fight won't last long."

"I have my reasons to fight!" Hiruzen replied, managing to smack one of Danzo's kunai out of his hand, and deliver a strike to his head. Unfortunately, one of the afterimages parried it.

And while they fought, Mito's hands formed new hand seals for her next move.

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

Mito released multiple crescent-shaped winds of blade, forcing Hiruzen to disengage Danzo in order to jump back and dodge them. A couple of them managed to graze his armor, drawing some blood. His feet skidded when they touched land again, threatening to make him lose balance.

"Danzo is right, Saru," Mito added. "Don't waste your life fighting us."

"It's not a waste," Hiruzen replied, breathing heavily. "Every second I fight you, is another second you aren't chasing after Naruto-kun and the others. Because I know my former pupil, and he won't pass this chance to kill me, especially if he can use the wife of one of my senseis and my former friend as tools of his will," Hiruzen boldly declared, before making several one handed seals. "Lightning Release: Lightning Staff!"

The Adamantine Staff started to crackle with electricity as it was covered in lightning. Hiruzen then dashed forward, ready to face Mito was again, who braced for the attack. Danzo, however, wasn't going to be left out and made several hand seals.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

More wooden vines were summoned, getting in the way between the Third Hokage and Mito. However, much to their surprise, Sarutobi stopped his dash, and threw the staff forward. The spinning staff shattered the wooden barrier thanks to its lightning coat, and when Mito was about to parry it, changed course and rotated around her, before smacking her in the back of her head.

"Sorry, Mito-sama, but it needs to be done," Enma apologized from within the staff.

Meanwhile, Hiruzen changed course and headed towards Danzo. He pulled out a sealing scroll, and unsealed a large broadsword while making several hand seals.

"Fire Release: Burning Edge!"

Mustering his remaining strength, Hiruzen delivered several swipes at Danzo with his flaming sword. Danzo used his wind-enhanced kunai to parry some while dodging others, but was reminded that Wind was a poor choice to counter Fire.

"Tell me, Danzo, given how you trained your Root ninjas to be mere puppets... how does it feel to be one?" Hiruzen asked, as he pressed his attack. "And I'm not just talking about now, but the knowledge that you have been an Akatsuki pawn all this time!"

"Does my response matter? Does anything I say will help or change anything that happened before?" Danzo replied, as he pulled several shuriken and threw them at his former friend.

Said shuriken were easily parried, with Hiruzen even grabbing a couple for himself. "Yes, yes it does! You ended up being an Akatsuki pawn because you stole Shisui Uchiha's eye, which was then stolen from you by Obito! Not only the Uchiha Insurrection could have been averted, but it was thanks to you that Akatsuki got so many Tailed Beasts!"

"I don't regret taking Shisui's eye. It was too dangerous. Who can assure us that Shisui won't use his mind control powers against Konoha?" Danzo replied.

"Shisui has been an exemplary ninja, one whose loyalty to Konoha has never been questioned other than by you!" Hiruzen replied, destroying one of Danzo's afterimages with a fiery swipe. "You always say that everything you do is for Konoha's sake, but all your actions have done nothing but weaken it!"

"Perhaps that might be true, but I'm not the only one whose faults weakened Konoha," Danzo replied. "If you didn't hesitate to kill Orochimaru when you had the chance, there wouldn't be reanimations laying waste through the Elemental Nations."

"Orochimaru is a longtime mistake I plan to rectify!" Hiruzen replied.

"No, you won't," Danzo countered.

"Sealing Art: Unsummoning Jutsu!"

That moment, Hiruzen felt Enma, who was keeping Mito busy, disappear, the jutsu that summoned to the island undone.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Danzo capitalized that second of distraction, and lunged forward, delivering an horizontal swipe at Hiruzen with his wind-enhanced kunai. Hiruzen managed to jump back, but he wasn't fast enough to dodge the attack completely, allowing Danzo to slash his chest, drawing even more blood. Hiruzen then felt his ankles being

wrapped by a chain, making him lose his balance and fall facefirst into the ground. Mito then retracted the chain, pulling Hiruzen towards her, while more chains bound his body, leaving him completely immobile.

Hiruzen looked upwards, and saw Mito ready to strike. However, her brown eyes were now pure white, and her mouth was curved into an extremely evil smirk.

"Sweet dreams, Sarutobi-sensei," Orochimaru's voice came from Mito's mouth, as Mito raised her fist, which shone with a golden light.

Mito then brought the fist down, impaling Hiruzen's chest. Hiruzen's mouth opened, spitting mouthful of blood as he tried to say something, but all the sounds that came from it were unintelligible gargles. That moment, Mito's eyes returned to normal. She blinked a couple times, before realizing what had happened.

"Saru? Saru! No, nooooooooooo!" Mito wailed, as she hugged the corpse of who once had been the star student of her husband and her brother in law.

Danzo watched the scene with a solemn expression, as a torrent of emotions boiled inside his artificial body.

"Fighting to the very end. Such a dignified death. Even in that, you proved to be my better. Farewell, my old friend."

...

In a nearby forest, Yugao and Hayate had finished fighting Kabuto. The pair of swordsmen managed to pin Kabuto to the ground by stabbing several chakra-infused kunai on several parts of his body.

"Great. This guy won't go anywhere," Yugao said, smiling at her victory.

"Indeed. Now let's go and help-" Hayate agreed, before covering a cough with his mouth. "We should go back and help the others."

Kabuto, however, rather than being angry, was smugly smiling.

"Your victory today means nothing. You have only seen a fraction of the power Orochimaru-sama commands!" Kabuto said.

Then, much to the couple's shock, the kunai pinning him to the ground were swatted away by an invisible force which also brought Kabuto to his feet. A coffin appeared behind him, and Kabuto was pushed inside it, before the lid slammed against the coffin, finally sinking into the ground.

...

Mountain Graveyard, that very moment

"So, you failed again," Obito said, exasperated. "I'm starting to regret making this deal more and more."

"I haven't failed, Obito-kun," Orochimaru said. "The plan is going as I have foreseen it."

"The jinchuriki escaped! All three of them!" Obito snapped, piercing Orochimaru with an angry glare. "What's good any foresight if in the end the result is failure!?"

"The result isn't failure. The jinchuriki might have escaped, but right now, based on the position of the Turtle Island, they only have one place to go. A place away from all the battlegrounds, and thus a place where they won't be able to ask for help," Orochimaru explained.

"If we send forces to that zone, the Alliance will catch wind of what's going on!" Obito replied.

"We won't have to send anybody, because I already have an agent in place," Orochimaru said, smirking confidently. "One of my best

reanimations, who happen to have no equal when it comes to jinchuriki hunting."

"Very well then," Obito said. "But keep in mind, this will be your last chance. No more screw ups."

"No more screw ups," Orochimaru echoed.

...

Land of Fire

Among the forests near the northern coast of the Land of Fire, a figure stood still. He could be mistaken for a statue, but said figure was very much alive. Alive in a roundabout way, that's it.

" *The time has come,*" a voice said inside the figure's head. He opened his eyes, which were full of anger and frustration at his current predicament. "*Now go, and capture the three jinchuriki. Let nothing and no one stop you.*"

The figure, unable to resist, obeyed the commands, broke his quietude, and leaped forward.

Hashirama Senju was on the hunt.

Cocoon Chamber, Undisclosed Location

During the past few days, the second cocoon the eight White Zetsu clones have been feeding and taking care of began pulsating with increased frequency. They remembered that such thing happened when Rin's cocoon was ready to open, so despite their excitement, they kept their emotions in restrain and continued taking care of the cocoon as best as they could.

This cocoon, however, started to do something Rin's cocoon didn't do: as the pulsations hastened their pace, it began to glow white with

chakra. The faster the pulsations became, the more it glowed. And the last day, it glowed so brightly, it was almost like looking directly into the sun.

And lastly, it opened.

It wasn't like Rin's cocoon, though, which merely split into four parts almost like a flower blooming, spilling its green colored, sap-like liquid contents and the body of the newly restored girl. This cocoon exploded with chakra, instantly vaporizing the Zetsu clones attached to it, flooding the galleries with a burning light, killing everybody unfortunate enough to be caught in the blast.

And when the light finally faded, the chamber was completely empty, except for one man, standing alone in a puddle of green sap. The man had fair skin, a slim but muscular body, and long, wild black hair that fell down his back.

For a few moments, the man didn't move. He then moved his hand towards his face, tentatively flexing his fingers, before curling them into a fist, and throwing a few punches into the air.

Then, that moment, Zetsu, the original one, emerged from the ground. He looked at the newcomer, and smiled.

"I see that you're finally back," the white half said.

"You took a bit longer than we expected," the black half added.

At first, the newcomer didn't seem to notice Zetsu. Then, without even turning at the plant creature, he asked: "How long has it been?"

"Sixteen years, boss," Black Zetsu replied. "A lot of things happened, as you can imagine. We're close to reach our goal, but there's still much to be done."

"I can imagine that. First, bring me some clothes. And fill me in about what had happened since the last time we spoke," the man ordered.

"As you order... Madara-sama," the white half replied.

Author's Note: First of all, sorry if the battle wasn't that good. Writting a battle with so many fighters on both sides it's rather challenging (hence why I cheated a little by having Yugao and Hayate push Kabuto away from the main kerfuffle). And even if it was kind of obvious, congratulations to all the people who guessed the mysterious woman was Mito. In fact, it couldn't be Kushina since I myself stated that neither she nor Minato were going to appear again after they helped Naruto defeat Kurama.

For those of you who complained about the lack of deaths in the war so far... yeah, hope you guys are satisfied. And trust me, these are far from the only deaths you are going to see now. As I said before, we're heading now into the endgame, and the stakes will be raised appropriately.

You know, I always regretted not killing Hiruzen during the Uchiha Insurrection, given that I hardly did anything with him. I realized a little too late that Hiruzen is a character that doesn't have much to do if he isn't wearing the Hokage Hat. And indeed, I heard other authors that had him step down as Hokage but keep him alive also had similar problems with him, and end up killing him anyway. Oh well, at the very least, I hope his last battle as well as his death were memorable moments.

There's also Tenzo and Choza dying as well. As for Tenzo, I always struggled what to do with him (even as the sensei of Hanabi and the Senju twins) and he wasn't very high in my top favorite character list, so off he goes. As for Choza, so like Shikamaru and Ino, Choji can also take his place as the head of his Clan at the same time as his teammates, as well as to show that, contrary to what Jiraiya believed, the island wasn't devoid of danger.

But I'm guess that what many of you found the most interesting is the last scene of the chapter. Yes, Madara has finally woke

up, and is ready to wreak havoc.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Naruto, Fu, and Killer B had escaped the island, but they got out of the frying pan to land into the fire, as a full-powered Hashirama is ready to hunt them down. How the jinchuriki trio will do against the most powerful ninja who ever lived? You'll find soon enough. In the meantime, don't forget to leave your thoughts on this chapter in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Hashirama Senju, the First Hokage

Author's Note: Here comes one of the battles I've been dying to write the most. I hope you guys like it:

Chapter 121:

Hashirama Senju, the First Hokage

or

Gotta Catch'em All (Tailed Beasts)!

Land of Fire, Coastline

After a couple hours of flying above the ocean, Fu and her two passengers managed to finally land on solid ground. Fu looked exhausted, B appeared neutral, but Naruto was impatient to make their next move.

"Come on, we should get moving," Naruto said, as he started walking. "We need to find friends or allies, and soon. Akatsuki still has their eye on us."

"Ouch..." Fu said, as she rubbed her shoulders. "Could we rest for a bit? I'm kind of sore after flying while carrying you guys for so long."

There was a moment of silence. Naruto was going to protest, but looked at B, who nodded.

"The girl made quite an effort, let her catch her breath. We need some rest as well, or the next fight may result in our death," Killer B sagely advised.

Even if he was unhappy, Naruto decided to agree with Killer B. Fu let out a sigh of relief, and plopped on the ground.

"I swear I don't need much time. Just a few minutes," Fu promised.

While Fu sat down, Naruto and Killer B remained standing. Nobody said anything for the next few minutes, nor did anything. B usually tried to take advantage of moments of clamness to think and write up some new lyrics, but all he did was stand there, arms crossed.

Naruto was the same. He was thinking in all the people that died on that island: Choji's dad, Choza; Tenzo, who was Hagane, Kaida and Hanabi's Jonin-sensei. More than likely the Third Hokage, Naruto's parents' Jonin-sensei and father figure. He hoped that Yugao and Hayate were okay, he didn't want to see another of his friends losing his parents. And then, another grim thought crossed the blond's mind.

" Just... how many people have died already in the war?" Naruto wondered. *"Are all my friends all right? Their families? There's no way they're going to come out of this unscathed."*

*" **There's no point in dwelling on that, Naruto,**"* Kurama interceded. ***"The only thing that matters is to end this war as swiftly as possible. You can mourn their deaths later."***

Naruto clenched his fist, angry at the fox's lack of tact. But deep down, he knew Kurama was right. There was nothing he could do for those who had died, but he could do something for those who were still alive.

"Number Nine has a point. What are we going to do now?" Killer B asked, apparently hearing what Kurama said. "You guys still need more training, but in our current situation I can't see how."

"The Old Man Hokage told us to go to the Allied Ninja Forces HQ. That we'd be safe there," Naruto said.

"Great! Let's go there then!" Fu happily said. She then looked around, as if trying to ascertain her surroundings. "Though, do any of you know where it is? Because I wasn't told."

"Me neither," Naruto said, looking at Killer B, who just shrugged and shook his head. "Just great."

"Well..." Fu began, fidgeting with her index fingers. "We obviously can't wander around until we find it, so... maybe we should try to find one of the Allied Divisions? We can be safe with them."

"I don't like the idea of putting a target on their backs with our presence, but right now that's our better option," Naruto said.

"We still have the problem that we don't know where to find them," Killer B interceded. "And while we wander, we might be found by those Akatsuki scum."

"Sage Mode might of be of help here. With the sensing ability that provides, it will be easy to track them. Large concentrations of people means large concentrations of chakra, something we should be able to pick up," Naruto said.

" Uh, question!" Chomei chimed in. **"Why didn't you guys use Sage Mode when we were fighting those zombies?"**

Naruto turned around, looking at Fu -or better said, Fu's stomach- in shock. "Wait... we can use your chakra cloaks and Sage Mode in unison?"

" Of course you can. Why did you thought it wasn't possible?" Kurama replied.

"I... nevermind," Naruto said, dropping his head in defeat, wondering how many lives he could have saved if it wasn't for his stupidity.

" Don't feel bad, Naruto," Gyuki interceded. **"The island was lost the moment Akatsuki learned of its location. Sage Mode would have changed very little there."**

Naruto seriously doubted it, but decided not to argue with the ox-octopus. He couldn't afford to waste anymore time. It was time to

end this war. Naruto sat down, and started to gather nature energy. Upon seeing him, Fu did so as well. After a few minutes, orange marks appeared around Naruto's eyes, while butterfly-shaped green marks appeared around Fu's. The more nature energy they gathered, the more their sensing ability expanded.

At first, all they could sense were animals and wildlife. When they finally started to sense human chakra in numerous quantity, they could tell they were just townspeople. However, as they continued their efforts, they finally noticed a large concentration of chakra of great intensity.

"I sensed something!" Fu excitedly said.

"Me too! To the southwest!" Naruto said, as he stood up and looked into that direction.

"In fact, I swore I sensed the chakras of Lee, Tenten and Neji!" Fu added, as she jumped to her feet.

"I sensed Kaida, Hagane and Sasuke as well. It must be the division they've been assigned to," Naruto said.

"That's good enough to me, let's go!" Fu excitedly said.

"Wait a second," Naruto said, as he bit his thumb, and started to make hand seals.

"What are you doing?" Fu asked. "Do you plan to summon something?"

"Yes, a messenger toad," Naruto replied. "I'm going to send a message to dad in order to tell him what happened and what's going on. Hopefully we'll get some help soon."

Naruto then slammed his hand into the ground, producing a burst of smoke as the summoning took place.

...

Konoha, Hyuga Estate

Quiet.

That's how Hinata described everything around her. Not only her home, which was devoid of more than two thirds of its usual clansmen because of the war, leaving only the children, the elderly, and the service staff -which they now had too little to do given how few Hyugas were currently in the Estate-, but the village as well.

Konoha felt like a ghost town, while her home felt like an abandoned mansion, even if it had still a couple dozen people on it. Which only helped to make the Hyuga Clan Head even antsier. Yet here she was, forced to stay confined in her home.

The moment Hinata returned, the first thing she wanted to do was fly straight into the nearest battlefield, presumably the one where her sister or her mother where fighting right now.

"Have you lost your mind? You need to rest right now!"

"The fight against Toneri left you drained. You need time to rest before you can head back to the front lines."

"The First Hokage went back to fight in the war immediately after his fight with Madara Uchiha, and we all know how that ended. He wasn't invincible, and neither are you."

From her clansmen, to the Moon Acolytes, to the non-Hyuga ninjas that had accompanied her like Sai and Shisui, all of them told her that going right now to the war was suicide. And as much as it pained her to admit it, they were right. Some of her clansmen scanned her with their Byakugan, and warned her that her chakra levels, while not as low as to present a risk for her health, they were too low for an actual battle.

"If I'm being forced to stay here, I better try to enjoy it," the young woman said in resignation, as she lazily finished eating her yakisoba.

Then again, after spending so many weeks on ration bars, homecooked food was a gift for her taste buds.

That moment, one of the cooks entered the dinning area. He appeared to be pleased that Hinata's dish was pretty much empty.

"I hope the food is to your liking, Hinata-sama," the cook replied.

"It was as excellent as the last time I ate here, Ichikawa-san," Hinata replied.

"I'm glad to hear it," the chef said, nodding in satisfaction. "We all know you're itching to leave for battle once again, so I hope that our food not only will help you recover your strength as quick as possible, but it will make your stay here pleasant."

"Yes. I can feel my chakra slowly getting back to its usual levels," Hinata said. "The clan's medics told me that I will be ready to go after a day or two of rest and proper food."

The chef nodded once again, before he snapped his fingers. "While eating proper nutritive food is important, I believe you also deserve a little whim given how hard you've been fighting for us, Hinata-sama."

A maid then entered the dinning area carrying a tray full of cinnamon buns. The Hyuga Clan Head's mouth began to water upon witnessing such a heavenly sight. She didn't even remember when was the last time she enjoyed her favorite meal.

As she bit the sweet, sweet pastry, she did remember when it was: Naruto bought her some as an apology gift for the way he behaved with her after the failed Roshi mission. She couldn't help but wonder how her boyfriend was doing now.

"Just wait a little longer, Naruto-kun," Hinata thought. "We will be fighting together soon."

...

Madara Uchiha's Secret Lair

Madara was finishing putting up his old armor. After getting cleaned up and dressed, the former Uchiha Clan Head asked his minion about what had happened during the decades he had been hibernating inside the cocoon.

Zetsu told Madara all what Obito had done, such as the recruitment of Nagato, the creation of Akatsuki, how they managed to capture six and a half Tailed Beasts, but the other two and a half were proving to be exceptionally resistant to capture, to the point of losing half their members trying to do so. Then came the war against all five Great Ninja Villages, plus some of the lesser ones. Things... weren't going that well for Akatsuki.

But that was in the past. Now that Madara had completed his rejuvenation process, things would go better now.

"What about the test subject?" Madara asked.

"She's meeting our initial expectations. She has access to Wood Release as expected, her chakra pools expanded considerably, and her healing factor surpasses that of Hashirama himself," the black half began to explain.

"We also believe she inherited Hashirama's affinity for nature energy as well, given that she has mastered Sage Mode in a rather short amount of time," the white half added.

"Interesting... hearing her progress, it makes me want to find an opponent to fight as soon as possible," Madara said, as he adjusted his old vambraces.

"Are you sure you don't want the new armor, boss?" the black half of Zetsu asked. "That museum piece won't take you very far."

"Save it for later. This armor was how people remember me, and I want to appear the same way as in their memories," Madara replied.

He then closed his eyes, and expanding his senses. Madara has always been a pretty powerful sensor, but thanks to Hashirama's cells spliced into his, he could now cover the area of a small country in mere seconds. It didn't take him long to find a large mass of chakra, a huge concentration of human beings.

"Boss? Should we go and catch the remaining jinchuriki?" the white half suggested.

"There will be time for that. First, I want to test my new powers," Madara replied, opening his eyes and turning around. "I sense an army not too far away from here. They will be the perfect opponent to test my might. Take me there."

"As you say, boss," the white half agreed.

...

Meanwhile, in the northern part of the Land of Fire, after a few minutes of rest, Naruto, Fu and Killer B began their journey towards the front lines. Naruto and Killer B were jumping from one tree branch to another, while Fu flew a few meters above them. At the pace they were currently going, they hoped that they would reach the Allied Division a little before sunset. That was, of course, if there were no unforeseen events that would delay them.

Too bad Akatsuki loved throwing unforeseen events at its enemies.

As they advanced, Naruto's necklace started to glow with a greenish-white light, something it hasn't done in quite some time.

"Naruto?" Fu asked. "What's with your necklace?"

"I don't know," Naruto replied, as he looked at the jewel hanging from his neck with worry. "This necklace is imbued with the First Hokage's chakra. It only glows when-"

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The earth started to shake, and gigantic wooden vines emerged from down below, tearing down the already existing trees, the area being flooded in green. Fu yelled and flew even higher into the sky, while Naruto and Killer B were forced to jump onto the emerging vines. Naruto pulled his Wind Blade, while B unsheathed two of his short swords, and started to cut all the vines that were coming at them.

After a couple minutes, the jutsu finally stopped, even if the new gigantic forest remained. Naruto quickly activated his Kurama Chakra Cloak, while Fu was covered in the carapace plates of the Chomei Chakra armor. Killer B was surrounded by a cloak of bright maroon chakra that gave him horns and eight tails.

"Another enemy that can use Wood Release. Will these nasty surprises ever cease?" the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails asked as he looked around.

"The scale of this jutsu is nothing I've seen before," Naruto said in awe. "Neither Tenzo, Kaida or even Rin in Sage Mode can-"

"Naruto! B-sensei! Over there!" Fu pointed to a large vine arc.

The two male jinchuriki saw a man standing on the large wooden vine: a tan skinned man with long, straight dark brown hair. He was wearing an antiquated red armor, as well as Konoha forehead protector tied around his head. His cracked skin and black eyes betrayed his nature as a reanimation. And while that wasn't a face Naruto and Fu had ever seen in person, they both had seen it for days in the Hokage Monument.

The three jinchuriki immediately felt their Tailed Beasts squirm in both anger and fear.

" ***Oh shit, not him!***" Gyoku cursed.

" ***This is going to suck so much...***" Chomei whined.

"Of course Akatsuki would resurrect that son of a-" Kurama began, his words being muffled by growls of anger.

"Naruto, isn't that guy...?" Fu began.

"Yes," Naruto said, as he locked eyes with the man in question. "The First Hokage. No wonder my necklace is glowing."

"The First Hokage, hm? He looks to be pretty strong. This looks like it's going to be a pretty intense fight, am I wrong?" Killer B asked.

"'Intense' doesn't even begin to describe it, B," Gyuki said, sounding a little panicked. **"That man was the one who fought and subdued me without breaking a sweat, before selling me to Kumo."**

"Me too," Chomei stated. **"Hashirama has the power to bind us to his will, and we can't do anything about it."**

"So that was their plan all along, huh?" Kurama said in realization. **"The initial attack on the island was just a ruse to put us in the open, where Hashirama would capture us."**

"Well, First Hokage or not, no such thing is going to happen! All of us are as strong as a Kage, plus it's three on one! We can beat him!" Naruto said energetically.

"Watch out, he's preparing another jutsu!" Fu warned, upon noticing Hashirama making hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Hashirama slammed one hand onto the vine he was standing on, but rather than a cloud of smoke followed by some sort of summoned animal, Hashirama summoned a coffin with the Uzumaki symbol on it. The lid fell forward, and its occupant stepped outside, who turned out to be Mito Uzumaki.

"Oh shit, not those two together!" Kurama cursed.

Naruto gulped, sharing the fox's concerns and fear. He had experienced firsthand what Mito was capable of on her own, he didn't want to imagine what it would be to fight her alongside a godlike ninja like Hashirama.

"Mito-chan?" Hashirama asked, taken aback. "You too?"

"Hashirama," Mito said, looking at her husband. "I see that you're also a slave of this aberration of a jutsu."

"The saddest part is, this isn't even the first time," Hashirama said, letting out a weary sigh. "Though, I don't see my brother nor that Minato guy this time around."

Minato. That name sounded familiar to Mito, but she couldn't put her finger when did she hear it.

"At the very least we haven't been summoned in Konoha this time around," Hashirama said. "I would have hated if more innocent lives were on my conscience."

"Too bad I can't say the same," Mito sadly replied. "Our puppetmaster forced me to end Saru's life."

"You... you were forced to kill Saru!? No!" Hashirama cried, his eyes opening wide, before they narrowed in anger, as his fist clenched. "I don't know how, but I'll make sure that traitorous bastard pays for this."

"The best we can do is to make sure we don't cause anymore damage. And to do so, we need to help our enemies to seal us away," Mito replied, before looking at the jinchuriki in front of them.

Hashirama looked at Naruto, Fu and Killer B. "Those three appear to be our targets. Do you know them?"

"The jinchuriki of the Seven, Eight, and Nine Tails, respectively," Mito explained. "Orochimaru, the man who summoned us, is part of a

criminal organization that seeks to collect all Tailed Beasts. Those three are the ones who still remain. Albeit the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails only has half the beast within his body, the other half being bound to me once again."

"If they're jinchuriki, no wonder Orochimaru saved us for them. Wait... I'm sensing a familiar chakra... is he wearing the necklace I gave Tsuna?" Hashirama said. He then took a step forward, and cupped his hands around his mouth to increase his voice. "Hey, jinchuriki of the Nine Tails! Are you a Konoha ninja?"

"My name's Naruto!" Naruto replied. "And yeah, I'm from Konoha!"

"Nice to meet you, Naruto! My name's Hashirama, albeit you probably know who I am, given that I was told I'm on history textbooks now!" Hashirama said. "Anyway, if you hope to defeat me, you need to find this man called Shisui Uchiha! Only he can break the control the caster of the jutsu has over our bodies!"

"I'm afraid Shisui is a bit busy right now!" Naruto replied.

"Oh. Well, that's very unfortunate. You aren't going to like what's coming next, then. Wood Clone Jutsu!" Four Wood Clones emerged from Hashirama, and placed themselves around him. Both the original and the clones started to make hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Fire Destruction!"

"Water Release: Water Colliding Wave!"

"Earth Release: Tectonic Upheaval!"

"Lightning Release: Wrath of the Thunder God!"

"Wind Release: Breath of God!"

The three jinchuriki watched in shock how Hashirama and his clones breathed a massive stream of fire, a gigantic wall of water, a storm of lightning bolts, an extremely powerful gale, and raised gigantic rocks

from underground, meshing all of them in a single, massive elemental attack that advanced towards them, devouring everything in its way.

"WHAT THE HELL!?" a shocked Naruto asked, as he tried to come up with what to do to counter such a massive combination attack.

However, Naruto didn't have to do anything, as one of Killer B's chakra tentacles wrapped around his waist, before he was thrown into the air, and much to his surprise, he was caught by Fu.

"Number Seven, time to take us to heaven!" Killer B said, extending another of his chakra tentacles towards Fu.

The Jinchuriki of Chomei grabbed it, and lifted the Kumo ninja into the air, and the three of them were able to dodge the deadly attack.

"What the hell was that, kid? You never froze mid-battle before!" Kurama chastised.

"I'm sorry, it's just... the scale of those attacks was unreal! And from all five elements!" Naruto replied, shocked. *"I didn't know that the First Hokage could do that!"*

"What, you thought that all Hashirama has is the Wood Release? You humans and your habit to simplify everything..." Kurama said, shaking his head. **"There's a reason as for why he was called the God of Ninja, and it wasn't just because of his power and Bloodline Limit. Yes, he's a master of all five elemental ninjutsu, medical ninjutsu, genjutsu, is an expert fighter with pretty much any weapon..."**

"So we have our work cut, don't we?" Naruto asked.

"Yes. And don't forget that Mito is still there!" Kurama warned.

And indeed, Naruto saw a golden-orange blur blitzing towards them. More chains shot from many parts of her body. Naruto, however, was

ready to counter it. After releasing himself from Fu, he quickly pulled out a sealing scroll from his ninja tool pouch, and unsealed a Fuma shuriken, which he quickly threw in Mito's direction, before making several hand seals.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

The single shuriken became a dozen, clashing against the incoming chains, deflecting them elsewhere, while some others managed to hit Mito herself, which stopped her momentum.

" Good one, Naruto. Now here comes the other bastard!"

Kurama warned

And indeed, like Kurama said, Hashirama was leaping at them, holding a huge broadsword between his hands, almost as big as Zabuza's Executioner Blade. Upon seeing him, Killer B released himself from Fu as well, and used his chakra tentacles to usheathe the rest of his swords.

"Hey Naruto, let me take a crack at this guy!" Killer B said, as he rushed towards Hashirama. "My skills with the blade will make this man cry!"

The Kumo jinchuriki engaged Hashirama in a duel of swords. Despite the size of his blade, Hashirama swung his broadsword as easily as if it was a mere tanto, making Killer B realize that he wasn't going to have the speed advantage as he imagined.

Still, the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails wasn't somebody to frighten easily, and deflected Hashirama's blows by redirect them to the sides -he knew better than trying to parry a blow from such a big weapon-, while counterattacking with the swords he was holding with the chakra tentacles, even managing to land a few slashes on the First Hokage. Unfortunately, he was uanble to make any real harm.

"You're a good swordsman, Kumo ninja," Hashirama praised. "I would have loved to test my skill against yours had we met in

another life!"

" *Hmmmm... my skills alone aren't leaving any mark...*" Killer B mused, ignoring the First Hokage's words. *"Perhaps they need a little more spark!"*

When Hashirama delivered another swipe, Killer B instead decided to parry instead of deflecting, but when he did, he channeled lightning chakra through his sword. As his sword crackled with electricity, it managed to slice a clean piece of Hashirama's broadsword.

"Whoa!" Hashirama said, as he jumped back before Killer B could deliver another slash at him, and looked at his ruined blade. "Well, look at that. You're even better than I thought!"

"Of course I am, ya fool! Those who think who can compare with the great Killer B are nothing but tools!" Killer B boasted.

Taking advantage of Hashirama's surprise, Naruto ambushed him from one of his flanks, ready to strike the zombie Hokage down with his Wind Blade. However, Hashirama was still able to sense him, and parried Naruto's elemental sword with his ruined broadsword, which got another chunk sliced off. Hashirama jumped back, and Naruto tried to chase after him.

"Naruto, watch out!" Fu warned from above.

That moment, the four Wood Clones Hashirama had created surrounded Naruto and engaged him in a fight from every direction. Naruto smirked in return.

"You think you can use clones against me? ME?" Naruto asked, sounding half amused and half insulted. Without putting his Wind Blade away, he made a hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Several dozen Naruto clones popped to life among bursts of smoke, quickly overwhelming the Hashirama clones. However, the clones

had already fulfilled their purpose of buying the First Hokage some seconds to weave seals and use his next jutsu:

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Bloom!"

Once again, Hashirama created a dense forest out of nowhere, forcing the three jinchuriki to back off. However, large flowers began to bloom from these new trees, and started to release large clouds of pollen. Soon, the air was saturated with the pollen, taking on a yellowish hue.

" DO NOT BREATHE THAT POLLEN!" Chomei practically screamed.
"If you do, you're dead!"

And indeed, the Naruto clones that were further from the real one were unable to escape from the yellow pollen cloud, and they instantly fell on their faces, unconscious, before they all dispelled in bursts of smoke.

" Actually, that pollen isn't lethal, but puts to sleep to those who inhale it," Gyuki felt the need to correct his fellow Tailed Beast. **"... but given the circumstances, it may be synonymous of death, so yeah, don't breathe it."**

"That's easy for you to say! We can't fight without breathing!" Fu replied.

"Fu, you and I both know Wind jutsu! Let's try to blow the pollen away!" Naruto suggested.

" Even if you do, the flowers will just pump out more," Kurama helpfully reminded them.

"In that case, the flowers will have to go as well, if we don't want to fall prey to their smell," Killer B suggested.

" I don't think Hashirama and Mito are going to make it easy for you to do any gardening, though," Gyuki pointed out.

"Nobody said this was going to be easy, if it was it would be cheesy," Killer B replied.

"Well said!" Naruto said, as he started making hand seals. "Ready, Fu?"

"Ready!" Fu replied, her hands forming seals as well.

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Upon finishing the sealing sequence, Naruto thrust his hands forward, casting a huge horizontal cyclone, while Fu expelled a huge wall of air from her mouth. The two wind attacks merged into a powerful hurricane, and it quickly dispersed the cloud of pollen.

"Wow..." Hashirama said in awe. "In all the times I used that jutsu, not a single person ever thought in using a Wind jutsu to dispel the pollen!"

"I don't think a normal Wind jutsu would have been enough, husband," Mito replied. "Then again, those two are jinchuriki with mastery over their Tailed Beasts, so they have enough power to counter ours. Maybe there's hope they can beat us."

The flowers, however, continued pumping more sleeping pollen into the air. However, the jinchuriki moved in order to destroy them before they could release more. Though, as Gyuki pointed out, the pair of reanimations weren't going to just stay idle and let them do it, as the pair of older ninjas quickly jumped into intercept the jinchuriki.

"I'll take care of the flowers! Shadow Clone Jutsu!" Naruto made his favorite hand seal, creating a dozen or so of clones, which began to move towards the direction of the flowers. "Fu, I'm going to need some cover!"

"You got it!" Fu said, as she made the tiger hand seal while opening her mouth, releasing a cloud of sparkly dust scales. "Hiding in the Scale Powder jutsu!"

Fu clapped her hands together, and the whole area was flooded by bright white light flooded the area, blinding Hashirama and Mito. Naruto and his clones already closed their eyes in order not avoid being blinded, while Killer B's sunglasses negated the blinding light. The light receded quickly, but that was all the time Naruto and his clones needed to destroy all the flowers with explosive notes.

Meanwhile, Killer B and Fu jumped forward, and engaged Hashirama and Mito in a close combat duel (again, in Killer B's case), pushing the two reanimations back.

"Whoa! They countered my jutsu completely!" Hashirama said in awe, albeit he also sounded rather excited. "Not even Madara was even able to do that! Jinchuriki or not, these ninjas had a very fine upbringing and training!"

"I don't know about these two, but the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails is Tsuna's adoptive son," Mito told her husband.

Hashirama gasped loudly, and a huge smile appeared in his face. "Really!? Are you really the boy Tsuna told me about the other time!? That's great! I'm so glad to meet you, boy! I'm your great-grandfather, Hashirama!"

"You are the First Hokage, I know who you are!" Naruto replied. "Plus you introduced yourself earlier!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Hashirama said, laughing awkwardly while casually parrying a few slashes from Killer B. "I can get a bit excited when I meet a new family member, and I kind of lose focus of what I'm doing!"

"Hey, cut the chatter, it's me you have to fight! Ignoring your opponent is a huge slight!" Killer B protested, as he intensified his

onslaught.

"You'll have to excuse my husband, jinchuriki-san," Mito replied, as she herself ignored Fu while her body fought on her own. "He can be a bit silly sometimes. Still, try not to underestimate him, he can be a fierce warrior when he puts his mind to it."

"Not that I want to!" Hashirama added, as he briefly disengaged Killer B, and unsealed a pair of large swords, one being straight, the other with a curved edge, from the large scroll he was carrying on his back. "Much better! I prefer to fight an armed opponent when I'm armed myself!"

"I thought you said you didn't want to fight seriously!" Fu protested.

"I don't want to, but if I'm forced to, I might as well enjoy it!" Hashirama said, as his duel against the Kumo jinchuriki became more even.

"Like I said, my husband can be a little silly," Mito replied.

"Unfortunately, what comes next isn't going to be as silly!" Hashirama warned, as his two swords started to glow with chakra. "Strong Sword: Helmet Splitter!"

Hashirama projected through his blades swords of chakra that were twice as long and thick as the swords he was holding, and brought one of them down in a vertical downward slash. Rather than parrying it, Killer B wisely dodged to the side, with the sword releasing a gigantic crescent chakra blast that cut a giant furrow in the ground, while also shredding all the trees that were caught in its path.

Taking advantage of his building momentum, Hashirama made another cut with his other sword, this time horizontal, while also releasing another crescent shaped blast of chakra. However, rather than trying to dodge it this time, Naruto generated four giant arms of golden chakra, and attempted to stop the slash himself. After

struggling with the chakra blast for a bit, the golden arms managed to shatter it into thousands of blue sparks that quickly disappeared.

"Whoa... !" Hashirama said in awe. "Adopted or not, you're indeed Tsuna's kid!"

"Thank you. Though, if you liked that, you're going to like this even more," Naruto said, before orange markings appeared around his eyes. He raised an arm, which generated other arms around it, and used them to create a spinning shuriken of wind chakra. "Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto threw the deadly disc forward, the air being filled with a loud whirring noise. Hashirama quickly started to make hand seals, ready to counter Naruto's jutsu.

"Wood Release: Wood Golem jutsu!"

Hashirama slammed his hands into the ground, and a golem emerged from it. First the head, then the upper body, then the arms, lower body, and lastly the legs. The moment the arms materialized, one of the hands quickly went to grab the Rasenshuriken. However, to the first Hokage's surprise, the chakra shuriken exploded into a sphere of destructive razor winds, shredding the hand of the golem to splinters, as well as almost destroying its whole arm.

"So, Sage Mode already, Naruto?" Fu asked, noticing the marks around Naruto's eyes.

"I think this enemy deserves it," Naruto replied.

"In that case, don't mind me if I join you!" Fu said, making a hand seal.

Back in the coast Fu had landed with her fellow jinchuriki, there were two Shadow Clones of Fu and a single Shadow Clone of Naruto gathering nature energy, before one of the former disappeared, just like the Shadow Clone of Naruto a few moments before. Despite the

distance, it only took a few seconds for the nature energy to transfer to Fu's body, the Sage Mode manifesting in the form of green marks with the shape of butterfly wings.

While they normally couldn't create many clones if they had clones gathering nature energy, their limit had expanded now that they had access to the full power of their Tailed Beasts.

"You kids are Sages too?" Mito said in amazement.

"The newer generations are such a wonder, aren't they, Mito-chan?" Hashirama replied.

"Indeed. Unfortunately, that display of power is going to force me to go all out as well," Mito replied, before her orange-golden aura exploded in a torrent of light, shapeless at first, but taking the form of a translucent Nine Tailed Fox as it grew up, until it reached its full size, with Mito floating inside its head.

The colossal fox-shaped chakra construct let out a roar, as it stomped forward, and tried to smash Naruto with one of its paws. Naruto, however, was fast enough to shoot an arm of chakra towards the airborne Fu, who pulled him out of danger.

"What the hell is that!?" Naruto asked.

"It seems that Mito has complete control over my other half," Kurama noted. "And without you unable to do the same... this complicates things."

"If you can keep that pesky Hashirama out of our way, B and myself will deal with that woman!" Gyoku offered, as Killer B started to transform into his Tailed Best form.

"Leave it to us!" Fu replied. ***"That Golem looks all big and terrifying, but Naruto showed it's far from invincible!"***

That moment, the Nine Tails avatar opened its jaws and started to form a Tailed Beast Ball between them. However, Killer B quickly tackled the orange-golden beast, forcing the incomplete attack into the sky, when it safely detonated. As Killer B pushed Mito away, Naruto and Fu prepared to fight Hashirama and his one armed golem.

"No wonder Orochimaru send me to catch you three. I can't imagine any other ninja being able to carry such task," the First Hokage said. "However, given the abilities I saw you display, I have faith that you can overcome anything I throw at you!"

"Man, it's amazing how he has more faith in us beating him than ourselves..." Fu said with a nervous chuckle.

A tremor shook the land. Naruto looked to his right, and saw Killer B and Mito duking it out in their Tailed Beast forms, neither of them gaining an advantage over the others. Then, the blond realized that, while Mito was able to nullify summons, she was now busy battling Killer B, so maybe he could call for some help while dealing with Hashirama. He bit his thumb and made several hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Naruto slammed his hand into the ground, which was followed by a huge burst of smoke. When the smoke dispelled, he was standing at the top of Gamabunta's head.

"Hey there, kid," Gamabunta said. "Gamahiro told me about the pickle you got yourself in. Something about Mito Uzumaki coming back from the death? Anyway, glad to see you're still alive and kickin'."

"Thanks, boss," Naruto replied. "Though, I'm not out of danger yet. Could you lend me a hand against that guy?"

Gamabunta narrowed his eyes at the enemy. "Wait... isn't that guy... isn't that guy the First Hokage?"

"Yeah, he was-"

"You summoned me to fight the freakin' First Hokage!? Did you lost your mind, kid!?" Gamabunta hollered. "First your pops expects me to fight the goddamn Nine Tails, and now you summon me to fight the God of Ninja? What's with you crazy blondes!?"

"Calm down, boss! Fu and I are going to be the ones fighting Hashirama. I need you to provide some support. Mostly by distracting that Wood Golem," Naruto said, pointing out at the green giant. "I mean, it's lacking an arm, so how hard can it be?"

"The golem just ate a tree, and the missing arm it's starting to grow back," Fu pointed out, as she hovered over Naruto.

And indeed, there were several wiggling vines that were slowly growing from the stump where the arm used to be.

"It ate... a tree?" Gamabunta repeated.

"In that case, you should try to beat it as fast as you can, before it grows back," Naruto dryly advised.

"There's never a dull moment with you, huh?" Gamabunta said in resignation, as he unsheathed his short sword.

"Oh, so you're a Toad Summoner?" Hashirama asked, curious.

"Given that you were adopted by Tsuna, I thought you'd be a Slug Summoner."

"Slugs are more for medics. And son of Tsunade or not, I absolutely suck at medical ninjutsu, other than doing a very basic version of the Mystical Palm jutsu," Naruto explained. "I got the Toad Contract from my dad."

"I've never fought against a Toad Summoner, but I heard that Toads don't let anybody sign their contract. Then again, you, as well as

your companions, showed me that you're far from an ordinary ninja. Let's go then!"

With surprising nimbleness, Gamabunta dashed forward, and delivered a diagonal downward strike with his short sword on the golem, which was caught by its remaining hand. As the giant toad and the wooden construct struggled against each other. Hashirama choose that moment to leap at Naruto, his two swords ready to cut him to pieces.

Naruto smirked, and leaped to meet him mid air. Naruto's Wind Blade clashed against Hashirama's swords, struggling on a blade lock for a bit, before Naruto's superior senjutsu-enhanced strength drove the First Hokage back. As Hashirama was pushed back, Fu flew to intercept him, as she unsealed something from a large scroll.

"Hey, you aren't the only one able to use Wood Release!" Fu said, as much to Hashirama's shock, she unsealed her weapon of choice, a gigantic log. "Meet Arbor-chan!"

Hashirama didn't have time to react as Fu slammed the giant log against him, sending him flying towards a cluster of trees, producing a booming noise and raising a cloud of smoke as the undead Hokage hit the ground. The force of the impact managed to topple several nearby trees.

"Nice hit!" Naruto said, giving his fellow jinchuriki a thumbs up.

"Thanks! It was one of my best moves," Fu said, casually resting the giant piece of wood on her shoulder. "Do you think that was enough to bring him down?"

Suddenly, three large serpentine dragons made of wood emerged from the place Hashirama landed on, with Hashirama himself riding on the head of one of them. While he had multiple wounds across his body, none of them were bad enough to incapacitate him, and they were healing at a fast pace.

"I guess that's our answer," Fu replied. "Okay, new plan, I distract him, you nab him with a Rasenshuriken?"

"He won't fall for something so simple," Naruto replied, shaking his head. "Hitting him with a Rasenshuriken might be enough, but making sure the attack lands will be trickier."

They had no more time to plan, as the three Wood Dragons were already onto them. One of them tried to trap Fu between its jaws, prompting the Taki kunoichi to swing her giant log at her. However, the dragon bit onto the log, and pulled back in order to take it from Fu's hands, the two of them struggling against the other.

"No! No! Bad tree dragon! That's not a chew toy!" Fu chastised, as she and the dragon pulled back and forth.

The moment the second dragon got close to Naruto, the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails generated two large arms of golden chakra, and used them to grab the dragon by the jaws, keeping them from closing. Even with the enhanced strength of both senjutsu and Kurama's chakra, Naruto still struggled to keep the dragons' jaw from closing. Still, he was confident he could keep them opened enough time to make his next move, and began to quickly make hand seals with his real arms.

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe!"

Naruto spread his arms in an arc, creating a crescent shaped blade of pressurized air that flew forward, cutting the Wood Dragon in half as if it was made of paper.

"Piece of cake," Naruto said, before looking to the right in order to check on Fu. Much to his surprise, the girl was still trying to get her giant log back from the Wood Dragon, and Hashirama was about to strike her from her unguarded flank now that she was distracted.

"Fu, watch out!"

"Be careful, girl! I'm coming for you!" Hashirama warned as well, as he was ready to strike her down.

However, despite Fu seemingly not paying attention to the incoming danger, she generated a giant insect arm ending in three long claws from her left shoulder, just in time to parry Hashirama's blow, much to the First Hokage's surprise.

"HMPF!" Fu grunted, as she managed to finally wrestle the large piece of wood from the dragon. The moment the dragon lunged at her again, Fu slammed the log against it, blowing its head clean from the rest of its body. "Hah! That'll teach you- HEY!"

Hashirama's arm turned into a mass of wooden vines, wrapped themselves around Fu's log, yanked it from her hands and tossed it away.

"ARBOR-CHAN!" Fu screamed, before narrowing her yellow eyes at Hashirama. "You're so fucking dead!"

"Technically, I'm dead right now," Hashirama replied. "Sorry for your weapon, though. It wasn't my intention. Strong Sword: Helmet Splitter!"

Hashirama jumped from his dragon and leaped at Fu once again, ready to cut her down with her chakra-enhanced swords. Fu raised her right arm, and from her forearm she generated a large tower shield in the shape of a scarab shell just in time to parry the attack, resulting in a shockwave that shook the nearby trees, but the shield resisted the impact without cracking.

Fu then pushed Hashirama's sword aside, while her other arm morphed into a sting-shaped sword, and thrust it towards the reanimation, but parried it with his other sword. Naruto took advantage of Hashirama's predicament, and leaped at him, his Wind Blade above his head. However, Hashirama's remaining Wood Dragon intercepted Naruto, while the First Hokage continued his fight against Fu.

Then, that moment, Naruto could feel Gamabunta being unsummoned. He looked at where the giant toad had been fighting the Wood Golem, only to see the latter surrounded by an already disappearing cloud of smoke. The golem also had regenerated his lost arm, and wasting no time, stomped his way towards Naruto and Fu.

Naruto also spared a glance to where Killer B and Mito Uzumaki were duking it out in their Tailed Beast forms. So far, the fight seems to be going in Killer B's favor, but it didn't appear to end any time soon. He had to bridge some of the gap between them and their enemies.

"Even if he was a Boss Summon, guess I shouldn't have expected Gamabunta to be a match for something able to fight both the Nine Tails and Madara Uchiha's Susanoo on even terms," Naruto said in resignation. "Fu, how well are you doing against Hashirama?"

"Ehh... not very well!" Fu replied, as she blocked yet another of Hashirama's powerful sword strikes with her shield. "Can you lend me any help?"

"Not yet! Gamabunta had been defeated by the golem, and it's coming towards us!" Naruto warned his fellow jinchuriki. "I'll try to deal with the golem myself, but you have to keep Hashirama busy for a few minutes! Can you do that?"

"I'll try!" Fu replied.

"Very well then," Naruto made his favorite hand seal. "Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Five clones appeared around Naruto, three in front of him, and other two to his flanks.

"You know what to do," he said.

The three clones in front of him all dashed towards the incoming golem, and started to pelt him with various elemental ninjutsu attacks, as well as explosive tags. Meanwhile, the original Naruto held his Wind Blade in front of him, while the other two clones started to pour and shape chakra into it, as if Naruto was preparing a Rasenshuriken.

While Naruto dealt with the golem, Fu fought against Hashirama as best as she could. Even with the Chakra Armor and Sage Mode, he was proving to be an exceptionally tough adversary. She decided it was time to break her biggest attacks if she hoped to stand a chance alone. Her hands flew through hand seals as fast as they could.

"Sage Art: Water Release, Majestic Maelstrom!"

Fu expelled from her mouth a massive amount of water. The water took the shape of an expanding, spinning cone of liquid that flooded the entire zone. Hashirama, however, stabbed both his swords on the ground, and made more hand seals as well to prepare a defense.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Titanic Wall!"

Hashirama slammed both hands into the ground, raising a truly colossal wall of rock and earth, taller and thicker than the walls that protected Konoha. However, despite the scale of the jutsu and elemental advantage, Fu's water jutsu managed to break through the earth wall, shattering it to multiple rocks, and flooding the area around the First Hokage.

Hashirama quickly recovered his swords, and started to jump across the floating rocks that were being carried by the current of Fu's gigantic water jutsu.

"Mostly impressive, young kunoichi!" Hashirama praised, as he raised both his swords, which started to project a giant cloak of blue chakra. "I'm sure you'll be able to withstand this! Strong Sword: Celestial Slash!"

Hashirama brought both swords down, releasing a powerful wave of chakra that cut down the mass of water, splitting it in two, while it moved towards Fu, carving a furrow as it advanced forward, sending large rocks everywhere. While Fu's mobility would allow her to avoid the blast, the flying rocks were trickier to avoid, and in many cases she had to punch them away.

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Fu saw another serpentine green dragon coming at her from below, and was too slow from stopping it from trapping her between its jaws. While inside the dragon's maws, Fu turned both her arms into huge mantis blades, and used them to slice the dragon's head open from the inside, freeing herself. But before she could do anything else, Hashirama was already on top of her, and delivered a flurry of powerful sword strikes that the jinchuriki parried as well as she could.

"Naruto, are you done yet!? I could use some help here!" Fu cried, as she generated yet another scarab shell shield on her forearm in order to block Hashirama's attacks.

Meanwhile, the Wood Golem had destroyed all of Naruto's clones and moved towards the original, the earth shaking with each of its heavy footsteps. The clones, however, had already bought him all the time he needed. With the help of other two clones that he already dispelled, he infused his Wind Blade with enough chakra that it had grown four times in length and three times in thickness.

"Alright, you big dumbass, time for some extreme haircut," Naruto said, as he moved his gigantic Wind Blade a little, producing a gust of air. When the golem was in range, Naruto leaped at it, while raising his Wind Blade over his head. "Sage Art: Planetary Wind Blade!"

In one swift motion, Naruto brought his Wind Blade down, releasing a giant vertical blade of wind that moved forward at an imperceptible speed. At first, nothing happened. After a second of delay, there was

a huge burst of wind coming from Naruto. Then, the golem was bisected in two from head to toe, while several trees behind it exploded into clouds of shredded wood and cut leaves. The two split halves of the golem fell to one side each, before they broke down into thousands of tiny wood splinters.

" Well, Hashirama's mighty golem, defeated in a single blow," Kurama commented, as he began to sound uncomfortable. ***"Given that that thing fought me evenly, I don't know how to feel right now."***

" It wasn't that easy, I had to put all my remaining Senjutsu chakra into that attack," Naruto mentally replied, sensing how the Sage Mode perks were disappearing, as he returned back to normal. He turned around, seeing that Fu and Hashirama stopped fighting, in order to gawk at his spectacular display of power. Emboldened by their reactions, Naruto allowed himself to smirk and gave Fu a thumbs up. "Now I'm done! Let's deal with the First Hokage already!"

However, before Naruto could join Fu, a large shadow was cast above them. Looking up, they saw it was Mito in her Nine Tails form flying through the air, being at the receiving end of one of Killer B's powerful punches, before she landed with a deafening boom on the ground, flattening several trees, and causing a small tremor. Naruto leaped back, while Fu flew high into the air.

" Everybody, stand aside! Except for you, please stay open wide!" Killer B said, as he formed a Tailed Beast Ball between his jaws. **"TAILED BEAST BALL!"**

The Tailed Beast Ball hit the Nine Tails chakra construct, resulting in a massive explosion, clearing a whole area of trees. When the explosion subsided, the Nine Tails chakra construct was no more, only Mito, lying face down in the middle of a crater. Still, it seemed that the Nine Tails construct had cushioned most of the blast, and she only had several minor wounds, meaning she would be back on her feet in no time.

It was then when Naruto saw the black stake lodged on the back of her neck. Not taking any chances, Naruto dashed at Mito, and send a claw made of golden chakra towards the nail. Mito's body turned golden as she called the power of the Nine Tails bound to her, but before she could use it, Naruto managed to pull the nail out of her body, and the golden chakra flickered before it finally disappeared.

And for good measure, Naruto also placed a couple explosive notes on her back, which he made sure to detonate now that she no longer had the power of the Nine Tails to protect her.

"Quickly, somebody seal her, now!" Naruto urged.

"I'm on it!"

Fu quickly dived towards the lying Mito, and started to wrap her body in chakra thread that produced through her fingers, unless she was completely encased inside a cocoon. She caught the cocoon and carried it towards Naruto, so the blond could place several chakra suppressing seals on it. Fu then created a Shadow Clone which took the cocoon and took it away. Naruto let out a sigh of relief now that one of their enemies was down for the count, even if it was the weaker of the two.

"Yes, one down, another one to go!" Naruto cheered.

"Yeah! Hashirama's strong as hell, but without Mito, between the three of them we can beat him for sure!" Fu agreed, her mood renewed.

Killer B began to shrink back into his human form -while still wearing his Gyuki Chakra Cloak-, given that it was pointless to use that form against a powerful Wood Release user like Hashirama, plus there were no more giant enemies, and quickly rejoined his fellow jinchuriki.

"Yeah, the three of us kick plenty of ass! At the end we will be the one standing, you will have your back on the grass! Oh yeah!" Killer

B rapped.

"Yes, you truly have an amazing power," Hashirama praised. "I met a few jinchuriki in my lifetime, but none of them had the level of dominion over their Tailed Beasts' power as you three display. How did you do manage to bind such creatures to your will?"

"That's the thing old man, we didn't," Naruto replied. "We befriended them. The reason we have access to most of their power is because they allow us to."

Killer B then grew uncharacteristically serious. "There was a time were I saw Number Eight as nothing more than a mindless creature, a savage beast. But upon learning more about him, we got along and became good friends, at least."

"Yeah, I myself also saw Chomei as something I needed to keep prisoner inside me, instead of a living being that lives and feels," Fu replied. "But now I know that there's more to Tailed Beasts that meets the eye!"

"Chomei...?" Hashirama asked.

"Oh, that's her name," Fu clarified.

"... they have *names* ?" Hashirama asked, his shock growing with each passing second.

" **Naruto,**" Kurama said. ***"Please switch with me. I want to talk with this... individual."***

Naruto closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, they were no longer golden-orange, but blood red with slitted pupils.

" **Hey, you asshole,**" Kurama's voice said from Naruto's mouth.

Hashirama was taken aback by the sudden change of timbre and tone of the blond's voice. Despite his legendary denseness, it didn't take long for him to realize what was going on.

"You're... the Nine Tails..." he said almost in a whisper.

Kurama scowled. **"Yes. And the name's Kurama, by the way. And yes, we Tailed Beasts have names. Why is the idea so alien to you? So you could pretend we aren't living beings?"** he asked, not expecting Hashirama to answer that question. **"After you captured me and my siblings and forced us into human hosts, we Tailed Beasts have been treated as nothing but two things: weapons to use and threats to contain. Being kept inside the darkness of the pocket dimensions created by your seals. Away from the world, and from each other. Often experiencing such torture that it would drive the mind of the strongest human to insanity if they had to experience it for a single day, much less several decades.**

"Naruto, however, didn't look at me as a monster, despite the fact that I killed many of his kinsmen, his parents included," Kurama continued. **"He said he didn't want to see me suffering anymore, he didn't want me to continue holding onto my hatred for your race. He trusted me, despite the fact that I gave him no reason to trust me at all. He was willing to make the first step, to put himself in a vulnerable position, to risk his life, so he could improve the relationship between humans and Tailed Beasts."**

"I..." Hashirama began. "I don't know what to say..."

"Saying that you're sorry for the way you treated Tailed Beasts could be a good start," Fu softly suggested.

Hashirama, however, shook his head, and clenched his fists. "No. I can't be sorry for the way I acted. You Tailed Beasts are way too dangerous, too powerful. And people like Madara could put you under their control with amazing ease. Had I not defeated Madara during our final battle... I don't want to think what he would have done to the village with you as his thrall. I couldn't allow for such thing to happen again. What I was supposed to do?"

" How about talking to me, at the very least!? Maybe we could have reach an agreement, make an alliance! Do you think I have any lost love for Madara after he made me his slave?" Kurama exploded. "You and Madara were WAY more powerful than the average ninja! How would you feel if somebody decided that you're too powerful and a danger to the world, and hence not only you, but all your loved ones need to die for the sake of the rest of the world!?"

"I... no, I couldn't have taken such a risk..." Hashirama said.

" At the very least, you could have *tried* ," Kurama snarled. He then relinquished the control back to Naruto, as his eyes returned to the previous orange color, and the slitted pupils became dots again.

Hashirama was going to say something, when he felt that his body was about to move again on his own.

"I'm afraid we'll have to end this discussion here, since my puppetmaster wants me to continue the fight," Hashirama said, as he sealed his swords back into the scroll when he carried all his weapons. "Right now, I'm going to go all out. However, I do have hopes that fellow Sages like you two youngsters will be able to weather what I'm about to unleash on you."

"Yeah, we aren't going to- hey, wait a minute, what do you mean by *fellow Sages* ?" Naruto asked, as a very cold chill ran down his spine. The blond had a very, very bad feeling about what's going to happen next.

Hashirama clapped his hands together, as his body surged with energy and power, a gust of wind blowing from where he was standing on. His eyes turned yellow as green markings similar to those Rin carried appeared under his eyes and on his forehead. "Sage Mode!"

Naruto's mouth hung open in shock. "HE HAS SAGE MODE TOO!?" The blond desperately screamed. "AND HE CAN ENTER SAGE

MODE INSTANTLY!?

" Again, God of Ninja, kid," Kurama said. "Still, I have faith you can kick his ass."

Hashirama made a hand seal. "I suggest you not to stay still if you want to avoid my next attack! Sage Art: Gracious Deity Gates!"

Suddenly, a massive red torii gate fell from above where the three jinchuriki were standing, burying itself into the ground while releasing a wave of mud and earth. It would have trapped the three jinchuriki with them if they weren't fast enough to dodge it. However, it didn't stop there, as more gates continued to fall from the sky, prompting the three jinchuriki to split apart and move in different directions.

"Thank goodness we're fast enough to make it miss! Just what kind of jutsu is this?" Killer B asked.

"Kurama?" Naruto asked.

" No idea. I never saw Hashirama use this jutsu before," Kurama replied, shrugging a little. **"Again, God of Ninja. Don't lower your guard for a second."**

" Don't forget about Hashirama! He can still attack you while the gates drop from above!" Gyuki reminded the human ninjas.

And indeed, that moment, Killer B saw Hashirama above him, who had thrown a Fuma Shuriken.

"Shadow Clone Shuriken Jutsu!"

The giant shuriken turned into several dozens of them, and a rain of sharp steel fell upon the Kumo ninja, ready to tear him apart. Unimpressed, Killer B cast his hands towards Hashirama, placing his chakra tentacles around them. He quickly formed a dark purple sphere of chakra.

"Tailed Beast Ball!"

The Kumo ninja fired the ball upwards, exploding upon touching a shuriken. The explosion engulfed the rest of the shuriken, nullifying Hashirama's attack.

"Ha! If you want to beat the great Killer B you'll need-WHOA!" Killer B was interrupted as he was almost buried under the weight of a falling torii gate. "That jutsu made me interrupt one of my rhymes! I'm going to make sure that man pays for such a heinous crime!"

" ***B, focus on the battle, dammit!***" Gyuki exasperatedly said.

Meanwhile, Fu tried to fly closer to Hashirama while expertly dodging the falling torii gates, as a plan formed inside her head.

" *The gates don't seem to fall near him. If I get close to him, I'll be safe from those gates!*" Fu thought in realization.

" ***But... being close to him may be what Hashirama is planning,***" Chomei advised Fu.

" *I doubt he's able to match the combination of my physical strength and your power,*" Fu retorted.

" ***Okay but... try not to underestimate him, oka?***" Chomei pleaded.

When she was getting closer, Fu turned her forearms into blades shaped like the jaws of a stag beetle, and tried to gore him from behind. Hashirama, however, managed to dodge the attack despite not seeing it. Fu continued delivering blade swings, while Hashirama dodged them while making hand seals.

" *The hell how is he- oh, right, Sage Mode grants him sensing abilities,*" Fu reminded herself.

" ***Hashirama was able to sense chakra without Sage Mode, though,***" Chomei told her jinchuriki. "***Now brace yourself!***"

"Wood Release: Adamantine Fist!"

Suddenly, a gigantic arm made of wood burst from under Fu, and punched her into the sky, the green haired girl letting out a scream as she was sent flying.

"Fu!" Naruto shouted, witnessing his fellow jinchuriki in troubles, as he rushed to his aid.

Hashirama, however, wasn't done, and weaved more hand seals.

"Wood Release: Triple Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Three more Wood Dragons appeared, one going towards Naruto, the other towards Killer B, and the last one going upwards, following Fu. However, the Taki kunoichi managed to regain her balance mid air, and glaring at the dragon coming at her, prepared her counterattack. She dived down footfirst as she started to spin while her body was covered in a cloak of wind chakra.

"Sage Art: Takigakure Typhoon Kick!"

Fu spun with such speed, she became a living tornado. When the Wood Dragon reached her, it tried to clamp its jaws above her, but all it managed was to get itself shredded to tiny splinters. Consuming the last remnants of nature energy in her body, Fu's brutal attack plowed through the serpentine dragon until it reached Hashirama, who jumped back at the very last second. When Fu hit the ground, she opened a large crater while producing a shockwave strong enough to throw Hashirama off balance for a few seconds.

A few seconds was all Killer B needed in order to capitalize on such opportunity, and rushed towards Hashirama while dodging the still falling torii gates.

"You have something big to pay for!" Killer B said as he spun around his feet, slamming all his eight chakra tails into Hashirama, sending

him flying. "This is for making me stop that rhyme before! Naruto, Fu, make him suffer some more, leave him all sore!"

Naruto and Fu nodded, and both made the same hand seal, dispelling the last clone they had gathering nature energy, reactivating their Sage Modes. Fu started to make hand seals, while Naruto, with the aid of several chakra arms, began to prepare his most powerful jutsu.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

"Sage Art: Water Release: Majestic Malestrom!"

Naruto threw the Rasenshuriken at Hashirama, while Fu expelled a massive torrent of water in the form of a spiraling vortex. The two attacks converged into a gigantic shuriken of wind and water. As Hashirama saw the terrifying attack coming towards him, he prepared a desperate defense.

"Wood Release: Protection of the Forest!"

Multiple wooden roots emerged from Hashirama's own body, and grew and twisted around his body, forming a protective shell. However, said shell was obliterated when the double elemental shuriken touched him and exploded into a sphere of razor sharp winds and severing water blades. However, the protective roots did save him from being caught in the epicenter of the attack, and was instead violently pushed towards the ground by the ever expanding sphere of water and wind. The undead First Hokage was slammed against the ground with such force, he opened a gigantic crater upon impact, raising a wave of mud and earth everywhere, as well as sending large rocks and earth chunks into the air.

Both Naruto and Fu, and then Killer B, waited expectantly. They had noticed that the Gracious Deity Gates had stopped, but they weren't sure if that attack was enough to put Hashirama down long enough for him to be sealed. They could sense his chakra was still quite strong.

"Hey, that was quite impressive, you guys! Though, we should seal him fast, and not let him catch us by surprise," Killer B suggested.

"Agreed. He may be strong enough to resist sealing, but not to continue fighting us," Fu said.

Naruto nodded, and three jinchuriki quickly ran towards Hashirama's crater, ready to put an end to such a long and tiresome fight.

Unfortunately for them, the First Hokage still had one last card to play.

"Sage Art: Wood Release, Veritable Thousand-Armed Kan'on!"

As Naruto and Fu felt a gigantic spike of chakra, the earth started to shake as the colossal wooden figure of a Buddha, with his hands clasped in a prayer. Thousands of arms grew from statue's back in countless concentric rows, their shape resembling of the tail of a peacock. Once it raised to its full height, not only did the statue dwarf the trees around them, but it was large enough to make Tailed Beasts seem like mere housepets.

The titanic wooden construct began to move, dragging itself forward, crushing everything under its massive weight. The three jinchuriki once again stared at the titanic wooden construct with their eyes wide and mouths agape, their brains trying to process the sheer size and scale. If anything, it helped them understand to what extend Hashirama was the God of Ninjas.

"Just... what... WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!?" Naruto screamed again.

"Naruto, remember when I told you about Hashirama and Madara's last duel, and you asked me how did Hashirama defeated Madara despite the latter had me fighting for him? Well, that's how," Kurama explained, sounding infuriatingly non-chalant. **"The Thousand-Armed Kan'on is Hashirama's most powerful jutsu, the ultimate combination of Wood Release and**

Senjutsu. The good news are that, if you're able to beat that, Hashirama won't have anything else to throw at you. The bad news, though, is that no one has been able to beat it so far."

"What the hell is with this guy? Just when you think that you have him, he reveals a new trick to screw you up," Naruto complained. Deep down, he was starting to develop some grudging respect for Madara Uchiha and his desire to fight and surpass such an inexplicably powerful individual.

"***Don't tell me that you plan to give up,***" Kurama asked, almost in a mocking tone.

"*I didn't come so far by giving up,*" Naruto replied. His sight rested on Fu and Killer B to his side, who looked as shocked as he, and even a little terrified. "*And that thing might have never been beaten, but there's always a first time for everything.*"

Kurama nodded and smirked. "***Well said! Come on guys, just fight a little longer, you're almost there!***"

"*I think I should get back to my Tailed Beast Form, our chances will be better if I transform,*" Killer B said.

"***Don't bother. That thing is designed to fight Tailed Beasts and similar sized opponents. It will have a harder time hitting you the smaller you are,***" Kurama countered.

"I agree with Kurama. Let's test that thing to see how strong it is. Once we gauged its power, we will come up with a strategy," Naruto said.

"Sure thing, bro!" Killer B agreed.

"You got it!" Fu replied.

While Naruto and Killer B rushed towards the gigantic Kan'on running, Fu flew upwards towards its head. She could see that

Hashirama was standing on top of it, but the First Hokage didn't make any attempt at attacking them himself. And soon, he was going to show why he didn't need to. The arms sprouting from the statue's back quickly shot forward, their hands curled into fists, ready to pummel all three jinchuriki into fine paste.

"WHOA!" Naruto shouted, as he dodged a giant wooden fist, just to almost be crushed by another one.

"This kind of attack is insane! If they hit me, I'll be nothing more than a bloody stain!" Killer B said, as he also tried to dodge as well as he could. "Hey, Number Nine, you already fought this thing before, what can we do to bring it down to the floor?"

" Didn't you hear me? This thing has never been defeated!" Kurama insisted. **"The one time I fought against it, I was wearing an armor made of Madara Uchiha's Perfect Susanoo, and I'm still sore from the beating I took!"**

"Then what can we do? We can't just be on the defensive forever!" Naruto replied.

"Guys!" Fu said from above, as she flew down to them, dodging the giant fists coming at her. "I've been trying to attack Hashirama directly, but those giant fists won't let me get close! Did you guys got any luck?"

"We can't attack either unless the storm of giant punches become more bearable!" Naruto replied.

"Hey, Number Nine, you already know how to do the Tailed Beast Ball! Perhaps two of them at once will be enough to make that big boy fall!" Killer B suggested.

"Not a bad idea, but I can't do any jutsu if these rain of giant punches doesn't stop anytime soon!" Naruto protested.

" Also, we're being pushed back," Gyuki interceded. "It won't be long before Hashirama corners us against a cliff or something."

" You're right, but, how are we going to stop that thing from moving?" Chomei asked.

That moment, Fu smirked. "Leave that to me."

And before anybody could say anything else, Fu rocketed forward, flying close to the ground, nimbly dodging the giant fists that crashed around her with the force of meteors.

" What is that girl planning to do?" Kurama asked . **"Is she trying to stop the Kan'on on her own?"**

"If I know Fu... yeah, that's exactly what she's trying to do," Naruto said in resignation.

" All she's going to accomplish is getting herself killed." Gyuki dryly said.

"Perhaps not. If she reaches the construct's base, the fists won't be able to reach such a place," Killer B said.

" Figured you'd agree with her. It takes one to know one," Gyuki said in exasperation.

However, B proved to be right. Upon closing enough distance between herself and the construct, the wooden arms were unable to reach her. The Thousand Arms were like siege weapons, designed to bring down large targets. You couldn't use a catapult or a ballista to target an opponent at blank range.

Upon finally reaching the Kan'on, Fu placed her hands on the wooden platform the Buddha wooden statue was resting upon, dug her feet on the ground, and pushed in the opposite direction.

"Come on, come oooooooooooooooooon!" Fu shouted, as she mustered every last bit of her strength. She thought that, between her natural

strength being enhanced by Chomei's influence over the years, plus the additional boon provided by Sage Mode, she would be able to stop that thing from moving.

Hashirama was watching this from above, looking stunned at the girl's moxie and boldness, though even he had to agree that her plan was probably more stupid than brave.

"What did make that girl think that she can stop the Thousand Armed Kan'on on her own? While possessing a lot of might, no human being, jinchuriki or not, can stop this jutsu on their own," Hashirama said.

But much to his surprise, he realized that the speed at which the wooden construct was advancing was starting to slow down. Little by little, but it was starting to become noticeable after a few moments. Fu's feet generated several claws in order to anchor herself to the ground, while also spawning multiple arms ended in claws that also attached themselves to the ground in order to secure her position.

And finally, the Kan'on stopped moving. Hashirama looked down, speechless, his mouth agape and eyes wide open.

"That girl... how could she...?" Hashirama began.

"Three, two, one..." Fu counted.

"Just what do they feed that girl?" the First Hokage loudly asked.

"... aaaaaaand there it is," Fu said, rolling her eyes.

Meanwhile, Naruto and Killer B could only watch in surprise and awe.

"She... she did it..." Killer B said.

"Man, if Shino survives the honeymoon, he'll be my hero," Naruto added.

" *What are you doing, you pair of dumbasses! Attack now before the girl gives in!*" Kurama reminded the humans, snapping them of their shock.

"R-Right, Number Nine! Let's go for a combo, that should do fine!" Killer B suggested.

"Actually, I have a better idea," Naruto said, as he made a single hand seal, creating a handful of clones. "B, I have a plan not only to take down that thing, but Hashirama as well. However, I need you to do as I say."

"I'm listening, Number Nine, how are we going to combine?"

"First of all, enter your Tailed Beast form, and when I tell you, throw this clone into the air," Naruto said, as one of his clones walked close to the Kumo jinchuriki. "Make sure he has a clear shot at Hashirama."

" *What are you going to do then, Naruto?*" Gyuki asked.

Naruto generated several arms of chakra, and between them and his other clones, he started to prepare the biggest Rasenshuriken he had ever created. Rather than a Rasengan, the base would be a Tailed Beast Ball, and the clones would infuse it with Wind Release chakra. As the jutsu grew in size, Naruto was forced not only to enlarge the chakra arms supporting it, but create even more.

"Hey you guys, what are you doing!?" Fu distressingly called. "My arms are going to break anytime now, so you better not be wasting all this time I'm buying you!"

"Fu, when I tell you, stop pushing the statue back! And try to move to the side away from the giant fists' range" Naruto said, his jutsu almost ready. "Now!"

Fu did as she was told, and flew to the side as fast as she could. The Kan'on once again started moving at its usual speed. Several of its

giant arms from its back prepared to rain pain over them again.

"Octopops, now!" Naruto called. "Get away from that thing as well!"

" **There you GO!**" Killer B said, as he launched the Naruto clone into the air with as much force as he could, before turning back and dragging his body away.

As he did this, dozens of giant wooden arms shot from the Kan'on's back, ready to smash Naruto to pulp. However, before the fists could connect, Naruto's jutsu suddenly vanished, and the blond jinchuriki disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

" **Uh? What did Naruto do?**" Killer B asked.

" **Up there!**" Gyuki told him.

The Kumo ninja looked upwards, and saw that the Naruto clone he had launched into the air was now holding the giant Tailed Beast Rasenshuriken with both arms. The jinchuriki of the Eight Tails quickly realized what had happened.

" **Oh, I see, he used Substituion with a clone, that was pretty cool!**" Killer B said in realization. "**And from that angle, he has a direct hit to that fool!**"

"Sage Art: Tailed Beast Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto threw the gigantic wind shuriken downwards. Hashirama tried to direct the statue's wood arms to intercept it, but most of them had been used to smash ground targets, meaning that he was now defenseless. All he could do now was jump out of the statue, or else the jutsu would obliterate him as well.

Hashirama jumped away a few seconds before Naruto's attack connected, resulting in a massive explosion of chakra and razor sharp winds that quickly shredded the statue to splinters. It also produced a shockwave so powerful, it send a gust of wind in every

direction that threatened to take down nearby trees. And naturally, it threw Hashirama off balance, and the undead Hokage started to spiral down towards the ground.

Just as Naruto had been expected.

"He can't dodge now! Finish him off!" Naruto told Killer B.

"Alright, here comes quite the big blast! Time to finish this battle at last!" Killer B said, as he formed a Tailed Beast Ball as fast as he could between his jaws. He then swallowed the ball, before opening his mouth, releasing a cone of pure destructive energy. "Tailed Beast Wave!"

Hashirama could do nothing but watch how the destructive wave came close to him. Even with the extra resilience provided by Sage Mode, an attack of that power would leave him too wrecked to continue fighting, and the three jinchuriki could seal him before the Impure World Resurrection's regeneration could restore his body.

He smiled.

"To think that there are people able to beat my Thousand Armed Kan'on..." Hashirama said. "This generation of ninjas is truly outstanding..."

The wave of destructive energy engulfed him, and the fight was over.

...

Ninja Alliance HQ

Naturally, the news of the attack on the Turtle Island caused quite the commotion on the Alliance HQ. Onoki barked orders while the rest of the advisors tried to come up with ideas on how to find and secure the now vulnerable jinchuriki before the Akatsuki did.

Fortunately, none of those ideas would be needed.

"Onoki-sama, I believe we found the jinchuriki!" Ao said, as he and other sensors used the Sensing Water Sphere to scan the country. "A huge spike of chakra coming from the north!"

"Do we have any divisions there?" Onoki asked.

"The closest is the Kurotsuchi's Second Division, but they're too far away to be them! They have to be the jinchuriki!" Ao assured.

"In that case, they're our priority. Send a message to my granddaughter with the new orders. I know they just came from a battle, but their rest will have to wait! This is too important!" Onoki ordered.

"As you say, Onoki-sa... WHOA!" Ao said in shock.

"What? What's wrong, you one-eyed kid?" Onoki asked.

"Another spike of chakra. This one less than a kilometer away from the Second Division. I believe it's an enemy," Ao said, sounding now more worried and less energetic. A chill of dread ran down his spine. "The power of this new chakra... is something I never sensed before."

...

Hashirama's broken body laid on the ground. He was missing both his legs, his entire left arm, a chunk of his right arm, and the left side of his face. If his innards were nothing more than dust and ashes, Naruto would have probably thrown up. Even if the regeneration was already kicking in, he knew it would take some time before he could move again.

"Fu, seal him before he can get back," Naruto told the Taki kunoichi.

Fu nodded, and started to wrap Hashirama's body in chakra thread.

"Congratulations on defeating me, you three. No one has been ever able to beat me when I used the Thousand Armed Kan'on, but you

managed to do it," Hashirama said, smiling. "You give me hope for the future."

"Thank you, Hokage-sama," Naruto sincerely replied. Killer B didn't say anything, but nodded respectfully.

"That power you three displayed... that was the power born from humans and Tailed Beasts working together... not as master and slave, but as equals... if only I had knew," Hashirama chuckled sadly. "I don't know if the Tailed Beasts inside you can hear me, but for all that it's worth... tell them that I'm sorry for what I did, and how I treated them."

The three Tailed Beasts did hear Hashirama. They didn't say if they accepted the apology, but they didn't rejected it either.

"Also, that necklace... you're one of Tsuna's sons right?" Hashirama asked. "She told me she had two sons when I was revived the first time."

"Yeah. Though I'm adopted," Naruto said, as he held the chakra jewel on his hand. "Mom gave me this when I graduated from the Academy. I had it with me ever since."

"Good. Make you live so you can pass it to your descendants, like Tsuna and I did," Hashirama replied.

"Don't worry, I will," Naruto reassured.

"Guess that's all. Make sure you end this war as soon as possible," Hashirama said. Suddenly, his peaceful expression disappeared, and was replaced by one of shock and even panic. He tried to warn the jinchuriki, but before he could Fu finished encasing him inside a tight cocoon of chakra threads, while Naruto and Killer B placed seals around it to secure it.

Before he was sealed, Hashirama had sensed a presence, not far away from there. A presence he hadn't felt in decades. An extremely

powerful presence.

Hashirama realized in horror that he wasn't going to be the biggest obstacle the people of Konoha and their allies would have to face.

...

Second Division Base Camp

Kurotsuchi was relaxing inside her private tent after another hard won battle, which had ended a couple hours ago.

The battle had left the young Tsuchikage with a sense of unease for as long as it lasted. While the White Zetsu clones were numerous, and even had some aerial reinforcements, the reanimations this time around weren't that strong, which went against Intelligence predictions of Orochimaru sending increasingly powerful zombies against them.

Her instincts told her that this was a trap. Orochimaru wanted them to lower their guard so he could strike them with an unsuspecting attack, so she made sure to carefully watch over the battlefield as she took care of the winged Zetsu. The Zetsu's numbers were whittled down, the reanimations were dealt with, and when it became obvious Akatsuki had lost yet again, they cut their losses and retreated.

And the dreaded surprise attack never came.

So she did the same thing she had done in this situation and ordered a base camp to be set up. She contacted her grandfather, and requested medics to heal the wounded, as well as Hanabi Hyuga to destroy the sealed reanimations. They arrived in record time, and quickly got to work. It seemed that today wasn't going to be very eventful.

And once again, her instincts proved her wrong.

"Tsuchikage-sama!" an Iwa ninja hollered, as he basically broke into the tent.

"Whoa, calm down! Where is the fire?" Kurotsuchi asked.

"A new enemy! Please, you have to come with us!" the Iwa ninja shouted, in an almost pleading tone.

"A new enemy? How many?" Kurotsuchi said, jumping to her feet, ready to fight.

"Just one," the Iwa ninja said. Upon seeing his Kage's face of incredulity, he added. "But not just any enemy. It's no other than..."

...

From a small cliff overseeing the Second Divison Base camp, two figures stood there. One clad in the familiar Akatsuki black robe with red clouds, and the other in an extremely outdated metal armor.

"It is as you said, Zetsu," Madara said, as he saw all the ninjas gathering around the hill, ready to battle. "While they aren't exactly the same as in my time, I do recognize most of those uniforms. They belong to the Five Great Ninja villages."

"This one's being led by Iwa's current Tsuchikage," the white half began. "Onoki's granddaughter, Kurotsuchi."

"Interesting," Madara smirked. "I will take pleasure seeing how good she dances in comparison to her grandfather. Enough waiting, let's get started."

Author's Note: And thus Hashirama and Mito are finally defeated. Unfortunately, Naruto, Killer B and Fu are now too exhasuted to continue and they'll have to spend the night resting.

Something I forgot to say in the previous chapter: a lot of you have been asking me to give Naruto the Hiraishin. And I did consider it for some time before I decided against it. And these past two chapters validated my decision. Because if Naruto had the Hiraishin, I wouldn't be able to write these chapters, since the moment the island was attacked, he could just grab Killer B and Fu (hell, maybe everyone on the island) and teleport them to safety. Because, cool as I agree it is, a lot of people don't see how incredibly broken something like the Hiraishin is.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter, Madara is up and ready to wreck havoc. Be afraid. Be very afraid. In the meantime, don't forget a review with your thoughts on this battle, and perhaps what you think it's going to happen the next one, and how many people are going to die. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Terror of Madara Uchiha

Author's Note: Well, here it is, the moment so many of you have been waiting for. Also, the longest chapter in the entire story. Enjoy the bloodbath:

Chapter 122:

The Terror of Madara Uchiha

or

Sorry, no funny alternate title this time

Second Divison Base Camp, Land of Fire

"Is that really Madara Uchiha?"

"He doesn't look like a reanimation..."

"It can't be the real Madara Uchiha! He died long time ago!"

Up on the hill, Madara smirked, amused by the effect he was having on the Allied ninjas. Even if they weren't convinced of the authenticity of his identity, the sensors had to be noticing the immense power of his chakra.

"I see some people have doubts about my identity. Reasonable, I suppose. But let me assure you that yes, I am indeed Madara Uchiha in the flesh. You may have heard that I died in the battle against Hashirama Senju, way back during the First Ninja War. News of my death were grossly exaggerated."

Of course, Madara wasn't going to reveal that he *did* die against Hashirama, and it was thanks to the forbidden jutsu Izanagi that he managed to cheat death.

"From what I've been told, it seems that you already met my main associate, Obito Uchiha," Madara revealed, prompting the murmurs to grow even louder. "Yes, while I'm not a founding member, you could say that I'm affiliated with the organization known as Akatsuki. Figured I'd make clear for what side I'm fighting for.

"Now, I can hear that many of you are still having doubts about the validity of those claims, especially my identity," Madara said, as he took a step forward. "Allow me then, to dispel those doubts with something only the real Madara Uchiha could provide."

Madara then jumped from the hill, landing with a loud thud, and raising a small cloud of dust. He looked at the crowd of ninjas gathered in front of him, his naturally black eyes turning red as they shifted into the Sharingan, as he flared his chakra a little so non-sensors could feel its sheer, raw power. The effect was immediate, as a wave of panic washed over the ninjas of the Second Division, making them tremble and hesitate.

Madara smirked, and took a step forward, flaring his chakra again, causing most of the ninjas on the first lines of the front to take a step back in fear. Another step, and the fear grew more. Another step-

"Stand firm!" Kurotsuchi yelled, as she hovered above her troops. "Madara or not, powerful or not, he's just one man! He can't hope to take on all of us! So I don't want to see any of you hesitate, you hear me? We fought enemies far more fearsome than this guy!"

"Yes, Tsuchikage-sama!"

"As you order, commander!"

"Yes commander! We won't let you down!"

Soon, a chorus of cheers and affirmative answers filled the air, as the fear was lifted, replaced by a wave of battle euphoria.

"A girl that flies. That must be the granddaughter of Onoki Zetsu told me about. She has more spunk than the big nosed brat, but she's just as big mouthed," Madara thought, unable to repress a smirk.

"Nice job cheering up your troops, girl. But soon, you're going to see that your earlier fear was more than justified. Time to dance!"

And with that Madara decided to stop playing intimidation games, and charged towards the Second Division.

"Everybody, charge! Crush that guy!" Kurotsuchi ordered.

Kurotsuchi's order was replied by a roar of affirmations, followed by many battle cries, and every ninja of the Second Division charged forward, ready to put down this man who claimed to be Madara. The two forces finally clashed, and the initial result were dozens of Allied ninjas being sent flying by the sheer force behind Madara's charge.

As the former Uchiha Clan Head forced his way into the middle of the bulk of the Second Division, Allied ninjas swarmed him from every direction. Unfortunately for the latter, trying to overwhelm Madara with sheer numbers was proving to be useless. The rogue Uchiha moved fast, had excellent footwork, perfect awareness of his surroundings, and his strikes were fast and deadly.

He would parry or deflect every strike aimed at him with sheer speed and precision, and counter with a single lethal blow. Whenever somebody attacked him from the flanks, he sidestepped and used the attacker's momentum against them, making them to hit an Ally ninja instead. And Madara never stayed in the same position for more than two seconds, making attacking him from behind impossible. His Sharingan gave him an accurate prediction of what his enemies would do, to the point that from his point of view, it almost felt like fighting opponents in slow motion.

He even used the enemy's numerical superiority against them. Sometimes, rather than incapacitate or kill an enemy ninja, he would grab them and use their body as a living shield, making the other Allied ninjas to stop, and Madara would capitalize on said hesitation

by beating them with the body of the ninja he was holding hostage. When kunai or shuriken were thrown at him, he would expertly catch them and toss them towards other Allied ninjas. Someone even had the *bright* idea of tossing several kunai with explosive notes attached to them. He tossed one back at the Iwa ninja who tossed it first, and tossed the others in different directions. The action was followed by several explosions and screams of pain.

Soon Madara grew bored of fighting bare handed, and stole a katana from a Kumo ninja and grabbed a kunai a Suna ninja sent his way. Now that he was armed, he only needed one precise swing to a vital spot in order to end the life of his opponents, swings his enemies didn't even have time to block or dodge. Pools of blood starting to form across the green grass as Madara killed an Allied ninja with each passing second.

Kurotsuchi was flying above the battle, a cube of light ready to fire already in her hands.

"Come on, I only need one clear shot to end this asshole, but I can't fire without hitting my men right now," Kurotsuchi gritted her teeth as she watched Madara slaughter her troops. She always loved the sheer destructive power of the Dust Release, but now she was realizing of a really big downside.

"This is getting boring. Is there anybody among these rabble that can provide for a challenge?" Madara asked.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

Suddenly, Madara saw a young man surrounded by a green glowing aura, dressed in a green jumpsuit, sporting a ridiculous bowl haircut - that reminded him of Hashirama in his youth- and equally ridiculous thick eyebrows, ready to deliver a roundhouse kick. Madara smirked, took a step back to dodge the kick, and lunged forward to sink his kunai into the poor sod's neck.

However, much to his surprise, the teen continued to spin, and using his building momentum, delivered a kick with his other foot, swatting the kunai out of Madara's hand. Then, after completing a 360° turn, he launched himself towards the Uchiha, and assaulted him with a barrage of punches and kicks. Even with the Sharingan, Madara was having trouble following and predicting the young man's moves, as his speed and strength was way superior to that of the enemies' he had been fighting.

"He's even averting my gaze, almost as if he had been trained to fight against somebody with a Sharingan," Madara noticed. He then saw that his green clad opponent pulled something out of his ninja tool pouch, very quick, and in a way that Madara didn't see what it was. "Huh?"

His young opponent tossed the object to the ground, raising a cloud of black smoke, which he used as a cover.

"A smoke bomb. Not bad, but-"

Madara was interrupted when he saw the cloud of smoke shifting slightly. He leaped back just in time as a barrage of shuriken and kunai emerged from within the cloud, as he swung his katana in order to parry the weapons that would hit him. His Sharingan warned him that some of the kunai and shuriken were imbued with lightning chakra, and thus he avoided those instead.

While he was busy deflecting the rain of steel -now that the cloud was beginning to dispel, Madara could see they were being fired from a sealing scroll by a girl with brown hair styled in twin buns- the same green clad kid from before was charging at him, together with man who was dressed in the same green jumpsuit and had the same ridiculous hairstyle. Still, that didn't change the fact that they were moving at such insanely high speed that his Sharingan was having trouble following them.

"Come on Lee! The two of us at once!" the green clad man said.

"I'm behind you, Gai-sensei!"

"DOUBLE MORNING PEACOCK!"

Gai and Lee launched a barrage of fast and powerful punches at Madara, their fists moving so fast, they produced fireballs of the resulting air friction. Madara wasn't even able to counterattack, just block and dodge the lethal punches at best as he could. Still, he wasn't worried or nervous in the slightest; far from it, he was smiling, satisfied by the challenge provided by his green clad opponents.

"Yes! This is more like it!" Madara said, almost laughing.

Gai and Lee finished their combo by launching a fiery punch each towards Madara, which he shielded from by crossing his arms in front of him, the resulting fiery explosion sending the Uchiha skidding backwards.

"Hehehe, not bad, but you-"

Madara was interrupted when a new opponent, an Hyuga by both his looks and his activated Byakugan, rushed towards him. Like Gai and Lee, he was also surrounded by a green glowing aura.

"Eight Trigrams: Double Exploding Palms!"

The Hyuga slammed both his glowing palms into Madara, resulting yet again in another explosion, sending the revived Uchiha even further away from the bulk of the army, this time bouncing on his back rather than skidding. Still, he was able to regain balance and land on his feet again.

"Yes! Now that he's far away from my troops, there's no risk of accidentally killing them!" Kurotsuchi cheered, as she readied her deadly attack. "Dust Release: Atomic Dismantling Jutsu!"

Madara was encased by a cube of white light, which started to glow brighter, before flashing briefly, the cube and everything inside it

disappearing, Madara included, if he wasn't fast enough to dodge it before he could be vaporized.

"Shit!" Kurotsuchi cursed, as she began throwing more cubes of light at Madara, the Uchiha dodging all of them. Unfortunately, she had to stop herself from spamming the attack, or else her chakra reserves would be empty in seconds.

Upon seeing that he was relatively safe, Madara took a second to gather a little of his breath,

"It seems there are indeed some worthy ninja among you lot," Madara said, his Sharingan scanning the crowd in front of him. "I think that was enough warm up, don't you agree? Let's start taking this fight a little more seriously," Madara said, as he starting making hand seals. "Fire Release: Majestic Destroying Flame!"

Madara expelled a stream of fire, that quickly widened into a gigantic wall of flames, big enough to engulf half the Second Division, much to said ninjas shock and horror.

"Water Release users, counter that jutsu, now!" Kurotsuchi hollered.

Once again, Kurotsuchi's words snapped her troops out of their fear induced stupor, and those with water affinities quickly began to form hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

The combination of dozens of water jutsu formed a tsunami large enough to at least negate Madara's gigantic fire attack. There was a loud hiss as water was evaporated by the flames, and battlefield was covered in a thick cloud of steam as a result. Kurotsuchi could see how Madara took advantage of it and dashed inside the cloud.

"He's trying to engage us in close combat again!" Kurotsuchi warned. "Sensory ninja, keep track of his movements! Wind Release users, dispel the steam this instant!"

Inside the cloud of steam, Madara once again began to slaughter Allied ninjas unimpeded, the lack of visibility not slowing him down in the slightest. He was about to execute a terrified Kiri ninja, when he suddenly stopped, as he was astonished by something he sensed.

"This chakra... ! How it can be...?"

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The ground started to shake around Madara, and soon, the Uchiha was surrounded by multiple wooden vines. Madara managed to nimbly dodge them before they could grab a hold of him. However, his mind was focused on something else.

"No, it's not his chakra. Plus, the scale of the attack is too small to be him," Madara guessed. He tracked the source of chakra, until he finally found its origin: a girl no older than thirteen, with spiky white hair styled into two long pigtails. "I see. A descendant. She doesn't look like Hashirama in the slightest, but her chakra is too similar not to be related to him. She has potential, but she's too young and lacks the power that comes with age and experience. Perhaps I could kill her family in order to motivate her to become strong enough to beat me? She might have the potential to be an enemy as challenging as Hashi-"

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Madara was startled upon sensing another spike of Wood Release chakra, mostly because this one came from another source other than the white haired girl. A serpentine dragon emerged from underground, and lunged at Madara. Following the dragon towards its point of origin, Madara could see that the caster was a brown haired girl, a couple years older than the white haired one, with purple marks on her cheeks, and green marks around her eyes and forehead, identical to those that appeared on Hashirama when he used Sage Mode. The girl was strangely familiar to him, but it took him very little to recognize her.

"Oh, I remember you now," Madara said, as ghostly blue ribcages formed around his body, before they generated a gigantic blue skeletal arm. The Susanoo arm grabbed the Wood Dragon by the neck, and slammed it against the ground, shattering it to pieces. "You're the broken girl Obito brought to me, hoping that I could save you before it was too late."

"So you're the one who made me like this," Rin replied, her yellow eyes narrowing in anger.

"And you're complaining? Not only you are alive, but you now possess a power most men could only dream of having!" Madara replied, as his Susanoo vanished. "You should be fighting alongside Obito's side, yet here you are, spitting on his love for you and my gift."

"Gift? Ha! Don't pretend like you did it out of the goodness of your heart. I was nothing but a test subject, right?" Rin asked. "The second cocoon... it was you inside it, am I right?"

Madara couldn't help but smirk. "Clever girl."

Before the conversation could continue, the corner of Madara's eye caught a projectile flying towards him from above. He managed to jump aside just as the projectile opened a large hole in the grassy ground. Three more projectiles followed the first one, which he also dodged, and the Uchiha could see they were perfectly round black orbs with a purple gleam.

"Truth Seeking Balls? Who is powerful enough to...?" Madara asked in shock, as he saw the orbs return to their master, and floating in the air above the bulk of the division was yet another young girl, the same age as the white haired one, covered in a cloak of magenta chakra flames. " *Another flying girl. Her chakra is extremely potent. Can it be Six Paths Chakra? But how can somebody so young-*" Madara stopped his train of thought, remembering one of Zetsu's reports about the current Hyuuga clan head and her sister possessing an advanced Byakugan, supposedly coming from Sage

of Six Path's brother, who lived in the Moon. While finding this information pretty farfetched, the fact that it was Zetsu who said it, and the fact that Akatsuki did have a member claiming he came from the Moon with said advanced eyes, not to mention the girl that was currently facing him, Madara had to accept this reality... for now.

The Hyuga with the Tenseigan sent the four truth Seeking Balls at Madara again. Despite being the first time he saw them, Madara knew of their existence and what they could do, meaning that he had to avoid them at all costs. Fortunately, the Uchiha had the perfect strategy to counter them. Like he did before, he managed to incapacitate and grab an Allied ninja, one from Konoha, and used him as a human shield, intercepting a Truth Seeking Ball that was aimed for him. The poor Allied ninja died on the spot.

"SHIT!" Hanabi cringed, as she hastily recalled the Truth Seeking Balls.

"You have power, girl, but you won't be able to tap into your full potential as long as you care about the life of worthless maggots!" Madara spat, as he threw the corpse of the ninja the Tenseigan-wielding Hyuga had inadvertently killed. The corpse crashed against her, and was knocked out of the sky.

"Hanabi!" the white haired girl with the Wood Release cried, as she went to check on Hanabi.

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Madara sensed the girl Obito asked him to save gathering and shaping chakra for another attack, and indeed, wooden roots emerged under his feet and tried to wrap around him. But before they had the chance to, Madara reactivated the ribcage of his Susanoo, which he used as a protective shield. No matter how hard the wooden roots constricted the ghostly ribcage, it didn't crack.

"Don't bother. You might think you have a great power compared to your peers. We may have undergone the same rejuvenation process

and have the same power, but compared to me, even with Sage Mode you are nothing but an insect," Madara said, as he started to make hand seals. "And now that I think about it, I haven't used any of my new powers yet. Well, let's kill two birds with one stone, and show you the difference between the level of our powers! Wood Release: Deep Forest Bloom!"

The whole battleground started to shake while multiple cracks opened around it, as many, gigantic wooden roots and trees started to emerge. As they grew and spread around the area, flowers started to bloom around them. Said flowers began pumping yellow pollen into the air. While the Allied ninjas didn't know what were its effects, they were wise enough to realize they shouldn't get near it.

"What the hell? He can use Wood Release too?" Kurotsuchi asked in shock.

"Don't breathe that pollen!" Rin warned, as she covered her mouth and nose with her hand. "Or else you'll be knocked out!"

Despite Rin's warning, though, the clouds of pollen saturated the air around the battlefield, and many ninjas inadvertently breathed it. The effect was immediate, and they fell to the ground, completely knocked out. Kurotsuchi looked at this, and gritted her teeth.

"Wind Release users, blow the pollen away!" she ordered, as she elevated higher into the air in order to avoid breathing the pollen, while making several hand seals. "Everybody else, destroy those goddamned flowers! Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Kurotsuchi exhaled a large stream of fire towards a nearby flower, while other ninjas did the same, mostly using fire and lightning jutsu, and a Konoha kunoichi with brown hair styled in twin buns unsealed a gigantic shuriken that she used to cut the flowers down.

Madara, however, merely smirked in amusement at his enemies' attempt at destroying the flowers.

"You care about those flowers too much," Madara said, shaking his head, as he started to make hand seals. "Wood Release: Mass Wood Clone Jutsu!"

Wooden Madara clones started to emerge from the roots and trees across the battlefield. Said clones quickly jumped out of the trees once they were fully formed, and started engaging the Allied ninjas. The Wood Clones proved to be just as skilled and deadly as the original, if much more fragile. Madara watched in slight amusement and some disappointment, how the vast majority of the enemies struggled to deal with jutsu that weren't even that powerful.

"These clones only have a ten percent of my total power, yet they're giving you as much trouble as my real self," Madara said boredly, crossing his arms as he watched the carnage unfold. "How can you call yourselves-"

"Water Release: Wild Water Wave!"

"Lightning Release: Thunder Spear!"

Madara was snapped out of his arrogant monologue when he sensed two attacks aimed at him. He was soon under the shadow of a large tsunami that threatened to crush him under tons of water. Madara, however, was able to jump into the air just as the wave crashed against the ground, and landed on the surface of the mass of water. That moment, however, a spear-shaped lightning bolt hit the water, electrifying it, and zapping Madara.

"Agh!" the Uchiha grunted, though it was more due being caught by surprise, rather than the pain produced by the electric attack. He saw in front of him the white haired girl with the Wood Release, next to a white haired boy that looked identical to her, only a bit taller and with broader shoulders, as well as much shorter hair. "Oh, it's you again. And your brother, I presume?"

"We're your opponents. That's the only thing you should concern yourself with," the boy replied.

"Why? That's a boring outlook to battles. I want to know everything about my enemies," Madara said, chuckling a little, as if the whole battle was nothing but a big game to him. "Say, are you two related to Hashirama Senju?"

"Yeah, we're his great-grandkids," the girl replied. "Name's Kaida, and this is my brother Hagane. And we're going to resume the family tradition of kicking your ass so hard you won't be able to sit down without remembering us."

"So, Hashirama's Bloodline Limit finally manifested once again after neither his children nor grandchildren inherited it," Madara noted. His eyes then rested on Hagane. "Can you use Wood Release like your sister?"

Hagane scowled upon hearing such a question. "No, I don't. Not that I need it to fight you or anybody else."

"Regrettable," Madara said, shaking his head. "But even then... I can still see something special about you. Yes... it seemed that you inherited something from my rival as well. Hashirama was able to enter Sage Mode instantly and draw nature energy without having to stay still. The way I see how your chakra differs from your sister's... I see you inherited that from him, so you aren't a waste of genes like the rest of his offspring."

"So, do you plan to fight me yourselves? While I can see you have potential and power for two so young, you are no match for me, not even before gaining all this power," Madara said.

"Perhaps you would have defeated our great-grandpa if you weren't so arrogant and full of yourself," Hagane said, as he held out a fist to his sister. "Ready, Kaida?"

Kaida nodded, and bumped her fist with his. "Ready!"

Hagane started to transfer some of his senjutsu chakra to his twin sister, as the two young teens started to make one handed seals

with their free hands.

"Wood Release: Kanzeon Lotus King!"

Hagane and Kaida slammed their free hands into the ground, as a giant wooden statue of a praying monk rose from the ground. There were multiple arms growing from the statue's back, and the statue had five small heads encircling its head. The twins were standing at the top of the statue's head.

"How do you like this, huh?" Kaida taunted.

Some of the many arms growing on the giant wooden monk's back shot forward, ready to smash Madara to pulp. The Uchiha, looking unimpressed and even bored, began to jump and leap from one side to another in order to avoid the wooden fists. After one fist almost graced his shoulder, the Uchiha smirked.

"Definitely not bad, for a couple of young brats, that's it," he said, as he continued dodging giant punches. "You two definitely have potential. Maybe one day you'll be able to create the real deal."

"I'll give you a real deal!" Kaida said, as she made a single hand seal. "All is Suffering!"

The small heads encircling the giant wooden monk's forehead started to glow with chakra, and each of them released a stream of one of the five elemental nature attacks. Madara merely leaped backwards, dodging the blast, but had to shield his eyes with his arm to protect them from the wind and pebbles raised by the ensuing explosion.

The giant wooden monk advanced again, the small heads glowing with chakra as they prepared to fire again.

"That attack is pretty powerful. Let's see how well it does against mine," Madara said, as he began to make hand seals. "Fire Release: Majestic Demolishing Flame!"

Madara exhaled a huge stream of fire towards the incoming quintuple elemental blast. Unlike his previous fire jutsu, instead of being spread in a cone, the flames were focused into a single, thick stream. Both attacks clashed in the middle, but Madara's jutsu proved to be the superior one, and started to push the statue's multi elemental stream towards it, much to the twin's shock.

"How is he able to overpower our jutsu!?" Hagane asked. "Is he just that strong?"

"Let's worry about that later! Now do something before he burns us alive!" Kaida asked, her voice raising an octave.

Hagane dropped to his knees and slammed his hands onto the top of the statue's head. "I'm on it!"

Hagane's body was surrounded by a glowing white aura, as he used his Bloodline Limit to empower the chakra construct even further. The wooden statue's eyes began to glow with a white light, as so did the five small heads releasing the elemental attacks. The five elemental streams became thicker and larger, and they began to push Madara's fire attack back towards him.

"Yes! Good job, bro!" Kaida cheered, pumping a fist.

While Madara was still casting his fire jutsu, he began to weave even more hand seals.

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

The earth shook for a moment under the giant wooden statue, as large wooden roots burst from underground, and wrapped around it, threatening to make it tumble, and making it fall backwards, causing the five elemental attack to shoot upwards instead of towards Madara. Unimpeded, Madara's fire jutsu barreled towards the statue, setting it ablaze. Kaida and Hagane managed to jump out of the head just a second before being incinerated.

They landed on the ground, and saw the statue broke down into many pieces of burning wood. Kaida turned around, and pierced Madara with an angry glare.

"Hey, that's cheating!" Kaida protested, gritting her teeth.

The Uchiha smirked. "Cheating, she says. You're such an adorable kid," Madara said in a condescending tone, shaking his head and chuckling a little. "Do you have anything else to offer, or was that your last hidden ace? Because that last trick didn't even push me to use Susanoo."

Suddenly, both Madara and the twins sensed a surprisingly powerful chakra strike coming from behind them. Turning around, the twins saw a giant chakra construct in the shape of a horned, four armed woman stomping their way towards them. Inside the head of said chakra construct was Hanabi, with two clones at each side sitting in the lotus position, drawing nature energy and funneling it towards the chakra giantess.

"Thanks for keeping him distracted while I gathered nature energy for the Avatar of Kalika, guys!" Hanabi said from within the construct. "Everybody, stand back! I'll deal with Madara myself!"

The Senju twins nodded, and quickly leaped out of the way, leaving Madara alone against the chakra colossus. The Uchiha didn't move, he simply let his arms fall to the sides.

"So, you're able to produce cheap imitation of a Susanoo," Madara said, raising an eyebrow. "Hmmm... still, I can see that this 'Avatar of Kalika' radiates power. Perhaps you'll give me a better dance than the rest of these fools," Madara commented, as he started to make hand seals. "Let's test how resilient it is. Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

Another serpentine wooden dragon burst from the ground in front of Madara, and lunged towards Hanabi's chakra construct. The dragon tried to wrap itself around the Avatar's body, but the Avatar used two

of its hands to grab it and keep it in place, and the other two to deliver brutal hand chops that cut the dragon in three parts.

"Well, that wasn't half bad," Madara complimented.

Hanabi didn't say anything, and had the Avatar chuck the pieces of the Wood Dragon at its creator, while making several hand seals herself.

"Fire Release: Crimson Phoenix Flare!"

Hanabi breathed a massive stream of fire that quickly took the shape of a bird. As it barreled down towards Madara, it engulfed the pieces of the wood dragon, setting them on fire. In response, Madara generated the upper half of his humanoid Susanoo. It was a creature that looked like an ogre with rock or armor-like skin. Each of its two arms split into two forearms at the elbow, and it had two faces whose chins bifurcated into two spikes. The Susanoo quickly batted away the pieces of burning wood tossed at him, and managed to weather Hanabi's fire jutsu with relative ease.

"Alright, let's see how well your 'Avatar' does against a real Susanoo," Madara boasted, as his chakra construct reached its full form and size, growing a lower body and a pair of legs, leaving Madara floating in the middle of its chest. Two glowing blue undulating blades appeared on two of its hands. "Let's dance!"

Madara's Susanoo moved forward, and began the duel with a vertical slash, and Hanabi's Avatar stopped the swipe by grabbing it by the blade with one of its hands. The blade released a wave of energy in every direction, strong enough to threaten to break Hanabi's Avatar, but it resisted. The Avatar pushed the sword away, and used the other two hands on its side to deliver a double palm strike to the Susanoo, with enough force to make it tumble backwards for a bit.

"Not bad. Let's see how well you do against this then!" Madara said, as his Susanoo delivered a cross shaped chop with both swords,

generating an X-shaped energy shockwave towards Hanabi.

Hanabi made several hand seals, as her Avatar prepared to withhold the attack.

"Fire Release: Crimson Phoenix Flare!"

Hanabi once again exhaled a cone of fire, which clashed against the incoming X-shaped blast before it could take the form of a bird. Even if Madara's attack cut through hers, it did the intended job of slowing it down. The Avatar then thrust all its four palms forward in a quadruple strike, dispelling Madara's attack, and generating a shockwave that expanded in every direction.

Madara then charged forwards, ready to strike Hanabi's Avatar down with his two chakra swords. The Avatar, however, started to spin in place, generating chakra streams that spun with it as well, as well as raising a tornado around it.

"Six Paths: Heavenly Spin!"

Madara brought one of his swords down, but was deflected by the Avatar's spinning force. Even if the spinning wasn't as fast as the one done by a human being, and thus couldn't produce a spinning chakra dome, it had enough power to act as a repulsive barrier.

"Well, well, it seems that your so called Avatar is more resilient than I thought," Madara said, sounding a little annoyed.

"Still think this is just a cheap version of the Uchiha Susanoo?" Hanabi smugly asked, placing her hands on her hips.

Madara smirked, seemingly amused at Hanabi's bout of confidence. "It's certainly more powerful than I first imagined. I wasn't expecting somebody not even old enough to bear children to display such amount of power."

"Complimented by the one and only Madara Uchiha. Man, that's going to look so good on my record," Hanabi said, as her Avatar took again a battle stance. "But not as good as 'the kunoichi who defeated Madara Uchiha!'"

"Confident, are you?" Madara said, quirking an eyebrow. "While that construct of yours is a good match for my Susanoo in its humanoid stage, let's see how well you handle it in its armored form."

This gave Hanabi pause. "Armored... form?"

Madara didn't say anything, as blue armor plates began to grow around the chakra construct, covering it completely, while also increasing in size, going from being around the same size as Hanabi's Avatar, to the Avatar only reaching a little below the Susanoo's neck. Through her Tenseigan Hanabi could see the chakra forming this new Susanoo was much stronger. She visibly gulped upon realizing that she no longer had the upper hand against her opponent.

"And just like that, your confidence is all gone," Madara said in an insultingly jovial tone. "Then again, you should feel proud of yourself. The number of enemies that pushed me to use this form of my Susanoo can be counted with one hand. So, I'll make the most of this rare opportunity."

Without further ado, Madara's armored Susanoo charged forward, cracking the earth beneath its feet. A katana formed on the Susanoo's hands, and in less than a second, delivered a powerful blow at the head of Hanabi's Avatar. The Avatar managed to jump away and avoid the swing in time, but even if the initial strike missed, the sword released a wave of cutting chakra forward. Making several hand seals, Hanabi ignited the Avatar's hands on fire.

"Fire Release: Double Burning Palm Strike!"

Using its lower arms, the Avatar delivered a double palm blow at the incoming wave of chakra, shattering it into thousands of tiny dots of

lights. Even if it took her some effort, the fact that she was able to nullify Madara's attack restored some of her previous confidence.

"My turn!" Hanabi said, as she made the Avatar to rush forward.
"Eight Trigrams: Several Hundred Palm Strikes!"

Once it reached close quarter combat, the Avatar assaulted Madara with an onslaught of palm strikes with all its four arms, moving so quickly, most people could only make a magenta blur. The Susanoo raised its arms in order to protect itself. Each hand struck with both power and precision, pushing the Susanoo back a little with each hit. However, despite all the strikes landing, they failed to make a dent on the Uchiha's formidable defenses.

"What the...? I'm not making any damage!?" Hanabi asked in shock and indignation.

The Susanoo managed to block one of the palm strikes, and with a mighty shoulder bash, it pushed the Avatar backwards, taking several steps back and threatening to fall on its back. Fortunately, Hanabi was able to keep it in balance.

"There's a reason as for why I call this from the *Armored* Susanoo, little Hyuga," Madara said with a smirk. "But a good defense isn't the only thing this form has. Now behold!"

Madara's Susanoo charged once again. It raised its arms, and a katana of chakra appeared between its hands. It brought the weapon down in a downward slash, which Hanabi's Avatar blocked between the palms of the hands of its upper arms. However, while it stopped its momentum, the blow carried so much power that the hands of the avatar were blown to bits.

"WHOA!" Hanabi cried in shock, sensing part of her Avatar disappear. She hastily focused her chakra into the hands in order to regenerate them.

However, Madara wasn't going to give her any time to catch her breath. The Susanoo continued its assaults, with both brutal sword slashes and devastating stark punches. Hanabi tried to block every hit, but each strike chipped away parts of Hanabi's Avatar, while pushing it backwards, leaving her almost no room to counterattack.

"While you're still weak, I can see you have potential as well. Perhaps once you reach maturity, you might provide a decent challenge," Madara judged, as he made a single hand seal. The Susanoo held his free hand, and a trio of magatama-shaped chakra projectiles, spinning around an invisible axis. "But for now, I'm done with you. Yasaka Magatama!"

The Susanoo threw the magatamas at Hanabi's Avatar. She could see the sheer amount of power the attack carried, and thus she tried one last desperate move.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Broken as it was, the Avatar of Kalika began to spin in place, as protective chakra streams began to spin around it as well. It managed to gain enough speed for when Madara's projectiles impacted, resulting in a trio of explosions. Unfortunately, the Avatar's defense wasn't enough, and the explosions obliterated what was left of the Avatar. The explosions also hurled Hanabi towards the ground, landing with a loud thud. The chakra cloak around her dissipated, revealing her true appearance.

Inside his Susanoo, Madara crossed his arms and smiled, satisfied with his work.

"The power of the current generation of ninjas might be a little disappointing, but the power of the current generation of little girls is truly something," Madara commented. The former Uchiha patriarch then noticed two powerful chakra signatures closing in. "Oh? A new challenger-"

"Amaterasu!"

Suddenly, Madara's Susanoo burst into black flames from head to toe. The black fire began to quickly devour the chakra construct at an alarming rate. Madara tried to push more chakra into the Susanoo in order to repair it and put out the fire, but no matter what he did, the fire simply didn't disappear, nor slowed down in the slightest.

"What kind of fire jutsu is this...?" Madara wondered aloud as he abandoned the Susanoo, which quickly collapsed into nothingness, before the black flames could consume him.

That moment, two individuals, men wearing high collared clothes typical of the Uchiha, both young but older than the little girls he had been fighting against, landed in front of him. And indeed, the Sharingan blazing in their eyes confirmed their identities.

"In that case, you might be interested in seeing..." the older one began.

"... the power of the current generation of Uchiha," the younger one finished.

Madara eyed the two newcomers, as if sizing them up. He could sense the power of their chakra was nothing to scoff at. He didn't need to look at their eyes to know that these two had the Mangekyo Sharingan, given that the only kind of Uchiha chakra that felt like these two's was the one of his sadly late brother, Izuna.

"Well, well," Madara said, smiling again. "Look at that. At first glance, you two both look and feel powerful. Old enough to have some combat experience, but still in your prime. It seems that the gods above were generous enough to bless me with an actual challenge. What are your names? We're family, after all."

"If you really want to know, my name's Itachi, and that's my little brother, Sasuke," Itachi said.

"Sasuke," Madara repeated, grimacing as if he ate something sour. "Like the Sarutobi Clan head? Whose elder son was Hashirama and Tobirama's protégé. Such an unbecoming name of an Uchiha."

"You don't like my name? Too bad," Sasuke replied, scowling a little. "Because it's the name of the ninja that will send you where you belong: two meters underground."

"Speaking of which, how can you be alive?" Itachi asked. "We already know thanks to Rin Nohara how you returned to your prime and gained Wood Release, but that doesn't explain how you survived your final fight against Hashirama Senju. He brought your body to the village, where it was confirmed as dead, and that it was indeed you. Tobirama spent the next few months performing an extensive autopsy on your body, before finally giving you a burial on an unknown location. There's no way you could have feigned death for such a long time."

"Ah, yes, that's quite the mystery, isn't it?" Madara asked, as if the question amused him. "The answer is way simpler than you think, my esteemed clansman. You sure look like somebody familiar with the forbidden jutsu Izanagi."

"Izanagi?" Itachi repeated.

"Like... the jutsu Danzo used to avoid death?" Sasuke asked, as he recalled Shisui and Shizune's recount of the battle. "How? While Izanagi can undo death, it only works in a very short timeframe!"

Madara smirked. "Why? Who decided that? Izanagi is a jutsu that allows to rewrite reality on a personal level. You can rewrite your death immediately if you wish so, but you can also delay it so your death is undone at any amount of time afterwards. Had Tobirama destroyed my corpse, it would have been my end, but I knew that, even when he was done with it, he wouldn't want to cast it away and would keep it in a proper condition."

"So once we kill you, we'll make sure to burn your body so not even ashes remain," Sasuke stated. "Thanks for sharing such knowledge with us."

"You presume that you can kill me," Madara said with a chuckle. He then slipped into a fighting stance. "Anyway, enough chitchat! It's been very long since I danced with a fellow Uchiha! Show me the power of your generation!" Madara's hand flew through hand seals. "Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The earth around the Uchiha brothers was split as big, thick wooden roots emerged from underground, and spread towards the two Konoha ninjas. Sasuke and Itachi were quick to answer, their hands also weaving hand seals as fast as they could.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

"Fire Release: Phoenix Sage Fire Jutsu!"

Sasuke breathed a massive fireball towards the incoming mass of roots, while Itachi exhaled a volley of smaller fireballs for support. The two combined fire jutsu set the growing roots ablaze, successfully stopping Madara's attack.

Then, a katana blade burst from Itachi's chest. The older Uchiha brother coughed a streak of blood.

"ITACHI!" Sasuke screamed, upon noticing Madara impaling Itachi from behind.

"You might be an Uchiha, but your Sharingan must be a poor one if you didn't see me sneak from behind you," Madara taunted, as he twisted the blade inside Itachi. "Perhaps you aren't the worthy opponent I pegged you as."

Then, much to Madara's surprise, Itachi turned his head back at him, and smiled. "Then what comes next may change your opinion on me."

And "Itachi" burst into a murder of cawing crows, which started to fly around the former Uchiha Clan head, molting black wings as they cawed loudly, while pecking Madara with their black beaks.

The former Uchiha Clan head snarled. "Using a genjutsu against *me*. You have some nerve, brat," Madara said, as he used his own Sharingan to break the genjutsu.

The world around Madara flickered for a fraction of a second before it returned to normal, just in time to catch Sasuke about to strike him with his lightning-enhanced katana. Madara jumped back to avoid it, but then Sasuke delivered an horizontal swing with his other hand, holding a shoto whose blade was coated in flames, which Madara also dodged. Still, Sasuke was undeterred, and continued his assault, delivering quick swings from multiple angles and directions, though Madara managed to either dodge them, or block them by parrying Sasuke's wrists.

"One can put me in a genjutsu, and the other is able to manipulate two elements at once. Yes, you two have talent. Of course, I shouldn't expect any less from my fellow clansmen, should I?" Madara said with a grin, as he started to make hand seals. "I don't know about you, but I think I'm done with warm ups. Let's get to the good parts, shall we? Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

More large wooden roots emerged from under Sasuke and Itachi's feet, quickly wrapping around them and hoisting them into the air. Madara then manifested his Susanoo in its humanoid form, and generating a sword on each on its arms, brought them down in order to obliterate the Uchiha brothers. However, the brothers manifested their own Susanoo as well, breaking free of their wooden bindings, and jumping away just in time to avoid Madara's strike.

Sasuke and Itachi's Susanoo continued to develop until they reached their humanoid forms. Sasuke's Susanoo pulled the string of its shielded bow, generating a purple chakra arrow, while magatama beads-like projectiles appeared on Itachi's Susanoo's hands.

"Susanoo: Arrow Strike!"

"Yasaka Magatama!"

Purple chakra arrows and red chakra projectiles flew in combination towards Madara's Susanoo, who tried to deflect them with both its swords, but was unable to block all of them, and many found their marks, resulting in several explosions that chipped away a few chunks of Madara's Susanoo.

"Yes! Yes! This is what I was talking about!" Madara said, growing more excited by the second. "Show me what you're capable of!"

Madara's Susanoo progressed to the Armored form, and charged towards the Uchiha brothers, the ground beneath its feet breaking with each step. Sasuke and Itachi continued firing projectiles at it, with Madara blocking some and tanking others, but the Armored Susanoo didn't break as easily as the humanoid one. Before he could reach close quarter combat, the blue Susanoo leaped above them. Sasuke and Itachi started to weave hand seals.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire Jutsu!"

Both Sasuke and Itachi fired a flurry of dragon-shaped fireballs at the incoming Susanoo, half of them missing and flying into the sky, the other half crashing into it, but not making any effect. Madara's Susanoo landed in the middle of the other two chakra constructs with a loud crash, blasting them to the sides with the sheer force of its impact, almost falling on their backs due losing their balance.

Setting his eyes on Sasuke, Madara made his Susanoo move towards the younger brother, and struck the purple chakra construct with a large katana. Sasuke's Susanoo raised his shielded bow in order to parry the blow. While it resisted the attack, the shield cracked a little, much to the young Uchiha's worry. He generated a katana on the Susanoo's free hand and used it to stab Madara, but the blue Susanoo easily deflected the blow to the side, before taking Sasuke's Susanoo down with a powerful shoulder bash.

Before Madara could continue his assault, several explosions on his Susanoo's back nearly made it fall on its face. Turning around, he saw Itachi's own red warrior charging at him, wielding a sword made of golden flames. Madara parried Itachi's swing, managing to stand his ground, before shoving the older brother with a powerful kick.

"Come on, you started so well! Is this the extent of your full power?" Madara asked, a little disappointed.

He sensed a spike of chakra coming from behind him, and his Susanoo jumped aside just in time to dodge an arrow from Sasuke's Susanoo, this time coated in the black flames of Amaterasu. Sasuke fired more arrows, this time at Madara's Susanoo's leg, forcing it to jump. While in the air, Sasuke kept firing amaterasu-coated arrows, most of them missing and getting lost into the sky, but a couple of them managed to find their mark. Pushing chakra into his left eye, Sasuke had the black flames spread all around Madara's Susanoo. Still, his enemy refused to abandon the chakra construct.

"Either you get out of your Susanoo, or the black flames shall consume you, leaving nothing but ashes," Sasuke prodded.

Madara merely smirked in return. "That's what you want, don't you? To force me out of my Susanoo and into the open. But this Susanoo form has a couple surprises."

Madara made a hand seal, and the armor covering his Susanoo, some of which was burning the fires of Amaterasu detached from the main body, falling to the ground. Another coat of chakra plates instantly formed around it.

"Your little trick with the black flames won't work a second time," Madara replied.

"Don't worry, I have more little tricks," Sasuke said, as a thunderclap was heard in the distance. "Your Susanoo won't be able to survive them."

"You youths are so overconfident," Madara said, sounding between amusing and insulted. "Very well then. This isn't something I use against any enemy, but given your skill, the blood ties that bind us, and the excessive confidence you exude, I'm going to include you among the exclusive list of foes I have used this against!"

Madara's armored Susanoo grew in size once again, reaching one hundred meters in size, becoming twice as big as Sasuke and Itachi's, its armor taking the form of those worn by samurai. Its head was completely covered by a long-nosed mask that resembled a Tengu. A pair of large wings ended in hands grew from its back, the hands holding a pair of sheaths that held two katanas made of the same chakra as the Susanoo.

"Behold the magnificence of the Perfect Susanoo, and despair!" Madara boasted, spreading his arms in a dramatic fashion. "Only Hashirama was able to defeat this Susanoo! What do you plan to do against this, young Sasuke? Do you think you have a way to fight against me as I'm now?"

Sasuke looked up at the immense chakra construct, but much to Madara's surprise, didn't look intimidated or afraid in the slightest.

"That's quite the big Susanoo. Even bigger than father's," Sasuke mentioned, as the sword of his Susanoo was coated in black flames, while the other hand was coated in lightning. More thunderclaps could be heard from above. "But it will go down the same way. Itachi, you ready?"

From behind Madara, Itachi's Susanoo readied its Sword of Totsuka, but made no attempt to attack.

"As ready as I'll ever be, brother," Itachi said. "We must not fail."

"We won't!" Sasuke said, as he dashed towards the blue Susanoo, flaming black sword in one hand, lightning chakra in the other. He leaped at Madara.

Madara snarled in disgust. "Charging at me so recklessly with an inferior Susanoo," Madara said, as his own Susanoo unsheathed one of its katanas. "You will pay your foolishness with your life!"

"Infernal Release: Susanoo, Kirin Blazing Lightning Blade!"

As Madara's Susanoo delivered a swing at Sasuke's, a lightning bolt fell from the sky and struck the sword of Sasuke's Susanoo, supercharging it with electricity, as he brought it down. His lightning and amaterasu-enhanced sword cut through Madara's as if it was made of butter, before it struck the chest of Madara's Susanoo. All the energy stored in the blade was released at once resulting in an explosion of white light and black flames.

While the backlash of the explosion destroyed Sasuke's Susanoo, sending the younger Uchiha spiraling down to the ground below, Madara's Susanoo had taken the brunt of the blast, and was vaporized almost instantly. Madara himself survived the explosion, since his Susanoo absorbed most of the blast, but he was sent flying backwards, in Itachi's direction. Seeing his chance, Itachi moved towards Madara, and swung the Sword of Totsuka at him.

The sword impaled Madara, the blade piercing his chest and coming out of his back.

"YES!" Sasuke cried, excited to see that the plan they used to disable Fugaku had worked a second time. All Itachi needed to do was seal Madara, and the battle would be over.

Which made Sasuke wonder why Itachi wasn't sealing Madara. Looking at his elder brother, Itachi looked like somebody who was struggling to do something. A cold chill ran through Sasuke's spine.

"Itachi!" Sasuke called. "Seal him already! What are you waiting for?"

"I'm trying to! But I can't seal him for some reason!" Itachi said.

"What do you mean you can't seal him!?" Sasuke replied, as his fears started to become reality. "I thought that once you hit an enemy with that sword, it was over!"

Then, Madara wrapped his fingers around the sword of golden flames, and much to Itachi's shock, he began to *absorb* it into his body. And when he was done absorbing the sword, the rest of his Susanoo followed, pulling it away from Itachi. Madara crouch-landed on his feet, his face looking downwards, partially obscure by his wild long hair.

"Well, that was a close one," Madara said as he slowly rose up. "You two have both power and work really well together. You remind me of the days when my brother Izuna and I used to fight each other. However, what you have it's not enough to beat me."

Madara rose his head, his face being visible, and much to Itachi and Sasuke's shock, his eyes were no longer the red and black colors of the Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan, but purple concentric rings.

"Rinnegan!? How...?" Itachi asked, when a memory dawned upon him. "Of course. Any Uchiha sufficiently powerful can awaken the Rinnegan by combining their Yin half of the Six Half Chakra with the Yang half the Senju and Uzumaki possess."

"I see you did your homework," Madara said, smiling contently. "If you know the Rinnegan, I guess you must have met Nagato, am I right?"

"How do you know about Nagato?" Sasuke asked.

Madara chuckled. "Who do you think Nagato's Rinnegan used to belong to?"

"Wait... Nagato's Rinnegan wasn't his? It was yours? But... how!?" Sasuke asked again. There were far too many questions inside his head.

Something that Madara apparently noticed.

"It's a long story, but guess I can summarize it. Let's say that, after my fight with Hashirama, I managed to bite off a piece of his flesh in order to obtain his essence. I cultivated more of his cells and implanted them into my body. In time, I managed to gain Wood Release, but the Rinnegan didn't manifest until many decades later. I was a withered old man, and while I could experiment a little with my new powers, I knew letting the world know about my survival in such state was suicide.

"Among my new powers, I was able to summon the Demonic Statue of the Outer Path, and using its power, I managed to create an artificial creature from Hashirama's cells that I called Zetsu. I also devised a way that, even if it could take time, it would bring me back to my physical prime and merge my power with Hashirama's in a more efficient way.

"I knew I could use Zetsu and his clones to act on my behalf, but wouldn't be able to carry my plans on their own. I needed somebody to carry out my plans to bring the Ten Tails back to life while I underwent the rejuvenation process. I had my Zetsu scout for potential candidates to bear my Rinnegan, and Nagato was the most promising.

"That's why, shortly before I met Obito, I had my Rinnegan extracted and transplanted into Nagato by Zetsu. Obito found Nagato and convinced him to carry out my plan. I was expecting that by the time of my rebirth, they should be close to finishing, but alas, his progress wasn't as good as I was hoping.

"But let's not dwell in negativity, shall we?" Madara said, as he raised both his hands towards Sasuke and Itachi. "Let's have some fun first with the powers I was never able to test in an actual battle. Bansho Ten'in!"

Both Itachi and Sasuke were pulled by an incredibly powerful invisible force towards Madara. Itachi, however, quickly generated

his Susanoo, using one arm to catch Sasuke, and the other to anchor himself to the ground. Sasuke also generated the ribcage and one arm of his Susanoo in order to punch Madara, but the Uchiha elder simply jumped back in order to avoid the attack.

"Not bad. Let's see what else I can do," Madara said, as two pairs of arms burst from his sides.

The four additional arms then opened up and reassembled into weapons, as if they were machines. Madara then fired a barrage of missiles and chakra beams at the Uchiha brothers, who were forced to split apart and run away in order to avoid the attack, even if barely.

"Itachi! He's pushing us into the defensive!" Sasuke warned his brother. "We need to counterattack, now!"

"Agreed. Fighting from afar isn't an option if he can absorb our ninjutsu," Itachi said. "Let's attack from a different flank each!"

Gripping their katanas, the Uchiha brothers dashed towards Madara, who continued to bombard them with missiles, chakra beams and streams of flames, which they deflected with their Susanoo. As they got closer and prepared to strike, Madara's additional arms disappeared as he held his two arms towards the incoming brothers.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The air shimmered for a second, followed by an explosion of kinetic energy, that ripped part of the ground and send Sasuke and Itachi flying backwards, their weapons blown away from their hands, before painfully landing with a thud back on the ground.

"He was already a monster before, and now with that Rinnegan... how are we going to beat him?" Itachi asked, sounding desperate.

"Come on Itachi, I know you have a hidden ace in the hole prepared for a situation like this!" Sasuke said, sounding also a little

desperate. "Some kind of secret ninjutsu or forbidden jutsu, like a genjutsu that traps him inside an infinite loop or something similar?"

"Sasuke, this isn't the time nor the place to suggest such nonsense," Itachi said, as he got back to his feet as well as he could. "And I'm afraid I have nothing that may turn the tide of the battle in our favor. The Rinnegan is the most powerful doujutsu for a reason, and one of the most powerful ninjas who ever lived is using it against us."

Madara didn't give them any time to recover or plan a new strategy, as he held his hands towards them once again.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Just as they got back to their feet, Sasuke and Itachi were once again violently pulled towards Madara by an unseen force. The Uchiha brothers were too disoriented to properly manifest their Susanoo in order to counter Madara's jutsu like they did it the first time, while Madara himself generated his Susanoo once again up to the humanoid form, a blade of chakra on each hand, ready to kill his kin with a single strike.

"It pains me having to kill such talented clansmen like yourselves. Too bad you choose the wrong side of this conflict. Now-"

"Wood Release: Wood Binding jutsu!"

That moment, wooden roots emerged under Madara's Susanoo, wrapping around its body and arms, leaving it completely immobilized, stopping him from delivering the finish blow to Sasuke and Itachi, who were also caught by a pair of smaller roots. Madara turned around, and saw Rin Nohara, piercing him with a yellow glare, her hands locked into a hand seal.

"Earth Release: Crushing Avalanche!"

Several gigantic rocks appeared around Madara's Susanoo, burying it completely. Unfortunately, both the rocks and the roots were blown

away when Madara's Susanoo advanced to the Armored form.

"The test subject. I had forgotten about you," Madara said, looking annoyed of being cheated of his execution. His lips curved into a smile as an idea dawned upon him. His Susanoo started to vanish. "Then again, given that you're here, and you're still in Sage Mode, let me try something. Bansho Ten'in!"

Madara raised a hand at Rin, and the brown haired medic yelped as she was pulled towards the evil Uchiha, his fingers wrapping around her neck once she was close enough to him, and before Rin could fight back, he violently slammed her body against the ground, with such force it opened a small crater.

"Senjutsu is something that takes a lot of time and effort to master, but according to Zetsu, it's almost like a second nature to you, isn't it? Can you imagine what's the reason?" Madara asked. "Gakido!"

Madara started to absorb Rin's chakra, saturated with nature energy. Rin's yellow eyes began to revert back to their natural brown, and her green facial marks started to vanish little by little, as they began to appear on Madara's face. As his sensing ability heightened, he could sense Sasuke and Itachi dashing towards him, in a desperate attempt to either save the girl or prevent Madara from growing even more powerful. Probably both. Not that it mattered, as Madara casually manifested his Susanoo once again, and with a swipe of its arm, he swatted the Uchiha brothers away as if they were mere insects.

Once he drained all the senjutsu chakra of Rin, he released her. The girl didn't made any attempt to run away from him, or even get back to her feet. It appeared that having so much chakra drained left her in a dazed state. Oh well, she'd recover soon thanks to her regeneration.

"Yes, I can feel it now. Normally, one would need to stay still for some time in order to gather nature energy. But Hashirama was able to do so instantly and when he moved. Wood Release was far from

his only unique ability," Madara said, as his eyes drifted towards a certain chakra signature, one belonged to Hagane. Looking into such direction, Madara saw the white haired Senju treating the Hyuga with the Tenseigan, while his sister helped other ninjas to fight some of the remaining Wood Clones. He heard a pained grunt coming from below, and looking down, saw the barely conscious Rin stirring. "I have no more reason to keep you alive. But then again, Obito would be very... disappointed in me if he heard that I let you die," Madara said, shaking his head. "Plus it would be a waste after all the resources I poured to repair your broken body."

Madara moved from the spot Rin was lying on, and gave a look at the battlefield. He had sensed that more than half of his clones had been destroyed already, and the rest would soon follow. Then again, Madara could sense that no present ninja was a match to his current self right now. He considered to have the Wood Clones use Susanoo to finish things off quickly, but discarded the idea. He had a better way to end this battle.

"Oh, Hashirama, if you only were here... if you could witness the current height of my power... no matter how strong I became, I'm sure you'd manage to give me a challenging fight, unlike the rabble before me. Then again, even if I can't get more good fights from these people..." Madara then raised his hand to the sky. "... I can still use them to test the limits of my new power. CHIBAKU TENSEI!"

A marble sized, black colored gravity core appeared on Madara's hand, before it shot into the sky. Once it reached enough altitude, it grew in size, before splitting into six identical gravity cores, and shot into different directions, positioning on different parts of the battleground.

Then, the cores became active, and started to pull matter towards them. And that moment is where the horror truly began.

...

As the fight against the real Madara happened, Team Gai was facing several of the many Wood Clones Madara had created. After scanning them with his Byakugan, Neji claimed that they only possessed a small fraction of the original's power. Still, a small fraction of Madara's power wasn't something to take lightly, given that said clones had been able to defeat and even kill veteran Jonin.

Lee was engaging a clone in a duel of punches and kicks. Madara was fast, but between Lee's insane speed without his weights and the boost provided by three of the Celestial Gates opened, it was the green clad teen who was marking the pace of the fight. During one of their exchanges, Lee managed to wrap his arms around Madara's extended arm as he aimed for a punch.

"Neji, get ready!" Lee said, as he started to spin in place, with such speed, a small tornado formed around him. When he had built enough momentum, he tossed the clone in the Hyuga's general direction.

"Heavenly Spin!" Neji turned into a spinning dome of chakra, just a second before the Madara clone was slammed against him. The combination of the powerful rotation and the force Lee had used to throw the clone was too much, and it burst into thousands of wooden splinters.

And not far from there, Gai and Tenten were also fighting another Wood Clone. Said clone had the same troubles keeping up with Gai as the other one with Lee, especially since, unlike Lee who fought bare handed, Gai had pulled out his trusted nunchakus for added power. Gai channeled chakra through his weapons, increasing their range and power, and producing powerful blasts of wind even if they missed their mark.

"Ha! After fighting the original, these clones are nothing but a joke!" Gai boasted, as he dodged a roundhouse kick from said clone. Taking advantage of the clone's brief but crucial lack of guard, Gai kicked him hard on the chest, sending him flying backwards. "Up you, Tenten!"

"You got it!" Tenten said, as she unsealed a pair of bladed tonfas from a sealing scroll. Her tonfas started to crackle as she channeled lightning chakra through them, and delivering a few precise slashes, Madara's wooden clone was reduced to shreds.

Their fights done, Team Gai gathered together in order to quickly plan their next move.

"Alright, two clones less. There can't be that many of them left," Lee excitedly said. "Once we're done with them, we shall help the others deal with the real Madara!"

"Indeed, these clones are providing a good warm-up for the real deal," Gai agreed. "Now let's-"

Suddenly, the earth started to violently shake, making them to lose their balance and almost fall. Rocks and pebbles that had formed as collateral damage from the fights happening around the place started to float and fly into the air, quickly followed by small chunks of earth being teared from the ground.

"What the hell!?" Tenten asked, as she tried to keep her balance. "Neji?"

The Hyuga prodigy activated his Byakugan in order to find the source of the quakes, and took no time to find it. A couple hundred meters into the air above them were six incredibly dense spots of chakra, pulling dirt, pebbles, rock, earth and even leaves and branches towards it, quickly growing in size, and taking the form of small planetoids. Of course, all the ninjas without a doujutsu were able to see them once they reached enough size.

"This..." Neji began, sounding alarmed. "I only saw this once before..."

"We all did..." Tenten said, looking up in horror. "This is the same jutsu that Pain guy tried to use to destroy the village, isn't it?"

"Except there are six of those giant rocks instead of just one..." Lee said, his excitement quickly vanishing, replaced with fear. "And we don't have Naruto-kun nor Tsunade-sama or Jiraiya-sama to stop them to begin with."

Gai looked at the forming planetoids, as he tried his best to come up with a solution. But no matter how much he racked his brain, nothing came up. The one time he saw such jutsu in action, it was thankfully stopped before it could have been used to flatten the village. He wasn't there the one time Nagato, now an undead reanimation, got to use it against the First Division, but he heard of how much death it resulted in.

And now, there were six of these things to deal with. There was no other option,

"I doubt they could stop all of them even if they were here," Gai somberly said. "There's only one thing to do. Everybody, run! Run as far away as possible, as fast as you can! Our only chance to survive this attack is to stay as far away as we can from when they hit the ground!"

Everybody who heard Gai seemed to agree with him, and started to run away while telling the others to do so as well. Soon, every member of the Second Division was running away in pretty much every direction.

...

Madara watched in amusement as his enemies tried to outrun his attack, the mere sight of his sheer power sending them into a collective panic. Of course, it would be useless, since Madara had placed the gravity cores in order to cover as much area as possible when they impacted: five of them circumventing the bulk of the division, and the sixth one in the middle. Perhaps a few of them would escape the carnage that was about to unfold, but the rest of them would perish.

Once the planetoids reached the appropriate size, Madara motioned his hand down, letting natural gravity to the rest of the work.

...

Panic increased tenfold once they saw the planetoids coming down. But no matter how much they run, they wouldn't be fast enough to avoid the crash's area of effect. Naturally, those trapped in the middle had it the worst, since even if they could avoid the central meteor, they would still run into one of the peripheral ones.

However, one kunoichi, Kurotsuchi, noticed this, and tried to mitigate the effects of the catastrophic jutsu. Even if she had the best chances to avoid the attack thanks to her flight, she would never forgive herself to do such a cowardly thing and left her men to their fates. While everybody else ran away, Kurotsuchi placed herself floating just below the central meteor.

"I might not be able to stop this monstrous jutsu completely, but I'll be damned if I don't try to minimize the damage!" Kurotsuchi said, as she started to make hand seals. "If I can destroy this meteor, I know I'll save the lives of hundreds of ninjas!"

After finishing the sealing sequence, she clapped her hands together, creating a square of white light between them. Normally, she'd just encase the target inside the square and then execute the jutsu, but in this situation, the target was way too big. Fortunately, that was only one of the many ways Dust Release could be used, albeit that one was the most chakra efficient one.

"I don't know if I have enough chakra for this jutsu, but at least I have to try," Kurotsuchi said, as the square of light between her hands was compressed into a ball of white light. "Dust Release: Obliterating Lightwave!"

The white orb between her hands exploded into a torrent of light, expanding upwards in the form of a cone. The cone managed to break through the falling meteor, growing in size and width as the

young Tsuchikage poured more and more chakra, until the cone engulfed the meteor almost entirely. There was then a flash of white light, and the meteor was almost completely gone, with only a few small chunks of rock that the jutsu had failed to cover, but their size made them harmless.

Due to all the chakra she had used for her jutsu, Kurotsuchi felt her head becoming light as a wave of numbness washed over her body. She was unable to sustain her Light Boulder Jutsu, and fell to the ground below.

"Tsuchikage-sama!" an Iwa ninja cried.

"Quickly, somebody catch her!" another one pleaded.

...

Kurotsuchi wasn't the only one to try to stop one of the meteors, as another pair of ninja knew they had to soften the blow of Madara's attack at any cost.

"Come on Sasuke, the two of us at once!" Itachi said, as he and his younger brother glared at the meteor closest to them.

"AMATERASU!"

A mass of black flames burst from the meteor's bottom part, and started to spread around it, as it slowly began to eat the rock and ground forming it. However, with the speed the planetoid was coming down, and slowly the black fire was spreading, they doubted they would be able to consume it completely.

"Dammit, that thing is too big!" Sasuke said, as he focused as much chakra as he could on his left eye. "Not even the two of us... !"

"Keep the jutsu up, Sasuke! We can't stop it right now!" Itachi insisted.

"Hey, maybe I can lend you a hand!" a new voice said. The brothers couldn't turn around to see the newcomer, but they recognize the voice as that of Hagane Senju. The white haired boy placed his hands on each of the Uchiha's shoulders. He started to glow with a white aura, which quickly spread to the brothers as he placed a hand on their respective shoulders. "Have some senjutsu boost!"

The effect was instant, and the black flames trying to eat the falling meteor roared as they burst into a black inferno, so hot and fiery that the air around it began to look distorted. The reinvigorated black flames began to quickly cover and devour the meteor, reducing it in size as it was consumed into nothingness.

"Sasuke, dispel the black fire now before somebody gets hurt by it! What's left of the meteor isn't a threat anymore!" Itachi commanded.

"Got it!"

As quickly as it appeared, the black flames were snuffed out at the brothers' command, leaving only a very small chunk of the original meteorite.

...

Despite Kurotsuchi, Itachi and Sasuke's valiant efforts, four of the initial six meteors managed to crash into the ground. While no ninja was directly crushed under the gigantic pile of rocks, many of them were fell prey to the ensuing shockwaves, which teared the very earth apart, producing a violent quake that sent large chunk of rocks into the air, as well as toppling many trees down.

Needless to say, countless ninjas fell victim to such attack apart that teared the very foundations of the earth apart.

Not even moving from his spot, Madara was contemplating the results of his devastating jutsu, his arms crossed, and a neutral expression on his face. Then, behind him, Zetsu emerged once again.

"An outstanding jutsu, boss," the white half praised. "You were already able to decimate armies single handedly before your rejuvenation, but you managed to take it to a whole new level."

"That Nagato brat wasn't able to form more than one meteor at once," the black half added. "Yes, with you, catching the jinchuriki is going to be piece of cake."

Madara, however, appeared that he wasn't listening to his minion. His Rinnegan eyes narrowed at the sight in front of him, as he caught multiple figures still moving around. His lips curved into a slight grimace.

"It seems that this jutsu isn't as outstanding as you had dubbed it, Zetsu, given that there are still quite a few survivors out there," Madara noticed. "Probably because they destroyed two of the meteors. Now, what would be the best way to deal with the survivors...? Oh I know! I can't believe I didn't try this before!" Madara said, as he bit his finger, and made five hand seals. "Summoning jutsu!"

...

Land of fire, Northeast of Madara's battlefield

"ARGH!" Naruto screamed, as he doubled over. He was rushing forward alongside Killer B and Fu when he was assaulted by an unspeakable pain.

"Naruto!" Killer B said, concerned. He quickly appeared besides the blond, placing a hand on his back. "Naruto, what's wrong? What's causing pain in somebody so strong?"

"Kurama... it feels..." Naruto said in a whisper. "It felt as if some force was trying to rip him away from me. Thankfully the seal kept him in place."

" *This chakra...* " Kurama said with an angry grow. *"No! It can't be! He's dead! He should be dead!"*

" *Kurama? What's wrong? Who are you talking about? Who should be dead?* " Chomei asked.

Kurama uttered two words: ***"Madara Uchiha."***

...

Back to the battlefield

Madara couldn't hide his disappointment when nothing came out of the burst of smoke produced by his jutsu. He was really seeking to unleash the Nine Tails on those fools, now that Hashirama wasn't there to spoil his fun.

"The summoning failed. I should have expected it, given that the beast is sealed inside a jinchuriki. Still, it was worth a try," Madara said, before his eyes looked at the horribly wounded survivors scattered around the battlefield. "Oh well, if I can't use the Nine Tails, guess a second round of meteors will have to do."

And with a sadistic chuckle, Madara raised his hand to the skies once again.

...

Carnage.

That was the only word that could describe what had befallen to the Second Division. Corpses of fallen ninja were scattered around the area, though some might be just unconscious and not really dead. The many rocks and fallen trees were splattered with blood. The few survivors called the names of their friends, hoping to find them alive, while others tried to futilely drag the bodies of those still alive but too wounded to walk, while pleading for a medic to come.

"Kaida! Hanabi!" Hagane yelled, as he frantically looked around.
"Kaida!"

The white haired Senju boy had survived thanks to Itachi and Sasuke, who used their Susanoo to shield him, as well as other lucky ninjas who happened to be around them, from the flying chunks of rocks and trees. Now, he was trying to find his sister and his other teammate, followed by Sasuke and Itachi.

"Hey, weren't you supposed to be a sensory ninja?" Sasuke asked.
"Can't you just sense them?"

"I'm trying," Hagane replied. "But I feel kinda dizzy, and I can't sense very well. I expended too much chakra while helping you destroy that meteor."

"Itachi!" a new voice said.

Itachi turned around, and saw Natsu running towards him. The former Hyuga Branch House kunoichi appeared to be good enough to walk on her own power, but her uniform was torn to shreds, and had many bleeding wounds, one of them on her forehead.

"Natsu!" Itachi called, as he went to meet his not-quite-yet girlfriend. He noticed her Byakugan was active. "Natsu, are you okay!?"

"I've been better, but I'll manage," the Hyuga replied. "Thank goodness both you and Sasuke-kun are okay."

"We won't be okay if we stay here for long," Sasuke stated. "Madara is way too strong for us. We must leave before he decides to give us the coup de grace."

"I won't leave without Kaida and Hanabi!" Hagane interjected.

"I was looking for Hanabi-sama as well. Don't worry, I know where she is," Natsu said, pointing in a seemingly random direction.

Hagane looked into said direction. At first he didn't see anything, before he looked something green. Something that appeared to be a dome made of wood. His eyes widened upon realizing what it was.

"That's a shelter made of Wood Release!" Hagane cried, as he rushed towards it. "Kaida!"

The two Uchihas and the Hyuga followed the Senju boy, and the four of them removed all the rocks under it as best as they could. Once there were no more rocks, Hagane forced two of the vines forming the dome apart, and entered inside. He sighed in relief upon seeing not only Kaida, but Hanabi as well, who was still unconscious. Rin was also there as well, her Sage Mode once again active, if the marks on her face were of any indication.

"Brother!" Kaida said, as she quickly rushed to hug her twin. "I'm so glad you're okay!"

"It was thanks to Sasuke and Itachi that I'm alive," Hagane said. "And I'm also glad that you and Hanabi are okay. Or all the okay somebody in a coma can be."

"Don't worry, I've been checking on her," Rin reassured. "I'm positive she'll wake up in a few hours."

"We don't have a few hours. Come on, we'll carry her as we get out of here," Sasuke urged.

Suddenly, the earth started to rumble.

"What the...?"

...

Kaida and Rin weren't the only ones who had the idea of creating a protective dome to shield themselves from all the flying debris caused by the four meteor impacts, as Maki also created a shield of cloth reinforced with fuinjutsu, big enough not just to protect her

students, but a few other ninjas as well, among them was Ran, the Kumo kunoichi she had befriended during their first battle.

Among them was also Kurotsuchi herself. While she managed to remain conscious, she could barely stand on her feet thanks to exhausting most of her chakra.

"Sensei," Matsuri broke the silence, her voice quivering with fear. "I think we should leave before that Madara guy goes onto another rampage."

"I agree with Matsuri-chan! That guy is way too strong for us!" Yukata whimpered, as tears of terror rolled down her cheeks.

"The battle was over the moment he used that insane attack to decimate our division," Maki agreed. "Still, we should make sure we aren't noticed so he doesn't come after us. We'll have to carry the division commander with us and protect her," Maki said, looking at the weakened Kurotsuchi.

"I'll go outside and check if it's safe to-" Mikoshi was about to say, as he was interrupted by another quake.

...

"Okay, on three, everyone push up," Gai instructed. "Ready? One, two, THREE!"

While Gai, Lee and Tenten had been able to dodge the gigantic collateral damage of the four meteor impacts, Neji wasn't so lucky, and during a brief moment, the brutal quakes made him lose his balance and fall to the ground just as a large rock landed on his leg, leaving him completely trapped. Fortunately, his teammates and sensei were quick to come to his aid once the initial devastation subsided.

Gai, Lee and Tenten all pushed up a large rock that was crushing Neji's leg. Once the wounded Hyuga was able to crawl out of it, they

dropped the boulder back on the ground, which made a loud thud.

"Neji, are you okay? Can you walk?" Lee anxiously asked.

Neji tried to move his wounded leg, and winced in pain when he tried to do so. "I'm afraid not," Neji replied, before activating his Byakugan in order to examine his pained limb. "It doesn't appear to be broken, but I don't think I'll be able to put any weight on it."

"In that case, we'll carry you," Lee said, as he helped Neji to get back on his feet, while allowing the Hyuga prodigy to rest his body on Lee's, with Lee placing one of Neji's arms around his shoulders.

Tenten was quick to help Lee, and placed Neji's other arm around her shoulders as well.

"Okay, time to get out of here," Tenten said, looking around, as if trying to find where Madara was hiding. With all the clouds of dusts that had been raised, it was a bit hard to tell. "This is going to hurt a bit, Neji, but we need to move fast if we want to leave this place alive."

"It's okay, I can-WHOA!" Neji said, as another quake almost made him fall to the ground again.

"What... what's going on?" Lee asked, as he frantically looked around.

"Up in the sky! Look!" Neji warned.

The four members of Team Gai looked up, and much to their horror, saw six more gravity cores pulling earth, rocks and dirt towards them, in order to form six more meteors. Paralyzed by horror, the four ninjas spent a few moments looking at the meteors forming and growing in size, with their eyes wide open and their mouths agape, trying to process what they could do.

"Again... he's going to do that again..." Tenten said, almost in a whisper. Her face then became a mask of pure terror. "We need to get out of here as soon as possible! Come on you two!"

"No!" Neji protested. "Leave me here! I can't walk, and I'm only a burden to you! If you leave me here, your chances of surviving will be all the greater!"

"We aren't going to abandon a teammate!" Lee angrily replied. "How you dare to suggest such an horrible thing! Tell him we will never abandon anybody, Gai sensei!" Lee asked his mentor. However, Gai didn't reply. His eyes were still fixed on the meteors above them. "Gai sensei?"

While Gai heard his student, he didn't say anything. As he looked at the meteors, hundreds of thoughts raced his mind. Mostly related on how he could get his students from this hell safely. On one side, he agreed with Lee; he'd die before leaving one of his students behind. On the other hand, Neji had a point; carrying him would slow them down, and they needed to move as fast as possible in order to avoid Madara's catastrophic jutsu.

" Perhaps using the Celestial Gates..." Gai wondered.

The green clad Jonin looked around, and saw his fellow division members in similar situations: some of them tried to run away as fast as they could, others tried to take their wounded friends and comrades with them. And others had seemingly accepted their fates, and were simply hugging while crying into each other's shoulders.

" And then what? No, my students will never be safe in a world where Madara Uchiha still exists. I need to put an end to this... right here and right now," Gai clenched his fist in determination as he took a decision.

"Gai-sensei!" Lee called him once again.

This time, Gai turned around, and gave his students his trademark smile. "Lee, you have nothing to worry. No one will be left behind. I promise that the three of you will live to see another day. To see many other days."

Lee smiled and nodded, his faith in that his sensei could do anything unwavered. Neji, however, wasn't as optimist.

"Gai-sensei, you can't make such a promise," Neji gravely said.

"That's where you are wrong, Neji," Gai said, before closing his eyes, and taking a deep breath. When he opened them again, his students could see that something inside him had changed. There was something about the way Gai was looking at them that made them feel uneasy. Very uneasy.

"He's looking at us as if... as if he's never going to see us again..."
Tenten thought, as a chill ran down her spine.

"Tenten, Neji, Lee. I've been your teacher for almost five years, and I can say without any doubt that they have been the best years of my life. You've been the best students any teacher could have, and I feel grateful for being said teacher," Gai began.

"Gai-sensei? What are you-?" Lee began, but Gai interrupted him.

"Lee, despite your lack of ability to use ninjutsu or genjutsu, you still had the burning determination to become a ninja no matter what, even if you could only rely on taijutsu," Gai began. "And look at yourself now! You're almost a Jonin! And you managed to reach this level through nothing but sheer hard work. Konoha is lucky to have you among its ranks.

"Neji. For most of your life, you were also burdened by something you didn't ask nor desired. But you didn't let that define you, and you managed to show everybody the immense potential within you. While some things may be set in stone, there's no fate but the one

we carve for ourselves. So keep working on creating the fate you want to see.

"Tenten. Even if your initial dream of being like Tsunade didn't pan out, it did work in a different way: you were able to grow into one of the finest kunoichi this village had the luck to have. Just like how Tsunade was your inspiration, I'm sure plenty of little girls will be inspired by you to take the path of the ninja in order to be more like you.

"All in all, what I want to say is... I can't feel more proud of being your sensei, and I love you."

Lee was moved to tears by Gai's heartfelt speech, but on the inside was a little confused as to the why of it. Neji was averting his sensei's gaze, already guessing what was going to come next. Tenten, meanwhile, knew the truth deep down but struggled to accept it.

"G-Gai-sensei...? Why are you saying this?" she asked, almost on the verge of tears. "Why are you talking... as if you're bidding us farewell?"

Gai's expression hardened. He turned his back at them, and let out a heavy sigh.

"Because... this is a goodbye, Tenten," Gai said.

"Goodbye?" Lee repeated. "Why...?"

"Neji is right. We can't carry him with us and still move fast enough to avoid the meteors. But we can't abandon him either. We can't abandon *any* of our comrades," Gai said, as he spread his arms around for added emphasis. "That's why I'm going to stay back and put an end to this."

"What? Gai-sensei, you're mad! You saw Madara's power! No matter how strong you are, what can you-" Tenten began, but was cut off by

Lee.

"The Gate of Death," Lee said in realization, as tears trickled down his cheeks. "You plan to open it in order to match Madara's power."

"But the Gate of Death... once it's opened, the user will... will..." Tenten choked on her words.

"Will it be enough?" Neji asked.

"I don't know. But right now, it's our only option," Gai said. He looked up once again, and saw that the meteors were almost as big as the first time. Madara would drop them on their heads any moment. "Come on, we can't waste anymore time, you need to leave this place now!"

At first, they hesitated for a moment, before they nodded.

"Goodbye, Gai-sensei. I will never forget that you were the first person who saw potential in me when others only saw a failure," Lee said.

"We will make sure your sacrifice isn't in vain, Gai-sensei," Neji added.

"The world will forever remember your brave sacrifice, sensei!" Tenten said.

Gai smiled, and gave his students one last thumbs up. Lee and Tenten turned around, and leaped away while carrying Neji on their arms. Gai then directed his eyes up again. The meteors were now fully formed, and began their descent.

While everybody else tried to run away, Gai began to run forward.

"So this is what you felt when you gave your life to save mine and my teammates', right, dad?" Gai thought, smiling at the memory. "I always wanted to be a ninja you'd be proud of, dad... you'll tell me now if I did reach said goal..."

"Gate of Death... OPEN!"

Chakra flowed unimpeded through Gai's entire body as all the dams in his chakra network were wide open. A blue aura flared around his body, quickly turning fire red, while his skin also turned dark red in color, and his eyes became entirely white, glowing with an eerie light. His body emitted so much heat, the ground around the Konoha Jonin started to burn.

Gai set his sights on his first target, a meteor that was the closest to the ground. The empowered Konoha ninja leaped towards it, breaking the ground he was standing on with the sheer strength he now possessed, and leaving a patch of scorched earth. In less than two seconds, Gai reached the meteor, and punched it with all his might. The meteor shattered and broke into thousands of tiny pebbles as if it was made of fragile sandstone.

" *One down! Five more to go!*" Gai thought, as he tried to locate the meteor second closest to the ground. "That one!"

Once again, Gai smashed into the meteor like a red missile, blowing it up to tiny rock chunks with a demolishing kick. The third one soon fell to Gai's might.

"Halfway done! Come on, just a little more!" Gai told himself. "I have enough power to destroy all of them and then take on Madara!"

...

At first, Madara was watching in amusements how those ants that pretended to be ninjas were about to be crushed under the weight of his godly power. He could see and hear their terror and desperation, and he reveled on them. While Madara was somebody who preferred fighting challenging opponents rather than crush weak ones, he did take pleasure in making unworthy opponents suffer and scream as much as possible.

After all, there were few things that disgusted Madara more than weakness.

Then, that red missile happened. Appearing out of nowhere, and destroying one of his meteors like it was nothing, Then another. And another. Madara was too stumped watched how this unknown element nullified one of his strongest new jutsu so casually, to the point that he didn't even attempt to stop it. Though, after regaining his bearing, he decided not to. After all, he was lamenting how there was nobody among this rabble able to give him a good fight, so this was a welcomed surprise.

Once this unknown but immensely powerful warrior was done destroying all of Madara's meteors, it leaped towards the Uchiha himself, landing on the ground with a thundering boom. The former Uchiha Clan Head could feel the sheer power this new enemy was radiating. Strangely enough, behind the terrifying appearance granted by the fiery aura that surrounded him, the man was oddly familiar to Madara.

"Wait a minute..." Madara said, as he narrowed his eyes. "You're that green clad fool with the ridiculous hairstyle that tried to fight me before!"

"Indeed. The name's Maito Gai. And you're far from the first person that calls me a fool," Gai said, as he slipped into a fighting stance, his flaring aura spreading a patch of scorched earth around him. "But this fool will put your reign of terror to an end!"

There was an explosion of dust and dirt as Gai opened a large crater on the spot Madara was standing on. If Madara was so much a fraction of a second slower, he would have been pulverized by Gai's devastating punch.

" *He's so fast I can hardly follow his movements!*" Madara distressingly thought.

While the Uchiha was still mid air, Gai launched himself upwards and delivered a brutal uppercut Madara was unable to dodge, before sending him back to the ground with a devastating kick. Gai was about to finish Madara with a drop kick, but the Uchiha wasn't harmed enough as to not move out of his way.

"You... you had this incredible power inside you the whole time... but you didn't use it until now... why...?" Madara said, as he manifested his Susanoo around him. As the gears inside his head began to work, he quickly came up with an explanation. "Chakra pours out of your body like a roaring waterfall. Every punch and kick you throw feels like a thousand enemies punching and kicking at once... oh, I see. This power... you're pretty much burning your entire life in order to convert it into sheer power. This battle... even if you manage to beat me, it will be your last. Disappointing. And here I thought that I had finally found a worthy opponent."

Gai, however, smirked. "This will be my last battle, yes. But this battle is the one that matters to me the most! I don't care what will be of me afterwards, or what do you think about me!"

As Madara's Susanoo reached its Armored form, Gai launched himself forward, delivering another mind-numbingly powerful punch, one so powerful it produced a gust of wind as a result. Madara tried to slash Gai with the Susanoo's sword, but Gai's reaction times were too fast and was able to easily avoid it. The punch left a crack on Madara's Susanoo's chest as it was forced backwards.

"Alright, not bad, but how-"

Madara was interrupted when his Susanoo was smashed with an overwhelming force from behind, cracking it as well. Then another hit from the sides. Then the opposite side. Then the flank. Then the opposite flank. All what Madara saw was a red blur moving around his Susanoo, who was being thrown around like a gigantic ragdoll.

"I can't follow his movements, he's too fast!" Madara said, his eyes quickly darting around in order to locate his evasive opponent. His

Susanoo was again victim of a powerful slam coming from the flank. "But his attacks do have a pattern... meaning that his next hit will come from... THERE!"

The Susanoo quickly turned around and swung its sword towards the incoming Gai. This time, the sword hit its mark, its flat side slamming against the Konoha ninja's body, breaking Gai's momentum, and sending him crashing back into the ground. Madara took advantage of the pause to restore the cracks in his Susanoo, while also taking it to its perfect form.

"You certainly gave me quite the beating, both to my body and to this Susanoo, with that technique of yours," Madara said, as his Perfect Susanoo stomped towards Gai, who jumped back to his feet. "But if that's the best you can do, then I'm afraid to tell you that your sacrifice, while noble, will be a pointless one."

"Even if I don't defeat you, my sacrifice wasn't pointless, since I managed to stop that jutsu of yours from killing the rest of my division, and I made you focus on me, giving the others a chance to escape," Gai said, as he took a weird battle stance, one that involved him being on all fours. "And I still have one hidden ace in the hole... one that will take you down for good!"

Madar smirked. "Oh? Alright. Show it to me then, So far, no one but Hashirama has been able to make a dent on this Susanoo. But perhaps you may be an exception."

That moment, Gai's fiery aura flared once again, and it grew into a roaring inferno. Gai's clothes started to burn down, as volcanic-like glowing red veins started to spread around his body. His eyes started to burn with an orange light, as if they were two burning coals. The earth started to shake as a patch of burned ground spread around Gai's position.

Then, Gai's red aura started to stabilize and slowly took the shape of a fiery dragon. The Konoha Jonin shot forward, leaving a trail of burning earth with each step, before leaping at Madara's Susanoo,

the dragon roaring with him. Madara's Susanoo quickly generated a sword of chakra on each hand, and delivered a cross-shaped slash at Gai, who made no hint to avoid the attack.

"NOW BURN AMONG MY FLAMES OF YOUTH, AND TURN TO ASHES, MADARA!" Gai hollered, as he readied his body to deliver a flying kick. "NIGHT GUY!"

The Susanoo swords found their target, but Gai plowed through them as if they were made of cheap wood. It also shattered the Susanoo's armor as if it was made of weak glass. Gai's foot connected with Madara's chest, violently pushing him out of his giant chakra construct, as the two of them continued flying high into the sky.

"This man... ! Just what is he... !?" Madara asked, as he was forced to vomit blood from the internal damage Gai's brutal kick had caused.

The volcanic veins around Gai's body started to burn with greater intensity, as his whole body glowed with a fierce red light. And as Gai expended the last of his chakra, his body exploded in a red blast, instantly burning to ash. The explosion sent Madara flying at least a kilometer away., before he painfully landed onto the hard ground.

...

Back on the ground, Neji was being carried by Lee and Tenten, while the three of them, as well as many other survivors tried to get away from the battlefield as fast as possible. While Lee and Tenten didn't dare to look back, Neji was monitoring the battle through his Byakugan. Then, the Hyuga prodigy winced as a flash of chakra blinded him for a few seconds.

That moment, they heard the explosion. And the three young Konoha ninjas finally knew that was the moment their beloved sensei had ceased to exist.

Author's Note: Rest in Peace, Maito Gai.

While some of the deaths in my fic happen on a whim, this wasn't one of them. I already decided that Gai was going to die fighting Madara even before I posted this story. Not because I hate Gai (far from it) but because I felt it would have made more sense if he had died in canon, given that his death had a lot of buildup, as opposed to Neji's death, which came out of nowhere. My guess is that, after killing Neji, Kishimoto didn't feel like piling even more grief on Lee and Tenten by killing their sensei so soon after that, so he had Naruto heal him with his new bullshit plot bending powers.

Does this mean that Neji will survive this time around? We'll see ;P

For the record, I'd like to clarify that Madara is still alive (there's no way he's going to die so soon), he will be on the sidelines for the time being, recovering before making a return. I know that Gai nearly killed Madara when he was the Ten Tails jinchuriki with the Eight Gates, but keep in mind that this Gai had to spend a lot of his power destroying those six meteors first before he could take his shot at Madara. Then again, I always found TTJ Madara rather underpowered. Even TTJ Obito put a much better show.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, what do you think about my version of Madara's return? Leave your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Picking Up the Pieces

Author's Note: And after the darkest chapter of the entire fic (so far), here comes a much needed breather. Enjoy:

Chapter 123:

Picking Up the Pieces

or

Licking Grievous Wounds

Land of Fire, a couple kilometers to the west of the battle between the Second Division and Madara Uchiha

"Argh... urk... damn... damn madman..."

Madara was on the ground, in a puddle of his own blood, grunting in pain, unable to move. Or what was left of him. Gai's final attack had blown away the Uchiha's entire lower half, as well as a chunk of his torso, leaving only his mangled and battered upper body, his right arm, and his head. Naturally, a normal man wouldn't have been able to withstand such brutal dismemberment, but thanks to the healing factor he got from Hashirama's DNA, which was even greater than the original, he managed to cling to life.

"But you failed... hahaha... you failed... !" he gloated, before he was interrupted by a violent coughing fit. "You died... for nothing..."

Madara was feeling lightheaded, probably due to all the blood he had lost. Thankfully, all his wounds were now closing, preventing further blood loss. Though even if his regeneration was already kicking in, it would take quite a lot of time to regrow all the body parts he had lost, and even more to regain his former strength. Gai may

have failed to kill the Ghost of the Uchiha, but he made sure he would be out of commission for quite some time.

At that moment, Zetsu emerged from the ground just besides his fallen master.

"Oh boy... this... this isn't good..." the white half said in horror.

"Did you reach to that conclusion on your own?" the black half snarked, before taking a look at Madara. "Though, I didn't think there was anybody to leave the boss so fucked up... thank goodness that guy died during the battle..."

"Obito-sama is going to be very mad when he finds out..." the white half added. "Very, very mad."

"It can't be helped. Come on, let's take him back to the lair so we can treat him," the black half suggested.

The plant creature then grabbed the barely conscious Madara, and both of them sunk into the ground until they disappeared completely.

...

Unnamed Territory between the Land of Waterfalls and the Land of Sound, Nighttime

Jiraiya and Tsunade were sitting in silence in front of a small campfire. It might appear that they had their eyes fixed into the fire, but in truth they weren't looking at anything in particular. They had just finished having some light dinner, even if neither of them had any appetite. They needed a full stomach if they hoped to have enough energy to defeat Orochimaru.

The reason behind their gloomy mood was Naruto's letter. While they were making their way towards Orochimaru's hideout, Kosuke the messenger toad appeared in front of Jiraiya with a scroll that Naruto had written for him. Jiraiya felt his heart skip a beat upon

hearing that, given that if Naruto did such a thing then an emergency must have happened.

And unfortunately, he was right. The letter not only revealed that Akatsuki had learned of the location of the Turtle Island, but launched an attack in order to capture the jinchuriki. Fortunately, Naruto, Fu and Killer B managed to escape, but several Konoha ninjas lost their lives, including Choza Akimichi, Tenzo, and their sensei Hiruzen Sarutobi.

"I can't believe sensei's dead..." Jiraiya began, sounding downcast. "I sent him to the island to babysit Naruto because I thought it was a safe place away from the frontlines, yet..."

Tsunade placed a hand on his forearm. "Don't blame yourself. Remember it was me who came up with that idea."

"But it was me who agreed to it," Jiraiya replied, placing his own hand on top of Tsunade's. "I could have just told that old fool to go back to his house and let us do the fighting, but no, I had to take the easy way and make him part of the war..." Jiraiya said, letting out a tired sigh.

"Sensei was always a warrior at heart," Tsunade said. "He was born during the last years of the Warring States Period, and became a ninja during Konoha's most tumultuous years. Not to mention that he's a veteran of all three wars. He wasn't like you or me, who were born in periods of peace and only went through our first war when we were adults."

"That's why I wanted him to stay in the village to begin with," Jiraiya replied. "That man has done more than enough. He deserved to sit this one out."

"And Tenzo... man, Kaida and Hagane are going to be devastated when they learn that their Jonin-sensei is dead as well," Tsunade said, shaking her head.

"To think that I was this close to send the twins with Naruto to the island for protection..." Jiraiya reflected.

Tsunade looked at him, perplexed. "You what?"

"I was worried about them, and I told them that I wanted them to be with Naruto, to help and support him in his quest to master the power of the Nine Tails," Jiraiya said, before chuckling a little. "Of course, they saw through my lie instantly. Even Kaida. They realized of my intentions, and pointed out that just because they were my kids, I couldn't give them a special treatment."

"As their mother, I would have agreed with you, though," Tsunade said, leaning his head back. "But Kami knows that had I been the one in their place, I would have protested even louder."

The two fell again into a silence, with only the crackle of the flames in front of them making any noise.

"Some leader I am," Jiraiya dejectedly said.

Tsunade looked at him with concern in her eyes. "Jiraiya, why are you saying that? You've been doing a great job so far, both as Hokage and Supreme Leader of the Alliance."

"I appreciate your support, Hime, but we both know you're only saying that because you're my wife," Jiraiya replied with a sad smile. "This war happened to begin with because I foolishly let Akatsuki get their hands on one of the Rinnegan because I had the brilliant idea of using them as a bait to lure Danzo out."

"The war would have happened anyway," Tsunade countered. "And nobody would have guessed that Danzo was under Obito's mind control."

"I've also sent Shikaku Nara to his death by allowing him to go to the battlefield because Inoichi was spotted," Jiraiya continued. "Shikaku

was our best strategist, and now we lost a critical member of our intelligence division."

"Shikaku was a Jonin. You had reasons to trust he could stay alive in the battlefield," Tsunade rebutted.

Jiraiya was going to say something, but closed his mouth, chuckled, and looked at his wife. "You're going to find a justification for every one of my failings, aren't you?"

"You can bet I am," Tsunade said with a confident smirk. However, said smirk disappeared quickly, replaced by a scowl and a solemn expression. "Jiraiya, we're now at the most critical part of the war. Our son and the other two jinchuriki are out there in the open, vulnerable, and Akatsuki won't resist the temptation of catching them. If I were the enemy, I'd send whatever forces left into one final offensive in order to act as a distraction while sending somebody capable of capturing the jinchuriki.

"Orochimaru had the reanimations of my grandparents all this time, yet he kept them under wraps until Naruto and the others were no longer protected," Tsunade pointed out. "I'm sure that that bastard still has more heavyweights in reserve, and he will send all of them soon. We're now going to face Orochimaru. If we can beat him, we'll be able to undo the Impure World Resurrection, depriving the enemy of their strongest asset. And if we're to do that, I can't have you doubting yourself when we're so close to end this."

Jiraiya was left a little taken aback upon hearing that light reprimand. After regarding his bearings, though, he smiled again. "Guess you're right. I'll have time to mop over my failings as a leader once we're done with this shit."

Tsunade rolled her eyes, but smiled good naturedly. "Honestly Jiraiya, drop it. You're being annoying. No one expects you to do a perfect job. In fact, I believe that out of all the potential candidates, you were the best, both to be Hokage and to be the Supreme

Commander of the Alliance. And I'm not saying this just because I'm your wife."

Jiraiya held his hands defensively. "Hey, I'm not going to argue with you anymore. I don't think I can get anything out of it except a headache."

"Good," Tsunade said, and nodded.

Again, another moment of silence. Aside from the fire, they could hear a couple owls hooting.

"So... do you think we can take on the bastard?" Jiraiya asked. "I mean... I know you have the Rinnegan, but will it be enough? By this point, Orochimaru must have integrated quite a few Bloodline Limits into himself as well. Fighting a man with that many abilities... it's going to be tricky."

"Not to mention that we can't even kill him," Tsunade added. "Or else we won't be able to undo de jutsu and destroy all the reanimations at once."

"Do you really think that we can convince him to undo the jutsu?" Jiraiya asked, skeptical. "Orochimaru is too far gone. He will fight us to death, either his or ours, and the guy loves nothing but himself, meaning we can't use anything or anyone else as leverage against him. I know it won't destroy all the reanimations at once, but we already have you and the Hyuga sisters to destroy them permanently."

"Perhaps we could trick him," Tsunade suggested. "Put him under a genjutsu or something...?"

"I'm not that good with genjutsu, and neither are you. Plus, with that Sharingan of his, I doubt he wouldn't be able to easily break it," Jiraiya countered.

Tsunade was starting to become frustrated. Her nose scrunched up as she began to think what else they could do.

"Give it up, Hime. I'm not looking up to it, but we'll have to kill the bastard," Jiraiya said, hoping to make his wife reconsider.

Suddenly, an idea dawned upon Tsunade's mind. The scowl in her face disappeared, replaced by a smile of realization.

"Of course. Yes, we'll have to kill him," Tsunade said. "That doesn't mean we can't undo the jutsu ourselves after that."

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow, a little confused. "What are you thinking?"

Tsunade smiled confidently. "I just had an idea of how we can force Orochimaru to undo the jutsu. This is the plan..."

...

Mountain Graveyard

"Again. Your aberrations failed. *Again*," Obito seethed, as he angrily paced around the cavern that they were used as an improvised command center. "The three jinchuriki were out in the open, with no support and no place to hide, ripe for being caught. AND YOU LET THEM ESCAPE!"

Orochimaru was somehow able to keep a calm façade as he endured Obito's tirade, the last of many. He had to admit that the Uchiha had a point, his reanimations weren't as effective as they should have been. They were immortal, indestructible ninjas with unlimited amount of chakra, that were forced to obey the fallen Sannin's order to the letter. On paper, that would make them the perfect soldiers, but the Alliance was taking them on with surprising ease.

The answer would be that the jutsu has a weakness that Orochimaru hadn't anticipated. The answer would be, what weakness?

" Even discounting Tsunade and the Hyuga girls with the Truth Seeking Balls, many of my reanimations have been defeated rather quickly," Orochimaru reflected. "Seeing that they were unable to kill them, the enemy decided to seal them instead. Maybe the zombies still exist, but if they can't fight, that's irrelevant."

"You had the reanimation of Hashirama Senju as your slave, and you're telling me that wasn't enough to capture three jinchuriki?" Obito asked, incredulous, as he threw his arms into the air. "All you have to do is capture them, and then the war would have been won!"

" Obito's right. I thought that between Hashirama and Mito, they would be able to subdue the three jinchuriki. Hashirama is the most powerful ninja that ever lived, and he and his wife had the perfect skillset to counter a jinchuriki, yet the combined power of the three jinchuriki turned out to be greater. How can that be possible?"

"It seems that I made miscalculation while gauging the power of the targets," Orochimaru admitted, yet his confident demeanor didn't change in the slightest. "I don't know what they've been doing on that island, but the increase in power of the jinchuriki of the Nine and the Seven Tails has been... meteoric, to say the least. Given that it was so easy to make them abandon that giant turtle, it seemed that they didn't have enough power to match Mito, much less Hashirama."

"Didn't somebody tell you that you have an awful habit of underestimating your opponents?" Obito sneered, as he stomped towards him. "You think yourself you're so clever, so cunning, so strong, and then you let yourself be defeated by those same enemies you deemed as your inferiors."

"We haven't lost yet," Orochimaru said. "The jinchuriki are still out there, in the open. I still have plenty of strong reanimations that can take them on. This time, I'll overwhelm them with numbers instead of relying on a single, powerful puppet."

Obito was going to reply, when Zetsu emerged between the two of them. Even if the dual being was trying to hide it, it was obvious that

he was bringing even more bad news.

He let out a tired sigh, and rolled his eyes. "What now?"

"Uh... you better come with me, boss," the black half said, as he eyed Orochimaru, while extending his arm at Obito. "This is... something you need to see."

Wordlessly, Obito grabbed Zetsu's hand, and let the plant creature pull him into the ground through his odd way of teleportation, leaving Orochimaru alone in the cavern.

...

Forests of the Land of Fire, Nighttime

After their excruciating fight with Hashirama Senju and Mito Uzumaki, the jinchuriki trio of Naruto, Fu and Killer B wanted to do nothing but rest. Even if they knew that people were counting on them, they wouldn't be of much help if they arrived on the battlefield completely exhausted. Of course, there was the problem of finding a place to hide in order to escape from Akatsuki's ever vigilant gaze. Fortunately, the three jinchuriki came up with a rather ingenious idea.

After finding a good cluster of trees that would help cover their position, Fu used her chakra threads in order to create a large hollow cocoon that could be used as an improvised shelter. Naruto and Killer B then created and applied as many seals of protection, camouflage and privacy as possible in order to make it impossible to find. That would mean that their allies wouldn't be able to find them either, but it wasn't a risk they could afford to take.

Now, the three of them were sitting around a fire -thankfully, the makeshift shelter had a hole at the top to let the smoke out- quietly enjoying some rest and dinner. Unfortunately for them, the only food they had with them right now was some instant ramen Naruto had with him inside sealing scrolls. Not that they were complaining, it

saved them from hunting, and they were hungry enough to eat pretty much anything.

They dined in silence. That's it, until, from a burst of smoke, a small frog appeared before Naruto. The blond quickly slurped the noodles they were in his mouth, almost choking on them. However, just before Naruto could greet the messenger toad, Fu's hand shoot towards the newcomer and caught him.

"Yay, a frog!" Fu cheered. "We can dine frog's legs with the ramen!"

"Hey, what the hell are you saying!? First, I'm a toad, not a frog! Second, what's that talk about eating me!?" the toad complained, as he broke free from Fu's grasp.

"A toad? Like the ones Naruto summons?" Fu asked, scratching her head. "But those are much bigger..."

"We toads come in every size and shape!" the toad protested, before he turned at Naruto. "Hey there, Naruto. I sent your message to your pops as you asked me."

"Kosuke! So great to see you back!" Naruto cheered, a little louder than he was hoping. "So, did you tell my dad about what happened? Will he do something about us?"

"Eh, yeah, I did, but..." Kosuke began, as he rubbed the back of his head, while averting Naruto's gaze.

"But what?" Naruto asked.

"Jiraiya wasn't where you said he would be. He wasn't at the Ninja Alliance HQ," Kosuke revealed, much to the three humans' surprise. "He and Tsunade were in a forest, I think far to the north."

"... what?" Naruto asked, looking stumped. "What the hell were they doing there?"

"From what Jiraya told me, they've located Orochimaru's hideout, and he and Tsunade are going to face him," Kosuke told him. "Let's hope they put that snake monster down."

"Hey, that's good, right?" Fu asked, looking back and forth between Naruto and Killer B, who didn't appear to be any happier.

"Orochimaru's the one behind the reanimations, so if they beat him, the enemy will lose its strongest minions!"

Killer B looked back at her, and shook his head. "If the big boss is out, there will be no help. And the bad guys are going to keep making us yelp."

"Pretty much," Naruto agreed.

"Oh," Kosuke lamely said, looking down. "Hey, do you want us to take you to Mount Myoboku? You will be safe there."

Naruto shook his head. "I'm not going to abandon Killer B and Fu. Not to mention all the people out there fighting and dying for us. They've already done enough, they need our help."

"You sure?" Kosuke asked. "It could be arranged for your companions to be transported there as well, even if it may take a little time..."

"I'm sure," Naruto said, nodding. "Though, don't worry, I won't do anything stupid. I'll ask to be reverse summoned if the situation gets ugly, but I plan to use that as a last resort."

"Very well then. You're strong, and your pals also seem to be just as tough, so I trust you'll be good," Kosuke replied with a nod. "I'll tell the others to get ready to assist you as well as Jiraiya."

"Thanks, I'll appreciate that," Naruto replied.

"And if you need to send another message to your pop, don't hesitate to summon me," Kosuke said with a smile. "Anyway, I'll be

taking my leave now. Bye!"

And Kosuke disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving the three jinchuriki once again with nobody but each other. They continued eating in silence until all three of them finished their instant ramen. When they did, Fu decided to strike up a conversation.

"Man, that Hashirama dude was crazy strong," she said, as she leaned against the wall of the shelter-cocoon, while placing her hands behind her neck. "I hope they don't make us fight a reanimation stronger than that one."

"I find that unlikely. Hashirama is the strongest ninja who ever lived in recorded history," Naruto mentioned. "Orochimaru can't have somebody stronger because such person doesn't exist."

"I think you're forgetting about certain someone, that tree man has nothing on the great Killer B, son," Killer B boasted. "And he was lucky my big bro wasn't here, between the two of us we wouldn't taken more than five seconds to make him disappear!"

Naruto rolled his eyes, but chuckled at his fellow jinchuriki's rap, while Fu giggled.

" Well, maybe not somebody stronger, but I can think in somebody just as strong as Hashirama," Kurama interjected. **"Madara Uchiha."**

Naruto frowned upon hearing the name, and angrily crossed his arms, remember the pain he felt when the Nine Tails was almost ripped out of his body by a Summoning Jutsu. "Are you sure it was him? Because if Orochimaru got a piece of his DNA then..."

" While nobody knows where the Second Hokage buried Madara, Orochimaru has proved to be crafty and resourceful, so I wouldn't put past that man to get his hands on a DNA sample of Madara," Kurama said.

"Well, regardless of how strong that Madara is, if we beat Hashirama, we can beat him in the case we have to fight him again, right?" Fu asked, sounding like she needed to be reassured of that.

"Of course! Madara was never able to beat Hashirama, something you guys did do, so you shouldn't worry too much," Chomei helpfully encouraged.

"Then again, the fight against Hashirama was more narrow than I would have liked, so I don't look forward any similar fight," Gyuki tiredly said. **"And from what I heard, Madara was crazy strong too."**

"There was also our old man and his brother, but I find very unlikely for Orochimaru to get DNA from two people who died almost a millenium ago," Kurama added.

"I agree with numbers Nine and Seven, if more reanimations come we'll just launch them above heaven!" Killer B rapped. "All we have to do is help the Alliance fight and survive, while your mom and pop make sure that Orochimaru bastard doesn't stay alive."

"Yeah, that's the plan," Naruto confirmed.

"By the way, Number Nine, can you check the position of our friends? Just to make sure we don't take any wrong ends," Killer B asked.

"Sure," Naruto said, as he sat with his legs crossed, closed his eyes, and stayed still as he began to gather nature energy. Orange marks started to appear around his eyes as Sage Mode manifested, granting him far sensing abilities. The more nature energy he absorbed, the further he could expand his senses. "Alright, I have them! Yeah, you were right, they changed position and... hey, wait a second..."

"Something wrong, Number Nine? It seems like there's something that's not fine," Killer B inquired.

"The chakra concentration that I felt before is nowhere near as big as this one," Naruto said, worry slipping in his voice. "I'm sensing quite a few familiar chakra signatures, like that of Hagane, Kaida, Hanabi, Sasuke, Itachi, Neji, Lee and Tenten but... there are a lot of people missing."

"Perhaps there was a battle while we were fighting Hashirama?" Fu suggested.

"No, that can't be right. The Alliance has been fighting for weeks against Akatsuki, and while they had casualties, they weren't nothing too worrisome. There's no way they could have lost more than half their ninjas in a single battle..."

"Perhaps you aren't sensing them right," Fu said, as she also sat in the lotus position, and stayed still in order to activate Sage Mode. After a few minutes, she managed to expand her sensing range in order to reach Kurotsuchi's division. "Wait... you're right... there are far fewer people than the last time I sensed them!"

"See? I told you!" Naruto worriedly said. "Also... their chakra seems to be pretty weak..."

"Naruto," Fu called him. "You said you sensed Neji, Lee and Tenten, and so do I. But I can't sense their sensei..."

Naruto realized then that he hadn't sensed Gai-sensei either, and much to his horror, he realized he could no longer find his presence. Beads of cold sweat started to trickle down his body.

"What the hell happened there... and what kind of enemy could have killed such a powerful ninja like Gai-sensei?"

Kurama didn't say anything, but he already imagined the answer.

...

Undisclosed Location

Obito looked at Madara's unconscious form, partially submerged under a sap-like green substance inside a hole that served as a makeshift bathtub. He could see that his breath was shallow, but steady. Obito didn't know what was that substance, but the Zetsu told him it was a balm made from Hashirama's cells that had regenerative properties and would restore Madara to full health in no time.

He was unable to repress yet another sigh of exasperation. Zetsu stood behind the younger Uchiha, fidgeting uncomfortably.

"And when did he get out of the cocoon?" Obito asked, his eyes still trained on Madara.

"A few hours ago, boss," the white half replied.

"Did he know about the war?" Obito asked, almost hissing with anger. "Did he know what we were doing?"

"Yes, sir. We told him everything that happened since he entered the cocoon, until now," the white half confirmed.

"And instead of seeking me, or going to hunt the jinchuriki, he goes to pick a fight with a random division of the Ninja Alliance?" Obito asked again. Despite his apparent calm tone, Zetsu could sense he was so angry, he wouldn't be surprised if steam came out of his ears.

"He said he wanted to test his new powers and abilities before continuing with the plan, and thought a large gathering of enemy ninjas would be an ideal target," the black half supplied.

"*Not so ideal, given how badly he ended,*" Obito bitterly thought. "And who the hell was able to put Madara Uchiha of all people in such a sorry state?"

"From what we know, a Konoha ninja named Maito Gai," the white half replied.

"Maito Gai?" Obito repeated, this time turned around to glare at the plant-like, dual being. "That idiot with the ridiculous haircut? Maito Gai did this!?"

"He used some kind of forbidden jutsu that granted him an immense power," the black half explained. "Something called the Celestial Gates or something like that."

Obito felt his anger subside a little. He knew about the Eight Gates. They were great sources of power, but came at an equally great cost. He could imagine that if Gai opened all eight Gates, he'd had a power to match Madara's.

"I presume Gai is dead then?" Obito asked.

"Very much, yes. His body was burned to ashes by the very power he was wielding," the black half said.

"At the very least we won't have to deal with that again," Obito said.

Zetsu nodded but didn't reply, while Obito turned back, and went to watch the wounded Madara once again, followed by an uncomfortably long moment of silence.

"Um, boss..." the white half began. "What are we going to do?"

"Deploy all our remaining troops on as many fronts as possible. Tell Orochimaru to send whatever reanimations he still has left to those very fronts as well," Obito ordered. "The goal of this attack is to keep the Alliance occupied while we catch the jinchuriki."

"I see," the black half said. "And what is the plan for that, boss?"

"I'm tired of delegating. I'm going to catch those stubborn jinchuriki myself," Obito declared. "It's time to end this farce of a war."

...

Second Division Base Camp, Nighttime

"Resolute. I need to appear resolute," Kurotsuchi thought, fighting back the tears. "The troops can't see you crying like a baby. They're looking up to you to guide them, and you can't afford to look weak."

The Second Division, or what was left of it, was resting inside their new base, an underground cavern that had been dug by the Earth Release users, the young Tsuchikage included. After Madara's brutal attack, the survivors wanted something not in the open. The few sealmasters that had survived had placed privacy and camouflage seals around the area in order to mislead enemy scouts.

There were no bonfires due the little ventilation of the man-made caves, with a few torches and small campfires scattered around the area providing some light and heat. Unlike the aftermath of their previous battles, there was no noise, other than the small murmur of a few conversations here and there. The mood was understandably gloomy. While many of the survivors were veterans from the previous war who also experienced their share of losing battles, it was nothing compared to what had happened a few hours prior.

Right now, Kurotsuchi was in front of a ninja of the Yamanaka clan, wearing a special helmet that amplified his psychic powers, in order to create a mental connection between the young Kage and the HQ. Now more than any time, they needed to know what had happened here.

"Commander, I'm ready when you are," the Yamanaka ninja in front of her informed.

Kurotsuchi merely nodded affirmatively. She could feel how her mind was linked to a network of many other minds, all of them which she recognized.

"I was expecting for you to contact us, Kurotsuchi. I was fearing for your life," she could hear the voice of her grandpa inside her head. She could hear the worry in his voice, despite the fact that she hadn't said anything yet. *"The sensor division detected a massive spike of chakra coming from your position, as well as a massive loss of*

chakra signatures. What happened? Did Akatsuki launched a second attack after that one? For some reason, we were unable to determine the size of the enemy force from our end."

Kurotsuchi gulped, as she prepared for what she was going to say. "It was one enemy, grandpa. One that claimed to be Madara Uchiha."

There was a moment of silence, before Onoki spoke again.

" Of course. Given that we knew Orochimaru had DNA samples of Hashirama Senju, it would be wishful thinking to think he didn't have those of Madara as well," Onoki said in resignation. *"Even then, Madara alone couldn't-*"

"Let me finish first, grandpa," Kurotsuchi cut him. "First of all, it wasn't a reanimation. It was Madara Uchiha in the flesh."

" What!?" Onoki yelled. *"But... but that..."*

" That can't be right, girl," Chiyo's voice interceded. *"If Madara Uchiha was still alive to this day, he'd be more than a century old. No human being has ever lived that long."*

"Well, he didn't look like a reanimation, given the lack of cracked skin and black eyes," Kurotsuchi said. "Then again, if he was a reanimation or not it's irrelevant. What matters the most is his power. Grandpa, you fought Madara Uchiha in the past, right? Did he have Wood Release, or the Rinnegan?"

" Of course not! He had that blasted Mangekyo Sharingan..." Onoki began, before catching on his granddaughter's implication. *"Wait... are you telling me the Madara you fought had such Bloodline Limits?"*

"Yes. In fact, I better start from the beginning so you can understand what we went through. You see..."

Kurotsuchi began to explain the battle against Madara. How he carved a path of corpses with taijutsu alone, before fighting the division's most powerful ninjas, only to reveal that he was toying with them and using them to test his powers, before finally deciding to finish them off with not one but several Chibaku Tensei at once.

According to the information gathered by the Uchiha brothers during their ill-fated battle against their elder clansman, Madara had undergone the same rejuvenation process Rin Nohara had gone through, gaining Wood Release as well as a potent healing factor. And on top of that, by mixing his Uchiha genes with Hashirama's Senju cells, he had managed to evolve his Sharingan to Rinnegan, effectively becoming the most powerful ninja who ever lived.

" There's something I don't understand, Tsuchikage-sama," Ao intervened. "If Madara Uchiha is so immensely powerful, how did you manage to defeat him?"

"A Konoha Ninja, Maito Gai, used a forbidden technique known as the Eight Celestial Gates, which granted him a massive power boost, big enough to match Madara, but at the cost of his life," Kurotsuchi explained. "However, despite managing to keep Madara at bay long enough for us to escape, and delivering a devastating final blow, we were unable to confirm if Madara is truly dead nor not."

" Yes, I know that technique," Ao said. "Another Konoha ninja, Maito Dai, also used that very same technique to fight all of our Seven Swordsmen at once, and kill four of them, also at the cost of his life."

" It's kind of poetic that his son went down the same way Dai did, isn't it?" Chiyo sadly reflected.

"Yes. The casualties my division suffered at Madara's hands have been catastrophic," Kurotsuchi said, unable to repress a few tears at the thought of her allowing so many of her troops dying. "If it wasn't for Gai's sacrifice... that monster would have wiped out my division completely."

" So we better prepare for Madara's eventual return, then," Onoki said, dreading the thought of facing that man again, especially now that his powers had increased so dramatically. "Perhaps our most powerful ninjas working together can take him down."

"Will that be enough?" Kurotsuchi asked, unsure.

There was a moment of silence before Onoki gave his answer.

" I don't know, but we'll have to try," the old man said. "As if we didn't have enough troubles with Kumo's secret island being attacked..."

"They attacked the secret island!?" Kurotsuchi asked, alarmed.
"When? How? Did they capture any of the-"

" A message reached us a few hours ago. We kept no communication between the island and the rest of our forces as not to give Akatsuki any lead to its location, but even then it wasn't enough," Onoki said.

" The Raikage said he had his mind scanned by a Yamanaka reanimation. It was only a matter of time that they found that island," Chiyo intervened. "Fortunately, word is that, despite leaving several casualties, Akatsuki was unable to capture the jinchuriki, and they escaped into the mainland."

"But that means that the jinchuriki are alone and unprotected," Kurotsuchi said. She then looked around. "I'd ask where they are, but my division is no shape to conduct an extensive search operation."

" We weren't expecting you to, child," Onoki replied. "Now if that's all, I suggest you to take some rest. We'll send you reinforcements and supplies as soon as we can."

"I will. Thanks, gramps,"

...

As said before, the atmosphere among what was left of the Second Division was gloom. Not only because of the crushing defeat at Madara's hands, not just because the sheer amount of casualties, but also because said casualties left friends and loved ones behind. And among those many unfortunate souls was a trio of Konoha ninjas who had just lost their Jonin-sensei in the battle against Madara.

Lee and Tenten broke down almost immediately after the underground shelter was set, and spent most of the time crying their eyes out. Even if Neji also shed a few tears, she managed to keep his composure. Perhaps because he wasn't used to display his emotions so openly, perhaps because, as the new leader of the Close Combat Squad.

"I can't believe that Gai-sensei is... is... gone..." Tenten said, not daring to say the word she meant to say.

"He was so strong... I never thought there was somebody capable of... of pushing Gai-sensei into sacrificing like that for us..." Lee cried.

"This is a war. People die. Shikamaru lost his dad not that long ago," Tenten said, still crying a little. "But... but you never think it's going to be somebody... somebody close to you..."

"No. You never do," Neji interceded. "Until you lose somebody, and realize how close death is to us. Especially when you're a ninja."

"You're talking about the Uchiha Insurrection, right?" Lee asked. "I know your clan was hit really hard during that tragic night."

"Yes. However, it happened almost a decade ago, and I didn't lose any of my close relatives, so I was among the lucky ones," Neji explained. "But even if I didn't know most of them, seeing so many of my clansmen die was a harrowing experience. I wasn't even out of the Academy, yet that day taught me what it means to be a ninja: to see your friends and loved ones die at any moment."

"Really? So... whenever we go to a mission... do you expect any of us to die?" Tenten asked.

"I prefer to look at it from a different perspective: what can I do to make sure all of us go home alive?" Neji rethorically asked. "And I can asume that Gai-sensei thought that way. That's why he sacrificed himself, so we could have another chance to fight. Another chance to live."

"And we'll use this chance to avenge Gai-sensei-" Tenten began.

"No. That..." Lee interrupted. "That's not something Gai-sensei would have wanted. Gai-sensei considered revenge to be mostly unyouthful."

"Not that we can do anything against somebody who wields such a monstrous power," Neji added. "If we want to honor Gai-sensei's sacrifice, the best thing we can do is to continue doing what we've been doing so far: keep fighting against the enemy to the best of our ability, and help end this war as best as we can."

Tenten wanted to protest. To shout, to yell, about how Gai's death was an injustice that needed to be punished. But as much as her emotional side wanted her to do that, her rational side couldn't help but agree with everything Neji was saying. Madara was way out of their league, and if he died, it wouldn't be by their hand.

So Tenten didn't say anything. Neither did Lee nor Neji. The group remained silent for the next few minutes, slowly absorbing the Hyuga prodigy's words.

"So... given that Gai-sensei is gone," Lee spoke, braking the silence. He looked at Neji. "That makes you the leader of our squad, given that you're the one of the greater rank."

"I guess so. But that's irrelevant now, since we're part of a much larger division," Neji pointed out, as he looked down. Then, he raised his eyes, and locked them onto his two teammates. "But like Gai-

sensei did before, as the commanding officer of this squad, I'll do my best to keep you two alive."

"And we will do our best to make sure you won't have to sacrifice yourself like Gai-sensei did," Tenten said energetically, as she clenched her hand into a fist. "This squad won't lose anymore members! Gai-sensei's sacrifice won't be in vain!"

Neji just crossed his arms and nodded, while Lee threw a fist in Tenten's direction, as a way to show his agreement. They would make it to the end of this war alive. They would make their sensei proud.

...

Not far away from there, Sasuke was sitting alone at the foot of another small campfire. He was shivering a little, as the underground cavern was cold, and the campfire didn't provide much heat, but it was better than nothing. He heard the steps of somebody who was walking towards him. He didn't turn his head around since he knew who he was.

"Hey," Itachi said, as he sat in front of him. "You okay, brother?"

"Yeah. A little exhasuted, but I'll live," Sasuke tiredly replied. "So... how is Natsu doing?"

"She's okay. The medics have already healed all her wounds. Nothing too serious. Thankfully," Itachi said, breathing out.

"And... how are you doing?" Sasuke asked.

Itachi visibly deflated. His eyes looked downwards, to the hard stone floor. "Physically, I'm okay. I'll need a day or two of rest before I'm at my best, so let's hope we get a little reprieve before we're called into the action again."

"You said 'physically'," Sasuke pointed out. "And mentally?"

"Mentally... not so good," Itachi honestly replied. He looked at Sasuke with tired eyes. "I keep replaying the battle in my mind, wondering what we could have done differently in order to beat Madara but... nothing comes to mind. The gap between us is too big."

Sasuke raised an eyebrow, and scowled at his older brother. "You don't seriously think it was your responsibility alone to end that maniac, do you?"

"If it wasn't mine, then whom?" Itachi replied.

"You aren't the only ninja in this division, Itachi. Nor the only one with a powerful Bloodline Limit. Many of them tried their luck against Madara, and all of them failed," Sasuke pointed out.

"True. Guess I'm not that used to failing," Itachi admitted.

"Really? I know you're strong, but even you must fail sometimes," Sasuke pointed out.

"Less than the average ninja. With the missions I usually get, failure isn't something that I can afford," Itachi said. "And when I fail, mass death follows."

Sasuke chuckled humorlessly. "Aren't you being a little overdramatic there?"

"Do I need to remind you of the Uchiha Insurrection?" Itachi pointedly asked.

Sasuke shot his older brother an unamused glare. "What? You think you could have stopped that by yourself?"

"I reviewed what happened in my mind quite a lot of times, and came up with at least five possible courses of action I could have taken in order to minimize the bloodshed of that night to a fraction of what it was," Itachi argued. "Then again, I don't blame myself for what

happened there. I was even younger than you are now, so I think I did the best I could have done back then."

"I do think you -both of us- did the best we could. You said it yourself, Madara was too strong, so no point in moping about it," Sasuke said.

Itachi let out a sigh. "Guess I'm not that used to fight against enemies so superior to me either."

"You always told me not to let my power make me confident, and that there will always be somebody much stronger than you are," Sasuke reminded him.

Itachi chuckled sadly. "Guess I'm not that good at applying my own advice either, am I?"

"Probably because you were never in a situation when you needed to," Sasuke told him.

Itachi merely acknowledged Sasuke's point with a nod. Silence then befell between the two brothers, who stayed like that for several hours.

...

Sometime later, sunrise

Dawn came a few hours later, when the sun rose and bathed the entire continent in light, driving the night coat of shadows away. Of course, that isn't something the people of the Second Division would know, given that most of them were hidden underground.

Despite the lack of natural sunlight, a girl that had been asleep for hours woke up shortly after the sun started to rise. Hanabi Hyuga stirred in her sleep, as her consciousness slowly returned. She opened her eyes, blinking a few times to adjust to the light of the instance, which was rather dim. Slowly, she sat up, and turned around.

"Hey, look, she's awake!"

Hanabi was quickly surrounded by her two teammates, who looked at her with worried eyes.

"Oh boy, thank goodness you woke up! After the beating that Madara asshole gave you, we feared for the worst!" Kaida said, before her mood lightened up, and gave her twin brother a hard slap on the back. "Thank goodness my little bro is a superb medic!"

"What happened? Where... where are we?" she asked, looking around. "Did Madara win?"

"We're in an underground shelter made via Earth Release;" Hagane began to explain. "As for what happened..."

The white haired Senju told Hagane how Sasuke and Itachi took over from Hanabi, but even the Uchiha duo failed to make any significant damage to the Madara, and how Madara decided to stop fooling around and showcase his true power in the form of not one nor two, but six Chibaku Tensei. When Hagane was going to tell her about the second round of meteors and Gai's sacrifice, Kaida tugged her brother's sleeve, and nodded to a pair of Iwa ninjas that were walking by.

"... yes, I heard Tsuchikage-sama herself say it. The hideout of the jinchuriki has been attacked by Akatsuki," one of the Iwa ninja, a man, said. "Though I heard the jinchuriki escaped, at the very least."

"Let's hope the other divisions move out and secure them," his companion, a kunoichi, replied. "After all the ninjas that died to protect those three, especially today, they better don't let Akatsuki get their hands on them and make all of this in vain..."

They continued talking, but the trio didn't listen. They already had all the information they considered relevant.

"You heard that?" Hagane asked.

"Yes! Naruto-niisan is in danger!" Kaida said, her voice cracking a little. "We need to go out and help him!"

Kaida tried to stand up and run outside, but Hagane grabbed her by the arm.

"Kaida, no! You don't know where Naruto-niisan and the other two are," Hagane said. "And even if you were, neither of us are in condition to go out and fight."

Hanabi wanted to say something, until an idea dawned upon her. She sat down in the lotus position, and focused her chakra. The twins took notice of this.

"Hanabi? What are you doing?" Hagane asked.

"I don't think Sage Mode is going to help here," Kaida added.

"I'm not gathering nature energy. We may not be able to help, but I'm going to ask somebody who can," Hanabi said. "Now shut up, I need to focus."

...

Konoha, Hyuga Estate

Despite being an early riser, Hinata was still asleep. She had been sleeping for quite a lot of time since her return to Konoha. The fight against Toneri had left her drained, more than what she wanted to admit, so her body was soaking on all the rest it could gather.

" *Hinata!*"

Her nights were dreamless, given how deep her slumber was. This one, however was going to be an exception. Soon, Hinata found herself inside a weird but familiar place, the ancient temple of purple stone where she first met Hamura Otsutsuki. And then there was that voice calling her name time after time, each time more desperate.

" *Hinata!*"

"Uh..." Hinata groaned as she tried to get on her feet, only to realize that she was already standing. She blinked a couple times, before realizing that there was somebody in front of her. Somebody she knew very well. "Hanabi?"

"Finally!" the younger sister said, throwing her hands into the air. "What took you so long?"

"Sorry Hanabi-chan, I was asleep. My last fight left me a little exhasuted, but I'm almost back to my full strength," Hinata explained. She tilted her head, and looked at her little sister with worried eyes. "You seem agitated, it's something wrong?"

"Something wrong? Heh, you have NO idea."

Hanabi then explained Hinata Madara's mysterious appearance, how he wrecked the Second Division, and how Gai had to sacrifice himself in order to stop him.

"Gai-sensei is dead!? No!" she cried, covering her mouth with her hands. While she herself didn't have much relation with the green-clad Jonin save from that time she trained under him to increase her endurance and strength, that was her cousin's Jonin-sensei. "Neji-niisan and his teammates must be devastated."

"And that's not all," Hanabi cotnined. "I heard that they attacked Kumo's secret island. Naruto and the others managed to escape, but they're still out there. I hope you're well rested, because your boyfriend needs you. Like, right now."

Hinata nodded. "Yes. Thanks for telling me this, Hanabi-chan. In the meantime, stay safe. I sense that you aren't at your best either."

"Don't worry about me, sis. But thanks. Now go."

...

Hinata opened her eyes, and found herself in her room at the Hyuga estate. There wasn't much time to act. She quickly went to the kitchen and prepared herself a breakfast that would keep her going for a long time, which she ate as fast as she could.

Then, she raced back to her room, tossed her nightgown, and put on a thigh-length battle kimono, purple in color with dark blue trimming and tied with a white obi. Lastly, she put on a pair of blue knee-length boots, before grabbing her ninja tool pouch.

Once she was ready, she rushed out of her room, and once she was outside, she took off into the sky, flying upwards until she reached five hundred meters in altitude. Once she was high enough, she directed chakra to her eyes in order to increase the vision range of the Tenseigan.

"Come on Naruto-kun... where are you?" Hinata asked, as her eyes scanned kilometers and kilometers of land in front of her. She was starting to grow desperate, until she found a very powerful chakra signature, one that radiated with the strength of the sun. Accompanying him were other two signatures of similar strength, one she was familiar with, the other unknown. Her lips curved into a smile. "There you are!"

Wasting no more time, Hinata shot forward. Even at her fast speed, she'd take many hours to reach her boyfriend. She prayed that nothing would happen before she could arrive to his side.

...

Somewhere in the Forests of the North of the Land of Fire

Obito looked at the mass of green that extended before him. Among all that green, his preys awaited.

"You have evaded me for a long time, Naruto. This will be the last time I'll have to fight you. You and your fellow jinchuriki will fulfill your

roles as the sacrifices that will allow a better world to exist," Obito said, as he leaped forward. "Let's go!"

Behind him, the reanimations of six former jinchuriki followed the Akatsuki, the tools Obito would use to catch his elusive foes.

Author's Note: I hope you enjoyed this chapter of relaxation, because it's the last one you're going to get until the epilogue. The pieces are set on the board, and the final part of the war is about to begin; Jiraiya and Tsunade are ready to face Orochimaru and put an end to the man they used to call friend and teammate, as well as to shut down the Edo Tense, while Obito is done relying on others and will try to hunt Naruto and the others himself. And of course, Madara is still out there, ready to rejoin the battle.

And thus Hinata rejoins the fight! I bet many of you were very eager to see her again, given that she's been absent for more than ten chapters. She will dive into the action soon, but not very soon. She's still far away from the main battlegrounds, and even if she can fly, she can't do so at supersonic speed.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

There's still one more chapter to wrap up the first half of the war, so to speak, and set up the pieces for the final battles, before the climax of the war, and thus the story, can finally begin.

And remember, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Moving Towards the Endgame

Author's Note: One last chapter to wrap everything up before we can dive towards the final battles. Enjoy:

Chapter 124:

Moving towards the Endgame

or

In with the cool stuff

The next morning, following Obito's orders, the remaining White Zetsu clones, a little less than half the initial numbers, launched a continent-wide attack on several areas in order to keep the Alliance occupied while the jinchuriki were vulnerable. Orochimaru also sent all the reanimations he had left to support the bulk of the Akatsuki army into the battlefield.

As the sun started to rise in the horizon, a new days of battles began. However, while few people knew it at the moment, this sunset also marked the end of the war, for this day of battles would be the last.

...

Ninja Alliance HQ

The Ninja Alliance HQ was in a state of chaos and confusion. Reports came in from the scouts, officers asked for orders, while Onoki tried to make a sense of everything that was going on while giving proper orders to make sure everything didn't fall apart.

The reason? Recent scout reports said that Akatsuki had launched multiple assaults at once on many points of the Land of Fire and the

Land of Lightning, with a large amount of Zetsu and reanimations. Considering Obito's boast of having an army of one hundred thousand White Zetsu clones and the amount of Zetsu casualties among said clones, the numbers of this assault suggested that Akatsuki was sending everything they had left in one last desperate attack.

"... and tell the Mizukage to head south and stand her ground there. If she's in trouble, she can fall back and ask the Raikage's division for relief," Onoki ordered.

The ninja he just told his orders bowed his head, and disappeared from there, in order to transmit them.

"The fact that this multiple front assault came right after the secret island was attacked is no coincidence," Chiyo chimed in. "They want to stop us from retrieving the jinchuriki."

"I'm aware of that, but what else are we supposed to do?" Onoki said in exasperation. "Let those armies roam unopposed through the continent?"

"With some luck, the jinchuriki will meet with one of the divisions of the Land of Fire," Ao intervened. "Which would increase the power of said division while keeping the jinchuriki safe and monitored."

"We can't just depend on luck," Onoki argued.

"No, we can't. But what else can we do?" Chiyo replied. "The best we can do is direct the troops from here, and hope that they finish their fights quickly so they can move towards the jinchuriki's position."

"Do we know anything about Jiraiya and Tsunade?" Onoki asked.

"Nothing, sir. As far as we know, they must have reached the place where Orochimaru should be, if the information was accurate," Mabui said, as she checked a scroll. "Then again, we don't know

how long it may take for them to force Orochimaru to undo the jutsu. Or if they can."

Onoki prayed that they would be successful. Getting rid of those undead was going to be critical if they wanted to win the war.

...

Land of Frost

"Poison Mist!"

Shizune exhaled a cloud of purple smoke at a group of incoming White Zetsu who were running into her. All of them were engulfed by the cloud, and they suffocated in a matter of seconds.

"I shouldn't waste my time with these small fries, but for some reason I keep attracting them like moths to a flame," the medic nin said. Thanks to her Sage Mode, she was able to sense every single one of the ninjas and enemies in the battlefield around her. She tried to find a suitable enemy, when she detected a powerful chakra signature coming at her. "Okay, this seems to be a much better opponent. Let's see who-"

"Wind Release: Razor Stream!"

Said enemy released a thin stream of super pressurized air at Shizune, moving it in an arc in order to slice her to bits. Shizune, however, already had a defense in place. She formed several hand seals.

"Sage Art: Water Release Maelstrom Shield!"

A torrent of water burst around the black haired medic-nin, which immediately began to spin around her forming a spiraling tower of water. The slicing attack hit the water column, but it failed to break through it. As the defensive jutsu receded, Shizune smiled at her opponent.

"Not bad, but as you can see, I- wait a minute..." Shizune said, as she could see now who the attacker was. A Konoha ninja in his thirties, with a pretty face -cracked skin and blackened eyes notwithstanding- and long, blue hair that fell down his back. "Uncle Dan?"

"Uncle...?" Dan replied, looking confused. He narrowed his eyes at the woman in front of him. "Wait... Shizune-chan? Is that you?"

"Yes, uncle, it's me," Shizune confirmed. She covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh Kami... I wasn't expecting to see you here... despite the fact that, with your reputation, I should have guessed that Orochimaru would have resurrected you."

"Oh goodness Shizune-chan... you've grown so much. You were nothing but a little girl the last time I saw you... it makes me happy to see that you've grown into such a pretty woman and skilled ninja."

Without further warning, Dan pulled out several shuriken and threw them at Shizune. Shizune's hands projected a pair of blue chakra blades as she activated her Chakra Scalpel jutsu, and used it to deflect all of them. While she was busy doing so, Dan weaved more seals for another jutsu.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Dan breathed a massive stream of fire towards his niece. However, Shizune was quick enough to jump backwards while making more hand seals for a counterattack.

"Water Release: Great Water Wall!"

Shizune expelled from her mouth a huge amount of water, forming a torrent that met Dan's fire attack in the middle. While both jutsu seemed to struggle against each other, in a matter of seconds Shizune's water attack overpowered Dan's fire jutsu, not only because of the elemental advantage, but also because of her jutsu carried more power thanks to Senjutsu.

When the gigantic wave was about to crush Dan, the blue haired man jumped into the air, letting the wave crash below him, while landing safely on the water.

"Incredible," Dan gushed. "I would never have imagined that you'd grow into such a powerful kunoichi. Not even Tsunade was that strong!"

"Thank you, uncle. That's Senjutsu to you," Shizune said. "And Tsunade-sama is still much stronger than I am."

"Wait, Senjutsu? How... how did you learn it?" Dan asked in shock, before he lunged at his niece, kunai in hand.

"It's... a very long story," Shizune replied, as she parried her uncle's blow, before pushing him back with a powerful kick. "One that I can't properly tell while I'm fighting for my life. As strong as I am now, I still need to be focused on the fight if I'm to beat a ninja of your caliber."

"I see," Dan conceded. "What about Tsunade then? Can you tell me what's she's doing?"

"Your death devastated her. Probably even more than me," Shizune revealed. "She spent a few years wandering around aimlessly with me as her only company, until she returned to Konoha for personal reasons. She then married Jiraiya, and had three kids, one adopted and the other two biological."

"Jiraiya? Heh... so that white haired pervert finally did it..." Dan said, sounding between happy and melancholic. On one hand, no one was happy to know that the woman you loved was with another man, and Dan was no exception. On the other hand, if Tsunade was happy, so was Dan.

Dan attacked once again, but his attack was oddly slower, which allowed Shizune to dodge easily. That moment, upon seeing the way her uncle was reacting, Shizune had a revelation, and remembered Jiraiya's tale about his fight with Minato and Kushina, how their spirits managed

"You'd like to know that I'm also married too, and have a couple of beautiful children," Shizune said sincerely. "If only you could meet them..."

"Really? That's-" suddenly Dan froze mid sentence, as if he was having a stroke, much to the medic-nin's confusion. Then, Dan's blue eyes turned white, and his mouth curved into an ugly smirk. "I'm sorry, but you aren't going to liberate his soul with some sob story!"

Shizune gasped upon hearing Dan speaking with Orochimaru's voice. So the snake had finally wised up and realized one of his justu's weak points. That means that Shizune had to defeat and seal her late uncle the old fashioned way.

...

Lightning Desert

Akatsuki had only sent a division made of five people in order to attack the Land of Lightning, and Rasa's Fourth Division had been dispatched to deal with it. Why a whole division for only a small squad, somebody may ask? The answer would be that those five people were the reanimations of five previous Kages: Second Mizukage Gengejutsu Hozuki, Second Tsuchikage Mu the Invisible Man, Third Raikage A, Third Kazekage Yoritomo, and lastly, the Second Hokage Tobirama Senju.

In front of the division stood Rasa, the Fourth Kazekage, as he watched the undead Kage quintet walking towards them at a steady pace.

"Here they come," Darui, who was a few steps behind the Kazekage, said. "How are we going to take them down, commander?"

Rasa used to wonder why the Kumo jonin seemed to shadow him like that. Sometimes even trying to strike up a friendly banter, as if pretending to bond. He found later that Darui was the current Raikage's right hand man, so being close to a Kage must be natural

to him. Still, not that the grumpy Kazekage was going to complain, given that the Kumo swordsman's knowledge would be useful for this battle.

"For the time being, keep them occupied while my children enter Sage Mode," Rasa said, as he looked at his children, several rows back, sitting on the ground in the lotus position, drawing nature energy. "I know my predecessor and have a good idea how to fight him. I take you're familiar with the Third Raikage?"

"The Third Raikage was my Jonin-sensei," Darui revealed. "The only people who know him better than I do are his sons."

"Good. Then I suppose you'll be able to keep him at bay, at the very least," Rasa said, nodding. "The other three Kages are going to be a problem. We have information on them, but no one who had dealt with them in life. This battle won't end without a lot of casualties on our side."

"Maybe, but sadly wars aren't so dull as to leave with no deaths," Darui replied. His visible eye narrowed. "They're getting close."

"Yes. We better begin then," Rasa said.

The Fourth Kazekage made a single hand seal, kneeled down and placed both hands on the ground. Suddenly, a tsunami of golden sand made from the normal desert sand rose over the quintet of undead Kages, threatening to crush them under it.

However, the Third Kazekage took a step forward, and made several hand seals. From under his clothes emerged several clouds of iron sand, quickly growing in size in order to match Rasa's golden tsunami, and successfully blocking the attack.

"Golden sand... so you've been sent to deal with me, Rasa?" Yoritomo pondered, as he watched his successor in the distance, surrounded by ninjas of many villages. "Wonder how-"

"Aw come on, I can't believe that guy made me team up with this asshole again!" Gengetsu protested, cutting Yoritomo.

"The feeling's mutual, you eyebrow-less freak" Mu replied.

"Oh, the walking mummy is calling me a freak? Now that's rich!" Gengetsu replied with a mirthless laugh. "Hey, why don't you-"

"Enough you two!" the Third Raikage roared. "NONE of us are enjoying this situation, and your constant whining is only making it worse! Focus on making sure our opponents know how to fight and seal us."

"Well said. We can't afford letting Akatsuki win this battle, and we must do our part to ensure their defeat," Tobirama praised.

"You shut up as well!" the Third Raikage roared at the albino Senju. "This is your fault! Why the hell did you have to invent such a jutsu!?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt such an enlightening conversation, but our opponents are approaching," the Third Kazekage reminded them.

And indeed, the bodies of the five undead Kages began to move on their own once again. Mu took off into the sky, while the remaining earthbound Kages split in order to deal with a portion of the Fourth Division each.

The Third Raikage started to make hand seals. "Guys, you better have some good Wind Release users to counter this, or else you're going to be in a world of pain! Lightning Release: Black Tiger!"

Upon finishing the seal sequence, A brought his hands together, which began to crackle with pitch black electricity. A black lightning bolt shot from his hands, flying towards a large group of Allied ninjas. It grew in size as it moved forward, while taking the form of a black tiger with white stripes. The elemental tiger let out a roar as it prepared to pounce over its preys.

"Lightning Release: Black Panther!"

However, before the elemental tiger could lay a claw on any Allied ninjas, it was intercepted by an equally large panther also made of black lightning. The two electrical felines struggled against each other, until they destabilized and exploded into a mass of pitch black electricity. The Third Raikage was taken aback at first.

"Another Black Lightning user?" A asked in shock. "It can only be..."

"Sup, boss. Long time no see, huh?" Darui asked, as he landed in front of him, cleaver in hand. "Sorry for blocking your jutsu like that, but hey, can't let my comrades die, can I?"

"Darui," A said, and he smirked. "Good to see you boy. You seem in good health. And that Black Lightning jutsu was amazing! I knew I made the right choice by picking you as one of my students!"

"You flatter me, boss. Still, let's hope you don't find fighting me too dull," Darui said, as he started to make hand seals. "Storm Release: Laser Circus!"

Darui brought his hands together, a halo of light spreading around them, and shot from his fingers multiple beams. Said beams homed onto Darui's target, the former Raikage, all of them finding their mark, resulting in a chain of explosions. However, Darui didn't hold his breath for the result, and indeed, once the resulting clouds of smoke and dust dispelled, A was still there, completely unharmed as if the attack didn't have any effect.

"Tch. Just like I feared," Darui said, taking a step backwards, while placing his cleaver in a defensive stance.

"If you knew such an attack wasn't going to have any effect, why use it?" the Third Raikage asked.

"I still had to try," Darui replied.

That moment, A's body was engulfed by a cloak of blue chakra and lightning bolts. Then, in a fraction of a second, he was in front of Darui, and thrust his hand forward.

"Hell Stab: Four Fingers!"

Even if he was unable to match his speed, Darui was able to block the lethal attack in time with his lightning-enhanced cleaver, while also deflecting the finger jab aside, since taking the attack directly would have resulted in his weapon wrecked. Still, the hit produced a shockwave so powerful, it hurled the Kumo Jonin backwards several meters, falling on his back and dropping his cleaver in the process.

"Damn!" he cursed, as he tried to get back on his feet before his former leader would kill him then and there.

However, before the undead Raikage could continue his assault, a mass of kunai, shuriken and other weapons rained upon him, and while none of them caused any harm, they did hindered his charge. Darui then felt as if an invisible force pulled him backwards, but said force made him land on his feet.

"Hey, you okay, pal?" a new voice asked. Darui then saw that it wasn't an invisible force that had pulled him back, but a hooded Suna ninja who had used chakra threads to do so. There were a trio of puppets standing besides him.

"Yeah. Thank you, uh..."

"Kankuro," Kankuro said, before shooting another chakra thread at his fallen cleaver, and pulling it towards its owner, who caught it expertly. "You're quite brave for facing that guy alone. He looks to be quite the piece of work."

"I am one of the ninjas who know the Third Raikage the most, hence I must be among those to face him," Darui explained. "And you're right, 'piece of work' is quite the accurate term to describe-"

"Watch out!"

The two Jonin were alerted by a cry of warning as the Raikage charged forward, plowing through the mass of ninjas in front of him, either throwing them away or trampling over them, in his path towards Darui and Kankuro.

"Tamotsu, time to shine!" Kankuro said, as he motioned a hand, and one of his puppets, one carrying a large shield, jumped between them and the Raikage. "Mechanical Light Shield Block!"

The seals on the large shield started to glow with a blue light, as a shield of chakra spread outwards, covering not only the puppet, but also those close around it. The Raikage once again struck with a four-fingered jab. The blow carried so much force, the resulting shockwave almost made everybody else lose their balance, and the earth shook a little. But much to Darui's surprise, the puppet didn't break.

"What the...? What kind of puppet is able to withstand my strongest blows?" A asked in shock.

Kankuro smirked. "A puppet that's being controlled by a Sage!"

"Sage...?" Darui repeated, as a realization dawned upon him. *"Oh, I see. I was told that after I was sealed by the Gold and Silver Brothers, a trio of Suna ninjas that were also Sages defeated them... this must be one of them... with his help, then we can defeat the Third Raikage with less casualties than I feared!"* he thought.

With renewed resolve, Darui rejoined the battle against his former mentor.

...

Land of Fire, Southwest Part

Mei Terumi's Third Division had been assigned to intercept Akatsuki's forces into the zone that were heading to Konoha. Part of the reason behind their deployment was that the reanimations of the three remaining former Swordsmen of the Mist had been spotted there. And indeed, despite being reduced to just three and not even fighting together, they took no time into making themselves known with a high body count.

At least, Mangetsu was.

With a mere swing of Mangetsu's blade, a Konoha ninja and a Suna ninja both fell to the ground, dead, as a pool of their collective blood formed around them. The former leader of the Seven Swordsmen made it appear so easy, almost as if his enemies were untrained children. His fake Hiraekarei proved to be just as good as the real one still in Chojuro's hands.

He turned around, and saw a frightened Kiri ninja, his trembling hand gripping a kunai. He stumbled backwards when Mangetsu turned at him.

"You're a Kiri ninja, hence you must know who I am," Mangetsu replied. "In that case, you should try not to die uselessly against me."

The Kiri ninja seemed to heed Mangetsu's advice, and turned around to flee. However, Mangetsu aimed a finger at him.

"Sorry, you were too slow," Mangetsu said, as a blob of water started to form around the tip of his extended finger. "Water Release: Water Gun!"

"Water Release: Water Gun!"

Mangetsu fired a bullet of pressurized water from his fingertip at his target, but said water was intercepted by a second one, not as powerful, but enough to interrupt its trajectory, resulting in an explosion of water, forming a large puddle on the grassy ground.

That moment, Suigetsu, Sewing Needle in hand, landed in front of him.

"Hey there, bro," Suigetsu greeted him. "Ready for round two?"

"Suigetsu," Mangetsu said. "What are you doing?"

"Eh, felt like our previous battle ended in a rather inconclusive note," Suigetsu said, shrugging a little. "And you know how much I hate leaving a job half done."

"You didn't even get the job started. Despite having Chojuro's help, you were still unable to beat me and needed to call Ameyuri for help," Mangetsu said, as his body slipped into a fighting stance, his sword in front of his face. "You should leave and let somebody else with more suitable skills to deal with me fight me instead. I already hate how Orochimaru is forcing me to kill so many people, and I don't want one of them to be my brother and last member of our clan."

"My, my, I knew you were cocky, but even I know my limits," Suigetsu said, flashing his brother a toothy grin. "Okay, I admit you're right about that. But I'm somebody who learn from past battles, either be victories or defeats, and I've been preparing for this. I promise you this won't be like the last time."

"I pray you're right, Suigetsu," Mangetsu said.

And without further warning, the former leader of the Seven Swordsmen and head of the Hozuki Clan shot towards Suigetsu like a bullet, and swung his fake Hiramekarei at Suigetsu. The younger brother parried the blow with the Sewing Needle. That moment, Suigetsu released one hand from his sword's handle, curled it into a fist, and reared it back.

"Water Release: Water Arm Jutsu!"

Suigetsu's free arm swelled up with muscles just as he motioned it forward, punching Mangetsu's blade out of his hands, and then trying to impale his undead brother with the now free Sewing Needle. Mangetsu then jumped back, doing a backflip, while expertly catching the falling Hiramekarei with one hand. The sword started to glow as he channeled chakra through it.

"Hiramekarei: Release!"

Mangetsu threw his sword at Suigetsu, who ducked just in time, letting the sword pass above him. However, he then saw how the flying sword made a U-turn behind him as if it were a boomerang, ready to impale him as well.

"Water Release: Greater Water Gun Jutsu!"

Suigetsu started to run around, both to dodge the flying Hiramekarei and the large blobs of pressurized water his brother was shooting at him. While all the water blasts failed, one of them managed to throw him off balance, resulting in the younger brother tripping over his legs and falling to the ground facefirst. Just as Mangetsu recovered his sword. Suigetsu tried to get back on his feet, but wouldn't be fast enough to dodge Mangetsu's next move.

"I'm very sorry, brother," Mangetsu said, as he raised Hiramekarei over his head, glowing brighter as more chakra was being poured into it. "Hiramekarei: Release!"

Mangetsu slammed his sword into the ground, sending a blue underground shockwave, which looked like the glowing fin of a shark sticking out of the water surface, cracking the earth as it moved forward. As Suigetsu got to his feet, he hastily made several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Suigetsu expelled a stream of water from his mouth at the incoming shockwave, causing the chakra and energy it was carrying to

detonate prematurely. Still, Suigetsu was caught inside the explosion and was hurled backwards, the Sewing Needle blown out of his hands.

Even if Mangetsu could see that his brother had survived the explosion, he also saw that he had lost his weapon, and was now vulnerable.

"Foolish brother, why did you had to come and face me alone?" Mangetsu cried, as he rushed forward, ready to end Suigetsu's life. "I told the Sewing Needle wouldn't be of any help against me!"

"How about this sword, then?" Suigetsu replied.

Then, from within the cloud of smoke raised from the explosion, Suigetsu appeared, wielding the Splatter, much to the undead ninja's confusion, and used it to parry Mangetsu's incoming strike. Suigetsu smirked, as the edge of the Splatter started to glow with a white light.

"Boom," Suigetsu smirked.

Mangetsu was caught off guard by the sheer unexpectedness of his brother carrying a second sword on top of the Sewing Needle, and couldn't react in time, letting the explosion catch him, blowing Hiramekarei out of his hands while being blasted backwards, falling on his back.

"Kumori, now!" Suigetsu called.

Suddenly, several kunai with sealing tags attached to them rained from above, embedded themselves into Mangetsu's body. Kumori then landed behind Mangetsu, and made a single hand seal with one hand. The sealing tags started to glow, and the kunai started to crackle with electricity. As the electricity ran through Mangetsu's body, it started to degrade, turning it into something akin to jelly, making impossible for the undead swordsman to move anymore.

With a sigh of weariness, Suigetsu walked towards his brother. "I know I can be pretty cocky, but I even I know my limits. I wasn't going to fight you again alone, with a sword that proved ineffective. But I needed you to believe that."

"I... see," Mangetsu said. His lips curved into a small smile. "That was pretty clever of you, using a second sword."

"I got the idea from you, brother," Suigetsu admitted. "You mastered all seven swords, and I plan to do the same one day. And this battle seemed like a good opportunity to start."

"I'm glad that I inspired you so much, little brother," Mangetsu replied. "I'm sure you'll be an even better swordsman than I."

"That's my intention. Though, for the time being let's return this to its current owner," Suigetsu said, as he lazily tossed the Splatter towards Kumori. The masked ninja caught it with just one hand. "Thanks for the assist, pal. I owe you one."

"You owe me nothing," Kumori corrected him. "I'm also a Swordsman of the Mist, dealing with Mangetsu was as much as my responsibility as it was yours. However, given the special tie you had with him, we decided it was for the best for you to be the one to deal with him."

"Still, I appreciate that," Suigetsu replied.

"We need to look for a sealmaster in order to neutralize Mangetsu," Kumori said. "I presume you'll want to spend a few more moments with your brother in order to say goodbye and all that, so I'll be the one fetching the sealmaster then."

"I appreciate that too," Suigetsu said. "Heh, this almost makes up for all the time you made a fool of myself by making me think you were a mute."

"Worry not, Suigetsu," Kumori said, as he turned around. "I *will* find more ways to make a fool of yourself."

And with that, the masked swordsman vanished.

...

Back at the Lightning Desert, the fight against the reanimated Kages continued. While four of the Kages fought from the ground, Mu flew over the battlefield, bombarding the Allied Ninjas with his deadly jutsu.

"Dust Release: Atomic Dismantling Jutsu!"

Mu created a cube of white light between his hands, before said cube exploded into a beam of white light that fired towards a large group of Allied Ninjas. Seeing it was something they couldn't counter, they tried to run away, and smart enough, they fled in every possible direction. However, many ninjas were unable to avoid the beam of destruction, and their bodies were destroyed to a molecular level.

"Unless you call one of my successors, you won't be able to avoid my power! The only thing that can counter Dust Release is another user of Dust Release!" Mu warned from above, as he prepared to attack again.

"Sand Drizzle!"

However, before Mu could attack again, he was pelted by a storm of projectiles made of compressed sand. The Second Tsuchikage quickly flew away from the rain of deadly sand, his body slowly vanishing until it disappeared completely.

"Ah, that must be your famed Dust Bewildering Cover," a calm, stoic voice said. Mu could now see it was a redheaded boy with golden eyes and strange blue marks around them, floating on a cloud of sand. "That's where your moniker the 'Null Man' comes, doesn't it?"

"So you've done your homework, kid. You must be a very skilled ninja to catch me by surprise like that. Given the way you manipulate sand, are you from Suna?" Mu asked, as he floated around.

"Indeed. My name is Gaara, son of the Fourth Kazekage," Gaara said.

"Heh, the son of a Kage. Of course," Mu looked down, and saw Rasa, accompanied by other ninjas, fighting against the Third Kazekage, in a duel of gold versus iron. "Yes, I should have guessed it. However, being the son of a Kage doesn't mean that you can match a real Kage, kid. You should pick an opponent more suited to your experience."

As Mu talked, he quickly floated around Gaara in order to place himself behind the redhead. His Dust Bewildering Cover was the perfect camouflage. The boy couldn't see him, and even if he was a sensor, he couldn't sense his chakra either, since the jutsu erased his presence completely. All that could give away his position was sound, and he could use that to confuse Gaara even further.

"It isn't wise to underestimate an opponent, regardless of how young they may look. Yes, I am young, but, even if I don't want to sound arrogant, I can say I had surpassed my father, at least when it comes to sheer power," Gaara said.

"You're the one underestimating me, son, by being so confident in fighting me," the Tsuchikage said, as he quickly moved again.

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I'm being overconfident," Gaara conceded. "But then again, I am the only one suited to fight you. Not only I'm currently one of the few ninjas in our division that can meet you in an aerial battle, but among those, I'm the only one who can sense you."

Mu was tempted to call the redheaded child for his insolence, but a swift death would be a more appropriate punishment for such an insult. While he hated being forced to fight and kill fellow Iwa ninjas, he had no reservations ending the life of a Suna scum. Once he was behind him, he started to make hand seals for a Dust Release attack. His invisibility cloak dispelled as the jutsu took form.

"Did you sense this, then?" Mu shouted, as he prepared to fire. "Dust Rele-"

Before Mu could attack, "Gaara" burst into a torrent of sand, much to the Tsuchikage's confusion. The sand then wrapped around Mu, trapping him inside a cocoon, leaving his head exposed.

"WHAT? How...?" Mu asked, shocked, as he tried to futilely break free from the sand prison. "How did you know I was there?"

From the cloud of sand the Gaara Sand Clone was standing on, the real Gaara emerged.

"Easy. Sensors might not be able to detect you, but not even your famed camouflage can evade the enhanced sensing provided by Sage Mode," Gaara explained.

"Sage Mode...? Of course," the trapped Tsuchikage said in realization. "That explains those eyes, and the marks around them. Wait, then that means-"

"That I noticed that you used your Fission Jutsu, and that your duplicate is behind me as well, ready to strike me down?" Gaara asked, as another torrent of sand poured from the gourd on his back, covering an unseen shape, before it was revealed to be a second Mu. "Yes. I did notice."

Sealing tags carried by sand were slapped onto the sand cocoons. As Gaara activated them, chains of symbols started to wrap around the sand prisons.

"Heh, beaten by a mere child with such ease. Such humiliation... thank goodness I'm already dead..." Mu said with an unamused chuckle. "And thank goodness we didn't have to fight ninjas like you back in my time, other than that asshole Madara."

"And lucky for us, there are ninjas like me ready to fight against undesirables that threaten not just my village, but the world at large,"

Gaara said, as the seals finished taking effect, silencing Mu forever.
"One down, four more to go."

...

At the Land of Frost, Shizune continued her duel against her undead uncle. His irises kept that eerie white color as opposed to their usual blue hue. He also kept oddly silent, as

"Uncle Dan? Uncle Dan, are you still there?" Shizune asked, as he traded kunai swipes with the blue haired man, to no response.

"Curses. Orochimaru must have suppressed his personality. Guess he realized the weakness of that jutsu of his."

"Earth Release: Sharp Rock Pillars!"

Dan slammed his hands into the ground, launching a row of stone spikes that protruded from underground towards Shizune, spreading in a cone. The medic-nin curled her fingers into a fist as she channeled chakra through it, covering it in a blue flame-like cloak of chakra. Shizune then threw a punch forward, shattering the incoming spikes into multiple rocky bits.

"The stone shattered under my fist, and I don't even feel pain. Senjutsu-enhanced strength is simply unreal... and I love it!" she thought with a smirk, as she looked at her held fist. *"When this is over, I need to master Tsunade-sama's chakra-enhanced strength myself as well. It was a mistake giving up on it."*

Dan, however, didn't give up, and made more hand seals, ready to reuse the remains of his previous jutsu to kill his niece.

"Earth Release: Earth Spine Grudge!"

The rock fragments still in the air were frozen in place, almost as if time had stopped for them. Then, after directing themselves towards Shizune, flew towards them at great speed. The medic-nin, however, already had the perfect defense, as she made more hand seals.

"Sage Art: Corrosive Cloud Armor!"

Shizune's body started to emit a thick purple steam that quickly formed into a purple cloud, covering the medic-nin completely, obscuring her from Dan's eyesight, as it slowly expanded outwards. The moment the rock bits flew into the cloud, they quickly decayed and eroded until they were nothing but dust, leaving her completely unharmed.

"You can't beat me when I'm using this jutsu. This cloud will corrode everything solid in a matter of seconds, meaning that you can't get close nor use Earth Release jutsu against me. And this poison in particular is fireproof, meaning that it also protects me from Fire and Lightning jutsu," Shizune explained. "There's nothing you can do to harm me."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, my dear Shizune," Dan replied, thought it was Orochimaru's voice that came from his mouth. The reanimation started to make hand seals.. "Because your beloved Uncle had a deadly jutsu that no cloud of poison will be able to stop. Spirit Transformation Jutsu!"

Once the chain of seals was complete, Dan's body started to float as it became translucent, completing its transformation into a spirit. Dan flew into the cloud of poison, which as expected, didn't have any effect on him, until he found the surprised Shizune, who could only yelp as Dan possessed her body. The cloud of poisonous gasses around her quickly dispelled as a result.

"You're dead, Shizune. The possession will-" But Orochimaru-as-Dan was interrupted when "Shizune's" body poofed, leaving Dan's spirit behind. "What the...?"

"Sakura, Karin, now!" Shizune called.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Several chakra chains shot from an unseen direction, and wrapped themselves around Dan. Despite being a spirit, the chains were able to touch him as if he was solid. And indeed, once the chains made contact, they bound Dan's chakra, forcing him to cancel the jutsu, making him solid again. That moment, Sakura landed in front of Dan, and started to make hand seals.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Prison!"

Suddenly, rocks of many sizes appeared above Dan, and started to land on top of him with loud crashes, until he was completely buried under the rubble. The moment the jutsu was finished, Karin quickly slapped several sealing tags around it. As the tags were activated, chains of symbols spread around the rocky prison, making sure that Dan wouldn't be able to either move or use chakra.

As Karin and Sakura cheered for their victory, Shizune walked towards the rock prison, and placed a hand on it, as if trying to feel the undead being inside it.

" You thought you could use my uncle's power against me, didn't you, Orochimaru? But after Tsunade, I was the worst opponent you could have directed Uncle Dan towards," Shizune thought. "It was great to see you again, Uncle Dan. Hope you can return to the peace of the afterlife that Orochimaru tore you from," she whispered, before turning around at her still celebrating students. "Come on girls, no time to celebrate! There are still plenty of enemies that need to be beaten, and ninjas that need to be healed!"

"Yes, sensei!" the two of them said at once, as they followed Shizune deeper into the battle.

...

Lightning Desert

The Second Mizukage, Gengetsu Hozuki, was surrounded by a multitude of ninjas from many villages. All around him were quite a

lot of kunai, shuriken and other weapons that the Allied ninjas had thrown at him, to no effect, since they phased through him as if he were a ghost.

"Come on guys, I'm not even trying to fight back!" the exasperated Mizukage said, almost begging.

"And we're trying to kill you! But our attacks have no effect!" an Iwa ninja protested.

"Because I'm a genjutsu! In order to find the real me, you have to get rid of my Clam Summon!" the Mizukage pointed out.

"We tried to attack the clam and it didn't work either!" a Kiri kunoichi replied, just as exasperated.

"Because that's a genjutsu too!" the Mizukage yelled. "You have to get rid of... ugh, I don't know why I am even trying, you guys have to be the most useless, dumb lot of ninjas I had the displeasure of fight! And I've been married three times, so that should say something!"

Suddenly, a puddle of water mixed with oil started to form at Gengetsu's feet, while expanding outwards. As it did, bubbles started to emerge from the puddle, floating around the undead Mizukage. Gengetsu frowned upon seeing this.

"Guys, you better fight more seriously now, because this Orochimaru guy is going to make me go all out on you!" Gengetsu warned.

"We were fighting seriously!" an Ame ninja protested.

"Water Ballon Jutsu!"

The moment the balloons barreled towards the Allied ninjas, Temari landed between them and the incoming attack. Her normally teal eyes were golden, with small brown marks around them. Fast as lightning, she unfolded her War Fan and swung it once.

"Sage Art: Magnificent Sickle Weasel Jutsu!"

With a single swing of her fan, Temari created a gale force wind so powerful, it pushed all the incoming bubbles back, which detonated against the many rock pillars scattered around the area. However, the wind didn't have any effect on Gengetsu, as it didn't none of the other attacks.

"Hey, that's quite the arms you got here to blow such a wind!" Gengetsu complimented, as he gave Temari a thumbs up. "But no matter how hard you can blow, you won't be able to harm me until you defeat my Clam Summon, like I've been saying to these idiots all the time!"

"We've been trying to destroy the clam, but that's a genjutsu too!" a Konoha ninja repeated.

Temari nodded, closed her eyes, and expanded her senses. It took her only a few seconds to locate the source of chakra that was creating the insidious genjutsu. The sand blond kunoichi gestured towards a seemingly empty area. "There's the clam! Aim your attacks towards that spot!"

Temari's orders were followed by a moments of silence, as the Allied ninjas hesitated to attack that seemingly empty spot. They already made fool of themselves fighting the elusive Mizukage, and they didn't want to increase said ridicule. Some Suna ninjas, however, decided to trust the daughter of their Kazekage.

"Come on guys, let's do what Temari-sama asked!" a Suna ninja said.

The Suna ninjas started to throw kunai, shuriken, and ninjutsu towards the seemingly empty area. This prompted the rest of the ninjas of the group to follow their lead. And, to their surprise, their attacks connected with some sort of invisible mass. The invisible being quickly became visible, revealing Gengetsu's Clam summon, its shell starting to break under the pressure of the attacks, until it couldn't take it anymore, and it was forced to cancel the summon.

The fake clam and Gengetsu disappeared instantly, and the real Gengetsu was made visible. And, much to their confusion and irritation, started to clap.

"Not bad, guys, definitely not bad! You needed help from this extraordinary lass just to beat my clam, but hey, progress!" he cheered. "So let's hope you guys are ready, because the hard part of the fight comes now!"

"Wait... that was the easy part?" a Taki ninja asked, both astonished and a little frightened.

"Easy or hard, we won't give up until this guy is sealed! Come on, you guys won't fall prey to his trickery anymore as I'm with you!" Temari roused, her voice booming with confidence and boldness. "Now, let's show these Kages of past times what our generation has to offer!"

The group of ninjas around Temari cheered in response, as they prepared to attack the undead Mizukage at once.

...

Forests of the Land of Fire, Northeast zone

After a full of night of sleep, the jinchuriki trio were now completely rested and ready for the battle to come. By using Sage Mode, Naruto and Fu had noticed that there were many battles taking place at once. They deduced that Akatsuki must be going all out in order to keep the Alliance busy in order to catch them.

Not that they were going to let such a thing happen.

They simply decided to move towards the one who was the closest, and with their help, end that battle in no time. Then, they'd move towards another battleground, and repeat the process. They'd do that as many times as necessary, until every single reanimation and every single White Zetsu clone was destroyed.

Unfortunately, no plan ever survived contact with the enemy, and this one wasn't going to be an exception.

Naruto and Killer B were jumping from one tree branch to another, while Fu flew a few meters above them. Then, without any warning, Naruto suddenly stopped on his tracks, prompting his fellow jinchuriki to stop as well.

"What's wrong, Naruto, why did you stop?" Killer B asked. "Did you sense any enemies that are about to drop?"

"Yeah, I'm sensing a powerful source of negative emotions... right there!" Naruto said, pointing forward.

And indeed, that very moment, a spiraling vortex formed in front of them, and from said vortex, Obito Uchiha emerged, landed on a large branch in front of them. The jinchuriki trio quickly adopted fighting stances.

"Hello there, Naruto," Obito greeted the blond jinchuriki.

"So after so many days of war, you finally show up," Naruto said. "Let me guess, do you plan to capture us yourself, after so many failed attempts?"

"Such a sharp observation," Obito said in a mock praising tone. "But yes. You know what they said, if you want something done, you should do it yourself. Well, this is it. I'm done delegating. You and your friends are coming with me, whether you like it or not."

"And you think you can beat the three of us, all on your own?" Killer B asked. "Ha! Now that's quite an ego overblown!"

"Yeah, you might have a Rinnegan now, but Naruto here already has experience fighting against Rinnegan users," Fu said, placing a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "Plus, like B-sensei said, he has us helping him."

Obito laughed disdainfully at Killer B and Fu's words. "My chances are much better than you think, you trio of fools. And who said I was going to fight the three of you alone? Summoning Jutsu!"

Before the jinchuriki could react, Obito slammed his palm into the tree branch, producing a large burst of smoke. Naruto could immediately sense six more presences appearing out of nowhere. A cold chill ran down his spine.

When the cloud of smoke vanished, perched on several branches around Obito were six reanimations, three of them he knew, and other three that were unknown to him. All six of them, however, had a Sharingan and a Rinnegan on each of their eye sockets instead of their usual eyes.

"Yagura... Uzakata... Roshii," Naruto said, as he looked at the undead forms of the two jinchuriki he failed to save from Akatsuki.

"Hello, Naruto," Yagura greeted him, smiling warmly. "We meet again. It's so unfortunate that we must do so again as enemies. It seems that, even if my mind is my own, my body is now the puppet of Akatsuki."

"Hey Naruto! Good to see that you're still alive!" Roshii said, sounding a little relieved.

"Yes, and not only you," Uzakata added. "Even if I don't know your friends, I'm glad that at least some of us still remain."

Aside from Uzakata and Roshii, there was a very tall and broad man wearing a heavy red armor, a thin old man with a long, white beard and a moustache that wore robes of a monk, and lastly, a blond woman wearing a Kumogakure ninja uniform. Given the way she and Killer B were eying each other, it's obvious they knew the other.

"Yugito-chan," Killer B said in an oddly neutral tone, an unnerving contrast with his usual upbeat attitude.

"B! Thank goodness you're still alive," the woman, Yugito, said.
"Listen, you can't let this guys get their hands on you, you hear me?"

"Behold, my Six Paths Undead Jinchuriki," Obito announced, spreading his arms in a dramatic fashion. "Immortal, indestructible warriors with full access to the power of the Tailed Beasts. They will be the ones to finally put you annoying lot down! Now attack, my minions! Show them your power!"

Without further ado, the six undead jinchuriki quickly leaped towards their living counterparts, while Naruto, Fu and B prepared for yet another intense battle.

...

Mountain Graveyard, Outside Akatsuki's Lair

Jiraiya and Tsunade stood in front of a vast forest that spread into the horizon. Across said forest, there were gigantic bones of all kinds, such as skulls, ribcages, legs, arms and more, scattered around, most of them larger than the trees themselves. The blond Sannin let out a whistle.

"Well, no wonder this place is called a graveyard. Look at those bones," Tsunade pointed out.

"Rather fitting that Akatsuki choose a place with such an evil aesthetic for their secret base," Jiraiya said, chuckling a little.

However, the gigantic bones weren't the reason the two of them where there. A couple kilometers in front of their position, they could see a lone, massive mountain towering above both the forest and the giant bones. According to the information provided by the clone of their daughter, Orochimaru was somewhere inside that mountain.

"Alright, now time to see if that girl lied to us or not," Tsunade said, as she bit her thumb, as so did her husband. Then, the two of them made the same sequence of hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

The two of them slammed a hand into the ground, producing a small burst of smoke each. From each cloud of smoke, a creature emerged: in front of Jiraiya was the Toad Sage Fukasaku, while in front of Tsunade was a mini-clone of Katsuyu. The two summons looked around, taking a minute or two to see the scenery around them, as well as the lack of immediate enemies.

"So, I take it is time, then?" Fukasaku asked.

"We hope, at the very least," Jiraiya said.

"First, we need to check if Orochimaru is really there," Tsunade added.

"Understood, Tsunade-sama," Katsuyu said.

Both summons jumped onto their respective summoners' shoulders, and began to gather nature energy and funnel it into them. After a couple minutes, Sage Mode manifested in both of them in the form of golden eyes, and red marks around Jiraiya's eyes as well as teal blue marks around Tsunade's. They expanded their senses, and immediately got an answer to their question.

"I sense Orochimaru there," Jiraiya said.

"Me too," Tsunade confirmed. "Him and nobody else."

"You think this might be a trap, Tsunade-sama?" Katsuyu asked.

"Orochimaru letting us know about his location in order to have the Rinnegan within reach isn't something that we can't rule out," the Slug Princess admitted. "But we have no other options."

"Plus, if there was a trap, I'm sure the bastard would have more people with him," Jiraiya added. "And either he's very confident about his chances, or he is able to shield people from even the senses of a Sage."

"Okay, enough talking. Time to go there and give that asshole the pounding he deserves," Tsunade asked.

Jiraiya smirked. "You took that out of my mouth."

"No matter how hard the battle becomes, we'll be there with you the whole time," Fukasaku reassured.

"We will fight alongside you as much as possible," Katsuyu added.

Jiraiya and Tsunade nodded, and dashed forward, ready to fight for the final time the man they once called their friend and teammate.

Once the day was over, there would be at least one Sannin less in the world.

Author's Note: If the previous chapter was the last breather of the story, this chapter was the last "lower deck" chapter, so to speak. To wrap up the first half of the war, and squeeze a couple more battles I wanted to write, like Shizune vs Dan or the Suigetsu vs Mangetsu rematch. From the next chapter onwards, all the battles will be headed by the main characters (Naruto, Hinata, Fu, Killer B, Jiraiya and Tsunade) and will stay that way until the very end. As much as I love the secondary and supporting characters their time to shine, I think they already had enough.

That means that no, I won't plan to write the resolution of the Five Kage Battle. I know many of you wanted to see it, but I really didn't feel in the mood to write it, plus it would only drag the pace of the story even more (since it was going to be VERY long) .

And hell, I even included it because making it happen entirely offscreen would have been a bit too much of a disservice. Because trust me, there were many other fights that I had planned but I was forced to scrap because I didn't know where

to insert them, and at this point the story demanded I got on with the main plot already. One of those battles would have involved Kuninotoko Uzumaki, which I would have used to air once again what I think of authors that turn the Uzumakis into a clan of complete Gary Stus. Another one would have involved Kurenai fighting her undead dad, and showing him the kickass kunoichi she had become, and that she's worth more than a baby factory ("you have to live long enough to give me a grandkid", seriously?).

Oh well, no point in dwelling on that.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next week, Jiraiya and Tsunade will face Orochimaru for the final time. How will the battle unfurl? In the meantime, don't forget to leave a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Legendary Sannin

Author's Note: Well, here it is, the fight so many of you have been waiting for. Hope it meets your expectations:

Chapter 125:

Jiraiya, Tsunade and Orochimaru: the Legendary Sannin

or

Farewell to a former friend

Mountain Graveyard, Akatsuki Lair

When the wall behind him was blown to pieces from the other side, Orochimaru barely even reacted. He calmly stood up, and turned around to see the newcomers. Despite the ensuing cloud of dust, Orochimaru was able to tell who the newcomers were, since he could identify them by their chakra -and his chakra sensing had gotten especially good thanks to some of the DNA strands he had spliced with his own-. This brought a smile to his face.

"Well, well, well... if it isn't my old teammates, coming to pay me a visit," Orochimaru said, grinning. "Hello, Jiraiya, Tsunade. It's been a while since the last time I saw you. How have you been?"

"Small talk? Really?" Jiraiya asked, unimpressed. "Come on Orochimaru, your fake politeness is grating. Let's just get down to the business already."

"Always the impatient one, Jiraiya," Orochimaru said, shaking his head, before his yellow eyes rested on Tsunade. "I'm sure Tsunade will be more likely to catch up with me."

"Catching up? No. But I do plan to make you catch my fist with your face," Tsunade threatened. "I owe you one for kidnapping our children several years ago. And then cloning them like that. Not to mention using that horrible jutsu to bring my grandfather and granduncle as your undead slaves. Plus all the people you have indirectly killed."

"We also know how you killed Sarutobi-sensei when you attacked the Genbu Island," Jiraiya added.

"As well as Tenzo, our children's Jonin-sensei," Tsunade said, clenching her fist. While she hardly knew the man, she knew Kaida and Hagane would be devastated once they learned of his demise.

"So no, Orochimaru, as you can see, there won't be small talk. Nor we will try to convince you to change your evil ways or surrender peacefully," Jiraiya continued. "You won't live to see another tomorrow. We will make sure of it."

Orochimaru chuckled darkly. "I'm almost impressed, Jiraiya. And here I thought that Konoha was all about making friends and taking the higher road. It seems that you guys finally learned."

"We're ninjas, Orochimaru. We will kill if the situation demands it," Tsunade said.

"Though, have you considered that killing me won't cancel Impure World Resurrection?" Orochimaru asked. "If you kill me and the jutsu is still active, the reanimations will carry the last orders I give them."

"Let us worry about that, you slimy bastard," Jiraiya angrily said. "You aren't getting out of here alive. You will die by our hands."

"It seems you guys *really* are out for my blood. Then again, it's understandable, given your list of grievances against me," Orochimaru admitted. "However, before we begin, a question: how did you find this place?"

"A good ninja doesn't reveal their secrets to the enemy, Orochimaru," Jiraiya said, as he took a step forward. "You will die without having such knowledge."

"It was Hebiko, wasn't it?" Orochimaru asked, a scowl developing on his face. "I know about her betrayal, Kabuto told me about her. But I didn't know she'd go as far as to help my enemies. After rising her from infancy and turning her into a ninja most people would kill to be, this is how she thanks me. Ungrateful brat."

"Maybe you shouldn't have abandoned her brother when it wasn't convenient," Tsunade fired back. "As a parent, you leave a lot to be desired."

"Oh, right," Orochimaru said, seemingly forgetting about Hebimaru's existence. "So that's why she went to help you, right? She wanted her dear brother back. Now it makes sense."

"You developed a penchant for discarding people the moment they no longer are of any use," Tsunade said. "And sweet irony, said attitude lead you to your downfall."

"Downfall?" Orochimaru repeated, before laughing a bit. "Oh no. All what my treacherous daughter accomplished was to give me what I sought for such a long time. You see, the reason I regretably had to return to Obito's side and pledge my help to his silly cause was because he promised me a Rinnegan in return. More specifically, the Rinnegan you're wielding in your eye socket under that piece of cloth, Tsunade."

This made the blond Sannin to adopt a defensive stance.

"But now... you saved me a lot of trouble by bringing that eye to me, Tsunade," Orochimaru said, as his lips curved into a maniacal grin. "To show you that I'm not ungrateful, I'll make sure your death is quick and painless!"

"Enough talking! I'm tired of seeing your ugly mug and hearing your odious voice!" Tsunade said, raising an open hand at her former teammate. "Bansho Ten'in!"

Suddenly, as if yanked by an invisible hand, a great force pulled Orochimaru towards Tsunade's open hand, whose fingers wrapped around the black haired man's neck the moment he was within reach. She then moved her other hand towards the top of Orochimaru's head.

"Now-"

But before Tsunade could finish, "Orochimaru" burst into a mass of large snakes that quickly wrapped around Tsunade's body.

"Ack-"

"Tsunade-sama!" the Katsuyu mini-clone cried, as she started to spray acid around the snakes from her mouth.

Between Katsuyu's acid and Tsunade's own strength, they were able to get the snakes away from her, who quickly scurried away, hiding behind the many stone columns.

"Nice way getting rid of my surprise attack. Then again, I shouldn't have expect that a Sage like yourself would have fallen to that," Orochimaru's voice said. "Hmmmmmm... two Sages versus little old me... yes, I'd say the deck isn't stacked in my favor, isn't it?"

"You must be delirious if you think we're going to let you escape after how much it took us to find you," Jiraiya replied, as he tried to sense which of the snakes was the real Orochimaru.

"Hide? Weren't you hearing me, Jiraiya? Why should I hide, when everything I want is on this very cave?" Orochimaru asked, as he emerged from under the mouth of one of the snakes. "Do you think your chances against me are so good? Because Rinnegan or not, underestimating me would be a very poor choice."

Orochimaru completely emerged from the snake's mouth, wearing nothing from the waist up. His pale skin was now covered in what appeared to be reptilian scales, and several horns grew at the side of his head., as the four snakes seamlessly attached to his back hissed angrily at the two Konoha ninja. The Snake Sannin finally got up, and as his yellow eyes turned the red of the Sharingan, he flexed his chakra, and the entire cave *shook* .

"What the...?" Jiraiya asked, as he almost lost his balance.

"Yes, I'm sensing it too! His body is saturated with nature energy!" Fukasaku said. "He's a Sage too!"

"Ah yes, Senjutsu... that art always evaded my skill... but alas, I finally found the way to channel nature energy. And it's all thanks to your son, Jiraiya, Tsunade. I'm sure the poor boy is overshadowed by his sister's because of her Bloodline Limit, but being able to draw nature energy and mix it with your own chakra without any risk... plus being able to do it while you move... kukuku, let's say that I don't feel like I'm going to lose this battle."

"So you're a Sage too. So what? We're still going to pound you into bloody paste," Tsunade said.

"You don't get it, Tsunade. Nature energy isn't merely my ally. We're as one now. And that makes me a better Sage than you or sorry husband can hope to be," Orochimaru boasted, as he started to make hand seals. "But let my actions speak for me rather than my words! I have your daughter to thank for this ability! Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The entire cave started to shake once again as large wooden roots emerged from underground and lunged at the pair of married Sannin. Jiraiya, however, was already preparing a counterattack.

"Pa, I need some oil!" Jiraiya asked, as he also started to make hand seals.

"You got it, Jiraiya-chan!" Fukasaku replied, as his dewlap swolled up, before releasing a deceptively large cone of oil at the incoming roots.

"Fire Release: Toad Oil Flame Bullet!"

Taking a deep breath, Jiraiya exhaled a huge stream of flames his mouth, which ignited the oil Fukasaku was expelling, resulting in a raging inferno that quickly burned the cimong roots to a crisp.

Orochimaru merely chuckled at his initial attack being countered, and made more hand seals. "Fire, huh? Alright then, let's fight fire with fire! Lava Release: Melting Apparition Jutsu!"

Orochimaru's cheeks puffed as burning lava build inside them, before releasing a huge cone of molten earth at the two Sannin. Tsunade, however, merely took a step forward and raised a single hand. From said hand, a barrier of white light was projected.

"Gakido!"

The moment the wave of molten earth touched Tsunade's barrier, it was quickly absorbed into it, before it was converted into pure chakra and funneled into the blond Sannin's body. Tsunade closed her fist, extinguishing the light produced by her barrier once she had absorbed the jutsu.

"So, aside from our children's DNA, you also got a bunch of Bloodline Limits there, huh?" Tsunade asked, as she placed a hand on her hip. "Well, as you just saw, all those fancy techniques aren't going to do shit against me, as long as I have the ability to absorb ninjutsu."

Orochimaru forced a smile. "So kind of you to make that clear," Orochimaru replied, as he formed three hand seals in quick succession, while his eyes were sealed shut and his ears closed completely. "Try absorbing this then! Sage Art: White Rage Jutsu!"

From Orochimaru's mouth emerged a chakra construct that looked like a serpentine dragon, with a solid looking, purple orb in one of its claws. The dragon then coiled itself around the orb, exploding into a blast of blinding light and an extremely loud and high pitched screech. The effect was immediate, and Jiraiya and Tsunade fell to their knees, their eyes closed, hurt by the bright flash, while gripping their pained ears, their summoned animals being on a similar predicament. With his enemies incapacitated, Orochimaru took the chance to strike.

"Sword of Kusanagi!" as a snake crawled from inside his mouth, the snake regurgitated the legendary sword, which the Snake Sannin was quick to grasp. *"Thanks to my body modifications, I can completely seal my eyes and ears shut, thus becoming immune to the effects of the White Rage Jutsu, while I can use the sensing granting by Sage Mode to keep track of Jiraiya and Tsunade. Now, to gut Tsunade like a fish before claiming my prize!"*

However, being as fixated as he was on Tsunade, Orochimaru didn't notice that, despite the pain, Jiraiya was forcing himself to make hand seals.

"Needle Jizo!"

Jiraiya's hair quickly grew in size and volume, and wrapped itself around both himself and Tsunade, forming a protective barrier, before the hair facing outward took the shape of very hard spikes, forcing Orochimaru to stop the attack.

"You're forgetting that we're also Sages, and thus we can't sense your movements!" Jiraiya reminded him, before making another hand seal. "And as long as I'm here, you won't put a finger on my wife! Needle Hell!"

Jiraiya then fired a multitude of hardened hair needles in every direction, forcing Orochimaru to jump backwards. Thanks to his Sharingan, he was able to predict the trajectory of the white needles

flying at him, allowing him to dodge most of them and parry with his sword those he couldn't.

However, that attack served to keep Orochimaru busy while Tsunade healed their eyes and ears. Once the two of them were recovered, Jiraiya undid the protective hair barrier, allowing Tsunade to leap towards the retreating Snake Sannin. She generated a black chakra rod from one of her palms, and channeling chakra through it in order to increase its power, she delivered a mighty swing at Orochimaru.

Orochimaru managed to parry it in time, his sword resisting as he expected, but the Konoha traitor was unexpectedly hurt by the sheer energy that Tsunade's blow carried. Undeterred, Tsunade attacked again, but this time Orochimaru focused on redirecting her attacks to the sides rather than parrying them in full. Tsunade surpassed him in sheer power, but he was much better than her when it came to armed combat, and he was going to take advantage of that.

And indeed, during their exchange, Tsunade fumbled a swipe, leaving her completely wide open. Orochimaru's lips curved into a predatory grin, as he thrust his sword forward.

"You Lose Tsuna-"

However, before Orochimaru's cold metal could pierce Tsunade's flesh, Fukasaku's prehensile tongue wrapped around her waist, pulling her backwards. Given the lack of surprise on the blond Sannin's face, she was clearly expecting that move. And as Tsunade was moved to the back, Orochimaru's Sharingan saw how Jiraiya rushed towards him, with one of his hands holding a large sphere of chakra.

"Big Ball Rasengan!"

Having no time to dodge, all what Orochimaru could do was put his sword between himself and the large sphere of destruction Jiraiya was thrusting in his direction. The sword provided of little protection, as when the Rasengan exploded, it blasted the sword out of his

hands while lunging the Snake Sannin crashing against the wall of the opposite side of the cavern, making the whole place rumble.

"You got a nice hit there," Tsunade praised, as he walked towards her husband. "You think that got him?"

"Not even close," Jiraiya said with a chuckle, as Fukasaku shivered. "We're going to need more than that to bring him down for sure. But that definitely help-ug, Pa? Is everything okay?"

"Don't you guys feel it's getting a little chilly in here?" the toad sage asked, hugging himself.

The moment he mentioned it, the two Sannin realized that he was right, and the temperature was rapidly falling. Then, they noticed a spike of chakra coming from Orochimaru, and much to their surprise, a sheet of ice started to spread around the entire cavern.

"What the... Ice Release!?" Jiraiya asked in shock. "When did he get his hands on Ice Release!?"

"Getting a sample of the Yuki boy's DNA was laughably easy, Jiraiya," Orochimaru laughed, as he slid on the icy floor towards the two Sannin.

Two additional pair of arms grown under Tsunade's arms, and opened up several compartments, firing a multitude of missiles from them. Orochimaru, however, was able to dodge all of them with the help of the icy floor. He then jumped into the air while making several hand seals.

"Lightning Release: Snake Thunder!"

One of the snakes on Orochimaru's back started to crackle with yellow electricity, before it opened its jaws, releasing a snake-shaped lightning bolt towards the blond Sannin. Tsunade, however, already moved to counter it, rising her two original arms towards the incoming attack.

"Gakido!"

Once again, Tsunade created a ninjutsu-absorbing barrier to protect herself. However, the snake-shaped electric bolt changed its course mid air, and forked downwards, striking the ice instead. The ice helped spread the electricity, zapping Tsunade and Jiraiya.

"You're mine!" Orochimaru said, as he prepared to strike Tsunade.

However, Tsunade wasn't down for the count, as she managed to extend one arm.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Once again, Orochimaru was blown away backwards by a powerful gravitational force, sending him crashing against a frozen stone pillar, which broke upon impact, making the cavern shake again. A few rocks and stalagmites fell from the roof.

"Jiraiya, you okay?" Tsunade asked, as she placed a hand on her shoulder, and began to heal him.

"I'll live," the white haired Sannin replied. "Thanks, good save there."

"Come on, we need to continue attacking. We can't let him drive us into fighting defensively," Tsunade urged,

There was another spike of chakra, and Orochimaru burst from the pile of frozen rocks he had been buried under, the force of his chakra sending the rocks flying away into every direction, before he slammed both hands into the ground.

"Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

Rows of gigantic frozen spikes shoot out from the ground towards the two Konoha Sannin. However, before they could impale them, Tsunade took a step forward and raised a hand, calling for the most versatile ability of the Rinnegan.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Releasing yet another repulsive shockwave, the ice spears shattered like weak glass, turning into thousands of ice shards. However, Orochimaru was already expecting that, and was already weaving more hand seals even before Tsunade destroyed his ice attack.

"I know you can't use that jutsu again until five seconds pass! Let's see if you can survive this until then!" Orochimaru laughed. "Ice Release: Thousand Flying Ice Needles of Death!"

The moment he finished the seal chain, the thousands of ice shards froze mid air as if time stopped for them. Then, they all pointed towards Tsunade, and lunged at her at insane speed. Jiraiya, however, stepped once again to shield his wife from harm.

"And you're forgetting that she isn't alone!" Jiraiya said, as he finished his own chain of seals. "Sage Art: Fire release Big Flame Bullet!"

Jiraiya expelled a massive cone of roaring flames, completely engulfing the hundreds of ice shards coming towards them, melting them almost instantly before they had the chance to touch them, as well as melting the sheet of ice that covered the floor of the cavern. However, there was something Jiraiya's admittedly impressive fire jutsu was unable to melt: the Kusanagi blade, which, as if being pulled by an invisible force, emerged from behind the wall of flames and drove itself into Tsunade's gut.

Tsunade was able to react in time and grabbed the sword by its blade in order to stop it, but she didn't break its momentum completely, and it managed to bury itself into her stomach. Tsunade choked out blood.

"Tsunade!" Jiraiya yelled.

"Tsunade-sama!" Katsuyu shouted.

"I'm... I'm okay!" Tsunade said, as she forced the legendary sword out of her gut, before tossing it away. "I can heal myself! Just... keep him busy while I do so!"

"Let me help you healing your wounds," Katsuyu offered.

"Got it!" Jiraiya said, as he took a couple step forward, in order to face Orochimaru. Right now, he needed to push him away from Tsunade while she healed from such a sneaky attack.

Orochimaru grinned, and extended his hand. As if the sword had life of its own, it floated mid air, before it shot back towards the Sanke Sannin, whose fingers firmly wrapped themselves around the handle, before pointing the blade towards Jiraiya menacingly.

"Do you plan to face me alone, Jiraiya? I already proved to be the better of the two in the past, and that was before becoming what I am now," Orochimaru boasted. "Without a Rinnegan wielder to help you, you have no chances to survive against me."

"Keep underestimating me, let's see how good it does to you," Jiraiya fired back.

Orochimaru chuckled. "Fine then. Let's fight in a way I know it's far from your favorite: in close quarters!"

Kusanagi in hand, Orochimaru basically blitzed towards Jiraiya, ready to impale his hated enemy like he did with Tsunade. Jiraiya, however, was faster than he anticipated, and prepared a counter attack.

"Needle Jizo!"

Once again, Jiraiya's size grew in size and volume, while also taking the form of sharp spikes that were as hard as iron. The Toad Sage shook his head, throwing his weaponized white mane at the incoming enemy. Orochimaru sidestepped and prepared to strike,

but unfortunately, Fukasaku wasn't going to make the fight any easier.

"Sage Art: Toad Oil!"

Once again, Fukasaku expelled a huge stream of oil from his mouth, but he didn't aim it at the Snake Sannin, but at the ground below. Orochimaru immediately caught wind of what the small, elderly toad was planning, and broke his dash, opting instead to jump back and throw his sword at him. Jiraiya gritted his teeth.

"He knows I can't afford to dodge, or else that sword will fly towards Tsunade," thanks to his sensing, Jiraiya could tell Tsunade was still healing her wounds. She was almost done, but needed a few more seconds. *"Let's try deflecting it then!"*

Jiraiya held out a hand and formed a Rasengan as fast as he was able to, before driving the chakra sphere onto the incoming sword, which detonated the Rasengan upon piercing it. The resulting explosion harmed Jiraiya's hand and forearm a little, but he was able to deflect the sword blow, sending it flying away.

However, as Jiraiya did this, Orochimaru took advantage of his predicament and prepared to attack again. He bent over and rested his hands on the ground, while the four snakes on his back hissed angrily at the Toad Sannin. The snakes opened their jaws, and more snakes emerged from it. Said snakes also opened their jaws, releasing even more and more snakes. Soon, Orochimaru was buried under a pile of a truly staggering number of snakes, before all of them who lunged at Jiraiya, ready to sink their venomous fangs onto his flesh.

"Shit!" Jiraiya cursed, as he jumped back while wrapping himself with his chakra-enhanced mane. And while many of the snakes crashed against his spiked barrier, he saw that just as many passed by him and went after Tsunade, who was still healing herself. Panicking, Jiraiya's hands weaved hand seals as fast as he could. "Earth Release: Multiple Earth Style Wall!"

Jiraiya slammed both hands onto the ground, and several walls of rock and earth sprouted around Tsunade, protecting her from the mass of snakes

"And done! Thanks for the help, Jiraiya! Now better get out of the way!" Tsunade warned from within her rock shelter.

Several whistles alerted Jiraiya of what Tsunade was about to do, as a cluster of missiles flew out of the makeshift shelter. Jiraiya quickly jumped towards the shelter, while missiles rained upon the mass of snakes that covered the ground around them. Despite the number of snakes destroyed this way, there were many of them left. Tsunade then jumped out of the shelter, and scanned the area.

"Hey, where's Orochimaru?" the slug Sannin asked.

"I don't know, I can't sense him. His chakra is all around the place," Jiraiya replied.

"He must be using the snakes in order to hide his position!" Fukasaku pointed out.

"How so clever of you!" Orochimaru's voice said.

Suddenly, one of the snakes quickly tripled in size as it lunged at Tsunade. The enlarged snake opened its jaws, and Orochimaru crawled from under them, ready to strike Tsunade down. However, the Slug Princess was faster in the draw, and quickly raised a hand towards him.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Orochimaru was blasted backwards. However, as he did, another snake came from his mouth, lunging towards Tsunade again. Jiraiya was able to intercept it by wrapping his arms around them, but the snake regurgitated yet another Orochimaru, who lunged once again at Tsunade, while the snake wrapped its body around Jiraiya.

Raising a hand, the blade of Kusanagi flew back to it, and prepared to strike his former teammate.

Tsunade managed to generate another black chakra rod from her palm just in time to parry the blow of the legendary sword. Unfortunately, her makeshift weapon broke under the assault of Orochimaru's blade, forcing Tsunade to jump back.

"You're really out to get me, aren't you?" an annoyed Tsunade asked.

"What can I say, the Uchiha genes within this body makes me yearn for Senju blood!" Orochimaru said with a feral grin. "Now-"

Unfortunately for Orochimaru, a prehensile tongue wrapped itself around his ankle, pulling him back and tossing him backwards with extraordinary strength. As he was flung over, Orochimaru could see it was that wrinkled toad on Jiraiya's shoulder pulling him back, while the white haired man got rid of the snake with the help of a Shadow Clone, and was using its help to prepare his next jutsu, before the Snake Sannin was slammed against the ground, making the whole cave shake once more.

"Well done, Pa!" Jiraiya praised, as he held a Rasengan with both hands, while the clone infused it with elemental chakra. The Rasengan started to grow in size and change color, from blue with a white core, to bright red with an orange core. Though rather than a mere fireball, Jiraiya looked like he was holding a miniature sun on his hands.

"Now's your chance boy! While he's down!"

Nodding wordlessly, Jiraiya dashed towards Orochimaru, who just jumped back to his feet. However, he wouldn't be able to dodge the next attack, something was aware of as his red eyes shrank in horror upon realizing the sheer power Jiraiya's attack was packing.

"What kind of-"

"Fire Release: Spiraling Inferno!"

Jiraiya slammed the miniature sun onto Orochimaru's chest, the sphere of fire and heat tripling in size as its stored power was released at once, before it exploded in an infernal cone that bathed Orochimaru in a sea of orange flames, while being violently pushed backwards. The flames burned so bright, they illuminated the entirety of the cavern for a few seconds as if it was bathed by daylight.

As Orochimaru smashed against yet another wall, the cave shook again.

"You know, I'm tempted to say that there's no way Orochimaru survived that," Tsunade said as she walked towards Jiraiya. "But I still sense his chakra going strong."

"I know. Though even if you must be the one to kill him for the plan to work, I'm not even going to bother to hold back," Jiraiya told her. "Look, there he comes."

Once again, Orochimaru was back on his feet. As the cloud of dust raised by the impact dispelled, the Konoha ninja could see Orochimaru's smoking body was covered in burnt bone plates. The plates started to fall to the ground one after another, revealing sizzling charred flesh. Orochimaru then opened his mouth extremely wide and regurgitated a new body, shedding the charred one.

"Even with Kimimaro's Dead Bone Pulse to protect my body, that jutsu nearly killed me," Orochimaru said, as he got back on his feet. "It pains me almost as much to admit that you developed quite the killer jutsu, Jiraiya. But as you can see, not even that is enough to bring me down."

"Don't worry, I can perfectly settle for seeing you suffer," Jiraiya snarked. He then looked at Tsunade. "Ready to continue?"

"You can bet I am," Tsunade replied.

As Jiraiya and Tsunade closed in, Orochimaru's eyes narrowed as he started to rethink his plan of action.

" I think I underestimated these two. Tsunade's Rinnegan doesn't make her impossible to get close to, but gives her several ways to avoid my ninjutsu attacks. And Jiraiya is no slouch, either. I can beat either of them on their own, but by working together, they can always get in the way and help each other if they're in trouble... distract one while I focus on the other has proven to be an ineffective strategy... my many Bloodline Limits give me a huge advantage over them, so I better use those to overwhelm them. Time to test the limits of my new power..." Orochimaru pondered, just as his enemies were getting closer.

As Jiraiya rushed forward, he made several hand seals. "Earth Release: Swamp of the Underworld!"

The white haired Sannin slammed his hands on the ground, turning it into a muddy swamp, spreading towards Orochimaru's position. The Sanke Sannin avoided the attack by leaping into the ceiling, using chakra control to stick his feet on one of the stalagmites.

"Got you!" Tsunade said, as she cast her hand upwards. "Bansho Ten'in!"

"Dance of the Larch!"

However, Orochimaru already expected that, and he was flung towards his former teammate, he quickly grew multiple sharp bone spikes around his body. Tsunade's eyes widen in shock upon seeing he had been played with, and jumped backwards in an attempt to avoid being skewered, while Orochimaru landed on his feet with a thundering noise.

"And that's not all!" Orochimaru said, as he started to spin around his feet. "Dance of the Larch: All Killing Bone Spikes!"

Orochimaru fired the bone spikes growing from his body in every direction, forcing Jiraiya and Tsunade to put even more distance between them and his opponent, as well as between themselves. As the bones landed on the ground or hit a stone column, they could see that the spikes either burst into flames, were crackling with electricity, or melted the rock.

"ARGH!" Jiraiya screamed, as he failed to dodge one of the bones, who lodged into his shoulder.

"Jiraiya!" Tsunade screamed.

"Yes, I should better get rid of Jiraiya first. Unlike Tsunade, he has no way of healing himself," Orochimaru said, as his lips curved into an evil grin.

"Don't worry, Jiraiya-chan I'll get that out in a-" Fukasaku said, as he moved to remove the bone spike from the Toad Sage's flesh.

However, before he could do so, the wound was frozen in ice, as the ice started to slowly spread around Jiraiya's shoulder.

"Do you like that, Jiraiya? I can combine my many elemental Bloodline Limits with Kimimaro's Dead Bone Pulse attacks. This is nothing but the tip of the iceberg of all the possible combinations I can experiment with!" Orochimaru boasted, before sending a flurry of more elemental bone spikes towards Tsunade with a swing of his arm.

Even if Tsunade could absorb the elemental chakra the bone spikes were coated with, Tsunade couldn't absorb the bones themselves, at least not before they caused her damage, so she only had one way to avoid the attack.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The first wave of bone spikes was repelled. However, Orochimaru continued to fire them at a fast pace, to both at her and Jiraiya,

forcing the two of them to continue running.

"I already lost count of how many times you have used that ability, Tsunade," Orochimaru mocked, as he continued his assault. "Did the Rinnegan degrade you into such a one trick pony? That's all you can do now?"

As she ran, Tsunade felt an arm, which then reassembled itself into a sleek looking cannon. Its barrel started to glow as chakra was gathered on it.

"Try on this then!"

After stopping and grabbing her cannon-turned arm with her free hand, Tsunade fired multiple bolts of chakra at Orochimaru, who was now forced to be on the defensive, stopping his attack and jumping away. The chakra blasts, while small, produced pretty big explosions when they landed on the ground or on any of the rock columns.

"Slightly better. But you still fail to grasp the potential that eye you have has to offer," Orochimaru replied, as he started to make hand seals. "While intelligent, you were always a blunt woman, Tsunade. You're an excellent medic, but when it comes to actual fights, you can't think in anything more complex than smashing your enemy with your fists or with something big and blunt. I can't stand seeing that Rinnegan being misused like you're doing right now! Wood Release: Deep Forest Bloom!"

Once again, Orochimaru summoned a multitude of large wooden roots and vines across the cavern. Said vines, however, had many large flowers growing on them. Tsunade's eyes widened upon realizing what jutsu was that.

"Jiraiya, stay away from the pollen released by the flowers! It will knock you out!" Tsunade warned, as she covered her mouth and nose with her forearm. "It's especially worse here since we're in a place with no air flow."

"I'll deal with them myself before they can turn into a problem!" Jiraiya replied, weaving hand seals of his own. "Sage Art: Fire Release Big Flame Bullet!"

"And you think I'm going to let you?" Orochimaru asked, his hands moving even faster than Jiraiya's. "Water Release: Great Waterfall Jutsu!"

Jiraiya breathed a massive wall of fire towards the pollen-pumping flowers, but unfortunately, it was met by a roaring vortex of torrential water, putting out the fire before it could incinerate the offending plants. Jiraiya gritted his teeth and growled in frustration, while Orochimaru grinned in triumph.

"I won't let you destroy the flowers. Now stop resisting, and let them put you to sleep," Orochimaru said as the yellow cloud began to expand. "At the very least, your deaths will be quick and painless."

"So, the complete opposite of what your death is going to be then!" Jiraiya said, as she made several hand seals. "Sage Art: Flying Needle Senbon!"

Jiraiya's hair stood on end, before he fired thousands of needles made of his own hair towards Orochimaru. The Snake Sannin was ready to counter the attack, when suddenly the needles changed their direction to the sides, crashing against the wooden vines and roots Orochimaru had summoned, as well as the flowers.

And without the flowers constantly pumping pollen into the air, the pollen cloud quickly began to shrink down in size instead of expanding, breaking down and dissipating.

"What the...?"

"Did you like that, Orochimaru? Thanks to Sage Mode, I have a degree of control of my hair senbons once I launched them!" Jiraiya boasted.

"Jiraiya," Tsunade as she walked towards her husband. "This enclosed space puts us on a disadvantage, limiting us to smaller jutsu and not allowing us to summon animals. We need to take this to open air."

"I'm with you, but I doubt Orochimaru will let us change the battlefield," Jiraiya replied.

"I have an idea. Do you have any jutsu to protect us if this cave where to collapse? Tsunade asked.

"Yeah. I have something that could shield us. But why are you asking that?" Jiraiya asked. "You aren't planning to bring this cave down while we're still inside, are you?"

"Brash as she is, I don't think Tsunade-sama would ever do something so recklessly stupid," the Katsuyu clone said, before looking at her summoner. "Right?"

Tsunade merely smirked, much to the white haired man's horror. Before Jiraiya or Katsuyu had the chance to speak any further, Tsunade began to smash every stone column she could see, while also stomping on the ground with as much force as she could, subjecting the cave to the equivalent of an earthquake. The effect was immediate, and soon rocks and boulders of every size started to fall from the roof as the cave started to collapse on itself.

"Are we getting that desperate?" Orochimaru asked in a jovial manner, almost unfazed by the cave being brought down on him, as large rocks landed around him. "Whatever suits you then."

"Jiraiya, prepare that jutsu, NOW!" Tsunade said, as she returned to him.

"You're batshit crazy, woman! Did anybody tell you that!?" Jiraiya shouted, as he scrambled to make the hand seals for the protective jutsu.

"You'll be thanking me when we win!" Tsunade replied, before the two of them were buried by an avalanche of boulders.

...

As the mountain collapsed, the Graveyard was shook by a powerful tremor, toppling down many trees, scaring birds into flying away and ground animals into running as far as they could from the epicenter of the man-made catastrophe.

While not with the same intensity, the aftershocks of the initial earthquake were felt in the rest of the continent as well.

...

After several minutes of thundering noises produced by rocks and boulders falling on top of each other, like a solid-rock storm, there was nothing but silence. One might have had the impression that no one survived the avalanche Tsunade had provoked. And in a way, they would be right, since no ordinary human, hell, even ninjas of above average power wouldn't be able to survive such catastrophe either.

Then again, the Sannin were no ordinary people. Or even ordinary ninjas for that matter. And indeed, after a few minutes of silence, several rocks started to rumble, as if something was under them. And, indeed, a toad statue made of solid black rock burst from under the pile of boulders, sending them flying away. The toad statue then opened its mouth, and spat both Tsunade and Jiraiya to the ground. Its job done, the statue disappeared, leaving a puff of smoke behind it.

"Next time you plan to do something like that, warn me with a lot of time in advance," Jiraiya began. "So I have enough time to get as far away from you as possible."

"Quit whinning. It wasn't so bad. I mean, we're alive, and we're not worse for the wear, aren't we?" Tsunade asked.

"What happened to Orochimaru?" Katsuyu asked. "Is he still alive?"

"I'd wish he wasn't, but I know this isn't enough to kill him. Not by a long shot," Tsunade replied.

"I hope he didn't run away. Because I can barely sense him," Jiraiya mentioned.

"He made it clear he won't run away when he has the Rinnegan within reach," Tsunade insisted. "I bet he's trying to disguise his chakra presence as to catch us by surprise. The fact that we can sense him at all should tell you as much."

More tremors, this time coming from multiple spots all around them. Rocks were sent flying in every direction one after the other as several gigantic snakes burst from under the piles of rocks, hissing loudly and angrily, before setting their eyes on the Sannin, and lunging at them.

"There's your answer to both questions," Tsunade said, before jumping right before one of the giant snakes could bite her. When the snake tried again, Tsunade knocked it out with a powerful right hook, making the snake to fall back. Tsunade then quickly grabbed the snake by its tail, and started to use it as a weapon against the other snakes.

"Yes, this is what I was talking about!" Tsunade gleefully said as he slammed the unconscious snake against another one. "I really need a wide open space to properly go all out!"

Jiraiya, meanwhile, bit his thumb and made several hand seals.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Slamming his palm on the ground, there was a huge burst of smoke, with Gamaken emerging from the resulting cloud, Jiraiya standing on his head. The Sannin didn't even have to say anything, since the

moment the giant toad saw the equally large snakes coming, his battle instincts quickly kicked in and started to fight them off.

"Good job, Gamaken-chan! You're doing great!" Fukasaku praised.

"Thank you, esteemed elder. My training to curb my clumsiness is paying off," the soft spoken toad replied as he fended off a snake.

As Jiraiya oversaw the battle, he directed his senses towards tracking Orochimaru. This attack made it obvious that Tsunade was right in her assertions and their treacherous former teammate didn't plan to leave empty handed. And that moment, he sensed a spike of chakra: Orochimaru prepared to attack again now that Tsunade was busy and apparently, distracted.

"There!" Jiraiya said, having tracked the position of his former teammate, who was moving under the piles of rubble covering the ground, and leaped towards him. He held up a hand, as an energy sphere formed on it. "Rasengan!"

Jiraiya slammed the sphere of destructing where he believed Orochimaru was, producing a huge explosion that grinded the rocks it directly hit into pebbles, while sending more rocks and boulders away in every direction. Unfortunately, however, Orochimaru had evaded Jiraiya's attack. The moment Jiraiya attempted to strike again, he was attacked by a pair of giant snakes.

"Tsunade, watch out, he's going after you!" Jiraiya warned, while dodging the attacks of the giant reptiles.

However, Tsunade heard Jiraiya's advice too late, and when she sensed Orochimaru coming out from under the pile of rubble, riding on the mouth of yet another giant snake, the ex-Konoha ninja was already weaving hand seals at an imperceptible speed.

"Lightning Release: Wrath of the Thunder God!"

As he jumped out of the mouth of the giant snake, Orochimaru's body started to crackle with yellow electricity, before he thrust his arms towards the blond Sannin, and his entire body released a massive electric discharge in the form of a storm of lightning bolts that moved towards Tsunade in an arc. Tsunade, who was still using a giant snake to bludgeon other snakes, tried to drop it in order to absorb the attack, but wasn't fast enough, and the attack connected.

"AAAAAAAAAAGGH!" she yelled, as the powerful electricity coursed through her body.

Grinning triumphally upon seeing that a ninjutsu attack finally connected, Orochimaru decided to go for another before Tsunade had the chance to recover or Jiraiya could interfere.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

Orochimaru blew a powerful wind current from his mouth, which thanks to Sage Mode was akin to an hurricane, and besides blowing Tsunade away, it cleared the area in front of him of rocks and boulders of all sizes, sending them flying as well. Once the wind attack subsided, Tsunade fell to the ground with a loud thud.

Despite the brutal impact, Tsunade was stirring on the ground, attempting to get back on her feet. Her chakra signature was faint, but it was still there. No doubt she'd try to heal the damage first. Fortunately, Orochimaru could sense that Jiraiya was still busy with the rest of the giant snakes. Yes, now it was the best chance to end her and claim the Rinnegan. Summoning the Sword of Kusanagi to his hand once more, the Snake Sannin rushed towards his fallen enemy.

"This is your end, Tsunade! No one can save you now!" Orochimaru said, as he leaped into the air, ready to sink his trusty blade onto the Sannin's gut. "Say hello to Dan and Nawaki when you see them in the afterlife!"

However, seconds before Orochimaru's blade touched Tsunade's body, Tsunade's chakra signature were from faint to exploding like a supernova, and the blond Sannin rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the thrust. Tsunade then jumped back to her feet with a vitality that surprised Orochimaru, and stomped on the ground, causing a small tremor that made the black haired man to almost lose his balance. And that moment, knowing that he couldn't use the Sharingan to avoid it, Tsunade took the chance to deliver a savage punch to Orochimaru's face, sending her ex-teammate flying in an arc, before landing on the ground.

"You think that those two shitty jutsu were enough to put me down?" Tsunade asked. Then again, those jutsu did harm her more than she wanted to admit, but she was still good enough to keep fighting.

Miraculously, Orochimaru had survived the hit, having only his jaw dislocated, almost blown out of the rest of his skull. However, he was able to recover from the damage with his Shed Skin Body replacement. Then again, Tsunade wasn't fazed.

"That jutsu of yours is really annoying, didn't anybody tell you that? We work so hard to pound you to death, and there's not even a miserable bruise to show for it," Tsunade said, shaking her head. "Unfortunately for you, my next attack won't be something you will be able to heal so easily."

"Oh, is that so?" Orochimaru asked, sounding almost curious. "Now that's quite the bold and confident affirmation, Tsunade. If you have such a jutsu under your arsenal, why didn't you used it before?"

Tsunade smirked, almost expecting that question. "Because the battleground wasn't suited for it," she then aimed a hand at Orochimaru, who quickly tensed up. "CHIBAKU TENSEI!"

A black sphere the size of a marble flew out of Tsunade's hand and slammed into Orochimaru's chest with a deceptively strong force. Much to his surprise and horror, Orochimaru was then lifted into the sky as the gravity core began to pull all the rubble around it, burying

the Snake Sannin under a ball of rocks. Just like it did when Pain used it with Jiraiya on Konoha, the forming planetoid slowly rose into the air as more and more rocks, rubble and chunks of earth were pulled into it, increasing its size.

Tsunade was sure the jutsu alone wouldn't be enough to bring Orochimaru down. Thanks to Sage Mode, Jiraiya was able to survive the crushing pressure the rocks exerted on his body, to the point that he only have a few broken bones that were easy to mend. And there was the fact that Orochimaru had more than likely made a lot of extra modifications to his body -born from extremely unethical researchs from a medical point of view, Tsunade could tell- to make himself harder to kill.

Not that it mattered, as Tsunade didn't want to kill Orochimaru with this attack, since it wasn't part of her and Jiraiya's plan. However, he was sure that the impact of the nascent asteroid would left Orochimaru within an inch of his life, too weakened to use that annoying Shed Skin technique. And then Tsunade would carry the final step of her plan.

But alas, it wasn't mean to be.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGHH!"

Tsunade saw in shock how after the loud roar, like a chicken hatching from an egg, a massive monster broke out of the asteroid from the inside, destroying it completely. The monster appeared to be eight giant snakes with razor sharp white scales, but upon further inspection, she saw it was a single creature with eight snake heads and eight tails.

With the gravity core destroyed as well, the giant monster fell to ground below, producing a thundering noise upon hitting the ground, and sending nearby rocks flying in every direction.

"Tsunade!" Jiraiya shouted, as Gamaken landed behind her. Jiraiya jumped off Gamaken and ran towards his wife. Tsunade could sense

the worry in the white haired man. "What the hell just happened? What's that thing?"

"I thought I already had him," Tsunade said, trying to repress her frustration. "I had him, and then he goes and pulls out this... bullshit..."

Humans, toads and slug watched the eight headed snake with a mixture of awe and horror. Each one of its heads was probably as big as Manda or Kurokiba, yet the chakra the monster radiated was way more powerful than that of those snakes. Even the large Gamaken looked puny compared to them.

"I... I think this enemy goes beyond my capabilities..." Gamaken noted, remaining calm even when fear bubbled inside him. "Then again, I'll stay and help you as much as I can."

"HAHAHAHAHA!" a laugh echoed through the place, as one of the snakes opened its jaws, and Orochimaru crawled from beneath it, Sword of Kusanagi in hand, reminding the Konoha ninjas and their allies that this wasn't a summon, but a transformation. "Behold, you filthy worms, the true extent of my power! Now perish so I can claim the Rinnegan!"

Five of the snakes opened their mouths, releasing a torrent of water, a mass of electrical bolts, a barrage of rocks, a powerful tornado and a stream of flames at the people and animals below.

"*Shit, those elemental blasts are too far apart, I can't absorb all of them!*" Tsunade thought, gritting her teeth in anger. "Scatter!"

They did as she commanded, with Tsunade jumped to one side, Jiraiya to another and Gamaken to another. The snakes, however, were relentless and continued to fire elemental streams towards them, leaving them no opportunity to attack. Two of them fired their blasts towards Tsunade, fortunately for her, close enough to absorb.

"Gakido!"

Tsunade held her arms towards the torrent of water and storm of electricity, creating the barrier of white light that converted the attacks into pure chakra and assimilated them into her body. And after how much chakra she had been expending, even with Sage Mode, a recharge was something she welcomed. That failed Chibaku Tensei had cost her a lot of chakra.

"Tsunade-sama, watch out!" the Katsuyu clone warned.

Unfortunately, Tsunade absorbing the attack was what Orochimaru was counting on, and while she absorbed the water and the lightning, a sixth snake head opened its jaws, releasing a torrent of molten lava to the ground, creating a flow of lava that moved towards her. Since the first two attacks came from above, Tsunade's barrier didn't cover the ground, and thus couldn't neutralize the lava. However, if she stopped absorbing the two basic elemental attacks, she would be hurt by them.

And she couldn't use two Rinnegan abilities at once. At least not from the same body.

"Earth Release: Fissure!"

Tsunade sighed in relief upon sensing a spike of chakra coming from her husband. The earth shook a little as a large crack spread across the path the flow of lava was taking, creating a deep rift. The lava then fell down the rift on the earth instead of following its course, leaving Tsunade unharmed. After a few seconds, she finished absorbing the streams of water and lightning fired from the other two snakes, and quickly jumped back in case the lava snake attacked again.

"Nice save, Jiraiya!" Tsunade told him.

"Anytime!" Jiraiya replied, while dodging a storm of razor sharp rocks and a wave of flames. "But we can't continue like this! This giant monster is pushing us into fighting defensively! We need to attack!"

"I know!" Tsunade said, as her one visible eye scanned what she believed was Orochimaru's strongest form. *"Hmmm... that thing sure has a lot of range, but I don't remember seeing it move from that one spot. Perhaps it's stationary. In that case, I have the perfect jutsu to counter it."*

"Not even your Rinnegan is a match for this form, Tsunade! Now die and let me claim it!" Orochimaru said, as he raised the sword of Kusanagi above his head. The other seven snake heads stopped firing elemental blasts at Jiraiya and Tsunade, and instead beams of purple and black chakra flowed out of their mouths and into the blade of Kusanagi, which absorbed the energy, as an aura of the same color engulfed it. "Try absorbing this!"

Orochimaru then threw his chakra-charged sword towards Tsunade. The sword flew down leaving a trail of purple light with black edges as it moved towards the blond medic. She knew Orochimaru was expecting her to use Shinra Tensei and attack her while she was wide open, so she had no option other than jump backwards. The sword missed her, but once it stabbed into the ground, it released all its stored energy in the form of a powerful purple and black explosion, ripping the ground apart, sending large chunks of earth and rocks flying away in every direction, and knocking Tsunade backwards.

"Ugh... !"

"Do you realize now how big the gap between you two and me actually is?" Orochimaru taunted. "Unfortunately for you, this is the kind of mistake you pay with your life!"

"Only one life will be come to an end today, and it won't be ours!" Jiraiya loudly replied. In front of him, there were six clones, preparing three Spiraling Infernos. "Take this, you monster! Fire Release: Spiraling Inferno!"

"Don't make me laugh, Jiraiya! That attack might have done something before, but countering it will be child's play!" Orochimaru said, watching the three spinning flaming orbs flew towards him. Five of

the snake heads fired streams of the five basic elements towards Jiraiya's triple attack, detonating them prematurely.

However, much to Orochimaru's surprise, the three attacks merged into one, massive wall of fire that started expanding towards him, forcing the Sannin to pour more chakra into his attacks in order to counter them. Little by little, he was able to push the expanding wall of fire backwards.

"You almost got me there, Jiraiya, but once again-"

"Sage Art: Gracious Deity Gates!"

Orochimaru sensed the spike of chakra coming from Tsunade too late, as red torii gates started to fall from the sky onto him, pinning the snake heads to the ground.

"Weren't you watching when I used this jutsu to against Nagato's summoned animals, Orochimaru?" Tsunade asked. "Jiraiya, now!"

"You got it!" Jiraiya said, carrying yet another Spiraling Inferno on his hands. "You won't evade this one! Fire Release: Spiraling Inferno!"

Jiraiya threw the spinning fireball at the snake head Orochimaru was hiding in. However, Orochimaru revealed that he wasn't really attached to the snake head as it appeared, and like an actual snake, quickly scurried out of it before Jiraiya's attack made contact, and reduced the head to ashes in a spiraling dome of blazing death.

"You missed-"

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Orochimaru felt how his body was devoid of all weight for a split second, before being forcefully pulled towards Tsunade's open hand by an invisible force. He tried to anchor himself to the ground like he had done before, but thanks to Jiraiya's distraction, he didn't see what Tsunade was going to do, and couldn't plan accordingly. In a

couple seconds, Tsunade's fingers strongly closed around his throat. Orochimaru was about to make the snakes on his back to bite Tsunade, but before he could Tsunade quickly placed her other hand on top of his head. Much to his horror, Orochimaru's body went rigid.

"I wish it didn't have to end like this, Orochimaru. But you brought this upon yourself," Tsunade said, her voice laced with a bit of regret. "Ningendo!"

Tsunade pulled her hand backwards, tearing Orochimaru's soul from his body, who was released from her other hand's grip, falling to the ground with a dry thud.

He didn't move. Neither she nor Jiraiya could sense any chakra coming from it.

Because Orochimaru's sordid life had finally come to an end.

Author's Note: And there you go, Orochimaru kicked the bucket, unlike canon, where the fucker got away with all his atrocities with a slap on the wrist. Yayyyyyyyyy!

Now, as for questions I know you guys are going to ask me: yeah, I noticed that they killed Orochimaru without forcing him to undo Edo Tensei first. Trust me, I haven't forgotten about that. They DO have a plan to undo the jutsu, but it won't be seen until a couple of chapters. I think you guys will like the solution I came up with.

And second, because I KNOW a lot of you are thinking the same thing: but what about Mitsuki? Well, the answer is, I don't care. The fact that Orochimaru was going to die was something I already decided to do even before I started writing the first chapter, because like I said before, I hate how the guy got away with all the shit he did in canon (the guy literally *murdered babies*, for fuck's sake). And while I think Mitsuki is one of the

better characters introduced in Boruto, I don't like him enough to spare his absolute monster of a father.

Well, now that that's done, we can now move onto the chain of fights that will make the final battle, beginning with Obito and his Six Paths jinchuriki (many of you asked who was the sixth jinchuriki taking Fu's slot; the answer is Bunpuku, Gaara's predecessor) versus Naruto, Fu and Killer B.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, how did you find my take on the Sannin battle? Are you excited for the next battles? Whatever your thoughts are, share them with me in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Jinchuriki Brawl

Author's Note: Well, I certainly suck at predicting how people are going to react to a new chapter, because I wasn't expecting the last one to prove so popular. While I was writing it, I thought that the Sannin battle wasn't that exciting compared to other more plot relevant fights. Guess people really wanted to see Orochimaru getting his comeuppance.

Well, here's hoping this chapter proves to be just as well received:

Chapter 126:

Jinchuriki Brawl

or

Facing Past Failures

Forests of the Land of Fire

Following Obito's command, the six undead jinchuriki launched themselves at their living counterparts. Naruto and Killer B quickly activated their Chakra Cloaks, as the plates of Fu's Chakra Armor spread over her body.

"Naruto, watch out! I'm going to attack with a wide area jutsu!" Roshi warned as his hands flew through hand seals. "Lava Release: Scorching Rocks Jutsu!"

Roshi exhaled multiple blots of lava at the trio of living jinchuriki. Naruto and Killer B jumped in different directions, while Fu flew into the air. The lava splashed around, setting the trees on fire.

"This guy's attacking us with molten earth? We better give him a wide berth!" Killer B rapped, as he narrowly avoided a lava projectile.

"That's Roshi, the jinchuriki of the Four Tails!" Naruto told him. "He can use Lava Release! Be VERY careful with him!"

Before Naruto could plan his next movement, the red armored giant appeared besides him, his leg pulled back ready to give him a devastating kick.

"Boil Release: Eruption Kick!"

Propelled by a geyser of steam, the armored giant delivered a devastating kick to Naruto. The blond, however, was able to create a pair of chakra arms that, alongside his real ones, used to catch the leg before it could impact him. Naruto then spun the undead jinchuriki in a circle a few times before tossing him away. However, he managed to land on his feet on a large tree branch.

"Nice one, kid. I don't think anybody has been able to catch one of my steam-powered kicks," the red-clad jinchuriki praised. "Name's Han, by the way."

"Naruto Uzumaki," the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails replied.

Roshi then landed on a branch behind him. "You should be a proud, Naruto. Han isn't somebody to hand compliments that often."

"You know each other?" Naruto asked.

"We were Iwa's two jinchuriki, of course we do!" Han replied. "Roshi was one of the few people that made living in that shithole worth it. If he's a friend of you, then you can consider me one as well. Please ignore my unwilling attempts to kill you."

"So you have to be one of the jinchuriki dad was unable to find any info on," Naruto deduced. "Guess Akatsuki caught you with us none the wiser."

"Like I said, Roshi was one of the very few people that made me stay at Iwa, so when he left, so did I," Han explained. "Guess that made me an easy prey for those Akatsuki bastards. Also, watch out, I'm going to attack again!"

Han shot towards Naruto again, geysers of steam shooting from the gauntlets he was wearing.

"Boil Release: Propulsion Fist!"

Naruto jumped back just as Han brought his fist down, shattering the branch Naruto was perched on. As he moved backwards, though, he noticed that Roshi was about to strike him from behind, his fist coated in burning lava.

"Lava Release: Scorching Armored First!"

Naruto generated a giant arm of golden chakra to catch Roshi's lava fist before he could connect. Feeling that the lava was eating through the golden chakra, Naruto swung the golden arm around, throwing Roshi towards Han. However, rather than crash against each other, Han managed to grab Roshi and, spinning around his heels, redirected Roshi's momentum back at Naruto. While in mid air, the elder jinchuriki extended his leg just in time to deliver a powerful kick on Naruto's face, sending the blond flying away.

Naruto, however, created several chakra arms to hold onto nearby branches and regained balance, landing on his feet.

" *How is that he armored guy has Boil Release? I thought it was a Bloodline from Kiri...*" Naruto wondered.

" ***It's the power granted by his Tailed Beast, Kokuo,***" Kurama explained. ***"Just like how the smelly ape Son Goku grants Roshi Lava Release."***

" *Other Tailed Beasts can grant their hosts Bloodline Limits. Man, you seem kind of mediocre when you're put next to them,*" Naruto

joked.

Kurama growled angrily. ***"Don't you dare compare me with those second rate animals! You should feel immensely lucky that you were blessed with my incredible power!"***

"I never thought that we'd get to fight together again. Too bad it's under such awful circumstances," Han lamented.

"I feel that Naruto will be strong enough to deal with us. I mean, that golden cloak isn't just for show, is it?" Roshi asked. "You didn't have it the time I met you."

"A lot of things happened since the time we failed to save you, Roshi," Naruto told him. "This is just one among many."

Roshi chuckled. "Heh, I can imagine. I have the feeling they'd be great topics to write a book about!"

That moment, Fu appeared behind the two of them, her two arms morphed into long blades resembling the maws of a stag beetle. However, before she could skewer them, the two Iwa jinchuriki jumped aside, and the Taki kunoichi ended up cutting thin air.

"How...?" Fu asked, surprised at their reflexes. And to her increased confusion, many bubbles appeared around her. "Where did these bubbles come from...?"

Remembering the way Utakata used ninjutsu, Naruto's eyes widened. "FU! Get away from those bubbles now!" He yelled

"Water Release: Water Explosion Jutsu!"

The seemingly innocuous bubbles detonated like they were explosive tags. Naruto launched an arm of chakra into the chain of blasts, and managed to grab Fu, pulling her away from the danger. Thankfully, her armor was able to absorb most of the blasts, leaving only a few burnt marks here and there.

"You okay?" Naruto asked, as he gently put Fu down besides him.

"I'll live. Thanks for the save," Fu said, as she dusted her armor. She then looked at Roshi and Han. "What's with the geezer and the iron giant? I made sure to be extra stealthy."

"It's a power of the Rinnegan. All six of them can see what each other sees," Naruto explained, and gestured towards Uakata, perched on a branch above them. "And Uakata was watching you."

"I see," Fu acknowledged, before she saw yet another zombie coming at her, this one a short man holding a staff with glaives at the tip. "Oh damn, here comes another!"

"Yagura...?" Naruto asked, recognizing the zombie.

"Greetings, Naruto. I'm glad to see you again, even if it's under such circumstances," Yagura politely said, his hands making hand seals. "Water Release: Water Shuriken!"

The air's moisture condensed into water, which then took the shape of several shuriken. The watery stars then flew towards the two jinchuriki, who quickly started to weave seals. Rather than dodge, they decided to counter them with jutsu of their own.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

Naruto thrust his hands in the direction of the shuriken, releasing a powerful horizontal tornado, while Fu blew a strong wind current from her mouth. The combined wind attacks broke the incoming shuriken, as the water forming them dispersed into moisture once again. However, while the wind traveled forward, Yagura was already working on a counterattack. He motioned one hand in a circle, creating a perfectly circular mirror made of water.

"Water Release: Water Mirror Jutsu!"

Using the glaive at the end of his staff, Yagura turned the mirror around, revealing a copy of Naruto and Fu. The copies jumped out of the mirror, and formed the same seals the originals had weaved.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

"Wind Release: Cyclone Vortex!"

The copies released the same attacks as the originals. The four wind jutsu clashed against each other, no attack pushing the other back, until all four of them ran out of power. The mirror copies then quickly vanished.

"Man... I need to learn that jutsu," Fu said in awe.

"It seems that Yagura hasn't lost his edge since the last time I fought him," Naruto said, glaring at the reanimation.

"You know that guy as well?" Fu asked.

"Yeah. That's Yagura, Fourth Mizukage and jinchuriki of the Three Tails," Naruto explained. "I had to fight him as part of Konoha's deal with Mei's rebellion in our mission to bring the Blood Misty to an end. Turns out the poor guy was mind controlled the whole time. Not only we were unable to break the mind control, but we couldn't even save him from Akatsuki either."

"Though in death my mind is once again my own," Yagura added, before chuckling sadly. "Not that it matters much, given that I have no control of my body. It seems that I'm doomed to be Akatsuki's puppet no matter what."

"Don't worry, Yagura. We'll make sure to send you back to the place you belong and make whoever's behind this pay," Naruto promised, raising a fist at him. "And I never go back on my promises."

This made Yagura smile a little. "It seems that you're as much tenacious now as you were back when you fought me. Yes, I know

you'll do your best, Naruto. By the way, may I ask about my wife and my son? Do you know if they're okay?"

"They're fine. Your family and the rest of your loyalists surrendered once the news of your condition spread, and Mei, the current Mizukage, pardoned them," Naruto explained.

Yagura seemed to sigh in relief. "It's good to know that. If only I could see them one more time..." Yagura lamented, before his body tensed up. "Watch out, I'm going to attack you again. Water Release: Tsunami Glaive!"

Yagura then leaped towards the two jinchuriki, rearing his staff back, water started to gather around the glaive at the end of the weapon, forming a large blob around it. He then swung the staff towards Naruto and Fu, who jumped backwards in order to avoid the strike. However, the water gathered on the weapon was then released in the form of a watery blade. Fu deployed her wings and flew upwards, but Naruto couldn't dodge, and was forced to parry the attack with his Wind Blade as well as two arms made of Kurama's Chakra for extra help. Naruto was able to overpower the water blade, which broke down into millions of water droplets.

" ***Naruto, watch out!***" Kurama warned.

Before Naruto could heed the fox's advice, two shadows fell upon him, revealing them to be the forms of Roshi and Han.

"Sorry, Naruto!" Roshi said, as he shot chakra coated fist at him. "Lava Release: Scorching Armored Fist!"

"Boil Release: Erupting Propulsion Foot!"

Naruto screamed in pain Roshi's lava covered fist and Han's steam powered kick connected, sending him flying backwards. Naruto, however, was caught by Fu, who placed him on a nearby tree branch. The blond hissed as he touched the scorched marks on his

chest the two attacks had left. Fu looked at the Iwa jinchuriki, who, alongside Yagura and Utakata, were closing on them.

" Hey Chomei, think you can contact the other beasts and tell them to drop it already?"

" Sorry girl, but I can't sense them," Chomei apologized, sounding a little sorry. ***"Even if the jinchuriki have access to their powers, I can't sense my siblings inside any of them."***

" That's because they aren't really there. If these six are like Mito, the rest of our siblings are still inside the Demonic Statue, and they're able to channel their power thanks to a chakra nail stuck on their bodies," the fox explained.

"Yeah, what Kurama said," Naruto agreed. "Right now, we should focus on finding where those nails are and remove them as soon as possible," Naruto said.

Meanwhile, as Naruto and Fu made plans, Killer B was fighting Yugito alone. The blond kunoichi assaulted Killer B with an onslaught of swipes from the claws growing from her fingernails, swipes that Killer B expertly parried with his swords. The rapper managed to swipe an arm aside, before smacking her with one of his tails, sending her flying backwards.

"I'm sorry, Yugito-chan, but I need to be tough, so, hope you don't-"

However, before Killer B could finish his line, he was assaulted by a large sand tornado, forcing the Kumo jinchuriki to jump backwards.

"Hey, what the hell's wrong with you, dude? Getting in the middle of my and Yugito's fight, that was pretty rude!" Killer B protested.

"Stay sharp, B! There's no time for polite gestures!" Yugito warned, as her hands started to form hand seals. "Fire Release: Mouse Hairball!"

Yugito expelled a single, large fireball made of blue fire that quickly split into many, mouse-shaped fireballs, all of them flying towards the living jinchuriki. Killer B's swords started to crackle with electricity as he channeled Lightning Chakra through them, and deflected all of them while jumping backwards.

" B, behind you, watch out!" Gyuki warned.

And indeed, another sandstorm formed in the direction Killer B was jumping to. Fortunately, he was able to change his course by wrapping one of his chakra tentacles around a nearby branch above him, avoiding the sand tornado. However, the bearded old man jumped from within the sandstorm, and raising his hand, formed a large spear out of sand, before engaging Killer B on hand to hand combat.

"Zzzzzzz..."

"What the... is this guy snoring!? Does he find fighting against me boring!?" Killer B shouted, taking offense at his enemy's flippancy.

That moment, the old man suddenly woke up, looking startled.

"Huh? Eh? W-Where am I?" the old man asked, sounding confused and scared. However, his body continued moving on its own and fighting with surprising skill. "H-Hey, sorry for fighting against you... my body seems to move on its own..."

"That's Bunpuku, B. He's the One Tail's first known jinchuriki," Yugito explained, as she jumped to join the fray. "Be careful with him, he might be a narcoleptic old man, but he's as much of a threat as I am," Yugito warned, before she quickly glanced back at Obito, who was still perched on the same branch as before, not having moved a centimeter since the battle began. "And be careful with that man. He has one half of the Nine Tails bound to his will."

"The fox won't be a problem anymore, we used his jinchuriki to wipe the floor," Killer B reassured his former fellow Kumo ninja.

"You did? Good. Still, don't lower your guard," Yugito insisted. "I underestimated that man, and it cost me my life. I'd hate seeing you making that mistake."

"Damn, fighting against Yugito-chan alone is quite testing, with the two of them, there won't be any time for resting!" Killer B distressingly thought, as he parried blows from Bunpuku's sand spear and Yugito's claw swipes.

"B, we should regroup with the others. Fighting individually against enemies of such caliber won't end well for us," Gyuki suggested.

"As much as I hate to run from a fight, I'm afraid you may be right, it's better to flee and fight another battle, than stay and be slaughtered like cattle!" Killer B agreed.

While fighting with one hand and several chakra tentacles, the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails dug into his ninja tool pouch, grabbing a couple of smoke bombs, and threw them at his feet, creating a large cloud of smoke, stopping Yugito and Bunpuku from attacking, and letting the ninja rapper some time to breathe.

"Now that they can't see, it's time for Killer B to flee!" Killer B thought -he was smart enough not to speak out loud when he was trying to be beneath notice- as he dashed towards where Naruto and Fu were exchanging blows with the other undead jinchuriki.

Or he would have, if he didn't find himself surrounded by chakra-charged bubbles.

"What the...?"

The bubbles detonated like bombs, resulting in a chain of blasts that shook the entire forest. Killer B was fast enough to dodge the explosions, but doing so pushed him back against the other two reanimations he was trying to flee from. Looking up, he could see a

tall, brown haired man in a long kimono floating inside a large bubble.

"Hey, that's not fair! Why do I get three enemies going after my hair!?" Killer B protested.

" Guess the enemy sees you as the biggest threat," Gyuki said, shrugging a little. "And feels that his chances of winning are greater if he keeps you isolated."

"I see. If they aren't going to let me go to them, then I'll be the one to flatter this scum," Killer B said, as he raised a hand, his index and pinky fingers up. "Tailed Beast form, oh yeah!"

Killer B started to grow in size as his chakra cloak began to morph into Gyuki's actual form, toppling trees down as his body expanded, and forcing the other three jinchuriki back. From his new vantage point, he could see his fellow jinchuriki battling against the other three undead, not doing that good. Oh well, that was going to change soon. The two youths did notice the Kumo jinchuriki going into Tailed Beast form, and glanced at him inquisitively.

" Fu, take Naruto out off the ground, the fight is going to take a turnaround once I change the shape of the battleground!" Killer B said, as he coiled his tentacles around his body. The two of them nodded, and Fu grabbed Naruto and flew into the sky. The other jinchuriki tried to bring them down with powerful ranged ninjutsu, but Fu's speed allowed her to dodge them. Now that his friends were safe, it was time to make his move. **"TAILED BEAST TWISTER!"**

Killer B extended his tentacles as he began to spin around. The tentacles tore apart every tree and rock in the area, flattening the battleground into a complete and empty plain. The speed of the giant beast spinning, as well as the speed of such movement also caused a tornado to form around Killer B, which sent the six undead jinchuriki flying away, before they fell back into the ground with loud thuds.

Once the winds ceased and the clouds of dust raised by them settled, they could see that Killer B was now standing in the middle of a large crater, and that all the forest in a kilometer around him had been wiped out, leaving nothing but ground.

"Whoa..." Fu said from above, awed at the sight below her. "He made the entire forest disappear..."

"Yeah... though, this is for the better. We will do better fighting in an open field than around so many trees," Naruto said. "Let's go back to B."

Fu nodded, and descended towards their teacher, placing Naruto on one of his horns, while she was perched on the other.

" All right, the three of us are together again! Now we can cause the enemy even more pain!" Killer B cheered.

"Hey, I see the other jinchuriki," Naruto said, pointing at their seemingly unconscious forms, lying on the ground. "We should try to seal them before they get back-"

" Too late," Kurama interjected.

And indeed, the six reanimations quickly jumped back to their feet as Obito teleported in front of them. He looked at Naruto and Fu standing on top of Killer B's head, and scowled.

"It seems that fighting you normally isn't going to be enough," Obito said, shaking his head. "In that case, I'll have to have them use more power."

Obito made a hand seal, and an aura of chakra exploded around the undead jinchuriki, looking at first like a generic Tailed Beast cloak, but each of them began to take on a new shape of their own.

Bunkupu's chakra cloak appeared to be made of sand in constant movement, in the shape of an armor that looked like Gaara's Shield

of Shukaku jutsu, complete with a wide conical helmet. On his hands rested a large spear made of sand. It was the Spear of Shukaku, another of Gaara's jutsu, a weapon powerful enough to pierce even a Tailed Beast Chakra Cloak.

Yugito's Chakra Cloak looked like Naruto's, giving her an appearance of being made of fire, except it was sapphire blue with black edges instead of golden, while her fingers being made longer and in the shape of claws. Yagura's, on the other hand, resembled more Fu's Chakra Armor, as it was a physical armor made of sharp maroon coral that covered every part of his body, leaving only the eyes visible.

Roshi's chakra armor was made of lava, so hot the air around him appeared distorted. Han's chakra cloak made him look as if he was made of clouds. But Naruto could tell that those clouds were both extremely hot and made of a very corrosive substance.

Utakata's chakra cloak was the only one who looked liquid rather than solid or made of flames, looking like he was covered in a light blue liquid cloak that was constantly producing bubbles, which burst almost as soon as they formed. Once again, Naruto knew that those were no normal bubbles. Plus, unlike the other jinchuriki, while Naruto knew what powers their Tailed Beasts granted them, he didn't know what was the Six Tails' abilities.

" The slug can secrete corrosive substances from his body, either in liquid or gaseous form," Kurama helpfully provided upon sensing Naruto's thoughts. **"So you better watch out for that."**

" I see... thanks, Kurama," the blond mentally replied.

Down below, Obito motioned his hand forward.

"Go!" he ordered.

As soon as that word left his lips, the six undead jinchuriki charged forward. While most of them merely ran, the three living jinchuriki

watched in shock how Han leaped towards them like a rocket, propelled by a stream of pressurized steam coming from his feet.

"What the hell!?" Naruto asked.

"Don't look at me, I didn't know I could do this either!" Han replied, even more surprised than Naruto.

" Heh, that's quite the risky move to try, and thus I'm going to crush this guy!" Killer B rapped as he tried to swat the incoming Han with his hands.

However, the other jinchuriki weren't going to let him. Roshi stopped and, after making several hand seals.

"Hey big guy, watch out! Lava Release: Flower Fruit Mountain!"

After trying to warn them, Roshi slammed both hands into the ground, and suddenly, the spot Killer B was standing on suddenly turned into a pool of burning lava. It wasn't powerful enough to harm him much while in Tailed Beast form, but it indeed hurt a lot.

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! So hot!" Killer B complained, as he dragged his body backwards, away from the pool of lava.

Unfortunately, the lava distracted Killer B from Han, who was barreling towards him at high speed. The former Iwa ninja slammed into Killer B's face with a tremendous force, enough to knock him on his back. Fu managed to jump and fly into the air before she could lose her balance, but Naruto couldn't do such a thing, and fell to the ground below.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHH!" the blond screamed.

"Naruto!" Fu shouted, as she dived to catch the falling Konoha ninja.

However, before she could grab her distressed friend, she was intercepted by yet another jinchuriki, Yugito, who tackled her away from Naruto.

"Sorry, sis. I know that boy means a lot to you, but that man really doesn't want you to help him," Yugito sadly said.

"Don't worry, I know you don't mean to cause harm. So please don't take this badly either," Fu replied, as she grew several insect arms, pushing Yugito away from her. When Yugito tried to get back at her, Fu kicked her hard in her gut, sending him flying backwards.

The winged girl dived towards Naruto once again, but she was too far away from him in order to save him in time. But alas, Naruto wouldn't crash against the ground, since much to his luck, a large mass of sand formed beneath him, cushioning what would have been a very painful landing.

"Sand Coffin!"

Unfortunately for Naruto, that sand had been placed there by Bunpuku not to save Naruto but to capture him. The sand quickly rushed towards the blond, encasing him inside a cocoon of sand. After Naruto was completely covered, more and more layers of sand added on top of it, taking the shape of a large pyramid. Han and Roshi then landed at each side of the pyramid.

"You better get your friend out of there because Roshi and I are going to use our combination attack on him right now!" Han warned, as he and Roshi began to make hand seals.

Killer B and Fu shuddered. A combination attack between two of the most destructive elemental combinations couldn't spell nothing but pain for the now trapped blond.

"Lava and Boil Combination Release: Blast Furnace!"

Roshi expelled a huge amount of burning lava from his mouth, surrounding the pyramid with a moat of lava, while Han created a tornado of boiling steam around it, making the air around the pyramid as hot as an oven. Under the intense heat, the pyramid of sand began to turn into glass.

Killer B was dealing with Yagura and Utakata. The latter was sliding among Killer B's giant body, leaving a trail of corrosive acid behind, while the former Mizukage was covering one of his arms in hard coral, which spread around it. Still, the Kumo jinchuriki was able to sense that Naruto was in trouble, and that if he didn't do anything, the enemy would take him away.

" **Get away from me, you fools!**" in anger, Killer B flared his chakra with all his might, creating a pulse that pushed Utakata and Yagura away from his body. "**NARUTO!**" Killer B screamed, as he shot several of his tentacles towards the construct.

Killer B tried to dig into the burning sand, but the extreme heat quickly began to burn his tentacles. Growing desperate, he was about to use a small Tailed Beast ball to destroy the sand prison, however, it burst from the inside out, sending sand and chunks of glass everywhere, revealing Naruto surrounded by a powerful blue aura. Seizing the opportunity, Killer B wrapped a tentacle around Naruto and pulled him towards him.

" **Hey, Naruto, you okay? Those guys got you belay!**" Killer B asked.

"The chakra cloak protected me. If it wasn't for that, I would be a goner," Naruto replied. "Thank goodness I had Sage Mode to break out from that prison. Fu, maybe you should do the same."

The green haired girl nodded, and made a hand seal. Back in the makeshift shelter the trio had used to spent the night, there were a Naruto clone and two Fu clones gathering nature energy. One of the two Fu clones disappeared in a cloud of smoke, transferring all the nature energy to the female jinchuriki, allowing her to enter Sage Mode.

"Much better," Fu said, basking in the feeling of nature energy coursing through her chakra network. She then noticed Killer B's arm encased in coral. "Let me fix that. Sorry if it hurts!"

Fu started to fly around the coral-encased arm, punching it multiple times. Each punch was powerful enough to shatter a section to pieces, and after a few hits, the arm was completely free of coral.

" Thanks, Number Seven, you're a life saver! Let's see if I can return the favor!" Killer B replied.

"You can repay her right now! They're coming again!" Naruto warned.

" *This time, don't let them split you apart! You're at your strongest when you fight together!*" Gyuki sternly said.

Once again, Han was rocketing towards them, propelled by a stream of pressurized steam. Bunpuku was also flying towards them on a cloud of sand. On the ground, the other four undead jinchuriki were charging as well.

Fu flew in front of Killer B, deciding to attack them first. "So, you said that they have a shared visual field, right? Then, I'm going to end that advantage right now!" She made the Tiger hand seal, and started to release a cloud of sparkling powder from her open mouth.

" *Guys, you better close your eyes now!*" Chomei warned Naruto and Killer B through their mental link.

Fu clapped her hands. "Hiding in the Scale Powder jutsu!"

Just as Naruto and Killer B closed their eyes shut, the cloud of sparkly clouded exploded into an extremely bright flash of light, blinding their enemies.

That moment, the two youngest jinchuriki decided it was time to attack. The flash would only last a few seconds, but that would be enough for them. Thanks to the sensing abilities provided by Sage Mode they could still track their opponents. Fu managed to send Han crashing into the ground by delivering a devastating kick to his face.

When she moved to deal with Bunpuku, she was assaulted by a tsunami of sand, forcing her to fly back. She started to remember her match against Gaara during the Chunin Exams.

"Just like the redhead, the sand moves on its own to protect the jinchuriki," Fu recalled, as she started to make hand seals. "But I know the sand's weakness! Water Release: Great Waterfall Jutsu!"

Fu expelled a massive amount of water from her mouth towards the airborne Bunpuku. The sand quickly moved to protect him, but all it accomplished was absorb part of the water of Fu's attack, becoming much heavier and thus falling to the ground, leaving the still asleep old man completely defenseless.

And indeed, taking advantage of the situation, Naruto created a massive arm of golden chakra, and used it to deliver a devastating punch towards the old man, who, like Han, was sent flying downwards, hitting the ground with a loud crashing noise.

"Nice punch, Naruto!" Fu praised, giving her fellow jinchuriki a thumbs up.

"Thanks! But we aren't done yet!" Naruto said, as the light of Fu's jutsu began to banish. "B-sensei, I'm sensing the other four jinchuriki just below you! Swipe the ground in front of you with your tentacles!"

" **You got it!**" Killer B agreed, as he quickly delivered a swiping blow, raising a large cloud of dust, but most importantly, hitting the four remaining jinchuriki, knocking them backwards with a brutal strike. **"Oh yeah! Four birds with one stone! If you mess with B, you will be blown!"**

"Now that they're incapacitated, we need to remove the black rods from their bodies!" Naruto urged. "If we do, they won't be able to draw power from the Tailed Beasts and we'll beat them easily!"

Naturally, Obito wasn't planning to make things for the three jinchuriki any easier. He was growing more and more frustated and

impatient with how his undead Six Paths of Pain were failing to beat his three elusive preys. Then again, he still had more cards to play.

"You're annoyingly persistent in your resistance," Obito said, though it was more like a growl. He made a hand seal. "Alright, let's see how well you do against THIS!"

That moment, Like Killer B before them, all the jinchuriki quickly grew in size as they transformed into their Tailed Beast forms.

" ***This... this is bad... very, very bad...***" Kurama said, sounding worried, even scared.

" *Come on, don't be such a downer! Didn't I beat you when I was less powerful than I am now?*" Naruto replied. "*Besides, you always boast about how you're the strongest of the Tailed Beast. Was all that bravado?*"

" ***I AM the strongest of the Tailed Beasts,***" the fox insisted. "***However, you don't have access to my full power. You won't have it until you're able to reach the Tailed Beast form, something you had failed to do.***"

" *I didn't need that to beat you!*" Naruto protested.

" ***Even ignoring the fact that you had external help, I was only one enemy,***" Kurama replied. "***If you were to fight against a single Tailed Beast, my proverbial money would be on you. But six ? Unless you and bug girl get their shit together, I see a lot of pain in your future.***"

" *Then I'll prove you wrong. Besides, I don't need to beat them per se. I only need to find the location of the black rods and pull them out,*" Naruto retorted, before turning his head at Fu and Killer B. "Come on guys, let's go!"

"Crush them!" Obito said. "Focus on the Eight Tails! That's the biggest threat right now!"

" Sand Coffin!"

Bunpuku raised his arms, and a torrent of sand formed around Killer B. The sand wasn't enough to cover him completely, but it was to impede his movements. While he was restrained, Han charged forward, lowering his head.

" Horn Strike!"

Han's horns stabbed into Killer B's flesh, drawing blood and pushing him backwards. Upon seeing this, Naruto realized that he needed to help his friend and mentor or else things would get ugly. He raised his arms towards Han.

"Leave him alone!" Naruto said, as he began to gather chakra into a spinning, dark purple sphere. "Tailed Beast Ball!"

Naruto fired the Tailed Beast Ball, and it hit Han squarely on the side. The resulting explosion lunged the Five Tailed Beast backwards, making him land on his side. However, before Naruto could have time to celebrate, he saw a shadow looming over him. Looking up, he saw the massive form of Roshi in his Four Tails beast form dropping on him. The blond was quick to leap away before he was crushed. Roshi's attack didn't end there, though. He took a deep breath.

" Monkey Flame Arson!"

Roshi expelled a stream of green fire at the still airborne Naruto, who quickly made several hand seals in return.

"Wind Release: Great Breakthrough!"

" Naruto, what the hell are you doing!? You won't beat this jutsu with wind!" Roshi protested.

However, much to Roshi's surprise, rather than aiming the wind blast towards the stream of fire, he aimed it upwards, making Naruto to

barrel towards the ground, dodging the attack.

" **Oh, I see... really clever, kid,**" Roshi said.

" **Shadow Stroke!**"

But once again, Naruto wasn't safe. He felt the ground shake as a chakra signature approached him at great speed. Turning around, he saw Yagura in his Three Tails form, curled into a ball that was about to roll into him at great speed.

"Naruto, watch out!" Fu yelled, as she dived down. "Takigakure Great Whirlwind!"

Fu punched the giant rolling turtle before it could steamroll Naruto, and managed to push it backwards as her strike generated a powerful gust of wind. However, she still hurt her hand a little with that punch, something she had never happened to her before. Even with Senjutsu, a Tailed Beast proved to be more than a match to her.

" **Cat Flame Roaring Fire!**"

Suddenly, Fu was hit by several large fireballs. The explosions didn't harm her much, but the kinetic impact threaten to destabilize her flight. Which was all what Yugito needed in order to land a clear blow.

" **Sorry again, sister,**" Yugito said, as she leaped at the Takigakure kunoichi. "**Cat Claw Attack!**"

Like a cat lazily swatting a fly, Yugito's brutal paw strike send Fu crashing against the ground, opening a crater where she landed. While she was on the ground, she could sense Bunpuku sending a wave of sand to capture her. Fu, however, forced herself back on her feet, and once again flew into the air. Unfortunately, Yugito was once again ready to put her down.

" **Cat Claw-**"

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

A whirring noise filled the air, and Yugito was hit in the face by Naruto's most powerful jutsu. The chakra shuriken burst into a spiraling dome of razor sharp winds that pushed the giant feline away, allowing Fu some respite.

"Thanks, Naruto. Guess we're even now," Fu replied.

" Girl, you can't continue fighting like this!" Chomei said.
"Kurama is right! If you want to leave this battle alive, you need to fight as a Tailed Beast like they're doing!"

" But I can't do it! No matter how many times I tried, I just can't do it!"
Fu replied, her fists clenching in frustration.

" Then try once more! It's still better than what you're doing now!" Gyuki interceded.

" I guess we have no choice..." Naruto conceded. He tried to put on a brave face. "Come on Fu! Let's show our fellow jinchuriki the results of our training!"

"Alright!"

Both Naruto and Fu started to glow with chakra, while their bodies started to grow, taking the form of the Tailed Beasts they housed inside their bodies. Naruto and Fu could feel the power surging through their bodies, and it felt... natural. Like the pieces that they were missing had finally been found, and were now whole. Both Killer B and Obito held their breath as they watched in awe how the two young jinchuriki were about to accomplish what had eluded them for so long.

"No... it can't be..." Obito said in a whisper. Was he going to lose again now that he finally was on the verge of victory?

" Yes, yes! They're going to do it!" Killer B cheered. **" They're-!"**

... right after the transformation wavered before breaking apart, and the two jinchuriki returned to their previous forms.

" ***They didn't do it...***" Gyuki said, letting his head down in defeat.

Obito, however, let out a mocking laugh. "Ha! For a moment, you made me believe that you greenhorns had mastered the power of the your Tailed Beasts in such a short amount of time. And while you have grown indeed very powerful, this is a battle you can't win. This ends right here, right now!"

"Naruto! The transformation failed!" Fu cried, panic seeping into her voice. "What the hell do we do now!?"

As Naruto watched the six Tailed Beasts closing in, the ground rumbling under their heavy footsteps, he tried to think what else he could do. Though, just like the Taki kunoichi, Naruto was unable to think properly due his panicked state. Something the Nine Tails noticed.

" ***Come on Naruto, you aren't going to let Akatsuki get their hands on me, are you? Tell me you don't plan to give up, after you went this far!***" Kurama interceded. "***What about that obnoxiously positive attitude you always have?***"

" *I'm trying, but I can't think anything! For some reason, I just can't pull the complete transformation!*" Naruto snapped back.

" ***All that training, and this is the best you can do!? Unbelievable,***" the fox scoffed. "***Didn't that loudmouth from Kumo give you any advice on what were you doing wrong?***"

" *He did, but he-*" Naruto said, before interrupting himself. Suddenly a realization dawned upon him.

Jinchuriki are two being sharing a single body, the two need to agree, or the result will be shoddy. If you want to get the job done, the key to that is to work as one!

" But he what? What did he say?" Kurama nervously asked.

To work as one.

" To work as one," Naruto said. *" Wait... maybe... maybe that's what I've been doing wrong? I've been trying to do the transformation on my own. Maybe... the two of us need to be synced in order for that to work?"*

" Oh? So you need a little push from me then?" Kurama asked. The idea... didn't sound half bad.

" Wait, all this time..." Gyuki's voice said. **"Where you trying the transformation on your own? Instead of working together?"**

"..."

" Didn't B tell you that the key was to work together?" Gyuki asked again.

" Eh... whoops?" Naruto bashfully said.

Gyuki let out a defeated sigh. **"You guys... I'm starting to wonder if it's not just B, but all of you who lack in the brain department..."**

" You can insult the inferior species' intelligence later! We have a battle to win!" Kurama said. **"Chomei, you hear that?"**

" I did!" Came the giant beetle's reply. **"I'm ready to help my girl!"**

" Let's hope it works this time," Fu said.

"Alright Fu, one more time!" Naruto said out loud.

Once again, Naruto and Fu reached for the power of their Tailed Beasts and brought it out, triggering the transformation. And once again, when they reached a certain point, the transformation began to waver, threatening to break apart. This time, however, Kurama

and Chomei pushed more chakra themselves, helping stabilize the process. Naruto and Fu felt how like a door that refused to open more than a little creak was slammed open, letting a huge stream of chakra flow free into their beings, which in turn, gave them the final push to complete the transformation.

" Yes, yes! This is such a blast! After so much struggle, they did it at last!" Killer B cheered.

While Fu had transformed into Chomei, Naruto was floating inside an avatar of Kurama made of golden chakra.

Upon seeing Naruto and Fu successfully transform on their second attempt, Obito's smile disappeared from his face. Still, he refused to back down. He still had the advantage. He still could win. Or that's what he wanted to convince himself of.

"Your transformation means nothing! Numbers are still on my side! Attack, my Tailed Beasts!" Obito ordered again.

"You might have the numbers, but as the saying goes, quality beats quantity! And there's no better quality than the three -no, the *six* of us!" Naruto boasted.

The six opposing Tailed beasts opened their mouths and started to gather chakra in the form of a sphere in front of them. Naruto, Fu and Killer B replied in kind, forming Tailed Beast Balls on their own. Nine spheres of destruction fired, six versus three, clashing in the middle in the form of a gigantic explosion that opened a large crater while raising strong winds in every direction.

The moment the blast subsided, Naruto in his Kurama Avatar and Killer B in his Tailed Beast form charged forward, the former slamming his tails against Han and the latter taking down Bunpuku in a single punch. Naruto and B then wrapped their tails around Roshi and Yagura, immobilizing them, before launching them into the air.

"Fu, your turn!" Naruto called.

" **Got it!**" the girl said, as she quickly flew towards the airborne Tailed Beasts. Her Y-shaped horn started to glow with a teal light as it doubled in size and length. "**Horn Buster!**"

The horn hit both the targets resulting in an explosion of chakra, sending them crashing down against the other Tailed Beasts, The impact left them momentarily stunned, and they would get back on their feet in no time. However, said moment was all what Naruto needed in order to end the battle here and there.

"Alright, found all the black rods!" Naruto said, as he clapped his hands. From the Kurama Avatar's back shot six arms of chakra which latched onto the parts of the Tailed Beasts' bodies that had the rods. Each of the arm had a Naruto clone that was grabbing each of the rod. "I got all of them! All I need to do now is to pull and... !"

...

Somewhere else

"... uh?" Naruto asked in confusion.

The noise of the ongoing battle had disappeared, being replaced by a welcomed but suspicious calmness and silence. The blond then he realized was no longer in the battlefield, but inside some kind of vast, empty room. Which wasn't a room, and more like the pocket dimension where Kurama was sealed.

Except, instead of just Kurama, there were six other Tailed Beasts there with him.

"What the... what is this place?" Naruto asked, looking around. He took no time to notice all the six enemy Tailed Beasts, and was startled upon seeing them. "UH!?"

" **Relax, Naruto. They aren't your enemies,**" Kurama's voice said. The fact that the Nine Tails was with him kinda soothed him a little. "**At least, as long as we're here.**"

"Oh... that's a relief..." Naruto said. Indeed, none of the Tailed Beasts -nor the jinchuriki, who were sitting on their heads- were displaying any kind of aggressive body language. "By the way, what is this place?"

" This is a pocket dimension that links every Tailed Beast with one another, young one," the Two Tails said. **"Due to being sealed inside the Demonic Statue, we're barred from this place for the time being."**

" But by touching all the chakra rods that bound us to the undead jinchuriki, we're allowed to temporarily reach this place once again," the Six Tails added. **"It's little consolation given our due predicament, but you have our thanks."**

"Oh... eh, you're welcome," Naruto said, as he rubbed the back of his head. "Wish I could do more for you guys."

" Really? Do you really want to help us?" the Four Tails asked, sounding skeptical. **"A human wants to help Tailed Beasts? Ha! Now that's a good one!"**

"Don't laugh at Naruto, you ungrateful monkey. This kid basically lives to help others. He tried to help me, despite being from an enemy village," Roshi replied.

"Yeah, what Roshi said! Uh..." Naruto continued, before losing trail of thought. "Hey, I don't think I know your names, do I? I know Shukaku over there because of Gaara, as well as your jinchuriki, but I don't think I know any of you."

The Four Tails looked at Naruto as if he had grown a second head. **"You... you want to know our names? Thats-"**

"Ha! Told you!" Roshi said with a smirk, crossing his arms.

" In that case, let us introduce ourselves," the Two Tails said. **"My name is Matatabi."**

" **I'm Isobu,**" the Three Tails said.

" **Kokuo,**" the Five Tails said in a soft, feminine voice that caught Naruto a little by surprise.

" **Saiken,**" the slug added.

The Four Tails then cleared his throat. Shukaku rolled his eyes and groaned loudly.

"**Oh god, here we go again...**" the giant Tanuki lamented.

" **I have many names and titles,**" the Four Tails began. "**For I have lived a long live, committed many deeds, and mastered many arts. I am the King of the Sage Monkeys, the Handsome Monkey King, the Sage of-**"

" **Oh for fuck's sake! Son Goku! His name is Son Goku!**" Shukaku yelled, while throwing his arms into the air.

" **How dare you ruin my introduction, you filthy tanuki!**" Son Goku protested.

"Naruto only asked for your name, not a detailed story of your life," Uakata deapanned.

" **Silence, human! This doesn't concern you!**" Son Goku growled. He then turned towards Naruto in defeat. "**Well, that's my name. Son Goku.**"

Naruto smiled at all of them. "I'm glad to meet all of you. I mean, meeting in a way that doesn't involve you trying to kill me and my friends. Not that I blame you guys or anything."

" **We know. However, the fact that you brought all of us here means that we may actually help each other,**" Saiken said.

"Really? How? What can I do to help?" Naruto asked. "And how are you guys going to help me if you're inside the Statue?"

" We will give you a portion of our chakra," Kokuo began. " With that chakra, we will be able to assist you with our wisdom and what little power we can gather."

" Not to mention, we will be able to experience some form of freedom, and be in the company of our siblings," Isobu chimed in.

"And they won't be the only ones," Han interceded. "We will also give you some of our chakra as well. You're going to need all the help you can get."

"Zzzzzzz..."

"All of us minus Bunpuku," Yugito corrected, rolling her eyes a little. "I doubt the sleepy old man will be of much help, anyway."

" Now, Naruto, extend your hand upwards," Matatabi instructed.

Naruto did as he was told, and the six Tailed Beasts began to slowly place their limbs above it, on top of each other. Once all six were done, Naruto could feel a rush of chakra as the power of the Tailed Beasts started to flood his chakra network.

" This power will allow you to use our special abilities, such as my Lava Release or Shukaku's Magnet Release;" Son Goku explained.

"And with our chakra, we will be able to teach you how to use your new powers, Naruto," Yagura said.

" Also, once you return to the real world, ask Chomei and Gyuki to share your chakra with you as well," Saiken requested. **" That way, all nine of us will be in contact with each other through you."**

"Don't worry guys... I will. And I will save you. All of you," Naruto promised. "And when this war is done, I'll make sure no Tailed Beast

will have to go what Kurama or some of you had to go through."

As the connection finally broke apart, Kurama didn't say anything, but his lips curved into a small smile.

...

Real World.

Naruto and his clones pulled with all the force they could muster, and even if they resisted a little at first, the black rods slid out of the flesh of the jinchuriki-turned-Tailed Beasts, cutting the connection between undead and Tailed Beast. The effect was immediate, and all the undead jinchuriki quickly began to shrink back to their normal size.

" You did it Naruto, you removed the weird stakes!" Killer B cheered. **" Now finishing them off will be piece of cake!"**

" Chomei, Gyuki, I can't explain right now, but I need you two to share some of your chakra with Naruto," Kurama intervened. **" You'll understand once you do."**

The ox and the beetle didn't say anything. It was an odd and sudden request, but Kurama wasn't somebody to ask things nilly-willy, and the two of them wordlessly agreed. As the three living jinchuriki returned to their human forms, they walked towards Naruto, who was extending his fists towards them.

Both Killer B and Fu bumped their fists with Naruto, allowing their beasts to transfer some of their chakra to Naruto.

As Naruto's body absorbed the two remaining Tailed Beast chakras he didn't have yet, something happened. His body started to glow brighter, as white electricity started to crackle around it, before producing a burst of a very bright light that blinded Naruto and his fellow jinchuriki.

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Ninja Alliance HQ

"Onoki-sama, we're picking up several powerful chakra signatures to the northeast of our position!" Ao informed. "We believe- no, we know it's Naruto, Fu and B! It appears that they've been found by Akatsuki and they're fighting once again!"

"We need to send them help as much as soon as we can!" the aged Third Tsuchikage exclaimed. "What's the state of our forces?"

"Unfortunately, all of them are still engaging enemy forces. They appear to be winning, but it will take some time until they can deal with all the reanimations," Santa Yamanaka informed.

Onoki grunted in annoyance. "Keep me informed of their status every fifteen minutes! Once they're done, I want them directed to the jinchuriki's position!"

...

Somewhere else

Naruto was once again back in the pocket dimension that linked all Tailed Beasts. The other beasts and their jinchuriki minus Bunpuku were there, in the very same positions. But they weren't the only ones there this time.

At Naruto's sides were Fu and Killer B, and behind them, flanking Kurama, were Gyuki and Chomei. However, there was one more individual in that mysterious place: in the center of the room, there was an old man, floating above the ground, in a sitting position. His appearance was rather unsettling, with his wrinkled gray skin, forehead that grew into a pair of horns, and a red circular mark with several concentric black rings on said forehead. He was wearing a white priestly robe with black magatamas around it, not unlike those used by the Moon Acolytes.

But the more fascinating feature of the man were his eyes: purple with concentric rings. Eyes that Naruto had only seen in one other individual: Nagato.

And even more fascinating than that, was the way the Tailed Beasts were reacting to the man. They looked at him in awe and shock. Not because they were afraid of him, but as if they saw somebody who they hadn't seen in a long, long time.

" **Father...?**" Gyuki asked.

"**It's papa!**" Chomei excitedly said.

" **The old man? Here...? But...**" Kurama began to mumble.

"Papa?" Fu repeated, looking at Chomei incredulously. "That man is your father, Chomei?"

" **You can bet he is!**" Chomei replied. " **Oh papa, I'm so glad to see you again!**"

The old man smiled kindly at the giant beetle. "I'm also happy to see you, Chomei. The same goes for your brothers and sisters as well."

"Wait a second! Just... who the hell is this guy?" Naruto asked, pointing at the floating monk. "And why does he have a Rinnegan?"

The old man seemed amused by Naruto's questions. He looked at the blond, and smirked a little. "Who am I? I'm sure you can tell. Because you told the kid about me, right, Kurama?"

" **I did, father,**" Kurama said, before he looked down at Naruto, groaned, and slapped his hand against his face. " **Seriously? Did you forget already everything I told you?**"

"Father...? Then that means... you're the Sage of the Six Paths?" Naruto said in realization.

The Sage nodded. "Indeed, that's the title I'm known in your time. But that's not a title I was keen on having. My name is Hagoromo Otsutsuki, and I'd appreciate if you addressed me by my first name."

"Hey there. I'm Naruto Uzumaki," the blond awkwardly said. Not every day you get to speak with a legend who had lived a thousand years ago.

"Naruto. Yes, the name sounds familiar. You're the romantic partner of my brother's heiress, Hinata Hyuga, right?" Hagoromo asked.

"You know Hinata-hime? And yeah, I'm her boyfriend," Naruto said, smiling proudly of the fact. He then remembered that he didn't come alone this time, and was quick to introduce the other two jinchuriki. "Oh! These are my friends Fu and B."

"What's up?"

"Yo."

"A pleasure meeting you two as well," the Sage nodded. "I can sense a very strong bond between the two of you and Gyuki and Chomei. From what I could gather, not many humans have a meaningful bond with a Tailed Beast, so it's delight to be in the presence of not one or two, but no less than three."

Both jinchuriki didn't say anything, but smiled in return. The normally loud and talkative ninjas were too awed to say anything, being in the presence of a living legend. And the fact that said legend had sent a compliment their way did nothing but increase said awe.

" **Not to sound disrespectful, father...**" Kurama began, looking nervous, shaken even. It was odd for Naruto to see the usually haughty and arrogant fox being so humble. " **But why are you here? Better said, *how* can you be here?**"

"The answer is a simple one, Kurama. I'm here because of all of you," the Sage replied, spreading his arms towards the Tailed

Beasts, much to the beast's surprise. However, he decided to elaborate. "I once held in my body the primordial Six Paths chakra that I used to create all of you, and thus my spirit is bound to it, even long after my death. When the pieces of your different chakra were sealed inside Naruto, they merged together, creating Six Paths chakra, and allowing me to manifest once again."

"I get it! It's like when Hinata saw Hamura! She told me he said that he was also bound to the Six Paths chakra that she and Hanabi have," Naruto said in realization.

"Exactly," Hagoromo nodded. "And you, Naruto, are the second person who was able to recreate Six Paths chakra and summon me."

"Second? Who was the first then?" Naruto asked.

"A man by the name of Madara Uchiha," Hagoromo replied.

Naruto could feel the sheer rage that was coming from Kurama behind him. Still, the Fox was doing his best not to lose his cool in front of the being he respected the most. Still, he ignored his tenant's anger and focused on the matter at hand.

"Madara Uchiha? How? When?" He asked. He couldn't think how Madara was able to manifest such chakra.

"To answer your first question... well, given that Madara has a Sharingan, that means he's a direct descendant of my oldest son Indra, who inherited the Yin Half of my Six Paths chakra, which I assume were passed to all his descendants as well," Hagoromo began. "He then took a bit of flesh from Hashirama Senju, whom I strongly believe is a direct descendant of my youngest son Asura, and integrated into his body, thus combining his Yang Half of my Six Paths chakra with his other half, thus making his chakra similar to my own."

Naruto nodded. This matched with what he had learned from the Moon Acolytes about the Sage and the Rinnegan.

"As for your second question... while my perception of time it's kind of muddy given the circumstances, I'd say it was... perhaps two decades ago? Give or take," the Sage said.

" No... that... that can't be right," Kurama said, trying to make sense out of his father's words. **"He should have been dead by then."**

"He was very much alive when I saw him, Kurama. That much I can tell you," the Sage confirmed.

" Then the Madara who tried to summon you wasn't a reanimation," Gyuki concluded. **"How did that monster managed to survive for so long?"**

"From what I had gathered, he used an Uchiha forbidden jutsu called Izanagi to undo his death. Then, he went into hiding, and spent the following years planning. He then used a complex jutsu to return his body to his prime over several years," Hagoromo said. Naruto then remembered Rin's story, and how there was a second cocoon next to hers. That had to be Madara's. "However, that doesn't matter right now. What does matter, however, is this: Madara Uchiha is the mastermind behind this war. He's the one who indoctrinated Obito Uchiha into following his ways. He's the true enemy that you have to defeat to put this war to an end."

"But... why is that Madara guy doing this? What does he want?" Fu asked.

"When Madara met me for the first time, he had... less than kind words for me," Hagoromo said, causing all the Tailed Beasts to scoff in indignation. How dare that filthy human disrespect their father like that! "He believed it was my fault the world was in such a sorry state, ravaged by wars, misery and death, and how I shirked my

responsibilities. How I should have used my power to impose peace on the world."

"That's nonsense!" Naruto said. "Your mom already tried that and she failed! There's no peace through suppression by force!"

All the Tailed Beasts were quick to agree and nod, all expressing their support of Naruto and their beloved progenitor.

"My thoughts exactly. Unfortunately, Madara didn't share them. He said that, if I refused to create, and I quote, 'perfect world for mankind', then he'll do it with the new power he had awakened," the Sage explained.

Naruto, however, felt there was something he was missing. "That makes no sense. Madara was nothing but a warmonger consumed by bloodlust. And now he wants to create a perfect world of peace?"

"Madara Uchiha is... a little more complex than the way history books describe him," Hagoromo said.

The Sage then waved his hand, conjuring a large sphere of white light above him. Images could be seen on that sphere as if it was a screen. It was the image of a young Madara Uchiha fighting on a battlefield.

"Madara Uchiha was born and grew on very turbulent times. He had to watch his mother dying after delivering her sixth son. He had to watch how his father, and four of his five brothers died to the Senju one after the other. All what he had left was one of his younger brothers, Izuna."

The sphere of light then showed another battle, one where Izuna fell before Tobirama's blade. Naruto knew that this was the last battle between the Senju and the Uchiha, that preceded Konoha's foundation.

"Izuna's death affected Madara more than any of his other relatives. His death caused him so much pain, Madara refused to form any new bonds anymore, out of fear of experiencing the pain of loss again," Hagoromo explained. "However, Izuna's death also left a hole on Madara's heart, a hole that Madara refused to fill with new relationships.

"And if Madara couldn't fill that void with love, he would fill it with something else: war and power," Hagoromo continued. "That's why he sabotaged all of Hashirama's attempts at establishing peaceful relationships with other villages. His desire of making Konoha into a superpower was nothing but a excuse to allow him to bathe in the blood of his enemies once again, in an attempt to fill the painful void in his heart."

" Yeah, that sounds like Madara alright," Kurama scoffed.

"After his final argument with Hashirama, Madara finally left Konoha, a village he never saw as a home, no matter how hard he tried," the Sage continued. "After leaving Konoha, he journeyed the world, trying to find a place he could call a home, or trying to fill the existential pain caused by the void in his heart. After some time, and finding about the origins of his clan, he sought a plan to unite the world under a single nation, and for that, he needed to awaken the Rinnegan, for which he needed to fight Hashirama one more time."

Hagoromo told them the details about what Madara did after he lost against Hashirama and how he faked his death, how he stayed hidden underground for decades until he met Obito, how he turned Obito into an agent of his will, and what he planned to do once the Ten Tails was revived once more.

"It's rather sad, when you think about it. Madara thinks he's doing this to create a better world in honor of his fallen brother's memory, but in reality, all he wants is to soothe the pain of his heart, and thinks that absolute power is the key. I don't think even Madara himself is aware of this," Hagoromo shook his head. "In a way, he reminds me of my eldest son, Indra. Like Madara, Indra was also

extremely gifted, and grew into somebody so powerful, his might could match my own. He could do anything he set his mind to. In fact, he seemed to take pride in the fact that he didn't need any help to do anything."

"Yet you didn't chose him as your successor," Naruto stated.

Hagoromo nodded. "No, I didn't. My youngest son, Asura, was born with none of Indra's talent. He needed to work ten times as hard as him to achieve a tenth on his accomplishments. This made him rely on friends and allies in order to even the odds. One may think that Asura would be an inadequate inheritor, but I realized that, by working together with other people, Asura's victories and accomplishments were also his friends' as much as his. This, in turn, helped create a sense of unity that fostered harmony and peace. Meanwhile... Indra would just follow my mother's footsteps, and bring peace through imposing his will on others. I knew that Asura's way was the key to peace an harmony."

The Sage then let out a weary sigh he had been holding.

"My biggest mistake was to naively believe that Indra would accept my decision and support Asura. I remember the last time I saw Indra, shortly before my death, when he swore that his hatred would live through his bloodline and wouldn't cease until everything Asura and I worked for were reduced to ashes. And when I met Madara, I could see that very hate in his eyes," the Sage recounted, sounding a bit disheartened. "Even if their reasons were different, both Madara and Indra refused to bond with other people, and that led them to a path of pain and suffering, for them and people around them.

"Such pitiful existence."

Naruto corssed his arms, and shot the Sage an unamused glare. "Yeah well, excuse me if I don't feel very sorry for him."

"I don't blame you if you don't. Like I said, Madara caused untold pain to countless beings," Hagoromo said, his gaze meeting

Kurama's. "But I felt it would do you good knowing a little more about the enemy you have to beat."

"Wait... that's it? That's all you're going to do?" Fu asked, sounding a little disappointed.

" Fu! Don't talk papa in such disrespectful way!" Chomei chided her.

"It's alright, Chomei," Hagoromo cast Chomei's concern away with a hand wave. "And what else do you expect me to do, young lady?"

"I don't know... maybe give us some sort of extra power? You know, so we would have an easier time beating Akatsuki?" Fu asked. "I mean, you're the Sage of the Six Paths! According to the legend, you created ninjutsu!"

For the first time since they met him, Hagoromo's pleasant disposition disappeared, replaced by an unamused scowl. "First of all, I did not create ninjutsu. Ninjutsu is a tool of war. I created *ninshu*, which is a way to use chakra in order to help human beings connect with each other. I'd really appreciate if you don't make such mistake again.

"And second... as if it wasn't clear before, even if I'm standing before you right now, I'm dead. I can't influence the world in any meaningful way. I can't give you new powers or enhance the ones you have. All I can do is share some of my wisdom with you."

"Oh, I see," Fu sheepishly said, rubbing her arm. "Well, thanks for that. And sorry."

Hagoromo's smile returned. "No harm done, young Fu," he then looked at Naruto. "And while I may not be able to increase your power, the chakra of the Tailed Beasts that is sealed inside you will. With your new Six Paths chakra, you will be able to take your Kurama Chakra Cloak to a greater level of power. Thankfully, it will be enough to put an end to Akatsuki and their nefarious goals.

"Now, it's time for you three to finish this once for all. My children will help you as well as they can," Hagoromo said, as he started to vanish. "Good luck in this endeavor. I know your victory will pave the way for a much better world."

...

Real World

When Naruto stopped glowing, both him and his fellow jinchuriki could see that his Chakra Cloak had changed. For starters, there were more black markings around it, including the whisker-like marks on his cheeks, which were much bolder. Rather than merely cover his usual clothes, the cloak now was shaped like a long haori, with nine magatamas on its back.

Then, a sphere of golden light appeared behind him. The sphere started to grow in size, before splitting into nine spheres, revealing to be Truth Seeking Balls once they stopped glowing.

"Damn! Now that's a power-up!" Fu said, surprised at both Naruto's new appearance and the sheer power he was radiating.

"Whoa, Naruto, you look so amazing! Now that's a jinchuriki form worth praising!" Killer B rapped.

"Heh, thank you guys. Yeah, this form feels pretty awesome," Naruto said, looking at his hand, flexing his fingers. He then looked at the now depowered undead jinchuriki, who were slowly getting back to their feet. Even if they no longer had their main source of power, Naruto knew they could still cause trouble. Oh well, not that it was going to be a problem now. "Though if you like the new cloak, you're going to like this even more. Observe."

Naruto motioned his right hand forward, sending six of his nine Truth Seeking Balls into the undead jinchuriki, lodging them inside their chests. Naruto then clenched his fist, and the orbs grew multiple

sharp spikes that shredded the reanimations from the inside out. As expected, they didn't regenerate.

"Man, I wish we had that when we fought the tree guy..." Fu said, remembering the gruesome fight they had to endure against the legendary First Hokage, in contrast to how easy Naruto had defeated his enemies now.

"Also... sorry for killing you, guys," Naruto apologized.

"Don't worry, they weren't the real us," Yugito said from inside Naruto's head.

"Yeah. Those were mockeries of our true selves. Even existing as pieces of chakra within you is more dignified than slave zombies," Han added.

Meanwhile, in the background, Obito was looking with his eyes wide open, half amazed and half frustrated. Not only were Naruto and that dumb Taki brat able to pull the complete Tailed Beast transformation off, which allowed them to beat his Six Paths of Pain jinchuriki, but Naruto had somehow acquired Six Paths chakra himself, to the point of being able to summon Truth Seeking Balls.

"How...? How is he able to shrug everything I throw at him?" Obito wondered, gritting his teeth, and balling his hands into fists. *"Why can't I do something so simple as beating a mere brat?"* He took a deep breath. *"No. I can't let any defeatist thoughts. And desperate situations call for desperate measures. Time to play my final gambit."*

Obito made several hand seals, and slammed his hand into the ground.

"Summoning Jutsu!"

Obito's action drew the jinchuriki's attention to him once again. After a large burst of smoke, the Demonic Statue was summoned, with

Obito standing on the tip of one of its fingers, looking down at his prey below.

" So, he plans to throw the Demonic Statue at us," Kurama mentioned, and chuckled confidently. **"He's really getting desperate."**

" This is it, guys! If we crack that statue open, we will liberate our siblings and put this war to an end in a single swopp!" Chomei cheered. **"Come on, Fu, Naruto, Killer B! Just keep going for a little longer!"**

" Still, it would be good not to underestimate that," Gyuki advised. **"That statue is pretty powerful on its own, plus it has six of our siblings sealed there, as well as half of Kurama."**

The three jinchuriki nodded, and prepared for what they believed was the final battle. However, they weren't counting on what Obito was going to do next.

"Sealed within this statue are the Tailed Beasts from one to six tails. There's also half of the Nine Tails that we captured some time ago, plus the Eight Tails tentacle that Killer B used to dupe us," Obito explained. "You see, I don't need every beast to revive the Ten Tails, just their chakra. Meaning that I only need to acquire a little of the Seven Tails' chakra, and the Ten Tails will be reborn!"

"Ha! If you think I'm going to let you get a piece of Chomei's chakra. You don't-" Fu said, but was interrupted by what Obito did next.

The Uchiha pulled out a sealing scroll from within his robes, and unsealed its contents, which caused Fu to shock her into silence: it was a pair of insect-like wings, identical to those she generates to fly.

"Remember these, Fu? Kakuzu tore them from your back when he tried to capture you. I guess he wanted to keep them as trophies or something. It doesn't matter," Obito said. "Turn out, his failure to catch you wasn't as complete as I initially believed."

" Quickly, somebody stop him! If he feeds those wings to the statue-" Gyuki yelled, panicking.

Too late. Almost casually, Obito tossed the wings into the statue's open mouth. The statue swallowed the wings, and closed its mouth shut. Its last remaining closed eye finally opened. The statue let out an ear-piercing scream, as power began to build up inside it. The earth started to shake, and chunks of rock were lifted into the air, as if gravity had no effect on them.

Naruto, Fu and Killer B's senses were overwhelmed by the sheer power the statue was radiating. It felt like what they felt when Naruto gained Six Paths chakra, except this time it felt a thousand times more intense.

Obito then teleported back to ground level, his mouth curved into a manical grin, and let out a malicious laugh upon seeing the state of his opponents.

"It seems that you finally realize what you're up against," Obito said, as he spreaded his arms out. "Now get ready... for the return of the Ten Tails!"

Author's Note: Did you guys remember when Kakuzu tore Fu's wings from her all the way back in the Taki arc? Were you expecting that such action would become so plot critical? Because I can assure you, I had planned that from the very beginning.

I really hated that Kishimoto kept the undead jinchuriki as mere attack drones. He had the chance to flesh out their personalities at least a little, given that most of them were captured offscreen, but nope. Well, not that I didn't commit the same mistakes with some of them. At the very least, I just hope that I did some justice to Yugito and especially Han, since I didn't use them that much when they were alive, as opposed to Yagura, Utakata and Roshi. Then again, despite their undead bodies

being destroyed, they aren't going anywhere and will continue helping Naruto as much as they can. And yeah, Bunpuku was mostly a placeholder for the sixth Path of Pain, so I didn't feel like having him give his chakra to Naruto.

For those who complained about Naruto being too weak, I hope you guys are happy now that Naruto has unlocked Six Paths Sage Mode. That mode makes him at the very least as powerful as Hinata with a Perfect Tenseigan, but way more versatile since he has the abilities of all nine Tailed Beasts (which I plan to use way more than Naruto did in canon). But yeah, he's going to need all that power for the challenges to come.

We also expand on a little on Madara's revisit backstory. Like I said many times, I think my version of Madara's past is a little more consistent with his character than canon, and I hope you think the same.

Special thanks to W8W, who provided really good ideas about how the chakra cloaks of the other jinchuriki could look and what could they do.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

And with this chapter, the very final battle begins! Are you guys as excited as I am? So, what did you think about this chapter? What did you think it will happen next? Tell me your thoughts in a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Countdown to the Cataclysm

Author's Note: The final battle continues. Enjoy.

Chapter 127:

Countdown to the Cataclysm

or

The Final Battle's Here!

Mountain Graveyard

Once the battle against Orochimaru came to an end, the previous noise of the fight was replaced by a silence so intense it was almost deafening. Despite the situation was pressing, the two surviving Sannin needed a moment to catch their break, and were sitting on the ground, letting their pained bodies rest, at least for a little. Once the tension and adrenaline keeping them going on wore off, they felt like their bodies were about to break down into dust at any moment.

"Hey Jiraiya," Tsunade said

"Hey Hime... you okay?" Jiraiya asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Yeah. Relatively speaking," Tsunade replied. "I could use some sake right now. You aren't carrying any, are you?"

"If I had any sake, I would have drunk it myself," Jiraiya honestly replied.

"Asshole. I need it way more than you," Tsunade said, before shuddering a little. "I was inside Orochimaru's mind, you know. Ugh, I'll need to take a long shower after this. Or several showers."

"So... you got it?" Jiraiya asked.

"Rat, Ox, Monkey, Tiger, Dragon and Boar. And I doubt that, even with all his precautions, the bastard was able to protect his mind against the power of the Rinnegan," she then looked at Orochimaru's unmoving corpse. "Now, here comes the hard part."

Tsunade got back on her feet, and walked towards Orochimaru's corpse. She aimed her hand at him, and fired several black rods at him, embedding them on random parts of his body. Tsunade then made a hand seal.

"WHOA!" Jiraiya loudly yelped upon seeing Orochimaru's seemingly dead body sitting up.

It was even worse when he opened his eyes, and while one of them was its usual yellow color with a slitted vertical pupil, the other was a Rinnegan.

"Don't be afraid, Jiraiya, it's me, Tsunade," Orochimaru said in his original voice. "I'm using the power of the Rinnegan to remotely control Orochimaru's body."

Jiraiya was breathing heavily, trying to keep the whirlwind of emotions he was feeling -none of them pleasant- under control. Tsunade began to chortle, which caused him to shot an angry glare at his wife.

"I think you made me lose five years of my life with that stunt," Jiraiya told her.

"Oh come on, I'm sure it wasn't that bad," Tsunade said, before looking at the body she was remotely controlling. "Okay, here goes nothing. Rat... Ox... Monkey..."

As Tsunade verbally said the seals, Orochimaru's body started to making them.

"... and Boar. Release!"

...

Lightning Desert

In the Land of Lightning, the Fourth's Division battle against the reanimated Kages continued. Gaara had alleviated them of some pressure by getting rid of the Second Tsuchikage early, and joined his father and other ninjas in fighting the Third Kazekage, while his siblings lead the fight against the Second Mizukage, while Darui continued the battle against his former mentor the Third Raikage.

However, the Second Hokage, Tobirama Senju, didn't like to engage the same enemy or group of enemies for long. He used his extreme speed to blitz past numerous groups of Allied ninjas and strike them hard and fast, giving them a very narrow window to counterattack. This time, however, he was about to meet somebody who was prepared to match him.

"Water Release: Water Colliding Wave!"

Tobirama expelled a massive amount of water from his mouth, roaring into a torrent. The giant mass of water then exploded into a massive tsunami that threatened to crush and drown a large group of allied ninjas. Many of them tried to run away, but one stayed and prepared a counter jutsu, making hand seals as fast as his hands allowed them.

"Ice Release: Deep Freeze!"

Haku slammed his hands into the ground, sending a wave of cold chakra that covered the previously hot sand into a thin sheet of ice. And as the cold reached the gigantic wave, it too started to quickly crystalize into ice, freezing it completely only after a few seconds. But Haku's jutsu didn't end there; the last member of the Yuki Clan made more hand seals before clapping his hands together, making

the giant iceberg to shatter into hundreds of sharp ice shards that gleamed with the sun.

"Ice Release: Hundred Thousand Killing Ice Needles!"

The sharp ice shards remained frozen mid air for a second, before they faced towards Tobirama, and launched themselves at him.

"Impressive," Tobirama said in a monotonous tone that doesn't make him look particularly impressed.

The Second Hokage started to move from one side to another at an almost imperceptible speed, dodging the ice shards as they stabbed themselves into the sand, while deflecting those he couldn't with his katana.

Haku cringed upon seeing that a jutsu of such scale was barely slowing down the terrifying Senju and took a couple step backwards as he got closer. Several adult ninja, Kurenai among them, quickly landed around him in order to protect him from the inevitable counterattack from the Second Hokage.

"Huh?" Tobirama grunted in confusion.

Then, much to Haku's shock, but mostly joy, several of the last remaining ice shards found their mark and embedded themselves into the Second Hokage's body, who tripped and fell to the ground facefirst.

"Well done, Haku!" Kurenai praised, as she started to make hand seals herself. "Now, attack at once before he can recover!"

The surprises didn't end there, because just as the Allied ninjas prepared to attack, Tobirama's body started to glow with a white light, causing many of them to flinch or to take defensive stances, bracing for whatever the fearsome Hokage was about to unleash on them.

"That won't be necessary," Tobirama said, as he slowly pushed himself back to his feet. "The battle is already over."

"Kurenai-sensei, look!" Yakumo called the raven haired woman, pointing in another direction.

The Third Raikage had also stopped fighting with the group lead by Darui, and was also glowing with the same white light. So were the Third Kazekage and Second Tsuchikage.

"Contrary to my expectations, it seems that somebody was able to force that madman to undo the jutsu," Tobirama said, as his body started to slowly crack and break apart. "Please send my thanks to whoever did such a magnificent feat."

Kurenai smiled. "We will, Hokage-sama."

"With this, the war is almost over," Haku said, full of hope.

...

Across the Lands of Fire and Lightning, all divisions of the Ninja Allied Forces were fighting against what was left of Akatsuki, which wasn't something to scoff at. Even if they had lost the Toneri's Moon puppets, the Zetsu and the remaining reanimations still proved to be challenging foes.

That's it, until all the reanimations suddenly stopped fighting, and their bodies began to glow with a golden light. After a moment of confusion for both sides, the zombies' bodies began to fall apart, breaking down into the ash and dust that formed them, as their spirits returned to the afterlife, where they belonged, while leaving the corpse of the sacrifice used to reanimate them behind.

Akatsuki had lost the strongest part of their army, leaving nothing but Zetsu to fight against the Allied Ninjas.

"Shit... this doesn't look good..." a White Zetsu clone said, gulping loudly.

...

Ninja Alliance HQ

"Tsuchikage-sama, news from every battlefield!" Santa Yamanaka informed. "There are reports of the undead reanimations dying on their own! All of them!"

"It seems that the Supreme Commander and Tsunade-sama not only succeeded in their mission of stopping Orochimaru, but they somehow even forced him to undo the jutsu," Mabui mentioned. "If I'm being honest, I wasn't so sure they'd be able to do it."

"That's the Sannin for you," Chiyo added, a little bitter, but mostly happy. This was a huge victory for the Alliance after all.

"Tell every commander to move their division towards the jinchuriki's position!" Onoki said. "I don't care about their state! No time to rest! This is the last battle of the war, and the one which will decide it!"

...

Madara Uchiha's Secret Lair

"Are you sure you're ready to go, boss?" Zetsu asked.

As expected, Madara had made a very quick recovery. Thanks to the regenerative properties of Hashirama's DNA helped by the special balm, his body had regrown all missing limbs and organs, and the former Uchiha Clan Head had finally recovered his energy.

Madara was now putting on a set of armor before once again diving into battle. Given that his old armor had been destroyed, Madara was now wearing the armor his Zetsu had crafted for him during the years he spent inside the cocoon: it was black in color instead of red, with the Uchiha Emblem emblazoned on the chest and on the back.

While the previous armor was rather clunky, this was more form fitting, restricting the user's movement much less.

Once his armor was ready, Madara then grabbed his trusty gunbai.

"Yes. I feel completely recovered," was Madara's reply. "If Obito is engaging the remaining jinchuriki, then I must be part of that battle. Take me to that place"

"As you wish, boss."

Zetsu then walked towards Madara, and grabbed his shoulder. The two of them began to sink into the ground, until they disappeared completely.

...

Site of the Final Battle

As the Statue screamed and trashed in place, waves of power were released in every direction. Their sheer magnitude not only raised chunks of rock from the ground, but it seemed to distort the laws of physics themselves, leaving those rocks floating around it as if gravity didn't have an effect on them. In fact, the three jinchuriki could feel their bodies were lighter than usual.

" ***Okay this is... bad. Very, very bad,***" Gyuki began. While he was keeping his usual deadpan tone, they could hear the panic seeping through his voice. ***"Astronomically bad. Catastrophically bad. Killer B's rhymes-grade bad."***

"**Hey!**" Killer B protested.

"**That bad?**" Fu asked.

" ***Papa always said that the Ten Tails coming back to life would mean the end of the world as we know it,***" Chomei began to explain. ***"It's a being of untold power that can easily drive humanity to extinction."***

" Despite his immense wisdom, not even our father knew where it came from," Kurama added. "And only somebody of his power was able to curb its rampage."

" That Obito is one crafty asshole," Son Goku said. "We believed that as long as one of our siblings would remain uncaptured, that aberration couldn't be released. But the bastard found a way..."

" At the very least, he won't be able to summon the Nine Tails by surprise," Yugito mentioned, remembering the battle that led to her capture. "Since it must be inside the statue."

" Still, that monster is lacking some of us, so even if it revives, it shouldn't be at its full power," Kokuo chimed in.

" Well, they can still destroy the statue before it fully transforms, right?" Han asked.

"That's a good idea," Naruto agreed, before smiling confidently. "Thankfully, Obito alone shouldn't be a match for all of us. Especially with my new power. So, here's the plan: Since I have experience fighting against Rinnegan bearers, I keep Obito distracted, and you guys destroy the statue. Got it?"

"Understood, Naruto!" Fu agreed, as she began to transform into Chomei once again.

"Leave that to us, there won't be any trouble! We shall reduce that ugly statue to rubble!" Killer B said, transforming as well.

"Now time to test my new power!" Naruto said, as he motioned his hand towards Obito. "Sand Coffin!"

"What?" Obito asked.

Suddenly, a torrent of sand poured from seemingly out of nowhere, and started to converge around Obito. Naruto clenched his hand into

a fist, and the sand rushed him in a crushing motion. Obito, however, used Kamui to turn intangible in order to calmly walk out of the otherwise lethal attack.

"Man, I forgot how annoying that ability can be," Naruto said, as he prepared his next attack. "In that case-"

"Bansho Ten'in!"

This time, it was Obito who cast his hand towards Naruto, with the blond feeling his body becoming weightless for a second as he was pulled towards Obito by a powerful invisible force. Naruto, however, didn't merely let Obito drag him, and created multiple arms of golden chakra in order to anchor himself to the ground.

"Quickly, now that Naruto is keeping that guy at bay, let's attack without delay!" Killer B asked, as he prepared a punch.

"I'm way ahead of you!" Fu said, diving at the statue head first. Her frontal horn glowed with chakra as it grew in size and length. **"Horn Buster!"**

Obito, however, wasn't as distracted as the Kumo ninja believed, and quickly moved to counter the two jinchuriki's attacks.

"You won't harm the statue!" Obito said, as he slammed his palm, glowing blue with chakra, into the ground. "Sealing Art: Uchiha Flame Formation!"

The blue fire around Obito's hands turned crimson red. The moment his hand touched the ground, said crimson fire shot in a line towards the statue, forming a circle around it, which then projected a cylindrical barrier of the same color, just as Killer B and Fu attacked it. Not only did they fail to break the barrier, but got burned by the weird crimson fire in return.

"Ouch!"

"Oh shit! Hot, hot hot!"

"A little barrier won't be able to stop me!" Naruto said, and with a wave of his hand, he directed all his Truth Seeking Balls towards the statue. "The Ten Tails won't come back to life!"

Obito, however, appeared in the middle of the path of the Truth Seeking Balls, and used his Sharingan to open a spiraling vortex towards the Kamui dimension. Naruto cringed upon seeing all the Truth Seeking Balls being sucked in, as he failed to recall them.

"There. Those annoying balls won't help you anymore," Obito said.

"Damn, I can't believe I let him take away my Truth Seeking Balls like that..." the blond grumbled under his teeth, as he balled his hands into a fist. "As long as they're in that weird dimension, I can't recall them!"

"What's the problem, Naruto, can't you create more?" Utkata asked. "I do remember your girlfriend being able to create them out of nowhere."

"It's a bit complicated. I can only create new balls when the old ones have been destroyed. I'm still linked to them, even if I can't control them," Naruto explained. *"Meaning that I won't have any access to them for the time being. Guess if we're lucky and Kakashi-sensei shows up, I can ask him to let them out."*

That moment, Obito pulled out a scroll from underneath his robe, unfurled it, and dropped it at his feet. There were many seals, with a circle made of them in the middle.

Obito crouched down and started to make several hand seals. "May as well throw these in too," he said, before slamming his palm into the circle of seals.

Two very large bursts of smoke happened at Obito's sides, and much to the three jinchuriki's surprise, a Wood Golem appeared from

each of them. Then, without having to be given any command, the Wood Golems charged forward and delivered the stunned Killer B and Fu a punch in their faces, making them fall to the ground with a loud booming noise, followed by a quake.

"Fu! B!" Naruto shouted, before glaring back at the green giants.
"The hell? Wood Golems? How is he able to summon them?"

Turns out, after losing the use of Susanoo, once Madara gained Wood Release through assimilating the cells from the piece of Hashirama's flesh he had bitten out of the man, Madara planned to create an army of Wood Golems to carry out his plan of an unified world. Unfortunately, despite their immense power, the lifespan of a Wood Golem was of a few days, and after that they'd break down and die. That's why Madara spent the next years perfecting a way to create Wood Golems with an indefinite, or at the very least, very long lifespan.

Unfortunately, it took Madara many decades to achieve such goal, and by the time he accomplished it, he had aged considerably, and thus he lacked the chakra and stamina to carry out his original plan, being only able to produce three golems, before the effort of creating the third one nearly killed him. Shortly after that, he awakened the Rinnegan, and he decided to experiment with this new power and abandoned his previous project.

But the golems remained there, hidden underground, ready to be used whenever needed. One of the things Madara did before entering the cocoon was to give Obito a scroll that could be used to summon those golems.

Obito was always reticent to summon them, believing in his own ability to carry out missions without them. Perhaps he should have use them sooner. Oh well, there was no point in mulling in the past.

" Tailed Beast Ball!"

Killer B fired the sphere of destruction towards one of the golems. The wooden giant, however, managed to catch the chakra ball with its bare hands, and keep it from exploding, before, with much effort, throwing it into the sky, where it detonated safely.

" What the...?"

" ***Those things are strong enough to match a Tailed Beast, B,***" Gyuki stated. "***You won't defeat them with brute force.***"

" **Naruto managed to destroy one when the First Hokage guy summoned it. Perhaps we should let Naruto deal with them, while we fight Obito?**" Fu suggested.

"Alright, I'll keep these guys busy then!" Naruto said,

" ***Listen, I'll tell you all you need to now about the Rinnegan's power,***" Kurama stated. "***Also, he won't be able to use Kamui, given that if he does, Naruto will be able to pull back his Truth Seeking Balls.***"

" ***Don't try to fight him in Tailed Beast form. His Wood Release will bind your chakra and leave you defenseless,***" Matatabi advised. "***That's part of how he got me and Yugito down.***"

" ***Plus, I'm sure the bastard has more surprises in case Wood Release isn't enough,***" Yagura added.

Naruto flew above the two green colossi on a cloud of sand. He had both hands raised upwards, and with the help of four arms of golden chakra, Naruto prepared two rounds of his signature jutsu. "Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto threw the stars of wind chakra at each of the golems. However, before they could impact, the wooden dragons wrapped around their bodies breathed a stream of greenish-yellow flames at them, detonating them instantly. Then, one of the giants stepped

forwards, and tried to swat Naruto away with a gigantic hand slap. The blond maneuvered the sand cloud around it, barely dodging it.

"Man, if one was already hard... well, no point in mopping. I know these guys aren't invincible," Naruto said, as his brain worked to come up with a good tactic to deal with his colossal opponents.

Meanwhile, Killer B and Fu shrank from their Tailed Beast forms into their chakra cloaks, as they passed by the giants and headed towards Obito. Killer B raised his hands towards him, and began to summon yet another chakra sphere of destruction. Not as big as if he were fully transformed, but it would do.

"Tailed Beast Ball!"

Killer B once again fired his most powerful attack, with Obito not even making an attempt to block it. Was Kurama's assesment wrong, and planned to use Kamui to let it phase through him? However, Obito was about to show that he didn't need it to negate his enemies' jutsu, and raised a hand towards the incoming projectile.

"Gakido."

Obito's hand generated a thin barrier of white light. The moment the Tailed Beast Ball touched it, it was converted into pure chakra and absorbed into his body.

"Foolish," Obito said, as he drained the attack. "Didn't Naruto tell you that ninjutsu is-"

"BOOT TO THE FACE!"

Obito was interrupted by Fu's armored foot being slammed against his face with so much force, it produced a sonic boom, interrupting the jutsu absorption, and sending him flying backwards, landing with a painful thud.

"Try absorbing that, dumbass!" Fu taunted.

While Obito was still on the ground, Killer B prepared to attack before he could get up. He rushed with two of his short swords on each hand, and several on his chakra tentacles. He jumped into the air, and threw several of his swords at him.

Despite the force behind Fu's kick, Obito could still move, the regeneration provided by his Zetsu body parts already kicking in. Shaking off the considerable pain, the fallen Uchiha rolled to the side just as the swords stabbed on the spot he had been a second ago. Upon landing, Killer B grabbed his swords and dashed towards him, while Fu flew from one of his flanks, and morphed one of her arms into a blade shaped like the one of a mantis. The Uchiha jumped to his feet, and spread both arms each in the direction of each attacker.

"Shinra Tensei!" Killer B and Fu lost all momentum to their attacks, and were violently pushed backwards, letting out yelps of surprise, with B losing some of his swords in the process. "Don't underestimate the power of the Rinnegan!"

"You're the one who underestimate the power of my sick rhymes!" Killer B said, as he made a mid-air backflip, landing on his feet before barreling towards Obito once again. He started to channel lightning chakra through the swords he still had. "And now it's time for you to pay for all your crimes!"

Knowing through Kurama that he had a window of opportunity of five seconds before he could use any gravity-related attack again, Killer B jumped into the air and curled into a ball, his electrified swords sticking out of his body. "Lightning Release: Lightning Spikeroll!"

While Obito dodged Killer B's initial attack, the jinchuriki didn't let up, and continue his attack with his electrified swords, delivering quick and wild swings, moving from one side to another, flipping and spinning, eventually landing a few cuts on the Uchiha. However, as expected, the five seconds quickly passed, and Obito prepared to use the Deva Path's abilities.

"Shinra Ten-

Before Obito could cast the jutsu, Killer B vanished all of sudden, and was replaced by Fu, ready to deliver a powerful punch to his face.

"-sei!"

Both ninja were blown away backwards, Fu by Obito's attack, and Obito because Fu's fist managed to connect his face. While she was blown away before all of the punch's force could be released, she still managed to land a solid hit.

"Fu!" Killer B called.

Fu made the force pushing backwards work for her by deploying her wings and, using her ongoing momentum, fly upwards and do a U-turn.

"Don't worry, I'm fine!" she said.

"You won't be fine after this," Obito said, as he started to make hand seals. "Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The earth started to rumble, as large wooden roots broke through the ground surface and quickly lashed at the two jinchuriki. However, rather than being forced into the defensive, the two jinchuriki chose to actively fight against the attacking weeds. Fu turned her arms into blades shaped like the jaws of a stag beetle, and used them to slash the offending vines, while Killer B dashed around them, delivering precise cuts with his lightning-infused blades.

"Your attacks are weak, your moves are the same," Killer B rapped. "Do you plan to catch us with something so lame?"

"I don't need to catch you!" Obito angrily replied, as he started making hand seals. "I only need to keep you distracted until the Ten

Tails is reborn! Then all I have to do is feed you to it! Fire Release: Great Fireball jutsu!"

Obito breathed an admittedly large fireball that flew towards the two jinchuriki, which burned so hot it left a trail of scorched earth underneath. Fu, however, wasn't intimidated, and made some hand seals of her own.

"Water Release: Great Waterfall Jutsu!"

Fu expelled a large amount of water from her mouth, moving forward with the force of a torrent. The two elemental forces clashed, the fireball quickly overwhelmed by the power of Fu's watery attack. Before the attack could reach Obito, the Uchiha leaped into the air, and began to jump around using the floating boulders as stepping stones.

" He's right. He might not be strong enough to beat us, but he's doing a good job stalling us!" Fu thought, a little panicked. Her eyes drifted towards the statue, hidden behind the crimson barrier. *"I can feel that thing growing stronger with every second. We need to finish this as soon as possible!"*

While Killer B and Fu dealt with Obito, Naruto was fighting the two Wood Golems as well as he could. While the golems were very big, Naruto moved faster, so he thought to use that as his main advantage. Not to mention being able to fly thanks to Shukaku's chakra.

" Hey, Naruto, I think you might want to use the Tailed Beast form," Kurama suggested.

" You said Hashirama used these to fight Tailed Beasts and Madara's Susanoo, right?" Naruto asked. *" If I do that, then I'll be at a disadvantage. I'll do better fighting as a human."*

" We can see your logic, but in this case it might be better if you change forms," Han said, as he winced by how narrowly Naruto

avoided a hand slap from a giant. " *It would be easier if you fought to their level.*"

" *I think Naruto might be onto something. Just look how easily those monsters took down his friends when they were transformed,*" Yagura chimed in. " *They hit hard, but a big enemy is also a big target.*"

"Heh, nice to see that somebody gets me," Naruto said out out. He started to make hand seals. "So, focused attacks won't work, let's see how wide area attacks do then! Lava Release: Scorching Rocks Jutsu!"

Naruto expelled a multitude of large projectiles made of molten rocks from his mouth. The dragons wrapped around the golems' bodies reacted as expected, breathing greenish-yellow fire at the incoming attack. They managed to neutralize about half the lava missiles, while the other half found their marks and hit the golems. Naruto could hear a sizzling sound as the molten rocks ate through the golem's wooden limbs and body, but sadly, it wasn't enough to cause significant damage.

Then, the golems decided it was their turn to attack. Each of them cast one hand towards Naruto, who felt a chill down his spine as multiple spikes started to grow from them.

"Shit, this looks awful... !" Naruto said with a loud gulp.

" *Naruto-kun, use my chakra to counter that attack!*" Kokuo suggested.

" *Nice idea! You might not have my armor, but this jutsu should do just fine,*" Han said, as he told Naruto what he needed to do.

Naruto made the required the hand seals, and with Han's help, he molded the chakra the way he was told.

"Boil Release: Skilled Mist Jutsu!"

Just as the golems fired a barrage of wooden stakes at him, Naruto exhaled a huge cloud of corrosive mist towards them. The moment the storm of spikes entered the cloud, they quickly burned away, disappearing before even reaching the end of the cloud. Naruto poured more chakra into the attack, both to make the corrosive cloud stronger and to push it faster towards the golems.

The golems, however, weren't going to just stand there and take it. The two of them clapped their hands once, producing such a powerful shockwave it pushed the cloud back, while also sending Naruto flying backwards. The blond screamed as he spiraled down to the ground below. Fortunately, a cloud of sand formed below him, braking the fall, while lifting him upwards.

" ***And you're welcome!***" Shukaku said, giggling a little.

" *Heh. Nice save, Shukaku,*" Naruto told the Tanuki.

" *We told you we'd have your back, didn't you?*" Utakata asked.

" ***Naruto! You okay?***" Kurama asked.

" *I'll live,*" Naruto replied. " *Though not for long if I have to endure another thunderclap from hell like that. Much less two.*"

" *Hey, Naruto! Why don't you try me and Han's combo?*" Roshi suggested. " *It would roast those golems really good really fast!*"

" *I can attest to that. I would try it if there was just one golem, but with two, they can cover each other,*" Naruto replied.

" ***Naruto, you're trying to defeat the two of them at once, because one won't let you focus on the other,***" Isobu calmly said. " ***But you don't need to take them out permanently. Try to keep one's attention away from you while you deal with the other.***"

" *Guess that could work, but what could I-*" Naruto was about to ask, as an idea dawned upon him. A grin spread across his face. " *I think*

I have the perfect way to do that! Thanks Isobu!"

Once again, Naruto maneuvered his sand cloud towards one of the golems, flying around it like an annoying insect, hoping to get a reaction. Reaction that it came in the form of another gigantic hand swatt, something Naruto was expecting. He quickly jumped out of the cloud, landing on the giant's hand. Naruto then slapped the giant's hand.

"Coral Palm!"

The moment Naruto's hand touched the wooden surface, a coral formation appeared, and started to spread around it. Naruto then slid down the giant's body and right leg, creating more spots where coral appeared and started to spread. While unnoticeable at first, the coral quickly spread around the golem's right side of its body, slowly but surely impairing his movements. As Naruto touched the ground and ran away in the opposite direction, the golem's attention shifted from Naruto to the coral, and tried to break it with its other hand.

The other golem, however, continued to chase Naruto. The blond quickly created another cloud of sand to avoid being crushed under the giant's steps.

" Ingenious idea, Naruto," Yagura praised. "But that jutsu won't be enough to incapacitate a creature the size of that golem. He will be able to get rid of the coral in less than a minute."

" No... but less than a minute is all what Naruto needs," Yugito said, smiling and nodding, realizing what the Konoha ninja was going to do.

Naruto turned towards the incoming wooden giant, and smirked.

" Roshi, Han... pay attention, because you guys are going to love this..." Naruto mentally said, as he prepared his next attack.

Naruto created several arms of golden chakra and used them to form two Rasenshuriken, one at each of his sides. However, rather than their usual look, one Rasenshuriken was crimson red with black edges, and the other was pure white. Both of them were releasing so much heat, the air around Naruto appeared distorted. The blond wasn't perturbed, though.

"First, let's get rid of that annoyance!" Naruto said, looking at the serpentine dragon wrapped around the golem's body, as he started to make hand seals. "Fire Release: Mouse Hairball!"

Naruto exhaled a large, blue, mouse-shaped fireball from his mouth, which flew towards the serpentine dragon. Said dragon opened its jaws once again, releasing a stream of greenish-yellow flames. However, the large blue fireball then split into dozens of smaller ones, which flew around the stream of fire, and homed into the dragon's head, blasting it to ashes.

"Clever use of my jutsu, Naruto!" Yugito praised.

"Heh, thanks! Now to finish this big guy for good!" Naruto mentally replied. "Lava Release: Spiraling Eruption! Boil Release: Spiraling Geyser!"

Naruto launched the dual attack, one shuriken of chakra flying in an arc in the opposite direction of the other, before the two of them crashed against the golem from different sides. The attacks exploded into a dome of spiraling magma and a dome of spiraling burning, corrosive mist, which merged into a single dome of infernal heat. The golem was burned to nothingness by the sheer power of Naruto's combination attack, while carving a large crater when it once stood.

Roshi let out a whistle. *"Wow, that was amazing! Something worthy enough to be written in a book!"* Roshi praised.

"An admirable rework of our combo," Han said.

" Unfortunately, Naruto-kun can't celebrate just yet," Kokuo said. Indeed, Naruto could see that the golem was stomping towards him. **"The other golem broke free of the coral, and it's getting ready to attack again."**

" One golem won't be a problem for him," Kurama said, smirking confidently. **"Say, Naruto, are you going to use the same jutsu you did the last time?"**

" Not exactly the same. You'll see," Naruto said, as he started to prepare a Tailed Beast Ball. However, rather than shooting it, Naruto pulled out his Wind Blade, and channeled the Tailed Beast Ball through it. The sword projected a gigantic blade made of the chakra that formed the Tailed Beast's ultimate attack. "Disappear already, you overgrown pile weeds! Tailed Beast Blade!"

Like he had done during the fight with Hashirama, Naruto brought down his blade in a vertical downwards slash, cutting the golem in two as if it was made of soft butter. However, it didn't end there: upon cutting it, the blade of Tailed Beast chakra exploded in a gigantic, fiery blast, engulfing the golem, and reducing it to ashes as it happened with its "brother". When the explosion receded, there was nothing left of the giant creature, and a large crater had been opened when it once stood.

"And both of them down for the count!" Naruto said, pumping his fist as a sign of victory. He could sense Killer B and Fu still fighting against Obito. "Alright, better hurry and help them finish that asshole off for good!"

...

While Killer B and Fu continued their duel against Obito, the three of them saw and heard the explosion that heralded Naruto's victory over the wood golems.

"Ha! Look at that! Looks like your little wooden dolls were no match for Naruto!" Fu laughed, before suddenly growing concerned, as if

she realized she said something stupid. "I mean, I said 'little' in a pejorative way, not in a literal way. I know they aren't little at all."

" You know a word as big as 'pejorative', yet you care about us not understanding basic sarcasm," Gyuki pointed out, as a drop of sweat slid through his head. **"Yep, definitely not just B."**

"Hey guys, sorry to keep you waiting!" Naruto said, as the cloud of sand slowly dispelled once the blond touched the ground. "Those overgrown bushes were pretty tough, but nothing I couldn't deal with, with the help of some of the new friends I made," Naruto boasted good naturedly, before his eyes were fixed on Obito. "Alright, now I'll keep Obito busy. See if you guys can bypass that barrier. Try to bombard it with-"

"Hey boss, we're here! Sorry for being late."

Naruto, however, was interrupted when something rose from the ground beneath Obito. The blond recognized Zetsu, the seldom seen Akatsuki from which those clones were produced from. Next to him was a long haired man clad in black armor that neither Naruto nor Killer B or Fu had seen in their lives. Still, they couldn't help but flinch when they sensed the sheer power the man was radiating, or when they noticed that his eyes were Rinnegan. Then again, there was somebody who did remember.

" It's... it's HIM!" Kurama said, trembling with anger. **"MADARA!"**

"Whoa, it's that Madara!?" Naruto asked out loud, much to Killer B and Fu's surprise, who were now looking at the newcomer with other eyes.

Madara couldn't help but smirk a little. "Oh? Do you know me? Did we- no, wait, it isn't you. It's that fox. It still remembers me, doesn't it?"

Naruto could feel Kurama's anger burning so fiercely, it felt like there was a small sun inside him. He worried if Kurama might explode at

the presence of the man he hated the most.

"Took you long enough," an unamused Obito said, as he glared at his mentor. "Had you come earlier instead of fooling around, we would have won already."

"Do not fret, Obito. That was an insignificant setback. As you can see, I'm back and ready to show..." Madara trailed off, as he turned around, and saw the crimson chakra barrier that was hiding the transforming statue behind it. "Did you... did you start the Ten Tails transformation without capturing the remaining jinchuriki first?"

"I was left with no other choice," Obito rebutted. "If you had been here earlier, we could have done this properly. "

Madara let out a sigh of resignation. "Guess it can't be helped right now. Let's subdue them while the Ten Tails revives, then we'll continue with the plan," he then took a look at Naruto. "Given that you're the jinchuriki of the Nine Tails... you must be of Uzumaki descent, am I right?"

"Yeah. Naruto Uzumaki's the name," Naruto said. "Burn that name into your mind, because it's the name of the ninja that's going to kick your ass back into retirement."

"Look at that! A small ninja with big bravado and even bigger mouth! Breaking you will be fun," Madara said, before his Rinnegan rested on Killer B. "A Kumo ninja... you must be the jinchuriki of the Eight Tails and..." Madara finally looked at Fu, and his expression was that of mild disgust. "... a Takigakure kunoichi. I hated that Hashirama foolishly gave the Tailed Beasts to other villages, but the fact that he decided to give one to such a disgraceful village like yours nearly drove me insane."

"... disgraceful!?" Fu repeated, before her expression morphed into a scowl of anger. She punched her palm menacingly. "Sorry Naruto, but I'm going to be the one to pound him into the ground."

"Ah, more bravado, isn't youth something so precious?" Madara said condescendingly.

"Naruto, while I want nothing more than seeing you beating the living daylights out of this asshole, Madara is an extremely powerful ninja," Kurama advised. "Plus, just like the Old Man said, he has the Rinnegan. Which means that he must have Wood Release as well. As he stands right now, Madara Uchiha is currently the most powerful ninja who ever lived."

"Plus, he isn't even alone. He has Obito and that Zetsu creature to help him," Matatabi added.

Naruto, however, was feeling confident. *"Don't worry guys, we have reinforcements of our own as well."*

Then, as if on cue, Madara's attention was drawn elsewhere, as he sensed a new chakra signature coming their way. A very powerful chakra signature that for some reason, felt strangely familiar to the former Uchiha Clan head.

And then, she appeared. Flying high into the sky, covered in a shroud of flame-like lavender chakra, was no other than Hinata Hyuga. Obito frowned, while Naruto and Fu grew visibly excited, and while Killer B didn't know who this girl was, his fellow jinchuriki's reaction eased him into smiling. In no time, Hinata landed close to the three jinchuriki, and went quickly to greet them.

"Hinata!" Naruto said, so excited he didn't even use the usual honorific reserved for her. "You're here!"

"Sky sister!" Fu cheered as well. "It's so great to see you!"

"Hello, Naruto-kun. Fu-san," Hinata greeted. "I'm glad to see that I didn't arrive too late."

"You didn't. In fact, you arrived just in time," Naruto assured her.

Hinata nodded, and then looked at the one person she didn't know, the Kumo ninja that wore sunglasses. She walked towards him, and bowed before him politely. "Hello. I don't think we know each other. My name's Hinata Hyuga. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hey there, the name's Killer B, and I'm also a jinchuriki as you can see. So, you're the girlfriend Number Nine told me so much about. Once this is over, we should all hang out!" Killer B rapped.

"I'll be honored to," Hinata replied.

"Hey, as much as I'd like to see you here, how did you know we were here?" Naruto asked.

"Hanabi-chan told me. We can talk to each other through long distances thanks to the Six Paths Chakra we both possess. She told me how the second division was almost annihilated," Hinata said, before her expression hardened, and pointed at Madara. "By him."

That shocked the three jinchuriki. Did Madara nearly wiped out a division of thousands of ninja, all by himself?

"The massacre of that division... Gai-sensei... it was you?" Naruto asked, his chakra cloak flaring with his anger.

Madara's expression remained unchanged. "Yes, it was me. And I would have wiped them out completely, if it wasn't for that man and his self-sacrificing jutsu. They proved to be mostly unworthy adversaries. Even the two Uchihas. Even the girl with the Wood Release-"

"Kaida!" Naruto shouted, worrying and anger growing bigger. "If you did something to her or Hagane, I swear-"

Hinata, however, placed a hand on Naruto. "Don't worry, Naruto-kun. Hanabi-chan told me that your siblings are okay. So are Sasuke-kun, Itachi-san and Neji-niisan and his teammates."

That managed to calm Naruto down, but only a little.

Madara's eyes now rested on Hinata. "So, I presume that you're the older sister of that Hyuga little girl with the Tenseigan, aren't you?" he asked, chuckling a little. "Yes, you appear to be older and more experienced. You should have a much better hang on that power of yours than her. Perhaps you'll offer a better dance."

"Hinata, forget about that guy! We need to destroy the Statue before it transforms into the Ten Tails!" Fu urged. "Obito hid it behind that barrier. Try to break it with your black ball thingies!"

"Number Seven's right, these guys don't matter, go and make sure that barrier shatters!" Killer B agreed.

Hinata nodded, and after making the required hand seals, she summoned no less than eight Truth Seeking Balls, much to the jinchuriki's surprise. With a hand motion, she directed the black orbs towards the barrier.

" And Obito can't use his Kamui to send them to his pocket dimension like he did with mine," Naruto thought, as his mouth curved into a grin of satisfaction. *"Or else he'll allow me to recall mine."*

The moment Hinata's Truth Seeking Balls moved, Madara immediately activated his Susanoo, reaching the humanoid form. A sword appeared in one of its hands, and it moved to swat away the black orbs. However, rather than the orbs simply breaking through the sword, it was the sword who deflected the orbs away.

"What!?" Hinata asked in shock. "How...?"

"Wait..." Naruto said, as he narrowed his eyes. He could feel that Madara's chakra had changed, as so did his appearance. He now had green marks on his forehead and around his eyes. The exact same marks Rin and Hashirama had when they used Sage Mode. "The hell!? You have Sage Mode too?"

"How!?" Fu asked.

"Do you really think I'd have a hard time learning such a simple skill?" Madara mockingly asked, as his Susanoo started to vanish. He made a single hand seal. "Now, this is a jutsu I was unable to try against the Ninja Alliance, but your little group will make for a fine test. Limbo: Border Jail!"

Naruto and Hinata's eyes widened, and fast as lightning, they moved forward, placing themselves between the other two jinchuriki and the two rogue Uchiha and their plant man servant. There was a clashing noise, and much to Killer B and Fu's confusion, it appeared as if Naruto and Hinata were struggling to keep in place an invisible enemy each. Obito appeared to have trouble following what was going on as well.

"What the... what are you guys doing?" Fu asked. Despite her Sage Mode, she couldn't sense any chakra in front of Naruto and Hinata.

"Naruto-kun, can you see them too?" Hinata asked.

"No but... I can sense them!" Naruto replied, before, fast as lightning, pulling out his Wind Blade and use it to eviscerate whatever invisible enemy Madara had summoned.

Hinata followed suit, delivering a devastating combo of lightning-enhanced palm strikes. Madara scowled.

"The girl can see the Limbo clones, even if it should be impossible. Probably because of that Tenseigan of hers..." Madara wondered, before his eyes rested on Naruto. *"And the Uzumaki boy... yes, it's unmistakable, he has Six Paths Chakra as well. But how?"*

"Guys, stay close to us! We'll protect you from those invisible clones!" Naruto told his fellow jinchuriki.

"It won't be necessary," Madara said, taking a step forward. "Given that you proved to be the biggest threats, I shall take on you

personally. Obito, Zetsu, deal with the other two jinchuriki. Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The earth started to rumble once again, as multiple cracks opened across the battlefield, caused by many gigantic wooden roots shooting from underground, spreading everywhere, covering the barren land with trees once again. Fu and Hinata flew into the air to avoid Madara's attack, while Naruto and Killer B jumped from one side to another as the roots lunged at them.

"Let's dance!"

Fast as lightning, Madara leaped towards Naruto, and assaulted the blond with a flurry of strong, fast paced punches. Naruto was able to block most of them, even if he needed to create additional arms to do so. A purple flash alerted Madara of Hinata's presence, who in turn attacked Madara with several lightning-enhanced Gentle Fist strikes, releasing purple bolts of lightning with each strike, forcing the Uchiha back.

Naruto took the initiative once again, this time attacking with his trusty Wind Blade. Madara generated a black chakra rod from each of his hands, and used them as improvised weapons in order to parry Naruto's blows, as well as to throw counterattacks on his own. As they traded blows, Madara was able to knock the Wind Blade out of Naruto's hands, and deliver a powerful kick to the chest that sent the blond flying. Madara started to make one handed seals while he reached for his gunbai.

"Fire Release: Great Fire Hurricane!"

Madara swung his gunbai while simultaneously breathing fire into the swing. The wind and fire attacks merged into a massive tornado of flames that threatened to engulf the blond. Naruto, however, raised a hand, and with the help of two additional chakra arms, began to form a Rasenshuriken, except he imbued it with water chakra instead of wind chakra as he usually did.

"Water Release: Spiraling Torrent!"

Naruto threw a gigantic spinning water shuriken at the incoming tornado of flames. Upon crashing, Naruto's attack exploded into a spinning dome of raging water, powerful enough to stop, and finally put out Madara's blazing attack. The water hissed as it was turned into steam by the intense heat of the fire, producing a large cloud that spreaded around the battlefield.

Hinata took advantage of the situation, and once again dived at Madara from the air, her palms crackling with electricity.

"Lightning Release: Double Thunder Palm!"

Unfortunately for the Hyuga, Madara saw the attack and used his gunbai to block the attack. The moment Hinata's hands slammed into the war fan, it began to glow with a white light. Madara smirked at her.

"Uchiha Return!"

The absorbed energy of Hinata's attack was reflected back at her, and the young Hyuga Clan Head was send flying backwards, painfully bouncing on her back a couple times on the ground.

"Hinata!" Naruto cried, before glaring at Madara. He started to make hand seals as fast as he could. "You won't be able to toss this back at me. Fire Release: Mouse Hairball!"

Naruto breathed a massive sphere of blue fire that flew towards the former Uchiha Clan Head. Madara dropped one of the chakra rods, and held a hand towards the incoming projectile.

"Fool. Perhaps not, but did you forget that I can absorb any ninjutsu?" Madara said, as a smirk spread across his face. "Gakido!"

Madara's hands projected a barrier of white light that extended in front of him. However, before the blue fireball could crash into the

barrier, it split into dozens of smaller fireballs that arched around him, avoiding the barrier, before they crashed on Madara's back, which was engulfed by the resulting chain of explosions.

"Nice hit, Naruto!" Yugito praised. *"You're getting the hang of mine and Matatabi's powers!"*

Fighting off the pain of the unexpected attack, Madara flexed his chakra in order to blow the cloud of smoke that formed around him away, only to see Hinata in front of him, which quickly delivered a palm strike to his abdomen, knocking the air out of him and forcing him to bend over, before delivering yet another strike to his lower jaw, sending him flying backwards.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata called him, while tossing him back his lost weapon.

"Thanks, hime!" Naruto said, as he caught the hilt of the sword, which projected a blade of wind chakra as soon as he touched it. "Keep attacking! Don't let him not even a second to breath!"

"Yes!" Hinata agreed.

Jumping back to his feet, Madara spread his arms open just as Naruto and Hinata converged on him from opposite directions, ready to strike him down.

"Shinra Tensei!"

The air shimmered for a fraction of a second, before the two Konoha ninjas were blasted away by a powerful, invisible force in opposite directions. Not wasting any second, Madara leaped towards Naruto, ready to continue the beating while he was down. However, even before he could get back to his feet, a giant golden claw shot from Naruto's body towards Madara, trapping the Uchiha within its strong grip.

Madara, however, immediately broke out of the hold by manifesting his Susanoo, first the ribcage, then the body, arms, and head, forming the upper half of his humanoid form. He brought down a massive blue hand to crush down the jinchuriki, but he managed to dodge it with a few well timed backflips.

"Lightning Release: Twin Lion Fists!"

Hinata rocketed at Madara from behind, her hands covered in an aura shaped like the head of a lion, with electricity crackling around it. The Hyuga Clan head slammed one of her lion fists onto the back of Madara's Susanoo, causing a crack and making the whole construct shiver. Madara glared at Hinata, and before she could deliver another strike, the Susanoo used one of its extra arms to swat her backwards.

While she was hit hard and the strike hurt, Hinata managed to stop herself mid air, and started to make hand seals, while her Truth Seeking Balls started to spin in a circle in front of her.

"Amethyst Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

The spinning black orbs merged into a single sphere of purple light, which exploded into a storm of lightning bolts that shot forward. Madara's Susanoo was pelted by a rain of powerful lavender bolts that began to crack chip away pieces of his Susanoo. Madara's eyes flashed for a second, and his Susanoo not only regenerated, but it reached the Perfect Form.

Naruto and Hinata, however, weren't intimidated. Naruto exploded into a mass of golden light that took the shape of Kurama, with him floating inside his head, while Hinata's Avatar of Kalika grew out of her body, leaving the Hyuga floating inside its head just like Naruto. Naruto and Hinata took a moment to notice the chakra avatar the other was able to manifest.

"I see that your time on that island was well spent, Naruto-kun," Hinata said, smiling at her boyfriend.

"I could tell the same about you and the Moon, hime," Naruto replied, returning her smile.

" *Leave that for later, lovebirds! Madara! Focus on Madara!* " an annoyed Kurama urged.

"You are powerful for two so young, but you're still beneath me," Madara said, as his Susanoo unseathed a katana. "Neither the Nine Tails nor that for armed avatar is something that I haven't beaten before. And that was before gaining the Rinnegan and Sage Mode."

"Did you beat the two of them together?" Naruto asked.

"No, but I'm always willing to welcome new challenges," Madara said, as his Susanoo held his free hand open, generating several shards of blue chakra. "Yagata Magatama!"

With a wide swing of its arm, Madara's Susanoo launched the barrage of magatama-shaped projectiles at Naruto. Too big to dodge them, Naruto used his chakra tails to deflect them away. He was unable to swat all of them away, with some finding their marks, exploding upon touching the avatar of golden chakra.

"You're mine, Nine Tails," Madara said, smirking in triumph as he started to make hand seals from within his Susanoo. "Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

A serpentine wooden dragon burst from the spot in front of Madara, which lunged towards the Kurama chakra construct and quickly wrapped around it, immobilizing it and binding its chakra. The construct tried to bite the dragon, but its bite simply lacked strength to make any dent on the wood. Then, the katana on the Susanoo's hand started to glow with a bright white light.

"Like I said before, you can't use the power of the Nine Tails to harm me, its true master," Madara boasted, as his Susanoo charged forward, ready to strike him down.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata cried, as she moved her Avatar of Kalika to intercept Madara.

Just as the Susanoo brought its katana down, the Avatar of Kalika got in the middle, and used its two upper arms to block the blade with its hands. The energy behind the swing was still released in the form of a circular shockwave that slashed and shattered some of the trees Madara had summoned earlier, but Hinata's chakra construct managed to resist.

The Avatar's lower hands started to crackle with electricity, and before Madara could counterattack, the Avatar slammed both hands into the Susanoo's chest, making it tumble backwards, dropping the katana in the process. Forgetting about Madara for the time being, Hinata turned around, and making use of the Avatar's many hands, she managed to get the wooden dragon away from the Nine Tails-shaped construct, and tossed it away.

"You okay, Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Yeah," Naruto said. "Heh, guess this is why I was told not to use the Tailed Beast from when fighting against a Wood Release user."

"We can still avoid that if we work together," Hinata said, as she eyed Madara, whose Susanoo was getting back to its feet. "If I'm near you at all times, I can destroy any wooden roots created by Madara before they wrap around you and bind your chakra."

Another pulse of chakra from the statue behind the barrier shook the land. They were running out of time. They had to defeat Madara as soon as possible!

"Hey, I have an idea!" Naruto said, as he punched his open palm. "Hinata, ride me!"

The Hyuga was taken aback by Naruto's request, as her face began to redden. "Naruto-kun! This is not the time to-"

"I mean, have your avatar ride Kurama as if it was steed!" Naruto clarified, much to the Hyuga's relief. "That way, the two of them can fight as one!"

"That... might not be a bad idea after all. Alright, let's do it," Hinata said, as she moved her Avatar to ride Kurama. Once she was sit on the golden fox, two of its tails wrapped around the purple chakra construct in order to keep it in place. "I'm ready!"

"Me too!" Naruto said, as he got up. "Let's go!"

Like a knight riding a horse, Hinata's Avatar of Kalika charged forward while riding on Kurama's golden avatar. Madara, whose Susanoo was already back on its feet, looked at the combo with a smile of amusement.

"What do you plan to achieve doing that?" Madara asked, as he started to weave more hand seals. "Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The ground started to shake as more trees started to emerge from the ground, moving towards Naruto, trying to wrap around it like the wooden dragon had done so before. However, Madara wasn't the only one making hand seals, Hinata doing the same as well.

"Six Paths: Lightning Release Thunderbolt!"

The Avatar of Kalika's hands started to crackle with electricity, and shot multiple lightning bolts from its fingertips towards the incoming trees, blasting them into splinters and burned leaves. More and more trees kept coming, but Hinata continued to burn them to a crisp, firing lightning bolts from four different directions, keeping the Kurama avatar safe.

"Good work, Hinata! Keep it like that!" Naruto said. "We're getting close to him! Get ready to strike!"

"Yes!" Hinata said.

Naruto slammed the Kurama chakra construct into Madara's Susanoo with all his might, pushing it backwards, but not with enough force to make it topple down again. Fortunately, there was more to his tactic than a mere tackle. Using the tails wrapped around the Avatar of Kalika, he threw it into the air towards the blue Susanoo.

"Hinata, now!"

Hinata didn't have to be told anything else. While the Avatar was mid air, she made it raise its legs in order to dropkick Madara. And indeed, the moment its feet smashed against the tumbling Susanoo, it was pushed backwards, making it land on its back, producing a thundering, earth shaking boom. The Avatar of Kalika also had a similar effect when its feet touched the ground as well.

"Madara is out for the count!" Hinata said, before her eyes moved towards the crimson barrier. "Naruto, do it now!"

Naruto nodded, and began to prepare the biggest Tailed Beast Ball he could. He knew he had the power to blast that thing into nothingness.

...

While Naruto prepared to finish the statue off and Hinata kept Madara busy, Killer B and Fu also were on the verge of finishing their fight against Obito and Zetsu. While Fu engaged Obito, Killer B was dealing with his main minion. And while the former fight was more or less even, let's say that the dual plant creature was having a less than ideal time against the Kumo jinchuriki.

"S-Stay away from me, you freak!" the white half say, as he nervously weaved hand seals. "Wood Release: Underground Roots Jutsu!"

Multiple roots emerged from underground in an attempt to subdue the Kumogakure ninja, but Killer B easily cut them off with his

lightning-enhanced shot swords while he advanced towards the Akatsuki member.

"Is this all what you can do, to csmmon some weed? If that's the case, you better concede," Killer B said.

"And stop with the damn rhyming!" Black Zetsu complained, as he made more hand seals. "Wind Release: Breakthrough!"

Zetsu blew a powerful gust of wind at Killer B, but once again, the Kumo jinchuriki's speed proved to be too much for the plant being, and easily dodged the attack, while getting even closer to him.

"You think that some breeze is enough to beat my thunder? Fool, fighting me to begin with was your biggest blunder!" Killer B said, as his whole body crackled with electricity. "Now get ready, this is a move only my brother can withstand! It's going to be awesome, it's going to be grand! THUNDER LARIAT!"

Killer B charged at Zetsu at, fittingly, lightning-fast speed. Still the plant-like beign was able to quickly sink underground, dodging the attack at the last minute.

"There's no way we can beat this man," the white half whimpered.

"Agreed. Let's stand back and bid our time. We won't be of any use to Obito and Madara-sama if we die..." the black half said, as the dual being sunk into the ground completely.

"So, the walking plant flees at the sight of my awesome power! All that chump could do was cower!" Killer B rapped, sounded a little disappointed to see his opponent leaving the fight like that. Oh well, it's not that there weren't enemies left to fight. He looked at Fu, still engaged in a fight with Obito. "Hmmm, decisions, decisions. Should I help Number Seven with the other guy with the wood, or should I go for the statue and break it for good?"

"Fu seems to be doing well against Obito, so you should better go for the statue," Gyuki suggested. "Naruto and Hinata should be keeping Madara busy, meaning that you should have a clear shot to destroy it."

"It's decided, then! In that case I better-"

BOOOOOOOM!

Needless to say, Killer B was stunned by the massive explosion that came from the spot where Naruto and Hinata were fighting against Madara. More specifically, the spot where the barrier holding the Statue was. Needless to say, both Fu and Obito also stopped their fight in order to gawk at the huge pillar of red chakra that shot into the sky. Once the pillar receded, there was nothing but a large, thick cloud of dust in its place.

"Hey, looks like Number Nine did it before me! Not that it bothers me, it fills me with glee!" Killer B cheered.

"I can no longer sense the statue's chakra! I think Naruto did it!" Fu said, sounding hopeful, before a realization dawned upon her. "No, wait a minute... that explosion didn't feel like Naruto's chakra... in fact, it felt like-"

A loud, high pitched roar, more like a screech filled the air. From the cloud of dust, a large single red dot of light could be seen. Wind started to blow from within the cloud, blowing it away, revealing what was inside it.

A titanic creature, probably four hundred meters in height, its skin dull brown in color. It had a bulb-like body, with long arms ended in claw-like fingers. It had no lower body, with ten tails as long as its body growing where the legs should be. There were many spike-like protrusions growing from its back, the bigger one looking like a conical conch shell.

It had an oval-shaped head that was connected to the body without anything resembling a neck. The head had a huge mouth filled with rows of sharp teeth. Above the mouth was a massive, single red eye that looked like a Sharingan with nine tomoe around it.

Fu paled. Killer B watched in horror. Obito smirked.

"Your time is over! Marvel and despair at the sight of the creature that will be both your end, and the harbinger of a new, better world!" Obito boasted. "The Ten Tails!"

The newly reborn Ten Tails let out another roar as if to emphasize Obito's introduction.

Author's Note: And after an agonizing wait, Hinata finally reunites with Naruto, as well as Fu and Killer B, ready to help them fight the final battle! Man, I was really dying for Hinata and Naruto to be together again. Now that everybody else had their time to shine under the spotlight, it's time for the fic's power couple to end this story with a bang.

Of course, Hinata isn't the only one to return. As you could see, Madara is back and ready to continue his rampage. Unfortunately for him, Naruto and Hinata together are completely able to match his power.

You know, I kinda hated how after Naruto got the abilities of all the Tailed Beasts, all he did was use a Lava Rasenshuriken (which didn't seem to be that different from a normal Rasenshuriken) again Madara, as well as, again, nine Rasenshurikens powered by each of the Tailed Beasts against Kaguya. I wanted to have Naruto use those abilities in a more creative ways. Seriously, Magnet Release, Boil Release, the spreading coral, Yugito's homing fire attacks... those powers could make Naruto into an incredibly versatile ninja, but all he ever did was Rasenshuriken of a different color. Even if I myself

had Naruto use Tailed Beast chakra to power Rasenshuriken, at least I hope the effect was different from a normal one.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next week, the battle against the Ten Tails. In the meantime, tell me what you think about this chapter in a review. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Ten Tails: The Living Cataclysm

Author's Note: Up to this point, the final battle has been pretty close to canon, even if I tried to give it my own spin in order to stop it from being a direct copy-paste (you guys know how much I hate those), but from this point onwards, things will diverge more and things won't go the way you expect to.

Even then, I'm sure you'll enjoy what I have prepared:

Chapter 128:

The Ten Tails: The Living Cataclysm

or

Go go jinchuriki!

Konoha, Hokage Tower

For the past few weeks, the Hokage's office had been vacant. While the administrative staff continued work as usual without Jiraiya and most of the ninja personnel, none of them ever thought in using the office reserved for Konoha's highest commander.

Then, a burst of smoke happened seemingly spontaneously, and the office wasn't vacant anymore, as from the smoke emerged Jiraiya and Tsunade.

"Good, we're here," Jiraiya said, as he moved towards the desk, and started to look for something inside the drawers. "Okay, where is that thing..."

"Too bad we didn't think of telling the toads to create a gateway to the Allied Ninja Forces HQ," Tsunade said, as she rubbed her arms

while Jiraiya looked for whatever item he was trying to find. "We're going to take a lot of time to reach Naruto."

Shortly after Orochimaru's final defeat, Jiraiya was again contacted by Kosuke. Turns out, after the attack on Genbu Island, Shima had been keeping an eye on Naruto per Jiraiya and Tsunade's request, and both he and his fellow jinchuriki had been ambushed by Obito and a bunch of reanimations. Needless to say, the two of them decided to join Naruto and the others in order to help them, but they were too far away from their position.

Fortunately, there was the Reverse Summoning Jutsu. Like he did many years ago, Fukasaku put a special temporary seal on Tsunade that allowed her to be summoned towards Mount Myoboku. Then, using Gamamaru's getaway to the Hokage's office, they returned to Konoha. And now, they would be heading towards the north, to help Naruto. They only needed his exact position.

"AHA!" Jiraiya said, pulling out what appeared to be a map of the Elemental Nations. Pushing some of the documents and office supplies to the side, he placed the map on the desk, and made a hand seal. Three symbols appeared on the map, all three of them in the Land of Fire. Two of them appeared to be together in the central part of the country, and the third one was in the northeast part, close to the border with the Land of Hot Springs. "Alright, here's Naruto. And these two are Kaida and Hagane. Nice to see that all three of them are still good."

"I had forgotten about those tracking seals you had placed on the kids before Naruto went on his first mission out of the village," Tsunade said, looking at the map. "Didn't you say you were going to remove them after they became Chunin?"

"I guess I did say that, but I kinda forgot. It's been quite a few busy years, you know," Jiraiya said, as he rolled the map and put it on a pocket. "Aren't you happy that I didn't?"

"Hurrah for convenient forgetfulness," Tsunade deadpanned. "Come on, let's go. Our children need us."

Jiraiya nodded, and the two of them left the office via the window.

...

Site of the Final Battle

Naruto, Hinata, Fu and Killer B watched in horror at the colossal abomination towering over them. Its massive size made the Tailed Beasts and Hinata's Avatar of Kalika look puny in comparison. Neither of them knew how they were going to fight against something so large, even with the power the four of them had together.

"So... that thing's the Ten Tails?" Fu asked, her voice quivering a little. **"Wow... its size is a little worrying."**

"That thing is the combination of several of our siblings, of course it was going to be big," Chomei replied. ***"And it isn't even at its full power, still lacking Gyuki, half of Kurama and me."***

"I'm afraid this won't be like fighting a normal Tailed Beast," Hinata said, as she eyed the monster. "And Kami knows what kind of power that creature has..."

"What the hell? Why can't I sense anything from that beast?" Naruto asked. "Its chakra should be massive, but I'm sensing none!"

"You're right, its chakra is massive," the Nine Tails began. ***"And as for why it can't be sensed... think of it like Earth's curvature. The planet may appear flat from our point of view, but that's because we're so comparatively small our eyes can't see it. The same thing goes with the Ten Tails' chakra."***

Naruto both deflated and shaken. "Geez... *that fills me with so much confidence...*"

That moment, Naruto felt something: his connection to his Truth Seeking Balls had been restored. Meaning that Obito had opened a gate to the Kamui dimension. And indeed, looking towards Obito's position, he could see the rogue Uchiha teleporting. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Naruto quickly recalled his nine Truth Seeking Balls, all of them flying out of the spiraling portal just as Obito disappeared.

"Yes! Come back to me!" Naruto cheered.

"Don't celebrate so soon, Naruto. That monster is not just a Tailed Beast, but a force of nature," Saiken warned. "That means that it's nature energy itself. So the Truth Seeking Balls won't be of much use against it."

Naruto deflated again. "Of course. It was much to ask that Obito had made a mistake," Naruto said, now realizing why Obito decided to use Kamui again.

"Still, I'd say it's still better than not having them. They can still be useful," Utakata said.

Obito reappeared on top of the Ten Tail's head, with Madara landing next to him. Madara then crouched down, and placed his hand on the bark-like skin. Then, two stalks of flesh shot from below them, and latched them onto the two Uchiha's spines, allowing them full control of the beast. Madara, however, grunted disapprovingly.

"Just as I feared," Madara said.

"What were you fearing?" Obito asked.

Madara turned at his disciple, and shot him an unamused glare. "Because of the haphazardly way you revived the Ten Tails, its chakra is mostly unstable and imbalanced. If either of us tried to become its jinchuriki, the imbalance would eventually kill us from the inside out. The Ten Tails needs to be complete before I can become its jinchuriki."

"That's just a minor inconvenience," Obito said in a dismissive tone, as he looked at the enemies below him. "Even if it's not at its fullest, the Ten Tails' power is unmatched. All we have to do is beat those fools down below, and have the Ten Tails devour its remaining pieces of power."

"Very well then. Let's do it your way, given that we have no other options," Madara said, as he turned his gaze to the three jinchuriki and the Hyuga.

"Don't act so disappointed. You want to see the Ten Tails in action, and this is the perfect opportunity to do so," Obito replied.

Madara smirked. "Yes, I admit that's a bright side to an inadequate situation, in my opinion at least. Well, let's see what this creature is capable of."

The Ten Tails let out another ear-piercing, screeching roar, before it dragged itself towards the Uchiha's enemies, causing the earth to tremble, and leaving a large trail of clouds of dust in its wake.

Of course, the sight of the titanic abomination charging towards them caused Naruto and his friends to panic even more.

" That thing's coming towards us ready to attack! Should we met it head on or better fall back?" Killer B asked.

" For the time being, run!" Kurama warned. **"Let's see what it does, and when we find an opening, we launch a counterattack!"**

Everybody seemed to be okay with Kurama's plans, as the four giants turned around and began to run away from the even larger giant chasing them, or, in Fu's case, fly away.

" Fu and Chomei, you better stay above us! We'll try to keep their attention on us, and once they're distracted, hit them from above!" Kurama said.

" **Got it!**" the transformed jinchuriki agreed.

Despite its lack of legs, the Ten Tails didn't take much time to bridge the gap between it and its preys. Reaching down, it brought a massive hand towards Kurama's form. Naruto managed to jump in time to dodge, but the titanic hand slamming into the ground produced a shockwave that sent the three earthbound giants tumbling away in different directions. Fortunately, they were able to regain their balance and turn against the incoming monster.

" **Running away has no perk, no choice but to face that jerk!**" Killer B said.

"Understood. Let me attack first, I'll try to create an opening for you to exploit," Hinata suggested, as her Avatar of Kalika charged forward.

The Ten Tails repeated the same action as it did before, and tried to crush Hinata under its massive hand. The Hyuga Clan Head, however, was prepared for such action, and made the Avatar spin in place.

"Six Paths: Heavenly Spin!"

Due to its size, the Avatar couldn't spin as fast as Hinata did, and thus couldn't produce a dome of protective chakra. Instead, blue streams of chakra quickly orbited around the spinning avatar, creating a lesser but still similar effect. When the hand slammed into the Avatar, the force of the spin pushed it backwards, but unfortunately it wasn't enough to negate the force behind Ten Tails' smack, and Hinata's Avatar was also violently pushed backwards as well, the chakra giantess falling on its back as it slid backwards.

"Hinata!" Naruto screamed.

" **Don't mind her! Focus on the enemy in front of you!**" Kurama reminded Naruto.

Before Naruto could attack, the Ten Tails balled its hands into fists, and slammed them into the ground with as much force as it could muster. The result was a shockwave that pushed the Eight and the Nine Tails backwards with even more force than the Avatar of Kalika, while shattering the ground around them, sending a multitude of rocks flying in every direction.

Their preys knocked down, the Ten Tails lunged forward, ready to consume them. There was, however, one more jinchuriki that hadn't made her move. Taking advantage of the fact that it wasn't paying attention to her, Fu dived towards the titanic abomination headfirst.

" Horn Buster!"

Fu's frontal horn glowed with a green aura and doubled in size and length, ready to gore both the Ten Tails and the two Uchihas riding its head. However, before she could reach it, one of its tails moved and slammed into the giant bug before she could have the chance to get any close, sending her tumbling back like a disoriented fly who had been swatted by the tail of a cow.

"Fu!" Naruto yelled, as the Nine Tails Avatar got back on its feet.

" *The strength of that thing is massive!*" Kokuo said in horror.
"*There's no way we can survive against that thing in a close fight!*"

" The eyeball looks like an obvious weak point. Perhaps you should aim your attacks on that spot?" Yagura suggested.

"Let's attack at once! He can't defend from three different directions!" Naruto suggested.

Both Naruto and Killer B prepared a Tailed Beast Ball each, while Hinata's Avatar of Kalika started to make hand seals.

"Sage Art: Twin Lion Assault!"

" Tailed Beast Ball!"

The Avatar of Kalika thrust its palms forward, releasing two large blasts of lavender chakra. The blasts took the shape of lions whose bodies were ended in large tails rather than back legs, looking like they were ready to pound on their prey, leaving a trail of purple light as they flew.

Obito and Madara, however, didn't look fazed in the slightest.

"Let's show these maggots how big is the difference in power between us and them," Obito said.

The Ten Tails opened its jaws wide, and like the Nine and Eight Tails before it, gathered chakra on its mouth in order to form a Tailed Beast Ball. This ball, however, was almost three times as large as a normal Tailed Beast Ball, crimson in color with black edges, and blue lightning crackled around it. The Ten Tails then swallowed the ball whole, before releasing it in the form of a wave of destruction. Making a wide sweep, the chakra beam not only nullified the incoming attacks, but it still carried more than enough power to blast its opponents.

Naruto and Killer B wrapped their Tails around themselves, forming a makeshift protective shell that took most of the blast. Unfortunately, Hinata's Avatar of Kalika had no such defense, and the lavender chakra construct was blasted into oblivion. Hinata managed to abandon it in time, but the resulting explosion sent her spiraling into the ground, landing with a loud thud.

"Hinata!" Naruto yelled again.

While the Ten Tails took care of its groundbound enemies, Fu decided to test her luck once again. Rather than melee, she decided to use a Tailed Beast Ball as well. In the case the Uchihes decided to absorb it, it would leave them vulnerable to other attacks.

" Tailed Beast Ball!"

As the ball of energy descended upon the Ten Tails, the two Uchihas noticed the attack getting closer each time.

"Oh, that annoying fly is still there," Madara flippantly said.

"She won't be there for much longer," Obito added.

Without deigning to look at her or her attack, the Ten Tails used one of its tails to almost casually swat the Tailed Beast Ball away. The attack landed somewhere far away, detonating upon crashing into the ground. Then, with another tail whip, the Ten Tails violently send Fu crashing against the ground near her fellow jinchuriki.

"Not Fu too!" Naruto shouted again.

"You have no time to worry about your friends, Uzumaki," Madara said, as he made a hand seal.

The Ten Tails once again opened its jaws to prepare yet another Tailed Beast Ball, much to their horror.

" The trick of using the tails as a shield won't cut it a second time!" Gyuki said. **"We have to counter it with a Tailed Beast Ball of our own!"**

" But our individual Tailed Beast Balls don't have enough power to match those of that monster!" Chomei whined.

" In that case, let's join our forces! Let's pour of chakra into a single Tailed Beast Ball!" Kurama suggested.

Shaking off the pain, Fu forced herself back on her feet, and joined her fellow jinchuriki. The three Tailed Beasts began to gather their chakra into a single point, quickly creating a Tailed Beast Ball much bigger than anyone they could produce on their own. The problem, though, is that it was still about half the size the one the Ten Tails was prepared.

" This is getting rough! No matter how hard we try, our power just isn't enough!" Killer B panicked.

"In that case, then let me try something!" Naruto said.

The Uzumaki motioned his hand forward, and his nine Truth Seeking Balls shot towards the forming Tailed Beast Ball. The nine orbs then sunk into the giant sphere of energy. As the Truth Seeking Balls dissolved into the Tailed Beast Ball, their power incorporating into it, it pulsated as it grew in size. It still didn't match the Ten Tails' power, but at least it was close enough.

"Enough of this nonsense. Disappear!" Madara yelled.

" Aim at the lower part of the opposite ball! That way, they will go upwards when they clash!" Yugito urged.

Both Tailed Beast Balls shot forward, meeting each other in the middle, pushing back and forth. And like Yugito had said, the balls started to move upwards as they tried to overpower the other one. After a few moments of struggling, both balls detonated at once, producing a massive explosion that cleared the sky of any clouds.

Even if the explosion happened far from the ground, the resulting shockwave shook the earth to the core, sending multiple chunks of rock into the air, and pushing the three jinchuriki and Hinata violently backwards, bouncing on their backs multiple times. Naruto, fortunately, managed to catch Hinata with a chakra arm before the poor Hyuga could be sent into the horizon.

The Ten Tails, however, wasn't affected by explosion, and was able to remain in place, unaffected by the gigantic blast.

The three jinchuriki felt their forces slowly disappear as they shrank back to their human forms. They weren't even able to use their chakra cloaks.

"I'm sorry, Naruto, but I've been spending a lot of energy, and those attacks didn't help," Kurama said, sounding a little apologetic. "I'm afraid I'll need some time to regenerate my chakra."

"I'm also at my limit. I need to rest for a bit," Chomei said.

"Same here. It pains me leaving you to your own devices against such a threat, but we have no choice," Gyuki added.

"Damn..." Fu cursed, as she looked at the one-eyed abomination in front of her. "How the hell are going to fight that thing without Lucky Seven and the others?"

"I don't know, but we will!" Naruto insisted. "We don't need to win right now, just buy them some time to rest and recover some of their chakra, and we can do that!"

"Quite the persistent fellow, isn't he?" Madara deadpanned, shaking his head. "Even in the face of certain doom, his confidence doesn't waver."

"You have no idea," Obito said, rolling his eyes. "That blond brat has been a thorn at my side since our mission started."

"I can imagine. But you know what they said," Madara said, as he issued a command to the Ten Tails. "Confidence is the fool's substitute of intelligence."

The Ten Tails opened its jaws again, and prepared to charge another Tailed Beast Ball, much to the Konoha, Taki and Kumo ninja's horror, as they began to panick, not knowing what to do do counter another of those monstrous attacks.

"Perhaps I'm overdoing it, but, this should be enough to beat any fight out of you without killing you or the Tailed Beasts within you," Madara said, as the Ten Tails prepared to attack.

Naruto desperately wracked his brain in order to find a way to avoid the incredibly destructive attack.

"I know! Let's fly into the air! Fu, grab Killer B!" Naruto said, as he summoned a cloud of sand beneath his feet.

"Will be able to fly high enough to avoid the explosion?" Hinata questioned.

"We have no other choice! Now let's-"

Before Naruto could finish talking, the Ten Tails fired the giant crimson sphere of chakra for the second time in a row. As Naruto and the others prepared to take off, he suddenly sensed a new chakra signature joining the battle, and indeed, an individual dressed in green and blue with silver hair blurred past him, drawing everybody's attention for a second.

"Kakashi...?" Fu asked.

Because indeed, Kakashi was now rushing towards the incoming attack. He jumped into the air, and touched it with one hand as his Sharingan transformed into its advanced stage.

"Kamui!"

Kakashi created a spiraling vortex that completely sucked the Tailed Beast Ball away, as well as himself, saving the jinchuriki and Hinata from being hit by the powerful attack. Naruto was left with his mouth agape, trying to process what had happened.

"Wait... did Kakashi-sensei just...?" Naruto stammered, fearing for the worst. That moment, he sensed Kakashi's chakra signature once again. Turning around, the silver haired Jonin was there, not any worse for the wear.

"Don't worry, Naruto, it was just a Shadow Clone," Kakashi assured, and he could see how a wave of relief washed over the son of his

late mentor. "I needed to make sure that thing exploded in the Kamui dimension. Or else Obito could have tossed it back at us again."

"Naruto! Hinata!" Kurenai's voice called, as she and Haku landed besides Kakashi. "Good to see you two are okay!"

"Nee-chan!" Hanabi's voice said, and Hinata saw her little sister flying towards her. The two of them celebrated their reunion with a tight hug.

"It seems we arrived just in time," Haku said.

"And we haven't come alone!" Hanabi chimed in, as she broke the hug.

Suddenly, Naruto's senses were overwhelmed as thousands upon thousands of new chakra signatures entered the place, many familiar, while most others were unknown. Then, a few seconds later, many more ninjas, not just from Konoha, but from the other four Great Villages, and some of the minor ones as well, started to land all around them.

"The First Division is here!" A announced, as the Raikage and the ninjas under his command landed on the ground, Team Asuma among them.

"The Second Division has arrived!" Kurotsuchi said, floating above the battleground, as what was left of her battered division joined the battle, including the Uchiha brothers, as well as the remaining members of the Close Combat Squad.

"The Third Division is here as well," Mei stated, as she, followed by Zabuza and the other Swordsmen of the Mist, lead their troops, Anko's Assassination Squad among them.

"The Fourth Division is ready to fight," Rasa stated, flanked by the Sand Siblings.

"So is the Fifth Division!" Mifune said, as his troops followed him, Kakashi's students among them.

"The Medical Division is here to provide relief to the wounded!" Shizune said.

"The Sensory Division has arrived as well!" C stated.

"The Air Force is here!" Konan said, as a large group of ninjas riding flying animals covered the skies.

Thousands upon thousands of ninjas converged upon them. Everybody was here! Even he could sense Shisui, who had now joined Sasuke and Itachi in the Second Division, as well as Sai, who had reinforced the Air Force with several of his ink birds. There were, however, two people the blond couldn't sense.

"Hey... I'm not sensing Mom and Dad... shouldn't they be here as well?" Naruto asked, as a knot began to form in his stomach. He then felt Kurenai placing a hand on his shoulder. The Genjutsu Mistress smiled at Naruto.

"Don't worry, Tsunade-sama and Jiraiya-sama undertook the task to put an end to Orochimaru, once we were able to pinpoint the position of his hideout," Kurenai explained. "And given that all the reanimations in all battlefields were dispelled, I said their mission was a resounding success."

"Even if they may not be in condition to join us in battle, I'm convinced they're still alive," Kakashi added.

Naruto nodded. Yeah, they were right. Wherever they were, Naruto knew they were still alive. And now, he needed to win this so he could come back to them alive as well. He took a step forward, and looked at the titanic monster in front of him, feeling now much more confident than before. He punched the palm of his hand.

"Alright, time to take that monster down!" Naruto said.

"What's going to be the plan?" Hinata asked.

" *Naruto, Hinata,*" a voice called them inside their heads. After a brief shock, they realized it was Ino using her telepathy. *"The Alliance HQ devised a plan on our way here in order to take down the Ten Tails. You're the last ones to learn about it. I'll try to make it brief, so pay attention."*

" *Got it, Ino!*" Naruto said.

" *We're listening!*" Hinata replied.

" *First, we will blind the creature...*"

Following the Raikage's directions, multiple Kumo ninja rushed forward, split into two groups, one led by C and the other lead by Darui. The first group moved a few steps ahead of the second, and began to make the same sequence of hand seals.

"Blind it!" the Raikage ordered.

"Lightning Release: Lightning Flash!"

The dozens of ninjas using this technique in tandem produced a pillar of incredibly bright white light. The Allied Ninjas were already expecting it and shielded their eyes in time, but Madara, Obito and their pet abomination weren't so lucky, and took the attack in full.

"Now that we disoriented it, destroy its eye!"

Darui nodded, as he and his clansmen started to weave the same chain of seals, before bringing their hands together, forming a finger gun.

"Storm Release: Laser Circus!"

Darui and his clansmen fired a barrage of chakra beams, which were all directed towards the Ten Tails' eye. The creature instinctively closed its one eye and reared its head back in order to avoid the

barrage of bright beams, all of which crashed against its face, resulting in a series of explosions.

On top of the Ten Tails' head, Madara watched the ninjas below him attempting to cripple the beast under his and Obito's control, and seethed.

"We can't let them take the initiative. Let's wipe them out in one blow!" Madara said, as he ordered the Ten Tails to move forward and attack, even if it was temporarily deprived from the sense of sight.

Letting out a screech of agony, with its eye still closed, the Ten Tails was forced to follow Madara's mental command, and lumbered forward.

" The Ten Tails will attack us in retaliation, that's why the next part of the plan involves hindering its movements..."

Kurotsuchi flew above a large group of ninjas, about half of them from Iwagakure, including her father Kitsuchi, but there were many from other villages as well. She landed in front of them, and pointed forward.

"Okay, guys, our turn! Let's reshape the battlefield!" Kurotsuchi ordered, as she and her troops started weave seals for the same jutsu. "Earth Release: Moving Earth Core!"

Kurotsuchi and her ninjas slammed their palms into the ground at once, sending underground waves of chakra towards the Ten Tails' position. Suddenly, sections of the terrain under the titanic beast started to raise or lower seemingly at random, causing it to lose its balance and fall to the ground on its face. It attempted to push its body back with its arms, but the constantly changing terrain caused it to fail.

" And once the Ten Tails can't move, we will make OUR move!"

"Now, quickly! Everybody, attack! Ignore the monster! Take Obito and Madara out!" Rasa ordered.

The entirety of the Allied Ninjas rushed forward, hollering and screaming battle cries, while many of them firing various elemental ninjutsu forward. Unfortunately, the Uchihas riding on top of the Ten Tails weren't going to just let the enemies reach them so easily.

"It's insulting how much they underestimate us," Obito snarled, as he sent a mental command to the Ten Tails.

The Ten Tails screeched in response, and like it did before, raised a hand, clamped it into a fist, and slammed it into the ground with all the strength it could muster, shattering the ground even further, and sending a destructive shockwave that sent both the incoming Allied Ninjas as well as many chunks of rock flying backwards.

Naruto, Hinata and Fu were able to stay mid air, and Naruto created a multitude of sand clouds in order to catch other ninjas close to him. However, it was safe to assume that a frontal attack like that wasn't going to work.

"What the enemy doesn't realize, though, is that the first wave is only a distraction for the second one, that will come from above!"

And indeed, while the Ten Tails smashed its fists on the ground, the air force moved in, all of them diving towards the titanic beast, like birds of prey ready to dig their claws into their next meal. Konan was leading the charge.

"I'll attack first and create an opening! Attack after me!" Konan said, as she dived down.

Obito noticed the airborne ninjas that were upon them. Upon seeing Konan leading the charge, the last member of Akatsuki scowled in anger an irritation.

"Konan. Figured that traitor would be here," Obito seethed. Madara also looked in the same direction. "I'll make sure that bitch doesn't leave this battlefield alive."

"Paper Drizzle!"

From her wings, Konan rained a massive storm of razor-sharp paper sheets towards the two rogue Akatsuki. The two Akatsuki raised a hand towards her, and prepared their counterattack.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Thanks to the two gravitational blasts, Konan's paper rain was stopped on its tracks, and dispersed to the winds. The blue haired woman smirked, already expecting such attack to counter hers. In fact, she hoped for one of them to use Shinra Tensei, but the fact that the two of them used it at once was even better than she thought.

"Now, attack!" Konan ordered. "There's a five second interval until they can use that jutsu again! Don't use elemental ninjutsu, the two of them can absorb chakra! Engage them in close combat and overwhelm them with numbers! They can't move without detaching themselves from the beast!"

Like an angry swarm, the airborne ninjas descended upon Madara and Obito, who didn't look that perturbed upon realizing they fell into a trap.

"Look at those insects coming at us. Thinking they have a chance," Madara chuckled condescendingly. He turned at his disciple. "Shall we give them a reality check?"

Obito made a hand seal. "I'm way ahead of you. Wood Release: Thousand Cutting Sprigs!"

The Ten Tails raised three of its tails, aiming their tips towards the thick of the air force, and fired a storm of sharp wooden stakes. The

first line of fliers were taken down almost in its entirety. Those behind them were able to move in time, but many of them were still unable to dodge the brutal attack.

"Shit! Fall back, fall back!" Konan ordered, as she tried to dodge the barrage of wooden spikes as best as he could.

Unfortunately, the attack wasn't just aimed at the air forces. Due the angle they were fired, the stakes flew in an arc, curving down towards the thick of the Ninja Alliance ground forces, who all watched in horror the rain of death that came from above. Most of the ninjas ran away trying to avoid the sharp projectiles, but others tried to counter the Ten Tails' attack.

"Wind Release: Rasenshuriken!"

Naruto, with the help of several of his clones, threw five shuriken of wind chakra upwards. They exploded into spiraling spheres of furious razor sharp currents, shredding some of the wooden spears to bits.

"Lightning Release: Heavenly Thunderstorm!"

"Fire Release: Heavenly Firestorm!"

Hinata and Hanabi flew towards the incoming barrage of spears, and started to spin mid air as they released elemental chakra through every point of their bodies, turning into spinning spheres of lightning and fire, respectively, blocking some of the spears while sending lightning bolts and bursts of flames to stop nearby ones they were unable to reach.

"Carapace Shield!"

Reactivating her Chomei Chakra armor, Fu also flew towards the rain of spears. She generated two large shields attached to her forearms in the shape of a beetle carapace, making them as big as

possible, before facing them towards the storm of sharp wood. The spears broke upon hitting the extremely hard and durable shields.

Other ninjas protected themselves and their friends and allies like they could, Haku raised ice barriers, while Kakashi, Karin and other Earth Release users raised rock barriers and domes, though some of them weren't sturdy enough to resist the wooden spears. Fire, Wind and Lightning Release users launched elemental blasts into the air in order to destroy the wooden spears. Gaara tried to create as much sand as he could and use them to form barriers around the ninjas close to him.

However, despite their valiant efforts, it wasn't enough to counter the rain of spears in its entirety, and many of them ended up finding their marks. Not only did the sharp sprigs painfully pierced through the thickest of armors, once it impaled somebody, additional sharp branches grew inside their victim's bodies, skewering them from the inside out.

Soon, the battlefield was filled with screams of pain and agony from the ninjas unlucky enough to be hit by such a brutal attack. This prompted Naruto into creating more shadow clones, and besides Rasenshuriken, he also mimicked Gaara by creating walls of sand, while also shooting waves of lava and streams of corrosive mist towards the incoming attacks. But no matter how much Naruto pushed himself, he simply couldn't match the power of such attack.

"Shit, they're massacring us! If I could use the Tailed Beast form..." Naruto growled, as he sensed many chakra signatures around him being snuffed in an instant. But Naruto realized that not even with Kurama's full power he would be able to counter this attack in its entirety.

" *Don't despair. We still have a chance. This was nothing but a distraction so the Uchihas won't see the true attack coming,*" he heard Ino's voice inside his mind.

"Huh?"

Then, the earth started to rumble, and Naruto felt a massive chakra spike coming from near the Ten Tails' position. A spike of chakra former by three people that he knew.

...

While the Ten Tails fought the thick of the Ninja Alliance's forces, three young ninjas sneaked past the titanic beast, getting as close to it as they could without raising any suspicion. So far, it seems that it was working, as neither Obito, Madara nor their pet monstrosity noticed them, despite their very unique chakra signatures.

"Man, look at that..." Kaida said, looking at the Ten Tails in a mix of awe and fear. "That thing is even bigger this close..."

"Will we be able to restrain it?" Rin asked, sounding unsure. "I have restrained Tailed Beasts with my Wood Release before, but that thing is on a completely different level..."

"We will have to," Hagane stated, as he glared at the titanic monster.

"Is this close enough? Or do we need to get even closer to that thing?" Kaida asked.

"I believe this is enough," Hagane said, as he narrowed his eyes at the two Uchiha on top of the Ten Tails' head. "Otherwise we may risk being spotted."

"I don't think they're expecting a trio of ninjas to make any difference against a foe of such power," Rin replied, looking towards Obito as well.

"In that case, let's prove them wrong," Hagane said. "Kaida, Rin, you ready?"

"Yeah, give me a second," Rin replied, as she clapped her hands together, and closed her eyes. In a few seconds, green marks appeared around her eyes and on her forehead. When she opened

her eyes, they were yellow instead of their usual brown. "Okay, now I'm ready."

"Me too," Kaida said. "Do your thing, bro."

Hagane merely placed both his hands on each of the girls' shoulders, and channeled his senjutsu chakra towards them, vastly increasing their power. Such peak of chakra wouldn't go unnoticed to their enemies, but it will be too late for them to do anything. Both girls made the same sequence of seals.

"Wood Release: Nativity of a World of Trees!"

The two girls screamed as they tried to pour as much chakra as they could into the jutsu, a bright silver aura flaring out of their bodies.

The earth started to rumble, before multiple gigantic wooden vines burst from underground around the Ten Tails, wrapping themselves around its neck, arms and all of its ten tails, stopping the barrage of piercing wooden spears in the process. The Ten Tails screeched in confusion as the gigantic roots and vines slowly immobilized it and bound its chakra. It tried to fight the vines away, but they proved to be too much even for its seemingly infinite power.

With a mighty pull, the vines and roots pulled the beast down, pinning it to the ground, and stopping it from moving completely. It squirmed in the grasp of the mighty wooden hold, but the vines and roots resisted firmly.

"Hot damn... look at that, we did it!" Kaida cheered. "It's completely bound! We totally did it! We submitted that monster to our awesome power! We-UGH!"

Kaida suddenly felt her legs become like jelly, and if it wasn't for Rin grabbing her, she would have fallen to the ground face-first.

"Easy there, sis. You expended a lot of chakra on that jutsu. All of us did," Hagane said, looking at the immobilized Ten Tails. "I doubt we'll

be able to do this again."

"Yeah," Rin agreed. She also felt a little feeble. Reaching into her ninja tool pouch, she pulled out a soldier pill and popped it inside her mouth. "Now it's on the rest of them to make the most out of this opportunity."

Hagane slung Kaida's arm around his shoulder, in order to help Rin to carry her. "They will. Now let's go to somewhere safer."

...

Back on the battlefield, both the Allied Ninjas and the Akatsuki watched with a mixture of surprise and awe as the gigantic wooden vines grew around the Ten Tails and immobilized it completely. Obito and Madara both mentally ordered the Ten Tails to break its bindings, but the colossal beast was helpless against the gigantic vines.

Madara was able to sense where that attack came from, and most importantly, who were the ones behind it. One chakra signature in particular annoyed him more than the other two.

"That little girlfriend of yours is becoming quite the headache," Madara hissed, narrowing in the direction of the chakra signature. "If you aren't able to rein her in, then somebody must put her in her place."

Such comment caused Obito to shot a glare at his mentor. "If Rin becomes a bigger problem, I will deal with her myself. Me. You got that?"

Madara was about to reply, when his senses alerted him of a mass of chakra signatures that was getting close, and indeed, turning his sight to the front, he saw a mass of ninjas leaping towards their position, Naruto Uzumaki leading the charge, with Hinata, Gaara and Fu flying besides him. The blond had a Rasenshuriken in hand,

which he tossed towards him, while other ninjas around him cast various elemental ninjutsu towards them.

" Smart. Either we waste a Shinra Tensei on those attacks, or we try to absorb them and become sitting ducks," Madara thought in realization.

Then, a shadow was cast above the two Uchiha. Looking up, they saw three Susanoo, one purple, another red, and another green, diving towards them from above. Realizing they had been cornered, Madara and Obito detached the stalks that linked them to the Ten Tails from their spines and jumped away before they could be overwhelmed by the sheer numbers, just as the Allied Ninjas landed all around the Ten Tails' body. Well, most of them.

"Naruto!" Sasuke yelled from above. "Itachi, Shisui and I will keep Madara busy! Try to release the Tailed Beasts if you can, while that monster is down!"

"I'll take care of Obito!" Kakashi volunteered, as he pursued his former teammate.

"Don't worry guys, I'll do it!" Naruto said, giving Sasuke a thumbs up, as he watched both him and his fellow Uchiha flying after the fleeing Madara. He then looked down at the Ten Tails, and scratched his head. *"Okay guys, I need to release your true selves from inside this monster... any ideas? Because I don't think cutting him up will work..."*

" Our father and his brother separated the Ten Tails' chakra from its body once. If they could do it, it can be done again," Kurama said, sounding certain. ***"You have the same power as my father, and that girlfriend of yours has Hamura's power. Between the two of them should be able to do it."***

" Err... right. I better call her and we will figure out... uh?" Naruto was snapped from his thoughts as thousands upon thousands of new chakra signatures appeared around him, none of them remotely

close to human chakra. However, looking around, he didn't see anything.

At least, not at first.

Thousands upon thousands of tumor-like lumps started to grow around the Ten Tails' body, and from those lumps, creatures of all sizes and shapes came out from them. Some of them were humanoid, other more animal-looking. Some were just as big as a human being, while others were as big as a Boss Summon. They still had a few things in common, such as lack of any eyes, a large mouth full of sharp teeth, and spikes and blades growing all around their bodies.

Without further ado, these Ten Tails Spawns immediately charged towards all the ninjas standing on its parent's body. Many ninjas were taken aback by the sudden appearance of these new enemies, albeit the rest of them were able to defend themselves. Still, the thousands upon thousands of Ten Tails Spawns quickly outnumbered the ninjas standing on top of the Ten Tails.

"We're being overwhelmed!"

"Retreat! Fall back!"

"The Air Force shall cover your retreat!" Konan said, as she and the other airborne ninjas launched their attacks towards the Ten Tails miniclones, giving the ground ninjas some room to retreat.

Hinata and Fu grabbed a nearby ninja each and help them flee, while Naruto and Gaara summoned multiple sand clouds in order to help other ninjas escape.

As the vanguard attacking group fell back and rejoined the thick of the army, the Ten Tails Spawns continued to pour out of the titanic beast's body, quickly jumping into the ground, giving chase the fleeing ninjas.

Fortunately, the rest of the army was already working on helping them avoid their chasers and rejoin the main group. Kurotsuchi led a large group of Iwa ninjas towards them.

"Alright, step one, raise a wall! A big one!" the Tsuchikage ordered.

Dozens of Iwa ninjas weaved the hand seals of the same jutsu, before slamming their hands into the ground at once.

"Earth Release: Earth Style Great Wall!"

An extremely long and thick barrier made of rock and earth burst from underground, bisecting the battlefield in two. The wall, being ten meters in height, three in thickness and a few hundreds in length separated the fleeing ninjas from the Ten Tails Spawns that gave chase. The abominations weren't deterred, and began to quickly climb over the wall.

"Now, step two! Create a moat of lava at the base of the wall!" Kurotsuchi said, as she and other members of the Kinryuu clan began to weave hand seals, before once again slamming their hands into the ground. "Lava Release: Eruption!"

The combined power of the dozens of Kinryuu ninjas summoned a large moat of lava at the base of the wall. Just when the Ten Tails miniclones were done climbing the wall, they haplessly fell into the lava moat, burning to death instantly. The clones weren't completely stupid, and upon seeing what had happened, rather than blindly jumping into the lava, they began to tear pieces from the wall and dropped them into the lava, in order to build a makeshift bridge.

However, Kurotsuchi's tactic already accomplished its goal, and the ninjas that went to attack Madara and Obito returned safely to the main group.

" ***Naruto,***" Kurama called. ***"I already gathered enough chakra for you to use the Chakra Cloak. However, I'll need to gather more in order to use the Tailed Beast form, so try not to squander it."***

"Good, because I'm going to need it," Naruto said out loud, as he and Gaara landed on the ground.

They were quickly joined by Fu and Killer B. The green haired girl looked at the army of the Ten Tails Spawns and let out a whistle.

"Man, look how many of those fuckers," the Takigakure kunoichi said. "Just when we thought we had won, the Ten Tails creates an army out of nowhere."

"I guess Naruto, you, I and a few others could bypass them by flying, but then we'd be alone and unsupported," Gaara said. "And we can't just carry the entire army flying."

"Yeah, it looks like we're in quite the plight. I guess there's no other option but to fight," Killer B agreed.

"Well, we've been doing nothing but fight this whole time, so guess we can endure another battle or two," Naruto said. Then, he noticed who was alongside him, and smiled. "And hey, for the first time, all four surviving jinchuriki are going to fight together! That has to count for something!"

Gaara, however, shook his head. "You three, sure. But I'm no longer a jinchuriki anymore. Remember that Shukaku was extracted from my body."

Naruto, however, placed a hand on the redhead's shoulder. "Even if that's true, that doesn't matter. You will be always one of us, Gaara. Never think otherwise."

Gaara was a little taken aback by Naruto's statement, but the Suna Jonin smiled and nodded.

"*Hey, don't forget about us!*" Yugito's voice said from within Naruto's head.

" Indeed. Just because we aren't alive doesn't mean that we can't contribute," Yagura added.

" All of us are in this together, Naruto," Roshi said.

" We will do our part, no matter how little it is!" Han said.

" Besides, we do have a score to settle with the bastards who killed us," Uakata added.

Naruto was going to say something, when suddenly an idea dawned upon him. It was kind of crazy and he wasn't sure if it would work, but he had to try it. He owed the jinchuriki sealed inside him that much.

"Thanks for reminding me that you're still there, guys," Naruto said, as he made the hand seal of one of his favorite techniques.

"Because I just realized how can you be even more involved in this battle! Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

From five bursts of smoke, five clones appeared around Naruto. However, said clones weren't of Naruto; instead, they looked like the five jinchuriki that whose fragments of chakra sealed inside him. It took a couple seconds to the clones to realize what had happened. While Fu and Gaara were only taken aback a little, Killer B was shocked to see Yugito back in the flesh.

"Y-Yugito-chan? Is that really you?" the rapper asked, shocked.

Yugito stared at her hands, then looked at him in confusion.

"I think? I don't know... Naruto?" she asked. The other jinchuriki looked at him equally confused.

"Sorry guys, but you aren't really alive. I converted some of my chakra into yours to create those clones, so you guys can control them," Naruto explained. "I also converted some of Kurama's chakra into the chakra of your Tailed Beasts and added them to your clones.

Though, with how little Tailed Beast chakra you have, I don't think you'll be able to use Tailed Beast Chakra Mode like Killer B, Fu or myself."

"It's okay, Naruto. This is way more than what we could have expected," Yagura thanked him.

"Oh, one last thing. Sealing Art: Hardening Seal!" Naruto said, as he made a hand seal.

In a flash, several seals appeared on the cloned jinchuriki, before they vanished.

"There! That way you won't dispel in one hit like a normal Shadow Clone," Naruto added.

"Guys, look! They're crossing the moat!" Fu pointed out.

And indeed, the Ten Tails Spawns had already created multiple makeshift bridges on the lava, and were now advancing towards the Allied Ninja army. Naruto, however, wasn't intimidated.

"Let them come," he said, punching his palm, as his Six Paths Chakra Mode flared back to life, covering him in a cloak of golden flames, a nine Truth Seekings Balls appeared behind him, floating in a circle. "So they can get a taste of what it awaits to their daddy! Let's go, everybody!"

"Yeah! Ready, Matatabi?" Yugito asked.

" ***Sure! I'ts great to fight against by your side!***" Matatabi excitedly replied.

"Now that we're no longer puppets in either mind or body, let's fight for the right side at least just once, Isobu," Yagura calmly said.

" ***Akatsuki will pay for the suffering they caused to the two of us,***" the three tailed turtle replied.

"You're not the only one with a pending score to settle! Come on Kokuo!" Han claimed, as bursts of steam came from his armor.

" *I'm with you, Han,*" Kokuo assured.

"Let's make the most of this brief second chance, Saiken!" Utakata said, bubble pipe ready on his hand.

" *Yeah, let's!*" Saiken agreed.

Roshi at first didn't say anything. He just closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. Son Goku wondered why didn't he follow the lead of his fellow jinchuriki, and let out a shout and show off, and was tempted to ask what was going through the old man's head, but bit his tongue. Roshi then opened his eyes, and his lips curved into a small smile.

"Let's go..." Roshi began, as he took a fighting stance. "... Son Goku!"

The four tailed monkey couldn't help but smirk. ***"Took you long enough, you stubborn geezer! But as your race says, better late than never!"***

With that, spearheaded by the nine jinchuriki, the Ninja Alliance charged towards the incoming army of Ten Tails Spawns, the air filled with the rumbling sound of thousands of steps, as well as the battle cries of the Allied Ninjas and the inhuman, high pitched screeches from the Ten Tails miniclones. In no time, the two armies clashed, and the battle to reach the Ten Tails began.

Of the nine jinchuriki, Gaara was the one who made the first move. He set his sights on a group of miniclones that were charging towards him. Little did they know that they were running towards their impending doom.

"Hey, Naruto, I don't think you ever saw me fighting in Sage Mode," Gaara said, as he waved his hands, summoning a truly massive

amount of sand from underground. "Take a good look at this. Sage Art: Wind Release, Demonic Sandstorm!"

Gaara created a huge tornado out of sand. The tornado quickly engulfed the incoming Ten Tails Spawns, who flailed their arms helplessly as they were blown away by the tornado. Once he had captured enough of them, the redhead made his next move, and clamped his hand into a fist.

"Imperial Sand Coffin!"

All the sand in the tornado suddenly compressed into a sphere of sand, instantly crushing the Ten Tails Spawns to death.

"Whoa! Such an amazing jutsu!" Naruto praised in awe. "Now I can't wait to see what your siblings can do with senjutsu!"

"You will have the chance to witness their prowess," Gaara said. "What about you, Naruto? Even if I couldn't sense the immense power you have now, your new appearance suggests that you're way more powerful than the last time we met."

"Hehe, indeed I am! Now, what could I do to..." Naruto began, before he noticed the Truth Seeking Balls floating behind him. "Alright, I barely got to use these last time, let's not make the same mistake! Now watch this, Gaara!" Naruto said, with a wave of his hand, he sent his Truth Seeking Balls forwards, towards a group of miniclones that was coming towards him. He reshaped the orbs into black spears, and impaled them through the creatures, killing them instantly. "What do you think?"

"Less flashy than the kind of jutsu I'm using to see from you, but it gets the job done," Gaara acknowledged.

"Well, there's still plenty of enemies here that I can use to show you my more flashier jutsu, hehe!" Naruto chuckled.

Meanwhile, another group of Ten Tails Spawns were closing on Yagura. The former Mizukage, however, was unfazed, as he created a large circular mirror of water in front of him, facing the incoming monsters, before using his hooked staff to rotate the mirror.

"Water Release: Water Mirror Jutsu!"

The miniclones' reflection on the mirror jumped out of it, colliding with the originals, and pushing them backwards. As this happened, Yagura started to make hand seals, before slamming his staff into the ground.

"Rising Coral Ripples!"

From the base of the staff, a gigantic row of corals rocketed towards the Ten Tails Spawns in the ground, and were covered in coral before they could even get up. Taking advantage of this, Yugito landed besides Yagura and rushed forward, making hand seals of her own.

"Well done! Let me finish them off!" the Kumo kunoichi shouted, as her nails grew into long claws, which were then coated in blue flames. "Fire Release: Flaming Cat Claw!"

Yugito delivered several swipes at the Ten Tails miniclones trapped by the coral, slicing them to bits while simultaneously setting them on fire.

"Good job, Yugito-san. Those won't get back again," Yagura praised his fellow jinchuriki.

"True. Too bad there are still many of them ready to take their place," Yugito mentioned, as she looked at the incoming horde of miniclones. "Fortunately, even on this body, I still have more than enough energy to bring up some heat!"

"Heat you say?" Roshi asked, as he turned towards his fellow jinchuriki and Iwa ninja. "Hey Han, let's show these kids some real

heat! What do you say?"

Han smirked under his mask. "Do you really need to ask?" Han replied, as he shot forward towards a group of incoming Ten Tails Spawns, steam pouring from every exhaust of his mechanized armor. "Boil Release: Eruption Tornado Kick!"

Han jumped forward as he delivered a steam-propelled roundhouse kick. Thanks to the steam propulsion, he managed to quickly spin while mid air multiple times, almost turning himself into a living tornado of boiling vapor, delivering a series of kicks towards his hapless opponents. Between the force of the attack and the power of the corrosive mist, the Ten Tails miniclones were quickly killed.

Unfortunately for Han, several miniclones noticed that he was wide open while spinning, generated several sharp spears from their bodies, not unlike those the Ten Tails had used on them before, and tossed them at the Iwa jinchuriki. Fortunately for Han, however, Roshi was near him, ready to cover his back at any time.

"Watch out, Han!" Roshi said, as he started making hand seals. "Lava Release: Molten Petal Rock!"

Roshi slammed his hands into the ground, creating a row of pillars made of molten rock, which not only blocked the coming spears - they were sharp enough and carried enough force to pierce through the molten rock, but they definitely didn't resist the intense heat and burned to ashes- but also struck the Ten Tails Spawns, setting them on fire while sending them flying.

"Nice save, Roshi. Guess I got a little carried away there," Han replied.

"It's okay. It's not easy not falling prey to that, given how real these Shadow Clones feel," Roshi said, as he flexed his fingers a few times. "Still, try not to drop your guard again."

"Don't worry. You won't have to save my skin again," Han told his senior jinchuriki.

Meanwhile, near them, Uakata was also taking care of some small Ten Tails Spawns, having trapping them inside bubbles. The beasts furiously pounded with their fists and claws at the bubbles, trying to break them, but to no avail.

"Don't bother, those bubbles are as hard as steel. You won't break them with mere brute force," Uakata said, as he made a hand seal. "Water Release: Explosive Bubbles!"

The bubbles started to glow with a pale blue light, before they detonated in a chain of explosions, dropping the charred corpses of the clones to the ground.

"Alright, next-"

"Sensei!" a voice shouted behind him. A voice that was very familiar.

Uakata turned around, and saw no other than Hotaru running towards him. Unlike that violet kimono and black shorts she used to wear often, she was now dressed as a Kirigakure ninja, forehead protector included. Before he realized, Hotaru had closed the distance, and almost tackled him to the ground with the force of a hug.

"Sensei!" she yelled again, tears coming down her cheeks. "Oh sensei, you're alive! You're really alive! I thought I had lost you! But how-"

Even if it pained him deeply, Uakata forced his disciple to break the hug. It was better to dash her hopes now than let them grow even stronger.

"I'm sorry, Hotaru, but... I'm not really alive," Uakata confessed. "I know it looks like it, but this is only temporary."

"Uh? I don't understand-"

"It's a bit complicated, and it would take too long to explain, and this isn't the place nor the time," Uakata stated, as he looked at another wave of Ten Tails Spawns coming towards them. "Naruto will be able to tell you everything you need to know. Now, we have to fight these creatures!"

Hotaru was taken a little aback. Why was Uakata saying that he wasn't really alive? She had so many questions, she wanted to tell Uakata so many things... but if her sensei had told him that, she better trust his word.

"I don't understand very much what's going on," Hotaru admitted. "But even if this is only temporary, then I'll take the opportunity to fight at your side one more time, sensei."

Uakata nodded in approval, and smiled, as the two of them met the new wave of enemies head on.

...

Meanwhile, away from the thick of the battle, Obito landed on the ground. Turning around, he saw Kakashi landing in front of him. Obito dropped his head, and sighed.

"Why I am not surprised to see you coming after me, Kakashi," Obito said. "And don't try to use countering Kamui as a excuse. I know why you are here."

"If you're thinking I want to convince you to see the error of your ways..." Kakashi said, glaring daggers at Obito. "You're sorely wrong. Perhaps when I learned of your survival, I might have wanted for you to return to your senses and come with us back to our home. But that time... that time is already gone.

"Ninjas who don't follow the rules are trash. But ninjas who abandon their friends are even worse than trash. You taught me that, Obito,

and I took it to heart. And you abandoned your friends when you joined Madara in his mad quest for power."

"Am I worse than trash? Perhaps you're right, Kakashi. No ninja that lives long enough avoids becoming trash," Obito conceded, chuckling as if he found the situation funny. "But tell me, Kakashi, if those who abandon their friends are trash... then what are those who let their friends die?"

"DON'T YOU DARE!" came the reply, but it didn't come from Kakashi's mouth. Turning around, Obito saw Rin landing behind him. Her golden eyes glared at him fiercely. "Don't you dare use my death against Kakashi. Not after you killed Minato-sensei and Kushina-san. Not after so many people died as a result of your plan. Don't. You. Fucking. Dare."

"All I ever did, Rin, I did it for you. I just wanted to create a world where neither you nor anybody else had to die pointlessly in absurd wars," Obito said, trying to justify himself. "Madara and I will put an end to this falling system, and put a new, better one in its place!"

"If in order to create that new world so many people have to die, then that world doesn't deserve to exist. I don't want it to exist," Rin replied.

"Great changes are impossible without equally great sacrifices," Obito rebutted.

"And who decides who get sacrificed? You? Madara?" Kakashi angrily intervened. "No, Obito. This ends here. I'll make sure of it."

"Fine by me, then. I'm done trying to justify myself to you," Obito replied. "Come at me with everything you have, then!"

With that, Kakashi and Rin rushed towards Obito from different directions, ready to fight, and possibly kill, the man who was once their cherished comrade and teammate.

Author's Note: And thus begins the first half of the fight against the Ten Tails. I tried to make it different from the manga/anime. It was kind of tricky given the sheep scale of the opponent, but in the end I think I came up with something good, so I hope you guys think I did a good job.

And here's another reason as for why I didn't have Bunpuku share his chakra with Naruto: so I could have Gaara as my part of the "All Nine Jinchuriki fighting together as a single unit" scene. Because Gaara might not be a jinchuriki anymore, but Naruto will always consider him one his people. Plus, now that I think about it, I didn't even write a scene in the story so far where Naruto and Gaara fight together, did I?

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Omnious warning: things will get worse before they get better.

So, the final battle against the Ten Tails and the evil Uchihas finally begins! What are your thoughts on it? Share your opinion with a review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Taste of Despair

Author's Note: Hey, look at that, an update much earlier than you expected! Yeah, I decided that, since we're close to the end, I might as well don't make you wait anymore and release the last batch of chapters over the course of this week and the next one.

Also, after many years postponing it, I finally went to chapter 1 and edited the part of Minato and Kushina's bodies disappearing. I made that as a part of a subplot to bring them back to life, but I ended up canceling it because it was way too much trouble. I also added a couple disclaimers to warn people which somehow expect this story to be an OP Naruto with 400 bloodline limits and a harem.

Remember when I said that things would get worse before they would get better? Yeah, this is the part where they get worse. Enjoy:

Chapter 129:

The Taste of Despair

or

Newcomers at the Eleventh Hour

Site of the Final Battle

Kakashi and Rin rushed towards Obito from different directions. Once they closed the distance towards their foe, the two of them opened the fight with a punch. Obito extended both his arms and caught their fists on his hands. Obito didn't bother to use Kamui to become intangible. Past battles made clear it was useless against Kakashi. Knowing his former rival, Kakashi probably had a clone in

the Kamui dimension ready to strike Obito whenever he sent a part of his body there.

He was only half right, though. Aside from a Lightning Clone, there were several Rin Wood Clones as well, all waiting for him to become complacent and rely on his Mangekyo Sharingan once the fight became too difficult. But Obito Uchiha wasn't a one trick pony. Madara wouldn't allow him to become one. Especially not now that he had such a vast array of powerful abilities at his disposal.

Kakashi and Rin then pulled out a kunai each with their free hand, and attempted to slash at the Uchiha. Obito, however, was already prepared.

"Asurato."

Another pair of arms grew under Obito's original arms, and used them to catch their other arms. Then, a third pair of arms grew under those, and morphed into a pair of chakra cannons. The tip of their barrels started to glow as they gathered chakra, ready to blast Kakashi and Rin at point blank. However, before he could do it, the two Konoha ninjas delivered a powerful double kick to Obito's chest, pushing him backwards and forcing him to release them, while his chakra beams fired in random directions.

Obito retracted the extra arms back into his body, and regained his balance with a couple backflips. Before his enemies had any chance to counterattack, he cast his arms towards them.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Kakashi and Rin were blown backwards by an irresistible gravitational push, sending them rolling on the ground. Meanwhile, Obito's hands flew through hand seals.

"I know Rin will survive this, but I'm not sure about you, Kakashi!
Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

Multiple thick but extremely sharp roots emerged from underground, and lunged towards Kakashi and Rin, ready to impale them. Upon noticing this, Kakashi forced himself to regain balance. The sound of a hundred birds chirping filled the air as one of his hands was covered in electricity. Whenever any vine came close, Kakashi quickly sliced it off with a precise swing.

"Rin, behind me!" Kakashi ordered.

Rin nodded, and hid behind her larger teammate's body. Of course, she wasn't planning to spend the entire fight hidden behind the silver haired man. Taking advantage of her temporary cover, Rin made several hand seals for a counterattack.

"Wood Release: Wood Dragon Jutsu!"

The earth started to rumble, as a serpentine green dragon made of wood burst from underground behind Rin. The medic nin jumped onto the vegetal beast's head, and rode it as it plowed through the field of sharp roots summoned by Obito. The dragon was eventually torn to shreds, but it already filled its purpose of letting Rin close to Obito once again. She jumped into the air, while making a hand seal.

"Wood Release: Wood Clone Jutsu!"

Three wooden clones grew out of her body, and shot towards Obito, two of them delivering a flying kick, and the third one with a kunai in hand. The Uchiha, guessing that Rin was baiting him into using the Deva Path on the clones, opted to jump backwards and avoid the clones as they landed, and engaged them in close combat. Obito generated a black chakra rod on each hand and used them to parry the clones' blows and to attack them. The Wooden Clones were much weaker than the real deal, their strikes predictable and slow, and they easily fell once he impaled them with his improvised weapons.

The real Rin, on the other hand, was a completely different story. Thanks to Sage Mode, her punches and kicks hit like a truck, and

moved so fast even his Sharingan was having trouble keeping up with her. When he tried to stab her with one of his black rods, Rin caught it with her bare hand and shattered it as if it was made of thin glass, before delivering a brutal kick to the chest that sent him flying backwards.

And that moment, Kakashi decided to make his reappearance, bursting from underground, one of his hands still coated in lightning. Kakashi was already aiming his electric hand thrust to pierce a vital organ, and Obito knew he wouldn't survive such stab.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Once again, Obito was forced to rely on the Rinnegan's most powerful ability. But rather than using it against Kakashi -which would leave him wide open against Rin- he used it against the ground, shattering the earth and propelling himself upwards, avoiding Kakashi's lightning stab at the very last possible second. The Uchiha then arched above Kakashi and landed behind him, putting the silver haired Jonin between himself and Rin, who was no doubt already moving to strike him down.

But not if Obito attacked first. As fast as he could, he made the hand seals of the Uchiha's signature jutsu.

"Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Obito breathed a massive fireball towards Kakashi, whose back was still facing the Uchiha. Kakashi, however, was fast enough to move aside and dodge the fireball, as it continued traveling towards Rin, leaving a trail of scorched earth as it moved.

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

Of course, Rin wasn't going to just stand there and take the attack. The brown haired Sage expelled a torrent of water from her mouth, which given the elemental advantage as well as its superior power, it quickly snuffed Obito's fireball the moment the two elemental attacks

clashed against each other, while the water continued forward with the force of a tsunami. With no way to counter it and his Kamui unavailable, Obito only saw one way to dodge the attack.

"Earth Release. Headhunter jutsu!"

Obito sank into the earth as if it was water, letting Rin's attack harmlessly wash over the spot he was a second ago.

Rin smirked. "Not bad, Obito. You developed a knack for quick thinking you didn't have when you were a child," she praised, as she and Kakashi looked around, wondering where would Obito strike from. Then, she started running towards Kakashi, and jumped into the air.

That moment, Obito burst from underground, just behind Kakashi's back, ready to skewer the copy ninja with one of his black chakra rods. But the moment he reappeared, he found himself at the receiving end of a powerful dropkick, courtesy of Rin. Obito grunted in pain as he was sent to the ground, rolling backwards.

"You forget that I can sense you. You won't take us by surprise," Rin stated.

Kakashi turned around, and taking advantage of his former teammate being wide open, decided to end the battle there and there, and rushed towards him, ready to stab him with his electricity-wrathed hand. That moment, Rin's eyes widened in shock.

"Kakashi, wait!" she shouted, extending a hand towards him.

"What-"

Too late. One second, Kakashi was moments away from putting Obito out of his misery, and the next one he found himself trapped between the jaws of what appeared to be a massive venus flytrap plant. Upon closer inspection, the copy ninja realized it was Zetsu,

who had emerged from underground just in the nick of time to save his master.

Pushing the pain away, Kakashi forced the jaws of the flytrap open and jumped away from the strange Akatsuki.

"Good timing, Zetsu," Obito said, as he got back on his feet, and used the sleeve of his cloak to wipe out the blood trickling from his busted lip, which slowly regenerated.

"Figured you'd need a hand," the black half replied, as he looked at Kakashi and Rin.

"Rin," Kakashi said, his sharingan glaring at the newcomer. "Do you know about that other Akatsuki? Because he looks very different from the rank-and-file Zetsu we fought during the war."

"I saw him a few times shortly after my rebirth, but I'm afraid I know nothing about him," Rin admitted. "I'd expect him to have similar abilities to the clones."

"Please! Don't compare me with those mooks! I'm on a completely different level!" the white half protested, as he started to make hand seals. "Wood Release: Jaws of the Forest!"

The earth started to shake once again as large venus flytraps emerged from underground, big enough to eat an adult human in a single bite, and lunged towards the two Konoha ninjas, their large maws snapping constantly. Kakashi and Rin jumped away in order to avoid being bitten in half by the undoubtedly dangerous plants.

"Okay, that's something none of the Zetsu clones was able to do," Rin was forced to admit, as she threw a kunai with an explosive tag at one of the carnivorous plants coming towards her, blowing it up into multiple green chunks.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Kakashi breathed a stream of fire towards the incoming venus flytraps, burning them to ashes before they could get any close to him or Rin, spreading flames across the battleground. However, the flames were the cover Obito needed to get close to the copy ninja. He lunged towards his former teammate, ready to sink one of his black chakra rods into the silver haired man's flesh. Kakashi moved to dodge, but for some reason, his body fell prey to a sudden feeling of paralysis.

"What?" Kakashi asked in shock.

Obito smirked cruelly as he sank his weapon into Kakashi's body. Even if he aimed for his heart, the Konoha Jonin was able to move a little and was stabbed in the shoulder instead. Kakashi grunted in pain.

"You can thank Zetsu for his Spore Jutsu! Good luck trying to move again!" Obito said.

" *Spore? When did he...?*" Kakashi tried to recall when did the plant Akatsuki had doused him with spores, and remembered when he was trapped between the jaws of the giant flytrap. *"It was then! But how-"*

Kakashi's thoughts were interrupted when Obito delivered a brutal kick to the lower jaw of the copy ninja. Kakashi's head was snapped backwards as his body was flung back, bouncing a few times.

"Kakashi!" Rin screamed. She jumped in front of her fallen teammate, shielding him from the two Akatsuki, as her hands weaved through hand seals as fast as she could. "Wood Release: Wood Clone Jutsu! Earth Release: Earth Dome Jutsu!"

Several clones made of wood grew and jumped out of the original's body, placing themselves between the original and the two Akatsuki, while multiple chunks of rock and earth gathered around Rin and Kakashi, forming a defensive shelter.

"Alright, that should buy us at least half a minute," Rin frantically said, as she turned towards Kakashi, who was lying down on the ground. "Kakashi, are you okay? Can you hear me?"

"Y-Yeah..." he weakly replied. He grunted in pain again as his body twisted. "Ugh! I think those spores are doing something more than just paralyzing my body!"

"I'm working on it!" Rin replied, as she placed both hands on Kakashi's body. A green aura surrounded her hands as she started to treat his teammate. Thanks to her Sage Mode, she could sense Zetsu's chakra inside Kakashi's body. Apparently, the spores were draining his chakra and spreading microscopic roots through his body, destroying his cells. If untreated, it could kill him in less than an hour. Fortunately, the brown haired medic knew what to do. "Alright, I'm healing your wounds while expunging foreign chakra from your body. This won't take long..."

As Rin worked, Kakashi could feel how mobility slowly returned to his limbs, as the constant pain started to slowly fade away.

The dome shook as it was hit by an unknown ninjutsu attack. Cracks started to spread around it, but it resisted. Rin diverted some of her chakra to the dome, in order to repair the cracks. Still, their makeshift shelter wouldn't last much longer.

"Rin, stop. You can't heal me and fight those two at the same time," Kakashi replied.

"Is that a challenge?" Rin asked.

Another ninjutsu attack that made the dome shake. More cracks appeared. This time, however, Rin didn't bother to fix them.

"Bravado doesn't suit you," Kakashi rebutted.

"Okay. How about a rational explanation then? If I don't force those spores out of your body, they'll drain your chakra, use it to multiply,

and eat your body from the inside out," Rin explained. Despite Kakashi keeping his usual poker face, Rin could sense how his chakra wavered when she told him what she was stopping from happening. Then, her hands stopped glowing. "Plus I'm done already. Try not to get too close to that thing."

"Duly noted," Kakashi said, as he sat up, just as their shelter was blown away by another ninjutsu attack. A fire one, given the orange flash of light the two of them saw.

Fortunately, they were able to jump in order to avoid the next attack, another mass of vines that came after them.

"What the...?" the white half of Zetsu asked in shock. "That guy shouldn't be able to move!"

"Don't underestimate Rin. She's one of the best medics Konoha had the luck to have," Obito rebutted. "That's why I wanted to keep them separated. Though I doubt they're going to let us."

And thus the two Akatsuki resumed their duel against the two Konoha ninjas.

...

Meanwhile, on the main battleground, the thick of the Allied Ninja army continued their fight against the hordes of Ten Tails miniclones. Despite their power and seemingly unending numbers, the ninjas of the Alliance were able to slowly but surely push the army of abominations back and get a little closer to the immobilized Ten Tails.

Two ninjas on the vanguard were Kiba and Tamaki, both in their animlaistic forms, figthing tooth and nail, literally in this case, against the wave of incoming monsters.

While Kiba engaged the larger monsters in one on one duels, using a combination of strength, speed and the sharp claws he had in his

new form to quickly tear them apart. Meanwhile, Tamaki engaged on several of them at once, confusing them with her blinding speed before swiftly striking them down.

Tamaki had just defeated a group of enemies, and saw that Kiba was still struggling with his. She was about to shoot him some mocking comment about not keeping up with her, when she noticed more of the smaller Ten Tails Spawns creeping up to him. With no time to waste, the cat kunoichi weaved seals as fast as she could.

"Fire Release: Multiple Blistering Firecat!"

Tamaki exhaled multiple fireballs in Kiba's direction. The fireballs took the shape of cats upon touching the ground, and the elemental felines quickly rushed forward, and slammed themselves against the Ten Tails miniclones that were going to ambush the wolf-man, exploding upon contact, engulfing the creatures in blazes of fire.

Both Kiba and the Ten Tails miniclone he was struggling with noticed what was going on and were briefly distracted. Kiba, however, was able to take advantage of his foe's distraction. He lifted the monster above him, and kicked it into the air, then jumped after it, and delivered a roundhouse kick that sent the Ten Tails Spawn crashing down against a group of its brethren that were getting closer.

"Good one, Kiba. That was quite the powerful move," Tamaki complimented.

"Thanks. For keeping my back, I mean," Kiba replied.

"Anytime," Tamaki said, smiling at him. "I mean, we're teammates and friends, right? That's what we do."

"I guess you're right," Kiba awkwardly replied. He then cleared his throat and swallowed, as if preparing to say something important and difficult. "Say Tamaki, with the war going on, and so many of our friends losing their loved ones, I've been doing some thinking, and there's something I'd like to get out of my chest..."

"You do?" Tamaki asked, flushing a little. "I mean... can it wait?"
Tamaki said, pointing behind Kiba. "We defeated quite a few of these critters, but more keep coming."

"I guess it can wait," Kiba said, as he turned around, ready to face the new wave of foes. "Just let's continue having each other's back so the two of us can make out of this mess alive."

Tamaki nodded. "You got it."

As Kiba and Tamaki continued their fight, the third member of their group was heading to meet his significant other, who was also in the heat of the battle, fighting Ten Tails miniclones left and right. Not that they were much of a challenge to her.

"HAAAA!" Fu cried, as she cut a Ten Tails Spawn down by delivering an upside down slash with a mantis-like blade that she grew from one of her arms. She sensed other two coming from the sides, but the jinchuriki jumped and delivered a roundhouse kick, sending the monster flying backwards, while forming a small tornado around her. "That's the best you can do, freaks?"

"Fu!" a voice called.

The jinchuriki the Seven Tails turned around, and much to her joy, she saw her boyfriend running towards her. Or running while he fought against the Ten Tails miniclones that swarmed the area. Fu deployed her wings, and barreled towards the miniclone that was fighting Shino, delivering a powerful punch, sending it flying into the sky.

"Shino!" Fu squealed. "I'm so happy to see you! Boy, I have soooooooooo many things to tell you!"

"I'm sure you do. The story behind how you acquired that armor promises to be entertaining," Shino replied.

"Oh, it is! It's an armor made of Chomei's chakra! Chomei is the name of the Seven Tails, by the way! Did you know that Tailed Beasts have names? Because they do! When you think about it, it makes sense that they have names, because why wouldn't they? Calling themselves by-

Fu was interrupted when Shino tossed a pair of kunai with explosive tags attached to them towards her. The kunai, however, flew past her head and embedded themselves into a coming Ten Tails miniclone. The Taki kunoichi instinctively braced for the explosion just before Shino detonated the notes, blowing the monster into multiple chunks of charred flesh.

"I would love to hear the tales about the events you experienced after leaving Konoha, but unfortunately, this isn't the time nor the place for such a thing," Shino replied in his usual unshakeable calm demeanor, though a little impatience could be sensed in his tone.

Fu was a little disappointed, but as much as she liked to catch up with her boyfriend, she couldn't help but agree with his logic.

"Okaaaaaaaaay," she admitted. "But we do get to fight together!"

Shino cracked a small smile. "Of course. That way, you can show me the new abilities you have developed during your training on that secret island. That armor appears to be nothing but the tip of the iceberg," Shino said, noting the organic blade protruding from Fu's forearm.

Fu smiled widely, and nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, you have no idea! Watch closely, because you're in for a treat!"

Fu's other arm then turned into a gigantic scorpion pincer, while two additional insect-like arms ending in sharp claws grew from her shoulders, just as more Ten Tails miniclones arrived.

Not far from there, another jinchuriki had reunited with one of his loved ones, and like Fu and Shino, the two of them were fighting

together. Mostly because the two of them were known as one of the greatest tag teams of all the Ninja Villages.

As three Ten Tails Spawns surrounded Killer B, the jinchuriki quickly moved away between his foes, who were unable to land a single hit. They were bigger and hit hard, but their size also made them much slower than the agile Kumo ninja. And most importantly, their attacks left them wide open for counterattack. Just as one of the miniclones tried to smash Killer B with a double axe handle.

"These things are strong, and can cause a lot of pain," Killer B rapped, as he jumped onto the shoulders of the miniclone that tried to crush him, hitting the ground instead. The moment he touched the monster's shoulders, he sank his electricity-imbued swords into the creature's head, killing it instantly. Killer B jumped away as the creature fell on its back. "Fortunately for us, they lack a brain!"

"Do not get too cocky, B!" the Raikage, who was grappling with a Ten Tails Spawn twice his size, chastised his brother. He then lifted the monster, and delivered a lightning-enhanced suplex so powerful, it opened a crater upon impact, releasing lightning bolts in many directions. "Don't you dare underestimate the enemy! These creatures might not be much of a match for us individually, but there are too many of them!"

"Relax bro, I am no clown! I'm not going to let my guard down," Killer B replied, as he cut down another miniclone, who tried to slash him with its blade-like appendages. "Recently I've been fighting a lot, so I'm trusty! But you, on the other hand, may be a little rusty!"

"Rusty? Ha!" the Raikage laughed. "I may be cooped in that forsaken office more than I would have liked, but I still find time to stay in shape! Now watch this!"

The Raikage crossed his arms in front of his face, before thrusting them to the sides. Letting out a yell, his Lightning Chakra Armor flared with power as electricity crackled around his body. Then, the Raikage rushed towards a nearby Ten Tails miniclone, leaving a trail

of lightning behind, smashing his elbow against it, killing instantly. Without even stopping, he then barreled towards another Ten Tails Spawn, this time choosing to end its life with a hand chop. He repeated the process multiple times, chaining multiple one hit kills, leaving a trail of corpses behind. All of this, in less than ten seconds.

"Does this look rusty to you!?" the Raikage roared.

Killer B merely chuckled, and shook his head.

"Ah brother, always so easy to provoke, all you need is a little poke!" Killer B rapped, laughing a little.

The Raikage and Killer B weren't the only fighting duo that had been reunited after an absence. In fact, theirs was almost nonexistent compared to two people who were now fighting together for the first time in years. The air around them started to get cold as the younger of the two started to make hand seals while gathering chakra for an attack.

"Ice Release: Certain Kill Ice Spears!"

From the cold air, multiple ice spears appeared above Haku, and with a hand flicker, he directed the cold weapons towards a group of Ten Tails Spawns. Before the monsters could realize, the spears had impaled them and pinned them to the ground. In the following seconds, frost spread around them until they were completely frozen.

A few meters from Haku, Zabuza was cutting down Ten Tails miniclones with his Executioner's Blade. He only needed a single swing with one hand to slice the monsters into two halves, then move onto the next target.

"Not bad, Haku," Zabuza said, his eyes focused on his current opponent, a particularly large miniclone covered in spikes. "Though I expected that after all this time, you have developed something new."

More monsters were rushing towards them. Haku slammed his hands into the ground, covering it in a sheet of ice, causing the miniclones to slip and fall on their backs or on their bellies. Then, multiple spikes grew from the sheet of ice, impaling the fallen monsters.

"Weren't you who tell me to stick to what worked, Zabuza-sama?" Haku asked his former master.

"Perhaps I did," Zabuza said, kicking the spiked miniclone backwards, before making several hand seals. "But it's always good to always have something new in reserve, in case the usual stops working. Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Zabuza expelled a truly massive amount of water from his mouth. The water started to spin into a vortex, and from said vortex a serpentine dragon made of water emerged. The wayter dragon lunged towards the spiked Ten Tails Spawn, caught it between its jaws, and tore into the air. After spiraling a few times into the air, it then crashed into another group of incoming monsters, exploding into a massive torrent of water that pushed the beasts into many directions.

"Truly outstanding, Zabuza-sama. I've never seen such a huge Water Dragon from you before," Haku praised him.

"Hmpf. Even without Sage Mode, I may not be on Mei's level, but that doesn't mean I don't have to keep working to make sure the gap between us doesn't get any bigger. I do have a reputation to keep," Zabuza sneered.

"I did hear of your victory over the Akatsuki's Kisame, Zabuza-sama. I wish I was there to see it. From what I was told, it was an impressive battle. Ice Release: Ice Barrier!"

Haku slammed his hands into the ground once more, this time erecting a wall of ice in front of him, half as tall as Konoha's walls,

just in time to block several wooden sharp spears several of the Ten Tails Spawns had chucked at him.

"Impressive doesn't even begin to describe it. That blue son of a bitch and his living sword had more tricks under their proverbial sleeves than I imagined. It was Mei who did most of the work, but I like to think I contributed to that bastard's downfall," Zabuza replied. "Water Release: Tsunami Sword!"

Water started to gather around Zabuza's Executioner's Blade, forming a massive, watery cover. Zabuza then swung his sword towards an incoming group of miniclones, releasing a crescent shaped blast of pressurized water. The water blade flew forward too fast for any of them to dodge, and cut them to pieces before they could even had the chance to react.

As they finished off their current opponents, master and apprentice noticed the earth trembling under their feet, as the sound of booming footsteps drew closer. Turning towards the source of the footsteps, they saw a giant Ten Tails Spawn, probably more than ten meters tall and with an impressive bulk, lumbering towards them. Aside from its size, something that set it apart from the other miniclones was the number of mouths that covered its body.

"Now that's a big one," Zabuza commented, letting out a whistle. "Cutting that thing down is going to be a challenge."

"Perhaps we don't need to cut it up," Haku said, as he started to make hand seals.

"What are you thinking, Haku?" Zabuza asked.

The boy finished his sealing sequence, and smirked towards his former master. "This is a great chance to show you a little something I've been working on. After all, didn't you want to see something new from me?"

"Cheeky brat," Zabuza said, smirking back.

"Let's see how well do you like this, Zabuza-sama," Haku said, as he prepared to release the jutsu towards the incoming monster. "Ice Release: Wrath of the Yuki-Onna!"

Once he finished the seals, Haku clapped his hands together, before thrusting them forward. From his hands, a powerful blizzard blew with the force of a gale, the cold being so intense it froze the air's moisture into chunks of ice, while also freezing the ground. The blast of frigid wind hit the giant monster square, and as frost started to cover his body, his movements began to slow to a crawl, until there was so much frost, he couldn't move anymore.

Zabuza then leaped into the frozen giant and slammed his sword against it. The force of the impact shattered the giant into a dozen frozen chunks.

"Not bad, definitely not bad," Zabuza complimented, upon touching the ground again. "Do you think you could do that again twenty more times?"

Haku was going to ask what did he meant by that, when he was alerted by an even bigger rumbling. Looking in the direction of the Ten Tails, he saw that the monster he just take down was just a vanguard, and many more just as big, were stomping their way towards them.

"I'm afraid not. I don't believe my ninjutsu can affect so many enemies of such size," Haku admitted.

"Yeah. These enemies are a bit outside our pay grade," Zabuza said. "Fortunately, some of your friends might be able to match them blow by blow."

As soon as Zabuza said that, Haku saw two gigantic chakra constructs come to life, both of them taking the shape of a four armed woman. One of them was soft lavender in color, while the other was a bright magenta. The two of them quickly stomped forward in order to meet the horde of giant beasts.

"Are those..." Haku narrowed his eyes to see the figures floating inside the chakra giantesses' head better. He was taken aback when he realized who they were. "... Hinata and Hanabi? When did they learn to do that?"

"Hinata? Isn't that one of your teammates?" Zabuza asked. "Didn't you know she could do that?"

"She certainly couldn't the last time we fought together," Haku said. "Then again, I knew her Tensiegan wasn't fully developed. Heh, the two of us will have a lot of catching up to do once this war is over..."

...

"I believe that talk between you and I once the war is over is going to be a little longer than I had anticipated," Shino mentioned, looking up.

" **Because how cool and awesome I am?**" Fu replied, smiling widely. Or she would be smiling if she wasn't transformed into a giant seven tailed beetle that had no human mouth.

Because Hinata and Hanabi weren't the only ones who had ushered giant forms in order to face the new threat. Fu teased Shino by asking "do you want to see something amazing?" and before he could answer, the Taki kunoichi grew into her Tailed Beast form. Naruto and Killer B mimicked her, their Tailed Beasts already recovered enough energy to allow such transformation.

"Guys!" Hanabi called, sounding agitated. "The Ten Tails is breaking free of the vines!"

"What!?" Naruto shouted.

Hinata directed her expanded eyesight towards the trapped Ten Tails, and indeed, many of the Ten Tails Spawns were working tirelessly to destroy the thick vines and roots that kept it immobilized and pinned to the ground.

"She's right!" Hinata confirmed. "If we don't do something, the Ten Tails will be free again in no time!"

"We can't afford to let that happen. I guess we'll have to take a more aggressive approach and head to the Ten Tails as soon as possible," Naruto stated. "We'll cut a path through them! Fu, can you provide us some aerial cover?"

" **You got it!**" Fu replied, as she took into the sky. As she ascended, many of the Ten Tails Spanws noticed her, and started to throw sharp wooden spears at her from the ground. She started to quickly move around in order to dodge the storm of wooden stakes aimed at her. Despite her current size, she was able to maneuver around the flying spikes easily, while gathering a sphere chakra in front of her mouth. **"Tailed Beast Wave!"**

The ball of chakra exploded in the form of a beam of destructive energy, directed towards the mass of miniclones in front of her in a straight line. After a couple seconds of delay, it was followed by a chain of explosions that carved a path across the conglomeration of monsters.

"Alright, let's go!" Naruto said, as his Kurama avatar stomped forward, followed by Hinata and Hanabi's Avatars of Kalika, and lastly B in his Gyuki form. "Hinata, Hanbi, cover my flanks! B, cover our backs!"

"Understood, Naruto-kun! You can count on us!" Hinata replied.

" **You can trust Number Eight and I to cover the rear! None of this monsters will get even close, that's much as clear!**" Killer B rapped.

And thus began the charge through the path Fu had carved from above. Naruto tried not to use the Tailed Beast Ball much, since he wanted to conserve energy. Fortunately, the physical power of his Tailed Beast form proved to be enough to deal with his similar sized attackers. When a giant miniclone came to him from the front, Naruto

punched it in the face with as much strength as he could, and the abomination was sent flying backwards, landing on his back and sliding on it.

When more than one monster tried to attack him from the same side, Naruto wrapped some of his tails around their necks, and first slammed their heads against each other, before tossing them away in opposite directions. And when they tried to overwhelm him with numbers, Naruto simply charged a Tailed Beast Ball to blow many of them at once.

" These guys are big and scary, but despite their size they aren't a match for us!" Naruto thought.

" Of course! Powerful as it is, the Ten Tails can't mass produce minions with the power to match a Tailed Beast," Kurama agreed. ***"Plus, with its chakra currently bound, the Ten Tails can't expend that much energy on these things. Still, don't underestimate them."***

"I wasn't planning to," Naruto replied out loud, as he slashed an incoming giant Spawn.

While Naruto worked to open a path in a straight line, the Hyuga sisters, each of them with their respective Avatar of Kalika, protected Naruto's flanks from the same horde of monsters. Their four arms proved to be exceptionally useful for dealing with them, especially those with multiple limbs. Unlike Naruto's Tailed Beast form, though, they lacked any kind of destructive, wide area jutsu that could be used to wipe out large quantities of enemies. So they had to use their own jutsu for when their giant chakra constructs weren't enough.

Which was almost all the time.

"Sage Art: Lightning Release Thunder Blast!"

Hinata's entire body crackled with purple electricity, electricity that she directed towards the enemies in front of her with a thrust of both of her arms in the form of massive pillars of lightning that travelled outwards, leaving a trail of scorched earth behind. The giant Ten Tails Spawns shook in pain as electricity coursed through their bodies, and while they were paralyzed Hinata's Avatar dispatched them with powerful palm strikes.

Given that she was given a brief respite, the Hyuga Clan head allowed herself to check on the others, more specifically, her little sister covering the other flank. Like Hinata, Hanabi was bombarding the Ten Tails Spawns with Elemental Ninjutsu of her own before delivering the finishing blow with her Avatar of Kalika.

"Hanabi-chan, how are you doing?" Hinata asked. "Do you need some help over there?"

"I'm fine!" Hanabi replied. "Though my Truth Seeking Balls don't hurt them as much as they should!"

"The Ten Tails and its spawns are pure nature energy!" it was Naruto who replied. "Truth Seeking Balls did okay against the smaller ones, but I doubt they'd do much against these behemoths!"

"In that case, I'll need to stick to brute force then!" Hanabi said, as her Avatar of Kalika smashed its palm into the face of a giant miniclone leaping at her, followed by a roundhouse kick to another one. Looking at the fallen creatures, she got an idea. "Alright, this should clear some of them out."

Hanabi then grabbed the knocked out monsters, and dashed forward, drawing even more Ten Tails Spawns towards her, just as she expected. Without letting the miniclones she was grabbing go, she made the Avatar spin on its feet.

"Six Paths: Heavenly Spin!"

Hanabi's Avatar of Kalika started to spin around itself. As it picked speed, a small tornado started to form around it. It spread its arms, using the miniclones she had grabbed to extend the range of her jutsu. As the Ten Tails Spawns dumbly charged at her, they were smacked with the bodies of its fallen brethren, knocking them on their back. Hanabi eventually let the ones she was grabbing go, sending them flying against a cluster of Spawns, making them tumble with a loud crash.

" Nice one, girl, such a move! You got quite the groove!" Killer B rapped, as he lifted a giant minicloner over his head, and tossed it against another group of them.

While Hinata also wanted to compliment her little sister, she felt it was no time for such things, especially since they were still so far away from the Ten Tails. The Hyuga Clan Head directed her sight towards the bound monstrosity, and gasped loudly upon seeing what was going on around it.

"Hinata-hime?" Naruto asked.

"Many of the wooden roots and vines bounding it to the ground are about to break!" Hinata warned. It seemed the miniclones were working much harder and faster than they had anticipated. "We need to-"

Hinata was interrupted by a very loud snapping sound, followed by one of the tails of the Ten Tails being released.

"Oh shit!" Hanabi yelled.

" I'll fly ahead and see if I can slow those guys down from releasing their daddy!" Fu said from above as she took off. **"You guys keep pushing forward!"**

With no other options, they decided to follow Fu's suggestions, and continued to fight with as much vigor as they could.

...

Not far away from there, Kakashi and Rin continued their duel against Obito and the original Zetsu. While Rin was engaged with their former teammate, the two duos still unable to beat the other, waiting for that decisive opportunity to reap a swift victory. Though, as they traded blows, there was something that dawned upon Rin's mind. Something she was deadly afraid to ask, but now that thought had invaded her mind, she needed an answer for.

"Wood Release: Great Spear Tree!"

A multitude of sharp roots emerged from the ground, threatening to impale the medic-nin, and forcing her to jump backwards, while making several hand seals.

"Water Release: Water Severing Wave!"

From her mouth, Rin expelled a thin stream of super pressurized water that cleanly cut the growing roots coming at her, and the jutsu still had enough power to reach Obito, who was the one forced into the defensive this time. While his Sharingan marked him the oath he needed to follow in order to avoid the enemy jutsu, he wasn't fast enough, and the water current grazed his cheek. Obito winced as a small cut formed on his face.

"Obito," Rin called before the Uchiha had a chance to counterattack. "I was told of the Nine Tails' attack on Konoha. And how you were the one behind it."

"What about that, Rin? It's ancient history. Why are you bringing up now?" Obito asked. There was a sizzling sound as the cut on his face slowly healed and closed.

"Not even getting into all the lives lost during such a tragedy... how could you do such a horrible thing to Minato-sensei and Kushina-san?" Rin asked, her voice cracking a little. "Didn't their lives mean anything to you at all? You were like a son to them! All of us were!"

This question seem to give Obito some pause, but if he was taken aback, he quickly recovered, as his mouth curved into a sad smirk.

"What lousy father he was, letting two of his children die. It's almost a surprise that Kakashi didn't follow the two of us into the grave, " Obito spat back. "Looking back, I may made Naruto a favor."

"You... you... !" Rin began, losing her composure, as her grief was slowly turning into anger. "How can you say such an horrible thing about Minato-sensei!"

In her anger, Rin pulled out a kunai and dashed forward, closing the gap between her and her opponent in a blink. Obito generated a black rod from one of his palms, and used it to block Rin's diagonal slash. More slashes kept coming, but thanks to his Sharingan and Rin's lack of skill in armed combat, he was able to parry or deflect most of her blows.

"Why do you defend him!? Minato-sensei did nothing but sending us to our deaths! You'd think after my loss, he'll take a better care of you two!" Obito replied, his own anger slowly rising to match Rin's own. This gave him a small boost in strength in order to counterattack and even push Rin back.

Obito's outburst brought Rin back to that conversation he had with Kakashi at the gate of Konoha's general hospital, and how he felt their Jonin-sensei was at least, guilty in part of how the team turned out. If Kakashi had it in him to blame Minato, no wonder Obito's anger towards the Fourth Hokage was so big.

"You know, I never blamed him for my apparent demise when it was just me. I did blame him for yours, thought, at least at first. How can that man pretend to be Hokage, when he can't even keep his own students safe?" Obito angrily snarled. "And that fateful night on Konoha, I was proven right. One man in the right place at the right time was all what was needed to show the world that man's incompetence. He failed to protect his wife, son and village just like he failed to protect you and me!"

"What happened to us wasn't Minato-sensei's fault!" Rin countered. "There was a war! People die in wars! Minato-sensei had other responsibilities! He couldn't just babysit us the whole time!"

"I know. That's why I said that I only blamed him at first. It wasn't his fault that there was a war, no. But it was somebody's fault, right? We ended that way because there was a war, a war neither of us started," Obito asked, leaving Rin a little confused. "That's why I'm doing what I'm doing, Rin. This is the only way to create a world with no wars or conflict. And if Minato-sensei and Kushina-san had to die for such world to exist, then so be it."

"And if I had to die?" Rin retorted. "If I had to die for such world to exist, would you sacrifice me!?"

This question seemed to stump Obito, albeit only for a moment. He averted her eyes, and let out a sad chuckle.

"Perhaps you had to," Obito said, his shoulder sagging, as the memory replayed once again in his mind. He had revisited that moment so often, it only made him a little numb now. "Since it was when I saw you taking Kakashi's Chidori when my eyes were opened to the ugly truth that it's the reality of this world."

While Obito and Rin's exchange happened, Kakashi continued his fight against Zetsu. However, the two of them had been listening to Obito and Rin's conversation. And more importantly, their reaction towards it.

Because thanks to his Sharingan, Kakashi had noticed that, the moment Obito admitted that he needed to see Rin die, the Zetsu's white half's mouth twitched into what appeared to be a smirk. Kakashi's eyes narrowed at the plant being as the gears of his mind started to turn.

"Something wrong, copy ninja?" Zetsu's black half taunted. "Can't stand hearing your teammate's fall from grace?"

"Yes. It was quite the tragic day, one I will never forget, especially now that I know the far reaching consequences such events had on the world at large," Kakashi replied, as he started making hand seals. "Water Release: Water Dragon Jutsu!"

Kakashi expelled a large amount of water from his mouth. The water took the shape of a serpentine dragon, and after letting out a roar, it lunged towards one of the last two remaining Akatsuki. The dual being merely smirked as he made his own hand seals.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The earth started to shake as large underground wooden roots broke into the surface, surrounding the battleground. Zetsu then merged his body with one of the roots, avoiding Kakashi's water jutsu, which crashed harmlessly against the strong roots.

"You can't beat us, copy ninja," the white half said, as Zetsu appeared for a second behind him.

"We are one with nature. Can you beat nature itself?" the black half taunted, as Zetsu appeared for a brief moment from a root to Kakashi's side, making the copy ninja to turn around.

"Not even your Sharingan can predict when will we appear next!" the white half said, as he appeared behind Kakashi, making several hand seals. "Wood Release: Leaf Hurricane!"

Zetsu cast a tornado of large green leaves towards Kakashi, which looked normal at first sight, but Kakashi could see they were as sharp as kunai. Kakashi jumped backwards while making several hand seals as well.

"Fire Release: Great Dragon Fire!"

Kakashi exhaled a cone of flames that engulfed the leaves of the tornado, burning them to a crisp. However, when the fire disappeared, Zetsu had disappeared once again.

"You know, the more I think about that day..." Kakashi began, hoping to lure his opponent out. "I can't help but think the extraordinary bad luck that led to Obito getting to us just when I accidentally killed Rin. The timing couldn't have been worse."

Zetsu once again appeared behind Kakashi, who summoned a mass of smaller wooden roots to impale him with. Kakashi, however, was already expecting this, and turned around as his hands blurred through hand seals.

"Wind Release: Wind Scythe Jutsu!"

Upon finishing the sealing sequence, Kakashi spread his arms outwards, releasing several blades of compressed air that shredded through Zetsu's attack. However, before the attack could reach his foe, the plant being already hid within the large wooden vines.

"You know that attacking somebody from behind is the most obvious choice, and thus the one I'll be expecting the most?" Kakashi asked, almost in a mocking manner.

That moment, two pair of gigantic venus flytrap jaws appeared from below him, ready to crunch him between them. Kakashi, however, managed to jump back just in time, before delivering a brutal kick in the face to Zetsu as he emerged from underground, which sent him backwards, skidding against the ground.

"Going for the second most obvious choice isn't that much better," Kakashi boredly said, as he watched the angry Zetsu merging once again with one of the vines. The copy ninja then started to make hand seals at a leisure pace. "By the way, I hope you enjoy this jutsu. It was created by my father. Lightning Release: Forked Lightning!"

Kakashi's hands were coated in electricity, as he threw them to the sides, releasing a storm of lightning bolts. The lightning bolts then began to bounce around the wooden vines, covering the area in

electricity. And naturally, several of those bolts managed to hit Zetsu the moment the plant-like creature emerged once again to attack.

This time, Kakashi didn't give his enemy time to flee. Using the Body Flicker Jutsu, the silver haired Jonin appeared in front of the Akatsuki, and lifted him into the air by his neck.

"I already had my suspicions, but you gave me additional reasons to believe that Rin's death wasn't the unfortunate tragedy I always believed it was," Kakashi said, his eyes narrowing in anger.

"You... you bastard..." the white half choked, as he tried to futilely break from Kakashi's grip.

Suddenly, there was a tremor that shook the entire battleground. Both Kakashi and Zetsu turned towards the source of the disturbance, and saw, to one's horror and the other's delight, that some of the Ten Tails' tails had been liberated from their wooden bindings, and probably more to follow. Zetsu smirked.

"You have lost. You won't be able to bind the Ten Tails a second time. Everybody in this place is living on borrowed time! You won't-" the black half boasted, before he and the white half were silenced as Kakashi trapped them inside a Sharingan genjutsu.

"In that case, let's have a chat at a more private place, shall we?" Kakashi suggested. The form of the Mangekyo Sharingan appeared on his left eye. "Rin! I'm going to take this scumbag to the Kamui dimension! Keep Obito busy!"

Rin, still engaged with Obito, quickly looked at the vanishing Kakashi, and nodded.

"Undrestood!" Rin replied, before facing Obito again.

"What is Kakashi going to do? Does he think he can accomplish anything by separating me from Zetsu?" Obito asked, trying to sound confident, but unable to hide how Kakashi's tactic was unnerving

him. He then looked at the slowly breaking free Ten Tails. "Even if he kills Zetsu, his death won't accomplish anything."

"I don't know. But I trust him. Kakashi isn't somebody to act without reason," Rin replied.

...

Kamui Dimension

As the two newcomers entered the pocket dimension, Kakashi gracefully landed on his feet, while Zetsu landed painfully on his back. He was already regaining mobility, breaking out of the genjutsu already. Not that Kakashi cared that much.

"Alright," Kakashi said, as he forced the plant being back into his feet. He once again focused his Sharingan onto the creature's eyes, reinforcing the genjutsu. "I have a few questions regarding Obito that you're going to answer. And no, that wasn't a request."

...

Back in the real world, the Allied Ninjas continued their charge against the sea of Ten Tails miniclones of all sizes and shapes, lead by Naruto, Hinata, Hanabi, Killer B and Fu. Unfortunately, they were only halfway done when the Ten Tails managed to break free completely. With the help of its arms, the titanic beast raised to its full height, and let out a deafening roar.

"NO!" Naruto screamed.

" Shit! Too late!" Fu yelled. **"What are we going to do now!?"**

" It isn't obvious? We bind it again! We have to keep going, or else all this will be in vain!" Killer B said.

"We need to find Hagane, Kaida and Rin," Hanabi said, as she started to scan the battleground. She was able to find Rin easily enough, engaged in a match against Obito. Her two teammates,

meanwhile, had returned to the rear of the army. Their chakra appeared to be weak. "Though I don't think they're in good shape enough to pull a jutsu of that size a second time..."

The Ten Tails roared again, making the earth tremble once more, as a powerful wind blew in every direction from its body. Naruto, Hinata, Hanabi and Fu shivered as they felt a massive wave of nature energy washing over the area.

"What... what was that...?" Naruto asked.

" ***This... this isn't good Naruto...***" Kurama replied, sounding worried. "***It plans to do the Cataclysm!***"

"Cataclysm... !?" Naruto repeated. He didn't know what was that, but he could tell it wasn't something good.

...

Meanwhile, not far away from there, the three Uchihas loyal to Konoha continued their fight against the man who was once their Clan Head, all four of them using their Perfect Form Susanoo. While Madara proved to be more than a match for Itachi and Sasuke, Shisui's addition proved to be what they needed to maybe not tip the scale in their favor, but bridge the gap between them to the point that it could be called an even fight. Even if Shisui's presence didn't make victory a certainty, they didn't need to win: all they needed to do was to keep Madara away from the Ten Tails while Naruto and the others dealt with the Ten Tails.

Given the scale of their battle, the Uchihas had pushed their rogue clansmate away from the bulk of the army, so their fight wouldn't cause any collateral deaths.

Their tactic involved the three of them surrounding Madara and attacking them from different angles, limiting the rogue Uchiha's ability to block or parry their attacks. Still, Madara wasn't considered the strongest Uchiha who ever lived for no reason, and he was more

than able to maneuver his Susanoo in order to move in time to block or dodge his enemies' attacks.

"Look at that, it seems that I'm not the only Uchiha who's a master of Senjutsu," Madara said, as his Susanoo parried a blow from Shisui's drill spear with its sword. "The clan might be down to a few members, but it warms my heart to see how talented you are."

That moment, Sasuke fired several Susanoo arrows coated the black flames of Amaterasu, while Itachi shot several matagama-like projectiles at him. Madara, however, sensed the attack coming and was already preparing a counter.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Madara cast a powerful repulsive way in every direction that not only stopped Sasuke and Itachi's attacks, but also managed to push Shisui's Susanoo backwards. Despite tumbling, Shisui managed to regain balance.

"So, you know about the Uchiha insurrection," Shisui said. "And don't you feel anything over the fact that our once mighty clan is now down to single digit numbers? Nor that we helped to its downfall."

Madara merely shrugged. "Why should I? What's important about a clan is the strength of its members, not its numbers. I prefer the Uchiha clan reduced to a single digit numbers like you said, as long as the remaining members are strong and skilled, than have the Uchiha be composed by a thousand weaklings. If the other Uchiha died during that coup, then they were weak and their deaths were deserved."

Itachi's face twisted into a grimace of disgust. "Disgraceful."

"And you're the one who's going to lead us to a world without conflict?" Sasuke asked, incredulous.

"Why of course. Power is the only thing that can shape this world into something better. That's why wars happen, because what are wars but struggles for power? And this war... this war is no different, at least on that regard. But it will be the war to put an end to all wars. With the Ten Tails, my power shall be unmatched. I'll have the power to shape the world as I see fit," Madara explained. "And with that power, I shall create a perfect world. A paradise for all to live. I shall fulfill the role the Sage of the Six Paths should have filled one thousand years ago!"

However, before any of the Allied Uchihas could offer a retort, Shisui felt a wave of nature energy washing over the battlefield as it flew into the Ten Tails. Given Madara's expression, he was already expecting it.

"Oh it's already happening," Madara casually said, as he looked in the direction of the Ten Tails. "It's been quite the fun spar, but unfortunately, as much fun as I'm having with you three, I'm afraid I must stop the battle here. Duty awaits. Besides, you might want to find a place to hide from what's going to come next."

And with that, Madara dispelled his Susanoo, and fell to the ground. The moment his feet touched the solid floor, he ran away from the other three Uchihas.

"Don't let him escape!" Sasuke said, as his Susanoo stomped forward.

Unfortunately, it was unable to take another step.

...

As the Ten Tails gathered nature energy, a white aura started to glow around the colossal monster's body, shining brighter by the second. Then, for a fraction of a second, the air shimmered as silence reigned absolute. And following that, the Ten Tails released all the nature energy that it had been stored in the form of a single, uncontrolled burst.

The effect was immediate. First, a massive hurricane formed from the Ten Tails, blowing everybody near it away, either be friend or foe. Not even the jinchuriki in their Tailed Beast forms nor the Hyuga sisters' Avatars of Kalika were unable to resist such a powerful gale of wind, and were blown away as if they were as light as little birds.

That hurricane, however, was only the first, as many more formed around the battlefield. Lightning bolts rained from the dark clouds above without pause, while hail the size of a fist pelted the ground with fury. The very earth was teared apart by a powerful quake, sending large chunks of rock everywhere, as plumes of lava erupted everywhere, creating red rivers of fire.

Even if the cataclysm lasted less than two minutes, it felt like hours for the hapless ninjas -and the Ten Teails miniclones, who weren't spared from their "father's" wrath, but they weren't smart or even aware enough to understand what was going on- who tried their best to survive the localized natural disaster that fell upon them. Many of them used their abilities to protect both themselves and those close enough to them, while others weren't so lucky and perished under the wrath of nature.

When the cataclysm ended, the battleground had changed completely. There were small mountains and depressions where it was completely flat before. Rivers of lava crossed the ground. There were many rocks of all sizes scattered around.

And most importantly, there were thousands of bodies laid across the battlefield. Many of them still alive, others not so lucky.

"Well, that should have cleared out most of the rabble," Madara said, as his Susanoo, which he used a shield against the cataclysm, slowly dispelled. He then watched the Ten Tails, and smirked. "Good. Time to move into the endgame."

...

Naruto groaned as he pushed himself from the ground. His Kurama Avatar had been destroyed in the ensuing cataclysm. The blond could feel something wet and sticky trickling down his temple, but he didn't pay it any attention. There were more important things to take care of. As he slowly got back to his knees, Naruto expanded his chakra sense in order to see how bad things were.

He felt his heart sink he noticed how the amount of chakras in the battlefield had been cut in half. Fortunately, it seemed that most of his friends had made it. Hinata hadn't landed that far away from him. Hanabi appeared to be okay too. Fu and Killer B were also away from him, but not only they appeared to be alright, if a bit beaten down, but unlike Naruto, they had managed to maintain their Tailed Beast forms. He started to feel a little more relieved as he identified the chakras of those who had survived: Kurenai, Haku, Shizune, Karin, Ino, Shikamaru, Choji, Kiba, Shino, Tamaki... hell, even the jinchuriki shadow clones were still there. Guess those hardening seals were more durable than he thought.

"Huh?"

Naruto's thoughts were interrupted when he felt a tremor shaking the earth, followed by another, and another, and another. Pushing himself back to his feet, he realized that the source of his tremors was the Ten Tails, who was dragging its body, making the ground quake whenever one of its arms hit the ground.

"No... no!"

While the Ten Tails moving was bad, it wasn't the worst part. It was where it was headed.

"No!" Naruto shouted, the adrenaline jolt as a result of his fear allowed him to get back to his feet and start running forward, towards the Ten Tails' target. "Fu, get out of there!"

Fu, still in the form of the Seven Tails, stirred, as she tried to get back. Naruto didn't even know if she was aware of the danger she

was, given that the Ten Tails had locked onto her as its next target. However, no matter how much the blond was trying to run, he knew he wasn't going to reach her in time before the Ten Tails did. He tried to activate Kurama Chakra Mode once again. Calling for his tenant's chakra, a golden shroud quickly formed around his body, before it flickered and put out like a candle drawing its last breath.

And reach her it did.

"NO!"

Naruto couldn't help but watch impotently how the Ten Tails' massive hand grabbed Fu, and brought her close to its face. The titanic monster opened its jaws, and began to suction air inside it. Streams of red chakra started to flow from Fu's eyes into the Ten Tails' mouth, thin and small at first, but growing thicker and larger over time. And as the Ten Tails drained Fu of Chomei's chakra, Fu started to shrink back to her human form. Once the Ten Tails finished, it carelessly dropped Fu's lifeless body to the ground, while the monster moved towards somewhere else.

Naruto couldn't sense Fu's chakra anymore. She was dead.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

This time, however, it wasn't Naruto the one who screamed. Naruto didn't recognize the voice, until he saw somebody running towards where Fu was. It was Shino, explaining why the blond didn't associate the normally quiet young man to the heart-wrenching scream of anguish. The Aburame, followed by his teammates, desperately rushed towards their friend's fallen body.

" ***Naruto, the Ten Tails is going to absorb Gyuki now!***" Kurama warned him.

This time, Naruto didn't have to use his chakra sense to locate Killer B, all he needed to do was follow the direction the monster. Naruto could see that, just like Fu before him, Killer B was lying on the

ground, beaten and bruised, probably barely even conscious and thus unable to defend himself. The blond began to run again, his wobbly legs threatening to make him fall. Naruto didn't seem to care why the Ten Tails was targeting the Kumo jinchuriki when he was closer. The only thing in his mind was to save his fellow jinchuriki.

However, the events from less than five minutes ago replayed before his very eyes: Naruto simply wasn't as fast as the colossal abomination. He tried to draw Kurama's power once again. This time, he could feel the Chakra Cloak's power manifesting with greater strength, forming a golden shroud around his body. This was followed by a feeling of strength returning to his legs, which allowed him to run faster.

But once again, it proved to be useless. The Ten Tails grabbed Killer B with one of its enormous hands, and brought it close to its face. It then opened its mouth wide.

"NO! NO! STOP, PLEASE!" Naruto begged, as he tripped on his feet and fell on his face.

But the Ten Tails didn't hear nor care about Naruto's pleas. Once again, red streams of chakra flowed from Killer B's eyes and mouth into the Ten Tails' mouth. As Killer B was drained of his Tailed Beast chakra, he began to slowly shrink into his human form just like Fu only a few minutes before. And once the Ten Tails was done, it carelessly dropped Killer B's body onto the ground.

And just like with Fu, Naruto couldn't sense any chakra coming from his body.

"BROTHER! NO!" another voice yelled, this one Naruto recognized as the Raikage. The blond barely noticed the leader of Kumo, followed by Killer B's students, rushing towards the man's inert body.

There was a rumble as the Ten Tails shifted its body, and locked its giant, red eye onto its final prey: Naruto himself. Or better said, the nine tailed fox sealed inside him.

"Naruto, it's coming for us! You need to move NOW!" Kurama urged. But much to the fox's surprise, and growing horror, Naruto didn't make any attempt to move. **"Naruto, what are you doing!?"**

And much to the fox's shock and bewilderment, not only did Naruto not move, he even fell to his knees.

...

The moment Kakashi's Animal Squad reached Fu, Shino instantly knelt before her and started to heal her body. In her unconscious state, the dying jinchuriki grunted uncomfortably as Shino introduced several of his own beetles into her body in order to analyze how bad was her situation,.

The answer: *very* .

"Her heartbeat is very weak!" Tamaki said, while holding Fu's wrist.

"I know. All the organs are on the verge of failing, and her chakra network is almost empty as well," Shino said, as he continued working. Apparently, he was able to rein in his desperation and keep the stoic and logic driven demeanor his clan was known for. "My beetles are converting my chakra and transferring it to her as well."

"Is that going to work?" Kiba asked, panic and insecurity evident in his tone. "I remember when Naruto told us about his mission with Gaara that only using the Nine Tails' chakra was he able to save him!"

"In that case, we need Naruto here as soon as possible," Shino stated. "I'll try to keep her-"

"WATCH OUT!" Tamaki shouted.

A few of the Ten Tails miniclones, the ones on the small side thankfully enough, suddenly appeared around them, prompting

Tamaki and Kiba to jump to their feet in order to engage them, while Shino continued keeping Fu alive.

...

Not far away from there, another similar situation took place, with Killer B instead of Fu, his own students instead of Kakashi's, plus the addition to the Raikage. Unfortunately, it seemed that the results were very much the same.

"It's no use!" T cried, as she applied the Mystical Palm jutsu on her sensei's body. "No matter what I do, he keeps getting worse!"

"Keep trying! Don't even dare to stop, you hear me!?" Karui yelled. "I don't want to learn that our sensei died because you gave up too soon!"

"Come on sensei, you can't go down like this!" Omoi begged.

"T won't help my brother on her own," the Raikage said, sounding as if he was admitting defeat, even if it was far from the case. "To save B, we need a transfer of Tailed Beast Chakra. And right now, there's only one jinchuriki left."

All of them looked to their left, and a few hundred meters away, they saw Naruto, down on his knees, with the Ten Tails rapidly approaching him.

"What's that idiot doing!? He's going to get himself killed!" Karui screamed in horror.

"Come on, we need to protect that Konoha ninja from the Ten Tails!" the Raikage said as he got on his feet. "Follow me!"

However, before the Raikage could take another step, a giant Ten Tails spawn landed in front of them. Several of the smaller variants were clinging to its body, but dropped to the ground the moment its feet touched the floor.

"You won't get in the way!" the Raikage said, as he charged forward. "I'm going to get Naruto! You two protect your teammate while she keeps B alive!"

...

Naruto continued on his knees, not realizing, or maybe not caring, that his impending doom was dragging itself towards him, its red eye looking at him with hunger. His whole body being felt numb. He could swear he could hear a voice that sounded like Kurama's, but he wasn't really sure. Did it matter anyway?

As the deaths of Fu and Killer B replayed in his mind, he couldn't help but recall his failure at trying to save Utakata and Roshi. He had the feeling that it would be different with Fu and Killer B, but alas, it wasn't the case. It seemed that all the jinchuriki were fated to die to feed Akatsuki and Madara's immense ambitions. And now, all that was standing between them and the rest of the world was Naruto himself.

And Naruto felt too tired to continue fighting. He simply wanted the suffering to end.

The world around him darkened as a gigantic shadow loomed over him. He didn't need to look up to realize it was the Ten Tails. A part of his brain, one that sounded like Kurama, told him to run, but why bother? The monster would chase him to the end of the world if necessary, killing even more people in the way.

So he didn't resist when the Ten Tails lowered one of its hands to grab him...

"Amethyst Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

"Turquoise Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

A massive storm of purple lightning bolts and a huge stream of teal flames came from different directions, crashing at once against the

Ten Tails' only eye, which being so focused on Naruto, it didn't notice the new pair of interlopers. With its only eye damaged, the Ten Tails let out a loud screech of pain as it recoiled.

That moment, Hinata and Hanabi's Avatars of Kalika landed between the colossal beast and Naruto with a loud thud, standing protectively in front of the former.

"Good, we managed to blind it. But I'm afraid it won't last long," Hinata said.

"What the hell's wrong with Naruto!?" Hanabi asked. "Why is he like that, all catatonic?"

"I don't know, but I plan to find out," Hinata said, before her Avatar of Kalika crouched, and with a swift hand motion, scooped Naruto with one hand and placed it inside its head, alongside Hinata. "Naruto-kun! What's going on? Please, answer me?"

"Hi... Hinata...?" the blond weakly replied.

"Yes, it's me, Hinata! What happened!?" Hinata frantically asked.

"I... I failed. I failed them, Hinata," Naruto said, his voice almost a whisper. It appeared as if he wanted to cry, but was unable to.

Hinata remembered how badly Naruto took their failure to save Uakata and Roshii from Akatsuki, especially the later -albeit in that one, Hagane's close call was probably a factor as well- and they were practically strangers to him. Killer B and especially Fu were people Naruto had known for far more than a couple days, and thus his bonds with them were far more meaningful, so their deaths must have affected him even worse.

"Their demise is... something tragic," Hinata had to choose her words carefully, not to make Naruto's situation any worse. "But we can't afford to mourn them now. Not until that beast, and Madara and

Obito, aren't done with. So please Naruto-kun, please stay with me and let's fight together."

"There is no hope. That thing's too powerful and it won't stop at anything until he gets its claws on me," Naruto said in a depressed monotone, refusing to make eye contact with Hinata.

"No, it's not! We can fight, we can win! No matter what kind of obstacles life throws at us, we will always overcome them, even if not at first, and this one is no exception!" Hinata insisted, desperation growing inside her as she watched her boyfriend becoming more and more an empty shell.

"Just... take your sister and the others and leave. That thing only wants me. I don't want you to die pointlessly like-

SLAP!

It took a couple seconds for Naruto to register the pain on his left cheek. He wordlessly brought his hand to Hinata's face still resting on his face, and for the first time, he made eye contact with Hinata. Her Tenseigan eyes flared with a mix of anger and sadness.

"Did you just tell me... to *abandon* you!?" Hinata seethed. "So... are you telling me that if our roles were reversed, you'd had to no trouble leaving me to my fate? Is that what you're saying!?"

"W-What? No! I would never... !" Naruto stammered, but Hinata didn't let him finish.

"No. Because you're Naruto Uzumaki, the boy who wants to be Hokage, who wants to become the best ninja there is while helping others becoming the better version of themselves as well. You would never abandon anybody. And thus, none of us, much less me, are going to abandon you in return!" Hinata shouted.

"Hinata..." Naruto whispered.

"I'm not going to abandon you! And you can't abandon us! You never would!" Hinata said, her voice growing louder. "Because if you abandon now... Fu-san and Killer B... all the people who lost their lives in this war... then they would have died for nothing!"

Those words felt like a cold splash of water against his face, shaking him off of his quasi-catatonic state. Which in turn, allowed him to finally listen to somebody else.

" ***Don't forget about me, you brat!***" Kurama yelled from the seal inside Naruto. Kurama. The blond suddenly remembered that he still was there. "***You weren't going to let that thing turn me into its dinner, were you!?***"

" Kurama..."

" ***Your jinchuriki friends weren't the only ones who died to the machinations of Akatsuki! Your birth parents... they sacrificed their lives to save you from me! And that's how are you going to honor them?***" Kurama asked. "***And what about my siblings? You said you were going to save them! Did you forget about that too?***"

" *I... no, of course not,*" Naruto replied, shaking off the feeling of numbness completely. "*I still plan to.*"

" ***Then do it! Prove me that those weren't just empty words to get on my good side!***" Kurama added.

Naruto smiled. He then grabbed Hinata's hand, and lowered it down.

"I'm sorry, Hinata-hime," Naruto replied. Hinata smiled upon hearing her boyfriend using the usual honorific. "You're right. We can't stop fighting, not after going so far. Even if we're doomed to lose and we can't stop Akatsuki's victory from happening, we still need to do everything in our power to stop them."

"However, we aren't going to lose," Naruto said, filled with determination as he turned towards the Ten Tails. Apparently, the monster had now recovered, and his damaged but still functional eye was focused once again on the blond. But it was expecting an easy prey, it had another thing coming. "Let's go, Hinata! Together!"

"Yes!"

Naruto and Hinata shared their chakra with each other, merging their power. And all of sudden, they were blinded by a very bright flash of white light. Aside from being blinded, they couldn't hear the noise the Ten Tails was making as it dragged towards them, of the battle going around them between the Allied Ninjas and remaining Ten Tails Spawns. Naruto couldn't sense anybody anymore either aside from Hinata, much to his shock.

"What the... WHOA!"

When Naruto and Hinata opened their eyes, they were no longer on the battlefield in front of the Ten Tails. Instead, they were in space, floating just above Earth's orbit. In their shock, neither of them realized that they were able to breathe just fine.

"Greetings, child of Hagoromo, and child of Hamura," an unknown female voice made the couple realize that they weren't alone. It sounded stoic and monotone. "We finally meet at last."

Naruto and Hinata turned around, and saw a woman. Or what appeared to be a woman, since she didn't look to be human to begin with. She had chalk white skin, ashen hair that went down to her feet. She had two white eyes not unlike those of the Hyuga, plus a third eye on her forehead that resembled the eye of the Ten Tails. A pair of horns crowned her head. She was wearing a long regal kimono decorated with magatamas and golden and purple trims.

The two teens gasped. While they never met this woman before nor heard her speak, they had seen pictures of her and were told about

her before. And if what they knew about her was true, her presence didn't spell good omens.

"Do you know who I am?" the woman asked.

Two words left Naruto's mouth.

"Kaguya Otsutsuki..."

Author's Note: So yeah, Fu and Killer B are- *ducks behind a table to dodge a barrage of sharp objects, some of them on fire, that angry readers throw at me* yeah, I'm terribly sorry about that, but I needed something to truly drive how dire the situation is, and nothing else would do the trick. I know it's a decision that it's not going to leave anybody indifferent. Though, all I'm asking is for you to wait for the next chapter before you decide that this story is ruined forever and deleting it from your favorite and alert list.

And if that wasn't enough to alienate the readers, here comes Kaguya Otsutsuki, whom was somehow summoned by Naruto and Hinata (the "somehow" will be explained next chapter, don't worry). But what does this mean for our heroes, and the story as a whole? I can assure you, though, her role isn't what most of you are imagining.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Next chapter will be up in two days, because I know you guys are dying to see what's going to happen next. At least those who still plan to continue reading. So if you're still there, don't forget to leave a review, even if it's to tell me how much I suck and you wish I die in a fire. Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Love VS Power

Author's Note: Well, I'm kind of surprised at the last chapter's reception. I expected the reaction to be more negative given what happened. Oh well, I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Let's hope the chapter is just as well liked:

Chapter 130:

Love Versus Power

or

When Grandma Shows Up Unnanounced

Site of the Final Battle

"It's over. There's no need for us to fight anymore," Obito stated.

Both Obito and Rin had been forced to interrupt their fight when the Ten Tails broke free and unleashed the cataclysm. Thanks to their augmentations, the two of them were able to weather the localized natural disaster with much more ease than their peers. Once it stopped, Rin was ready to continue their battle, but given what Obito had just say, the feeling wasn't mutual.

"What are you talking about? Maybe the Ten Tails just broke free, but we can still fight it! We can still fight you as well!" Rin protested.

Obito merely shook his head, but he didn't mock her nor laugh at her.

"Look," was all what he said.

Rin then saw how the now free Ten Tails dragged itself towards the fallen Fu, still in her Tailed Beast form, grabbed her with one of its

immense hands, brought her towards its mouth, and started to drain her of her Tailed Beast chakra.

"NO!" Rin yelled, as she instinctively ran forward. While she wasn't terribly close with Fu, she got to know better the Takigakure kunoichi after she moved to Konoha, and she was somebody the young medic-nin would call a friend.

However, the Ten Tails took no time to drain her dry of her chakra, before callously letting her drop to the hard ground below. Rin fell to her knees as she could no longer sense Fu's chakra.

"Do you understand it now? Nothing can stop the Ten Tails now," Obito stated. "It will now consume the Eight and the Nine Tails, and once it becomes complete, Madara will seal it inside his body, becoming its jinchuriki, and the new Sage of the Six Paths will be born. I was hoping I would be able to do that myself before Madara awoke, but guess fate didn't smile upon me."

That moment, an spiraling portal opened besides them. A dazed and almost catatonic Zetsu fell from the portal, followed by Kakashi, who landed on his feet. Obito turned towards his other former teammate, and smiled widely.

"Ah, Kakashi. I see you just defeated Zetsu," Obito said, looking unmoved by his fellow Akatsuki member's predicament. He spread one of his arms towards the Ten Tails, who was closing on Killer B. "However, your victory is meaningless. Look! The Ten Tails is free and on the way to become complete! Nothing can be done to stop it!"

"Perhaps I'm too late. Or would have been late, if I was able to do something to stop that monster. But I felt that before this ended, I could find the truth," Kakashi cryptically said.

This seemed to draw Obito's attention, making him a little annoyed. "Truth? What truth?"

"The truth about you. About me. About Rin. About the day when everything changed," Kakashi said, as he lightly kicked Zetsu on the side, making it groan with pain. "Come on, aloe vera, tell Obito how you and your pal Madara planned Rin's death."

Obito's right eye shrank, as he felt a chill creeping down his spine. "What? What did you just say!?"

"After we learned more about both you and Rin, there was something that always bugged me: how convenient it was. When Sensei was busy with another mission, one of your teammates, the one you had a crush on, gets captured by Kiri and is turned into the jinchuriki of the Three Tails, prompting her to kill herself. And you arrived just in time to see such a tragic moment. Such an incredible coincidence, don't you think?"

Obito started to shake, as his mind wrestled with the implications of Kakashi's words. One side wanted to believe his silver haired former teammate, as what he said made sense. But another, more emotional side of his refused to accept such possibility because of what it implied.

"That's why I decided to take your pal over here to a more private place for some interrogation," Kakashi stated. "And io and behold, my suspicions were correct."

"No... no! You lie!" Obito replied, as he pointed an accusatory finger at him. Kakashi and Rin could see how much his hand was trembling.

As this happened, Rin saw how the Ten Tails drained thr Eight Tails out of Killer B's body.

"You have a way to see if I'm lying or not," Kakashi continued. "If I'm not mistaken, one of the Rinnegan's powers is interrogation. Why don't you use it on this fella, hm?"

Obito looked at Zetsu, still rather dazed and confused.

"... or are you afraid of what you might discover?" Kakashi asked.

Obito's eyes moved between Kakashi and Zetsu as he struggled with indecision. Was his former teammate right, or was he playing a trick on him? And if it was a trick, with what purpose? What would Kakashi gain by having Obito use the Naraka Path on Zetsu? It wasn't like the Human Path, which would kill him. And even if it was the case... Zetsu's death wouldn't change anything. Not this late into his and Madara's plans.

In the end, Obito took a decision. He stomped towards Zetsu, and lifted the dual being by its neck, until the two made eye contact.

"Jigokudo!"

Kakashi and Rin couldn't see it, but Obito had summoned the King of Hell behind him. Its mere sight was enough to snap both halves of Zetsu out of their confusion.

"Wha-what are you doing?" the white half asked. They tried to break out of Obito's hold, but their entire body was paralyzed.

"Shut up! I'm the one making the questions here!" Obito yelled. "Now answer me this: was Rin's death part of a plan to manipulate me!?"

"I... I... I don't know!" he replied.

The King of Hell opened its maws, releasing a tendril like arm, just as a stream of energy flowed out of the plant being's mouth. The arm caught the stream, and pulled it towards the King of Hell's own mouth.

Obito narrowed his eyes in anger.

"Liar."

Both halves of Zetsu panicked. As they felt mobility returning to their shared body, they attempted to break free, but Obito didn't give him the chance. He was once again paralyzed as Obito placed one of his

hands on top of his head, and began to scan his memories. He had to dig very deep, given that the memories were almost two decades old, but in the end, he found them. Or at least, a memory that confirmed Kakashi's

...

Many years ago

"It is done, boss. The girl has been kidnapped and it's being taken to the Kirigakure outpost as we speak," White Zetsu said to Madara.

Obito realized he was watching the scene from Zetsu's point of view. Madara was in his makeshift study, where he used to spend most of the time, even if right now he wasn't reading any book or scroll.

"How about the Konoha ninjas? Are any of them in pursuit?" Madara asked.

"Just one. Kakashi Hatake. Though he did use those dog summons of his to ask for reinforcements to Konoha," Zetsu informed.

"That's no cause of concern. The only one who could reach them in time is the Yellow Flash, and we made sure he's busy elsewhere," Madara said, not worried at all. "The only thing we should be concerned with is that the sealing process is uninterrupted. Only then must the silver haired brat be allowed to rescue the girl."

"Uh, yes boss. I'll make sure me and the others see to that," White Zetsu replied.

Zetsu's tone didn't fly over Madara, who scowled at his creation. "Is there something in your mind, my minion? Something you might want to share with me?"

Zetsu gulped a little, as he shifted uncomfortably. "Well, it's just that... please don't mistake this for insubordination, boss, but, uh..."

this whole plan seems rather complicated just for that brat alone. There are so many things that can go wrong..."

Madara's withered lips curved into a smile. "It certainly does, doesn't it?" he asked. "The brat might not look like much, but I can see there's a lot of potential deep inside him. However, before said potential can be brought to the surface, he needs to be broken, so we can rebuild him to do my bidding.

" Besides, this will also ensure he will awaken the Mangekyo Sharingan. He will need it if he plans to carry out my will."

...

Obito didn't need to see more. He gritted his teeth in anger as tears welled up inside his eyes.

"NINGENDO!"

Obito pulled his hand away, tearing the souls of both the white and the black halves from their shared body. Zetsu stumbled backwards, before he fell on his back lifelessly, while the black half broke down into a puddle of black, ink-like liquid. The rogue Uchiha watched at the being that was once his right hand man.

Then, he realized he wasn't looking at Zetsu's corpse. Instead, it was Rin, with a bloody hole in her chest, the one he was looking at.

"No... NO!"

Obito stumbled backwards, and his foot tripped onto something. The Akatsuki turned around, and saw two more corpses, of two people he knew really well: Minato and Kushina. Next to them, wrapped in a blanket, was baby Naruto, crying profusely. Such sight startled Obito, and tripped again on another corpse. This time it was Biwako Sarutobi, the Third Hokage's wife, whom he personally had killed on his quest to release the Nine Tails and use it to destroy Konoha.

Obito found himself surrounded by corpses, all of them of people he knew. Of people he either killed personally, or helped to kill: Hiashi Hyuga, Inoichi Yamanaka, Yugito Nii, Yagura, Uzakata, Roshu, and many, many more. No matter where he looked, there were nothing but corpses as far as his eyes could see. He fell on his knees, shut his eyes down, and clutched his head with his hands.

"No, no! Stop! Make it stop!" he cried.

" Great changes are impossible without equally great sacrifices."

" And who decides who gets sacrificed? You? Madara?"

After joining Madara, Obito had been a follower of that idea. Sacrifice a few for the wellbeing of the many. How could anybody be against that? There was no system that made everybody happy, so humans always looked for one that at the very least made the largest number of people happy instead. And he wasn't any different.

Yes, sacrificing a few to benefit the many sounded really good. Until you're one of the few that is chosen as sacrifices.

Madara had decided that Rin needed to be sacrificed in order for his perfect world to exist. Needless to say, Obito didn't consider any world that didn't have Rin on it to be perfect by any stretch of the imagination. And now that Obito finally had reached such realization, he was now forced to come to terms with all the people he had killed, plus many more he made miserable, in his and Madara's mad quest for an apparently utopic world.

"What have I done? What have I done!?" he repeated, still clutching his head. He then felt a hand touch his shoulder. He dared to open his eyes, and saw Rin, alive and well, looking at him with a serious expression, her mouth a thin line.

"There's no time to lament for past actions, Obito," Rin said. She then smiled a little. "Come on, it's not too late. With your help, we can still fix this."

"It is. There's no stopping the Ten Tails now," Obito dejectedly said.

"I wouldn't be so sure, Obito," Kakashi intervened. "Look."

Obito turned around. His eyes widened once they saw what was going on.

"What the...?" Obito said, his mouth agape.

"That Naruto is truly something, isn't he? Then again, he is Sensei and Kushina-san's son," Rin said longingly. Her expression hardened when her eyes drifted towards somebody else. "However, he won't be able to do it alone. Come on, he needs our help!"

Obito didn't say anything. He merely nodded, got back on his feet, and followed the ones they used to be his teammates.

There was one last mission for Team Minato to fulfill before everything ended.

...

A place beyond time and space

"Kaguya Otsutsuki..."

"So you know who I am. Good. That shall allow me to skip introductions," Kaguya said with a nod. "Not that there's any hurry. We can stay here in this dimension for hours, yet only a couple seconds will pass in the real world," she said, albeit it appeared that she was mostly talking to herself.

"Wait... how the hell are we talking with you?" Naruto asked.

"Neither Hinata-hime nor I have your chakra!"

"You are correct, neither of you have my chakra. However, my sons inherited a half of my chakra's power each. The same power that you now possess. And the moment your respective chakras merged, it finally allowed me to contact you," Kaguya explained. "I do imagine

that you already met my sons, didn't you?" Kaguya asked. However, neither teen replied. They instead looked at each other, almost if silently asking each other if this woman could be trusted, given their past. Something Kaguya herself seemed to grasp. "First, however, I want to assure you that you have nothing to fear from me. I'm not your enemy. But even if I was, I would have no power to cause you any harm."

"Well, that's reassuring," Naruto said out loud.

"We heard of you from your sons. They told us what you did, and what you wanted to do with the world," Hinata said, looking at the pale skinned woman with a critical eye. "And maybe you can't harm us physically, but people underestimate how words, especially dishonest words, can be used to cause harm."

"Yeah. Are we supposed to believe that you saw the error of your ways, or something?" Naruto asked. "You used to be the Ten Tails. Maybe you were the one behind Madara's plan, and you're using him to come back to life."

If Kaguya took offense at the pair's skepticism, she didn't show it. "You don't need to believe me. But to answer your doubts, it is impossible for me to return to the world of the living, even if, like my sons, my spirit is still linked to this world thanks to the force of my chakra. I died the moment Hagoromo drained the Ten Tails of its chakra, even if the creature itself still lives. And yes, I did see the error of my ways. I did have, after all, almost a millennia not just to think about my past actions, but to observe the world my sons have created.

"However, there's still something that needs to be done. Even if my sons were right to stop me from subjugating the world, they didn't have the entire context of my actions. And such knowledge needs to be passed. Whatever you choose to do with such knowledge, it will depend entirely on you."

Once again, Naruto and Hinata silently looked at each other, and reached a decision without the need of trading words.

"Alright old lady, we're listening," Naruto said. His tone, however, also carried an unsaid warning.

Kaguya nodded, seemingly unperturbed by Naruto and Hinata's lack of trust in her. She waved her hand, the surroundings around them abruptly changed. They were no longer on Earth's orbit, but inside some sort of castle with many people inside it. They had chalk white skin, ashen hair, and wore similar clothes to Kaguya. Naruto and Hinata guessed they were her people.

"This is the Otsutsuki clan," she began, confirming their guess. "We have existed for eons, and for all our existence, we have traveled the cosmos looking for planets that were teeming with life," their surroundings changed once again, this time showing an alien planet. Said planet had a purple sky, tall trees with blue and white leaves, as well as plenty of animals that looked nothing like the animals from Earth. "Once we found a planet suitable for our needs, we planted a seed on it. From said seed, a special tree would germinate," the image changed once again, this one to show a tree so thick and tall, it disappeared into the sky, making the other trees look like mere blades of grass. "You know this kind of trees as the Divine Tree."

Both Naruto and Hinata gasped at the revelation.

"So the Divine Tree... it was you who planted it?" Hinata asked. "Not even Hagoromo nor Hamura knew where the tree came from. It simply... existed."

"Because I never told my sons what was the true purpose behind those trees," Kaguya continued. "The Divine Trees, once completely mature, would extend their roots through the entire planet, and would start to drain it of its nature energy little by little. Once it had stored nature energy over a thousand years, it would use it to produce a single chakra fruit. Then the Otsutsuki tasked with watching over the planet would collect the fruit and send it back home. Then, the fruit

would be used to produce many special pills that are distributed among the rest of the clan. By consuming said pills, we Otsutsuki are able to gain immense power, and extend our lifespans for more than a millenia."

"Wait, didn't you eat the fruit raw?" Naruto interrupted. "Or at least, that's what I heard you did."

"You are correct, yes. I will get to that shortly. Please refrain yourself from asking anymore questions until I'm done telling my tale," Kaguya replied, shooting Naruto an icy look, making the blond shiver a little. "We have to keep consuming those pills in order to maintain our power and immortality, so we have to harvest fruits constantly, and once a chakra fruit has been produced, the cycle begins anew, and the tree starts gathering more nature energy for another fruit. And after several cycles..."

The image changed again, showing the planet losing both fauna and flora little by little, until it is reduced to a barren, empty wasteland. Naruto's mouth was left agape, and Hinata covered her mouth with her hands in horror.

"So... that's what would have happened to the Earth if the Divine Tree wasn't removed?" Hinata asked, horrified.

"It would have taken several millenia to reach such state, but yes, your assessment is a correct one," Kaguya confirmed. He then looked at Naruto. "You asked me about eating the fruit raw before. Doing such a thing is forbidden by the clan under penalty of death. Eating a fruit raw makes one completely immortal, and gives a permanent power boost far greater than a mere pill," Kaguya said, and sensing Naruto about to ask another question, she continued. "However, eating a fruit raw also permanently binds you to the Divine Tree, making you unable to leave the planet. And once the Divine Tree is done draining a planet of its nature energy and dies, so does anybody bound to it."

"That means that you would have eventually died," Naruto said.

"Yes, you are correct," Kaguya confirmed.

"Then why did you do that? Plus, you wouldn't be able to return home. Did you like the Earth so much?" Naruto asked, crossing his arms.

"Yes," was Kaguya's reply.

The blond was taken aback. "Really?"

"Two thousand years ago, I was sent to this planet to plant the seed of a Divine Tree, and to oversee its growth. And while I did, I realize that this planet has something no other planet we harvested ever had: intelligent lifeforms. Lifeforms which shared an uncanny resemblance to our species," Kaguya continued. Then, for the first time since they met her, Kaguya smiled, even if only a little. "At first I didn't think much of humans. They were short lived, short sighted and brutish. Unaware of how small they were compared to the rest of the universe.

"However, despite their flaws, I saw that humanity had something we Otsutsuki lacked: creativity without limits, and the ability to change and grow with each new generation. That made me realize the flaws of my own people," Kaguya said. "We Otsutsuki existed for eons, and for eons we remained unchanged, doing nothing but harvesting chakra fruits in order to maintain our power and immortality. We aren't even allowed to have children, since more Otsutsuki would force us to harvest more fruits or to reduce our ration of pills.

"Soon I fell in love with your species, and tried to find a way to save you from your inevitable doom. I realized that I wouldn't be able to carry such task without incurring into the wrath of my brethren, so I took a decision: once the tree produced a chakra fruit, I would eat said fruit. With my newfound powers, I would then unite humanity under my leadership, and use my knowledge to lift them into a proper civilization. One that would be able to defend itself from the inevitable retaliation that was to come. I even seduced a human emperor into marrying me, and from such union, my twin sons were

born. They would help me unite the world and fend off the Otsutsuki invasion.

"Given that I was bound to the Divine Tree, I commanded it to gather nature energy at a much slower rate as to slow down the planet's death, while I prepared its people for the battle to come. And once the Otsutsuki Clan would no longer be a threat, I would destroy the Divine Tree, as well as myself. Leaving the world into my sons' care.

"I don't think I need to say that my plan didn't work out as expected. I'm sure you already know what happened next from my sons," Kaguya said, seemingly finishing her tale.

"Great. So even if we beat Madara, there's an even bigger enemy that's bound to drop onto our doorstep sooner or later," Naruto groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Yes. But now, Madara Uchiha and the revived Ten Tails are the more immediate threats, threats that you must put down post haste," Kaguya urged.

"You want us to stop Madara? Given that he's following your footsteps, I thought you'd approve of him," Hinata observed.

Kaguya glared at Hinata, unamused. "I would have approved of him in another time, but like I said before, I saw the error of my ways. Humanity has a great potential, but for such potential to manifest, freedom is a must. Yes, humanity is prone to conflicts and infighting, but that's an inevitable side effect of your diversity of thought. But conflicts can be solved, if all parts can reach an understanding, if there are people willing to do so.

"Like me before him, Madara is somebody who committed terrible actions for the sake of a noble goal. But terrible actions can only lead into terrible outcomes, no matter how righteous your intentions may be. Hence, he must be stopped, and the Ten Tails broken back into the nine beings Hagoromo split them into."

"And... can we really do that?" Naruto asked.

"Yes. You both have the same power my sons used to wield. Naruto, the chakra of all the Tailed Beasts lies within you. You must use said chakra to bind the Ten Tails' own," Kaguya then looked at Hinata.

"And just like the Moon pulls the seas to form the tides, you, Hinata, must use your power to pull the Ten Tails' chakra from its body once Naruto has bound it."

"So grab the chakra, and pull it out. Got it," Naruto said with a nod.

"Good. I have no more knowledge to share with you. Now you must go. Use what you've learned today to protect the world I love so much, so you can succeed where I failed," Kaguya asked. "May fortune smile upon you."

"Thank you. We'll do our best," Hinata stated.

"Don't worry, we won't fail, Naruto assured her.

And with that, the two Konoha youths left Kaguya's dimension.

...

Back in the Real World

Naruto and Hinata found themselves once again back inside the head of the latter's Avatar of Kalika. They were still holding hands, which glowed with a white light as they merged their power with each other.

"Naruto-kun, let's channel our power into the Avatar of Kalika. I believe it will be our best chance to win."

"You got it!" Naruto agreed.

As Naruto and Hinata funneled their combined power into the latter's chakra avatar, it quickly began to undergo a transformation. The Avatar started to grow in size, as its color began to change from

lavender to golden-orange as Naruto's power spread through it. Its hair grew both in length and volume, splitting into nine locks that resembled the nine tails of Kurama, so long they reached the Avatar's ankles. And lastly, pieces of armor started to form around the Avatar, on its chest, forearms, forelegs, and the upper half of its face was obscured by a kitsune-styled helmet.

"Sage Art: Golden Avatar of Kalika!"

The Ten Tails let out a roar of anger, as it fixed its massive eye on the newly formed golden chakra avatar, and once again, it extended one of its arms, its long fingers ready to wrap themselves around the golden giantess.

"Sage Art: Twin Lion Assault!"

The golden avatar thrust two of its palms forward, releasing two blasts of golden chakra. Said blasts took the shape of two maned lions, and crashed into the Ten Tails' hand. The force of the jutsu pushed said arm backwards, almost yanking the Ten Tails with it. However, the colossal beast wasn't going to give up so easily, and decided to use its many tails to grab its prey instead. Not that they were going to be of much help either.

When the first tail came, the Avatar easily deflected it with a palm strike. Another strike came from a different direction, but Hinata's Tenseigan caught it and acted accordingly. The Ten Tails then began to attack with two or three tails at once, forcing the Avatar to actually move while it deflected the attack. Seemingly running out of patience, the Ten Tails decided to attack with all of its tails at once. Unfortunately for him, Hinata had the perfect defense for such a wide attack.

"Sage Art: Protection of the Eight Trigrams, One Hundred and Twenty Eight Palms!"

The golden avatar started to move its four palms forward in a pushing manner, so fast they almost became blurry, while releasing

thin streams of golden chakra, deflecting each of the tails that got close to them. The Avatar increased the speed of the defensive jutsu, building up so much power that it pushed the Ten Tails backwards.

"Well done, Hinata!" Naruto praised. "Now it's my turn!"

The Avatar's four hands were brought together, and chakra particles started to gather in the space between them forming a dark purple sphere, the four hands moving further from each other as the sphere increased in size.

"Take this, asshole! Sage Art: Tailed Beast Wave!"

The Avatar thrust all four of its hands forward, releasing the energy stored inside the sphere in the form of a golden-yellow energy wave. The energy wave hit the Ten Tails square in the face, making it to screech in pain as it was pushed backwards. However, that was nowhere near enough to put it down, and the monster still had plenty of fight on it. Deciding that Naruto had the right idea, the Ten Tails opened its huge jaws and started to charge a Tailed Beast Ball of its own.

"Oh no, you won't!"

But before the crimson sphere of destruction was fully charged, the Avatar dashed forward and leaped, just as it delivered a brutal roundhouse kick to the titanic monster, causing the still forming attack to prematurely detonate inside the monster's mouth.

"That was for Killer B!" Naruto cried.

The Avatar jumped again in order to reach the Ten Tails' face, and during the brief time they were eye to eye, the chakra construct delivered a series of fast and powerful palm strikes, each of them carrying so much power, it produced a gust of wind to burst outwards. Once the brief but painful assault was over, the Ten Tails let out a screech of agony as it slumped over.

"Do you think we softened it enough?" Hinata asked.

"I think so. Alright, now time to bind it!" Naruto said.

Several locks of the Avatar's hair raised as if they had life of their own, and wrapped themselves around the Ten Tails' head and arms. However, before they could bind its chakra, the Ten Tails suddenly got up, and lunged forward, delivering a brutal headbutt to the Avatar, pushing it backwards, and releasing the Ten Tails from the locks of hair.

"AAAAAHHH!" Naruto and Hinata screamed in unison as the force of the impact dragged their Avatar through the ground, carving a large furrow, and sending chunks of rocks and earth everywhere.

The Ten Tails dragged itself forward once again, making the earth rumble, ready to claim its elusive prey. Its red eye glinted, and once again, extended a single arm in order to catch the golden Avatar. However, in its fixation, it once again failed to account for external threats.

"Sage Art: Spiraling Inferno!"

When the Ten Tails saw what appeared to be a spinning sphere of flames flying directly into its eye, it was too late to dodge. The missile hit the Ten Tails squarely in the eye, before it exploded into an even larger sphere of revolving flames. A loud screech of pain filled the air once more as the searing pain made the titanic beast recoil.

A gigantic toad Naruto recognized as Gamaken landed with a thundering noise besides the Avatar of Kalika. And on top of that toad, Naruto could see his adoptive parents, the two of them in Sage Mode, with Fukasaku on one of Jiraiya's shoulder, and a fragment of Katsuyu resting on one of Tsunade's shoulders.

"Mom! Dad!" Naruto cried in joy.

"Hey there, kid," Jiraiya greeted him. "Sorry for being late. We got a little tangled up during our reunion with Orochimaru. But we're finally here!"

"And it seems that we got just in time," Tsunade said, as her single visible eye focused on the Ten Tails. "I take you two know how to beat that thing for good?"

"We believe we will be able to drain it of its chakra and split it back into the nine tailed beasts," Hinata began. "But we can't do it as long as it keeps moving!"

It seemed that the Ten Tails, or better said its eye, had finally recovered from the damage caused by Jiraiya's attack, and charged forward once again. Tsunade, hopped off of Gamaken, and smirked at the abomination.

"You need that thing to stay still? Lucky for you, I have the perfect jutsu for that," Tsunade said, as she cracked her knuckles. She made a hand seal. "Sage Art: Gracious Deity Gates!"

Suddenly, massive red torii fell from above, landing on top of the Ten Tails' tails, pinning them to the ground. The beast growled in confusion as the torii gates left it rooted in one spot, unable to move. It tried to pull its tails free, but the torii didn't budge.

"Naruto, now, before it breaks free!" Tsunade urged.

Naruto and Hinata nodded, and commanded the Avatar to rush towards the Ten Tails. Once again, four locks of the Avatar's hair wrapped themselves around the arms and the head of the titanic abomination as if they were tentacles. This time, however, the Ten Tails was unable to break free, and its chakra was bound, leaving it unable to move or retaliate.

"The chakra has been bound!" Naruto announced.

"Let's pull it out then," Hinata said.

Other four of the Avatar's long locks of hair forced themselves through the mouth and down the throat of the Ten Tails, who could still do nothing to fight back.

"I have it!" Hinata cried.

"Great! Now, PULL!"

...

A few minutes earlier

Madara watched in worry the battle before him. One moment, Naruto wasn't even attempting to defend himself from the Ten Tails -not that it would have helped much if he did-, then that annoying Hyuga came and... something happened. The two of them had combined their chakra, creating a completely new kind of power, something Madara had never sensed in his life. Something that, he dared to admit, surpassed his own Six Paths chakra.

And that new power allowed the chakra construct of the Hyuga combined with the Nine Tails' chakra to fight back against the Ten Tails. Despite the fact that the power the two Konoha youths had now was still inferior to that of the Ten Tails, his instinct told him to intervene before things spiraled out of control.

"Better step in and put down those impudent brats once and for all," Madara stated, as he began to move forward. "I'm too close to achieve my goal to-"

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Madara was unexpectedly pulled back by an invisible force, making him fall on his back and roll on the ground.

"What the...?"

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

The second Madara stopped rolling, and was left lying on his back, a mass of wooden roots sprouted around him and wrapped themselves around his body, immobilizing him and pinning him to the ground. The sound a thousands birds chirping alerted Madara that something was coming from above, and looking up he saw Kakashi leaping down at him, one of his hands coated in blueish-light electricity.

"Lightning Blade!"

"Shinra Tensei!"

However, seconds before Kakashi could impale the old Uchiha, Madara released a kinetic shockwave from his body in all directions, destroying the roots binding him while also blasting Kakashi upwards. As Madara jumped back to his feet, he saw "Kakashi" bursting into a poof of smoke, realizing that what he blasted was a shadow clone.

Madara was able to sense a faint tremble beneath his feet, and jumped back in time to avoid what he assumed was the real Kakashi bursting from below, another Lightning Blade formed in his hand, barely missing his mark for a few centimeters. And it was that moment when Rin chose to attack, since the Deva Path was still recharging, and Madara couldn't move while mid air, delivering a flying kick to the long haired Uchiha's face, sending him flying sideways. Still, Madara was able to regain his balance by doing a backflip, landing on his feet.

"Wood Release: Cutting Jutsu!"

Madara turned around just in time to see Obito ready to impale him with a sharp spear made of wood. Madara was able to grab the spear before it could touch him, reducing its momentum enough so it wouldn't be able to pierce his armor. The older Uchiha looked at who used to be his protégé and right hand man, and scowled in disgust.

"Obito... you dare betray me, when we're so close to victory?" Madara asked, struggling with the wooden spear against the younger Uchiha. "After I saved both your and that pathetic girl's live..."

"Shut up, you liar! I read Zetsu's mind! You didn't save anybody! Her abduction and her death, it was all your doing! Those Kiri ninjas were under your control the whole time!" Obito yelled.

"Oh... so you found about it," Madara said, as anger slowly disappeared from his tone. "And on such a critical moment. Such a pity... you could have enjoyed a safe long life with Rin on the new world I'm about to create, but I guess that you won't stop until one of us lays dead on the ground, will you?"

"I don't want anything from you! Much less a world of your own doing!" Obito angrily replied.

"Come on Obito, until a few minutes ago, you were on board with my plan. I understand you must be hurt and angry after finding how I manipulated you, but you'll surely agree that creating a better world is more important than all of that, right?" Madara asked, as his lips curved into a smirk. "Besides, you should be thankful to me. I opened your eyes to the harsh realities of the world. That's why you never doubted any word from my mouth that reached your ears. That's why you were so eager to carry on my plan, even without me to watch over you."

"Open my eyes...? No, you blinded me, with your promises of an impossible world!" Obito replied. "Yes, I used to follow you, I drank every word you said like a desert dweller drinks water from an oasis. And like you, I used to believe that no great change is possible without equally great sacrifices. But believing that is much easier when is somebody else's the one getting sacrificed."

"Lightning Release: Lightning Beast Running Jutsu!"

Kakashi launched a lightning bolt at Madara, which took the shape of a hound, which began to run towards him. Madara then pulled the spear and Obito with it, grabbing his former minion and throwing it against Kakashi's lightning attack. The lightning hound, however, maneuvered around Obito and jumped towards Madara.

"Gakido!"

Madara raised a hand towards the elemental dog, creating a barrier of white light. Upon crashing against the barrier, the hound was converted back into our chakra which was absorbed into Madara's body. That moment, Rin decided to make her move, and started making hand seals.

"Wood Release: Wood Binding Jutsu!"

Before Madara could finish absorbing Kakashi's attack, multiple wooden roots emerged around him. However, before they could wrap themselves around the Uchiha's body, the blue ghostly ribcage of the Susanoo manifested around him, acting as a shield from the roots, which wrapped around it. The Susanoo developed into its humanoid form, destroying the roots in the process.

"You might have grown in size, but deep down you're still that immature brat I saved during the Third War," Madara said, shaking his head in disappointment. "In this cruel world, born of the imperfect dream of Hashirama, nobody is safe from a sudden death. Tell me Obito, were the deaths of all the people who perished during the Third Ninja War my fault as well? What about the two previous wars? How many did die, hundreds? Thousands? If you could save all those thousands of lives by sacrificing less than a dozen, isn't it our moral duty to do so?"

"Regardless of what you did to Obito and me," Rin interceded. "Your plan is destined to fail! You think that by becoming all powerful, you will bring peace to the world? Power alone can't lead to peace!"

"Power is the key to everything, little girl. People with power can do whatever they want, while powerless weaklings can't do nothing of note. That's why we need to ensure that only those those who are benevolent have power," Madara countered. "In my world, no wicked men will have the power to spread evil or start senseless war."

"That's rich, coming from the most wicked man in history that started the biggest war we ever saw!" Rin angrily replied.

Madara scowled. A sword formed on one of its Susanoo's arms as it raised it. "I'm done listening to you lot."

The Susanoo brought the sword down. Rin squeaked as she jumped just in time to avoid the giant blade striking the ground, opening a crack, and raising a cloud of dust. Obito snarled, and charged at Madara.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on Rin!" the Uchiha growled.

"Very well. Do you volunteer to take her place, then?" Madara mockingly asked, as he crossed his arms.

The Susanoo prepared to strike again, this time at Obito. But much to Madara's initial shock and later frustration, the blade of his Susanoo phased through him as he were an illusion. Obito was also able to phase through the Susanoo's body, reaching a hand towards Madara, who took a step back.

"That body of yours isn't immortal! All I need to do is send you to the Kamui dimension, and just wait until you die of dehydration!" Obito said, just as his index finger grazed Madara's armor. "There! Ka-"

"Shinra Tensei!"

Unfortunately, before Obito could teleport Madara to the pocket dimension, he was blasted away from him and out of the Susanoo, landing painfully on his back, as his body skidded on the hard ground.

"Obito!" Rin screamed.

"And you forget that your Kamui doesn't make you immortal either," Madara said. "You need to stay tangible in order to send something to your pocket dimension, and that window of time is more than enough for me to strike back," Madara then turned around, and saw the Ten Tails struggling against Naruto and Hinata. As a feeling of worry crept up his back, the Uchiha mastermind scowled. "That doesn't look good. Alright, no more wasting time with you lot."

"And you think we're going to let you escape?" Rin asked, as she leaped towards Madara, kunai in hand.

Madara let out an irritated sigh, as he generated a black chakra rod through his palm, and used it to impale Rin through the gut just as she leaped at him. However, "Rin" quickly lost all color, faded into the dull brown of tree bark.

"A Wood Clone. How original and unexpected," Madara deadpanned, as he shook the lifeless clone off his chakra rod and tossed it away.

"Don't let him go! Naruto and Hinata are almost done with the Ten Tails! We need to keep him at bay for a little longer!" the real Rin replied from the opposite side of him.

"It seems that I'll have to crush these annoying insects with my overwhelming power," Madara said, as he held a hand up. "Chibaku Tensei!"

A marble-sized black gravity core formed on Madara's hand, and shot into the sky. The ground started to shake as chunks of rock and dirt were torn from it, and pulled towards the gravity core.

"Kakashi, Obito!" Rin called her teammates, horror seeping from her voice as she remembered the last time Madara used that attack. "You can't let Madara finish that jutsu! You need to interrupt no matter how!"

"Leave that to me!" Kakashi said, as he focused his Sharingan on the nascent planetoid. The silver haired Jonin also remembered when Pain attempted to use that jutsu to destroy Konoha. That time he didn't have the chance to stop it, but he would do it now. As his Sharingan morphed into its advanced form, Kakashi made a hand seal. "Kamui!"

A spiraling vortex appeared on the forming planetoid, which began to slowly suck it into the Kamui dimension, much to Rin's relief.

And, unaware to Team Minato, that was the opportunity Madara was waiting for. He directed each of his hands towards Obito and Rin, respectively.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Obito was able to sense the attack and activate Kamui in order to avoid it, but Rin wasn't so lucky, and was yanked towards Madara. The long haired Uchiha's hand gripped her neck with such force, she was unable to breathe.

"Rin!" Obito yelled, as he rushed towards her and his former master. "Don't you dare touch her!"

"You know, I had many chances to kill this girl, but I exercised restraint for your sake. But given that we are no longer allies, I have no more reason to hold back," Madara said, and much to Obito's horror, he placed his other hand on Rin's head. "Ningendo!"

Pulling said hand back, Madara teared Rin's soul out of her body, killing her instantly, before disdainfully tossing her lifeless body to Obito, who caught it. It was cold to the touch. He couldn't sense her chakra, nor hear her breathing.

"No... no... !" Obito sobbed, as he fell to his knees, cradling Rin's body. The worst day of his life was happening again. Except this time it wasn't a nightmare or an hallucination. "NOOOOOOOO!"

"Rin... !" Kakashi said, after sending the Chibaku Tensei to the Kamui dimension, he had just caught Madara killing Rin in cold blood. He just stood there, with his eyes wide open in horror.

"Let this be a lesson of what happens to those dare to betray me," Madara hatefully said. "Once I decided you've suffered enough, I shall kill you next."

With that, Madara leaped away, and headed towards the Ten Tails, leaving Obito and Kakashi.

Obito didn't hear Madara's threat, nor registered him leaving. All he could think of now was Rin. He had failed her again. He had gone for such lengths not only to bring her back, but to create a world where she could live happy and safe. And now, all his efforts, years of work, were crumbling in front of his eyes. Was Rin's immutable fate to die before she could ever reach adulthood? Was Obito's crusade pointless from the very beginning?

"Everything I did, I did it for you..." Obito sobbed. "Yet in the end... in the end it was for nothing..."

" *You never asked me if I wanted you to do all of this,*" Rin's voice replied.

"I thought... I thought I knew better..." Obito continued. "I thought... you'd eventually see things my way..."

" *All you and Madara ever did was to carve a path of death. Is it that surprising that I ended up as one of his victims?*" Rin angrily asked.

Obito didn't have an answer to that. Or perhaps he did have, but was too afraid to say it out loud. That question brought to his mind once again the memory of all the people he had killed, either directly or indirectly. At the time, he just dismissed them as necessary sacrifices to build a better tomorrow. But now... they were people whose deaths didn't accomplish anything.

" *There's still a chance to fix this,*" a voice said. It wasn't Rin, nor Kakashi. He recognized the voice as his own past self, the goggle-wearing boy who was Kakashi's rival and wanted to become Hokage. "*But you know that the price is a big one.*"

"That price is nothing but a fraction of what should I do to atone for all my sins," Obito replied to his younger self. "No world that doesn't have Rin on it can be called perfect. And I don't want to live in a world where Rin doesn't exist anymore. I will gladly pay this price in order to give her another chance."

Carefully, Obito laid Rin's lifeless body in front of him. He then knelt down, and made the Ram seal. His body started to glow with a white light.

"I may not be able to undo most of my crimes. But at least, I will be able to correct my most recent ones," Obito said, as the Ram seal turned into the Snake. "Outer Path: Heavenly Rebirth!"

A beam of white light shot from Obito into the sky.

...

"Come on! Keep pulling!" Naruto encouraged. "Just a little more!"

The four tentacle-like golden locks were wrapped around a teal colored mass of chakra which they were trying to pull out of the Ten Tails' body. However, despite being immobilized and most of its chakra bound, the colossal beast still resisted, and the two youths were unable to separate the chakra from the body.

"Nggggh... ! No matter how hard we pull, the monster keeps pulling the chakra back!" Hinata cried. She tried to stay positive and remind herself that, if Hagoromo and Hamura were able to do this in the past, so could they. But a part of her mind reminded her that they weren't Hagoromo and Hamura. "I'm afraid we might not be strong enough to do this!"

Rather than sharing her panic, Naruto simply smirked, much to her bemusement. "In that case, let's ask more people to help us!"

The remaining golden lock of hair shoot backwards, where most of the Allied Ninja survivors were. The lock split into multiple threads as it spread around the battelfield.

"Everybody! Grab onto the chakra threads!" Naruto commanded. Nobody asked any questions, and the ninjas not currently fighting the few Ten Tails miniclones left did as he commanded. Naruto could sense how their chakras were added to his and Hinata's. Most of them unknown, but many of them familiar. Yes, with their combined power, they would put an end to this nightmarish monster! "Now PULL!"

They all pulled in unison. And, unlike the previous tries, it seemed that the Ten Tails was unable to swallow the chakra back. More and more of the chakra blob was forced out of its body, and with a final pull and a loud snapping sound, the Ten Tails' chakra was completely separated from its body. The backlash of such colossal effort caused the Golden Avatar of Kalika to break down and vanish, but it no longer mattered.

The mass of chakra then split into nine blobs, and each blob taking the form of one of the nine Tailed Beasts, all of them landing on the ground with a booming noise. And just like the nine Tailed Beasts reformed, the Ten Tails shrieked as its form twisted and shrank until it regressed to the Demonic Sature form, before disappearing in a cloud of smoke, returning to its sealing place within the moon.

" YES! You did, Naruto! I knew my trust in you wasn't misplaced!" Kurama cheered.

" Thank you, Kurama. But it wasn't just me. I would have never done this alone," Naruto mentally replied.

Kurama chuckled, and shook his head. **"Always have to play the part of the ideal, humble hero, huh Naruto?"**

Naruto was going to reply, when he heard Hinata gasp, and look up into the sky.

"Naruto, look!"

...

Like it had happened in Konoha months back, the sky flashed white for a brief moment, and beams of white light started to descend from above. When the beams of light touched the corpses that littered the battlefield, they miraculously returned to life. Even those whose corpses were far too mangled or slaughtered had their bodies completely restored before they were returned to life.

As the sensor ninjas started to sense all the new chakras appearing around them seemingly out of nowhere, the dead returned to life.

...

Away from all the action, Shino continued to try to keep Fu alive as he waited for Kiba and Tamaki to bring Naruto. But they were taking way too long. Fu's vitals kept deteriorating. His medical jutsu wasn't working. None of the chakra he transferred to her was of any help.

"Come on Fu, don't leave me!" he cried, at a louder volume than he was used to speak, as tears started to stream down his cheeks. "I know you're strong! You're the strongest person I ever met! You can't let this be your end!"

Then, all of sudden, a beam of white light hit her body, and almost instantly, Fu's eyes snapped wide open, and flung herself up, breathing heavily.

"Fu... !"

"Sh-Shino...?" the green haired girl stammered. "Shino! I... I dreamt I was dead! What the hell just happened!?"

Shino, however, didn't say anything, and simply hugged his confused but very much alive girlfriend, as more tears rolled down his face. Except this time, they were tears of joy rather than sorrow. However, much to his confusion, Fu gently pushed him back, breaking the hug, and looked into his eyes with a dazed gaze.

"Something... something's wrong..." Fu mumbled, as she started to look at her own body, until she finally noticed the missing piece. "Chomei! Where is Chomei? Why I can't feel Chomei!?"

...

Not far away from Shino and Fu, Killer B's students were gathered around him, watching how T was futilely trying to keep him alive long enough for the Raikage to return with Naruto. But no matter how hard the blond haired medic tried, it simply wasn't enough.

"He has no heartbeat!" Omoi said, placing his fingers on B's wrist.

"Come on T, we're losing him! I know you can do better!" Karui shouted.

"I'm trying my best, but it's not enough! No medic on earth can save a jinchuriki whose Tailed Beast has been extracted!" the braid-wearing girl protested.

"We can't lose sensei, you hear me? We already thought we lost him once, and I don't plan to go through that again! Not unless we've done everything in our hand! So you better-"

"Hey, what's that?" Omoi asked, looking up into the sky.

The two girls did likewise, and had to shield their eyes from the bright beam of light that was falling upon them. The beam of light hit B's body, and the rapper ninja instantly sat up, and started coughing.

"S-sensei...?" Karui asked.

"W-Where am I? What's going on? What does it feel like I've been gone?" he asked, as he confusedly looked at his students, who were crying tears of joy. However, despite his return to life, B felt that something was missing from him. Something very important. "There's something amiss, wait... where is Number Eight?"

...

Yugito was watching in awe how the dead were returning to life. Those who did were a bit confused, looking around, trying to understand what was going on. The friends and loved ones of the resurrected didn't question what was going on, and jumped to hug them, many of them crying tears of joy.

She couldn't help but smile at such a heartwarming sight.

" You know, Kurama told me about this happening in Konoha," Matatabi chimed in. **"But seeing it with your own eyes... it's something completely different."**

"It certainly is," Yugito agreed. "Despite all the people who died in this war, this battle at least will end up with zero casualties on our side."

Distracted as she was by the miracle happening around her, Yugito didn't realize that one of the falling beams of light was heading towards her. The jinchuriki of Matatabi screamed and fell on her butt in shock as the beam of light hit her, sending a jolt through her body.

" Yugito! What happened!?" Matatabi's shard within her asked, worried. **"Are you okay?"**

"I... think?" Yugito asked, confused. "I don't know, I feel... different," Yugito said. For some reason, her body didn't feel like a Shadow Clone anymore. In fact, she felt almost like she did when she was alive. Moved by a hunch, she pulled out a kunai from her ninja tool pouch, and made a cut on her thumb.

It started to bleed.

"Blood... my blood..." Yugito said, her voice barely a whisper, as she watched a thin thread of blood trickle down her finger.

" But... Shadow Clones don't bleed, right?" Matatabi asked.
"Then... it can only mean..."

"I'm alive..." she said in realization. Then, her lips curved into a wide smile, as she began to leap in joy. "I'm alive! I'm alive! Oh yes! Everyone, Yugito is back!"

...

Yugito wasn't the only one who underwent a rebirth, as the other jinchuriki that had temporary Shadow Clone bodies were also hit by the resurrecting beams of light.

Such as Han and Roshi, that were making sure that all the Ten Tails Spawns were truly done and accounted for.

Or Yagura, who had reunited with his wife and son, and was using the chance to say a proper goodbye before his artificial body finally disappeared.

Or Utakata, who was telling Hotaru about how he ended up raised as a zombie, before part of his chakra ended up in Naruto, while Hotaru was telling him about her battles in the war, and how she had met and fought Utakata's former mentor Harusame, and how, misguided as he was, the man never betrayed Utakata, but wanted to help him.

...

The last of the beams of white light fell upon Rin. As her body was revitalized and her soul returned to it, the medic-nin's eyes were opened wide, and quickly sat up, breathing heavily, while looking around, confused.

"W-What... where am I...? I am alive?" she asked, before she looked at Obito, kneeling next to her.

"Rin..."

"Obito...?"

Obito didn't say anything. He simply smiled, and much to the medic's shock, he dropped on his back, lying on the ground.

"Obito, what's wrong?" Rin asked, as he quickly went to check him.

"Nothing... nothing's wrong..." Obito weakly said. "At least... not anymore..."

"Your heartbeat is so weak... and you're so cold!" Rin said in horror. "What-"

"Rin, Madara killed you," Kakashi said, as he walked towards the two. Albeit dragging himself was probably a more appropriate term to use, since all the battling was finally taking a toll on his body. "Obito then used the Rinnegan to revive you, as well as the ninjas who died during the battle against the Ten Tails, to life."

"What? But how... wait a minute, isn't that what that Pain guy did after the battle of Konoha?" Rin asked. "But... that jutsu claims one's life after using it!"

Kakashi merely looked at Obito with saddened eyes. "I think he was aware of such outcome."

"No! Obito, why did you do it?" Rin said, as he grabbed his shoulders. Her eyes started to water. "Why? Now that you finally saw the light! Now that the three of us were finally together!"

Obito chuckled sadly. "Rin... one way or another, there was no future for me," he was interrupted by a coughing fit. "But you... you do have a future, Rin. You deserve it. I sacrificed plenty of lives for you,

Rin... and look how it ended. My life is the only life I have any right to sacrifice... so... let me do this for you..."

"Obito..." Rin said, as tears ran down her cheeks.

Obito then turned his head towards Kakashi.

"Kakashi... I asked you to protect Rin once... and you failed. Then again... I wasn't any better, was I?" he asked, laughing a little, before his laugh was cut by another coughing fit. "So now, make sure you don't waste this second chance," Obito said, before his eyes rested on Rin once again. "And you Rin... make sure you keep Kakashi alive as well. It's a miracle that this idiot made it alive so far."

Rin wiped her tears, and forced herself to smile at Obito's jab. "Yeah, hehe... and yes, don't worry. I always kept you guys in check, didn't I?"

"Good..." Obito coughed again. "Now... I also want to say that... for all what's worth... I'm sorry... for the hell I put you through..."

"It's okay Obito. You suffered a lot yourself as well. But don't worry, your suffering is about to end," Rin said, as she helped Obito to lie down. "You can rest now."

After taking one last look at the girl he used to have a crush on and the man who was both his rival, enemy and best friend, Obito closed his eyes, and never opened them again.

Rin hung her head, and started to weep, while Kakashi pulled her into a hug.

...

With the Ten Tails defeated and Obito dead, there was only one Akatsuki left. One who, despite his immense power, still couldn't match the combined might of the Ninja Alliance on his own. However, said Akatsuki was about to pull one last, desperate gamble

to achieve victory. Because many things could be said of Madara Uchiha, but being a quitter wasn't one of them.

As the Tailed Beasts were celebrating their newfound freedom with Naruto and Hinata, Madara leaped towards them, landing in the middle of the Tailed Beasts. Given his body language, it was obvious he wasn't going to surrender.

"This isn't over yet!" he hollered.

"I'm afraid it is," Naruto replied. "The Ten Tails is no more and your army has been destroyed. All what's left of Akatsuki is you, Madara."

"Yeah. Don't complicate things any further and surrender peacefully," Jiraiya stated. "Strong as you are, you can't defeat all of us."

"Especially not when we have all Tailed Beasts here to help us as well," Hinata added.

Madara chuckled condescendingly at the Konoha ninjas. "You're forgetting about an important detail," Madara then tapped the side of his head. "I still have the Rinnegan. Meaning that I can still summon the Demonic Statue and seal the Tailed Beasts again myself!"

" **And you think we're going to let you?**" Gyuki asked, as he lumbered forward.

" **Naruto, you and the other humans, please stand back,**" Chomei said, as she menacingly hovered over the rogue Uchiha. **"This is our fight."**

"I'm afraid you won't be fighting anybody, you filthy animals," Madara snarled, looking at the beasts closing on him with contempt. "Your fate is to disappear within the Ten Tails."

"Well, unless you can seal all nine beasts by yourself in a matter of seconds, you're pretty much screwed!" Naruto said.

There was a moment of a very uncomfortable silence. Naruto turned towards his parents.

"He can't do that, right?" Naruto asked, looking at Tsunade, who shrugged, not knowing the answer either.

"Even for one as powerful as I, such feat would be ludicrous. It would be as impossible as manifesting Susanoo without eyes," Madara admitted, much to Naruto's relief. "However, I can still do the next best thing. CHIBAKU TENSEI!"

Madara shot his hands to the sides, throwing nine gravity cores to a Tailed Beast each. The Tailed Beasts were unable to dodge the attack, and as the core latched onto them, they were lifted into the air as chunks of earth and rock were pulled towards them, trapping them inside small planetoids.

"First order of business, secure the Tailed Beasts," Madara replied.

"Release them! NOW!" Naruto demanded, as he and Hinata angrily ran towards him.

"Do you want your precious little animals?" Madara asked in a mocking tone, as his Susanoo manifested around him, going all the way to its Perfect Form. "Then come and get them!"

Naruto and Hinata didn't say anything. Nodding to each other, they held hands once again, merging their chakra and forming the Golden Avatar of Kalika.

The final battle of the Fourth Ninja War was about to begin...

Author's Note: Well, a lot to unpack here. Let's begin!

And thus, Fu and Killer B have been brought back to life! Yay! Come on guys, did you REALLY expected me to kill those two, after how often I gushed about them, and how much readers

like them? Yeah, no, in the list of characters that I'd permanently kill, those two rank close to the bottom. The previous jinchuriki are back as well, this time for good. Consider this my apology for the way I handled their capture arcs, which ended up being way too dark with Akatsuki winning time after time.

While I said many times that Kaguya was going to appear, I said just as many times that she wouldn't be an antagonist, and that the final boss of this story was always meant to be Madara, given that he's the mastermind behind the plot of the story. It would make no sense for a new guy (or gal) to show up out of nowhere and hijack his position. Anyway, what do you think of my take on Kaguya? I hope you found it a little more interesting than her canon self. She's a character that desperately needed some more depth to her character, and since she sucked as a villain, perhaps she could do better as a good guy.

Also, the lore about the Otsutsuki clan and the Divine Trees is inspired by canon but with my own spin on it, since not only the canonical lore on those subjects is vague as hell, in some cases it makes very little sense. I hope you find my version more coherent.

Many people wanted a combination between Kurama and the Avatar of Kalika, and here it is. While most of you were thinking in something close to Kurama with a Susanoo armor, I decided to go in the opposite direction and have the Avatar be the base infused with Kurama's power. If the appearance of the Golden Avatar sounds familiar to some of you, that's because I used Sakuyamon as inspiration for this new form.

Though, despite many characters coming back to life, one dies for good. Well, two, since Zetsu finally kicked the bucket as well (three? since Zetsu is two people). I know many of you wanted Obito to be killed like the villain he is, but I needed him to die using the Rinner Rebirth in order to bring all the fallen jinchuriki to life. Then again, at the very least this time around Naruto

didn't have him switch sides with Talk no Jutsu (seriously, while Naruto had reasons for wanting to redeem Neji, Gaara and even Pain, there's nothing that would make him want to extend the same courtesy to Obito, which is why I had Kakashi and Rin being the ones to deal with him in his final fight rather than Naruto).

Some readers in past reviews mentioned that it would made more sense for Naruto and Hinata to defeat the Ten Tails rather than Naruto and Sasuke, since it was defeated the first time by Hagoromo and Hamura, not Indra and Asura. Needless to say, not only I agreed with them (Hamura has no relationship with Sasuke), but it was one of the driving forces behind Hinata's role as deuteragonist.

Yeah, that was a Take That at one of the many ways Madara bullshitted his way into Marty Suedom in the manga, one I've been DYING to write, and boy, did it feel cathartic. That means that there won't be Ten Tails Madara (or Ten Tails Obito for that matter), mostly because if there was, I just can't think how the hell the good guys can beat him (because unlike canon, I wasn't going to have Madara hold back and purposefully use weak moves). But don't worry, I'm sure you guys will love what I have planned with him for the final battle.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Now, we head into the story's very final battle, Naruto and Hinata vs Madara Uchiha! Are you guys as excited as I am? And of course, don't forget to leave your thoughts on this chapter in a review while you wait for the story's climax! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Last Battle

Author's Note: Man, I'm so happy how well received the previous two chapters have been. A number of reviews not seen in quite a lot of time. Let's hope this chapter can draw just as many. Enjoy:

Chapter 131:

The Last Battle

or

The part where we blow up our budget for pure spectacle

Site of the Final Battle

"HAAAAAAAAA!"

With a mighty cry, Madara made his Susanoo deliver a vertical sword strike at his golden hued enemy. The Golden Avatar of Kalika caught the blade with its two upper hands, while it moved to deliver a double palm strike with its lower ones, as it had done before.

Madara, however, wasn't somebody who was easily caught with the same trick twice. He made the Susanoo drop its sword, and jumped backwards, causing the earth to rumble, dodging the double palm hit just in time. As he did so, the Susanoo brought his hands together, summoning several magatama-shaped projectiles between them.

"Yasaka Magatama!"

Taking advantage of the Golden Avatar being momentarily wide open, the Susanoo threw the chakra magatamas at it. Madara, however, wasn't counting with the Avatar's nine long golden lock of hairs that could be used like the tails of Kurama. They raised as if

they had life of its own, and quickly whipped the incoming projectiles, deflecting them with well timed strikes and avoiding the subsequent explosions.

Not bothered by the fact that his attacks were not having any effect on his enemies, Madara simply unsheathed his other sword, and charged forward, this time opting for an horizontal swipe once he reached the melee range.

The Golden Avatar, however, managed to deflect the sword strike to the side with a well aimed palm strike to the Susanoo's wrist, before countering with a few more palm strikes to the chest and the head, cracking the Susanoo's armor on each spot it struck, before finishing with a roundhouse kick, which packed so much force, Madara's Susanoo was launched backwards, falling on its back.

"Incredible... such power..." Madara said in awe, as he channeled chakra towards his Susanoo in order to repair its cracked armor, and had him get back on his feet, as the Golden Avatar approached. "I never thought I'd find somebody who would entertain me as much as Hashirama! And unlike that green clad fool, your power won't burn out after just a few hits."

"Don't you dare insult Gai-sensei!" Naruto yelled.

"Why not? He was a weakling," Madara said in disgust. "And weaklings shouldn't be mourned."

"You have no right to call Gai-sensei a weakling when he was close enough to kill you," Hinata rebuked.

"He was unable to match me unless he had to exchange his whole life for a temporal power boost," Madara rebutted. "Yes, he was close enough to kill me. And a ninja truly powerful would have another chance to finish the job given enough time. But not him. He put his life on the line for a desperate gamble, and he lost!"

Naruto's glare pierced Madara. "Be sure to enjoy this fight then, Madara, because I can assure you it's going to be your last."

"You can trust I will," Madara said, as his Susanoo extended his free arm, generating another sword of chakra. The chakra construct then crossed his blades in front of its face. "Susanoo: Twin Blade Dance!"

The Susanoo spread its crossed blades in opposite arcs, releasing a barrage of giant chakra crescents towards the opposing chakra construct.

The Golden Avatar started to spin around its feet.

"Six Paths: Golden Heavenly Spin!"

The Avatar's spinning speed continued to increase until it turned into a golden tornado of chakra, just in time to deflect the incoming projectiles, which were redirected elsewhere. Once the danger passed, it stopped spinning.

"Our turn," Naruto said, as he started to make hand seals. "Lava Release: Flower Fruit Mountain!"

The Golden Avatar crouched to one knee and slammed the ground with a single palm. Suddenly, a pool of lava formed at Madara's Susanoo's feet, and the blue chakra construct started slowly sink into a pool of molten rock, while the intense heat began to melt its armor. Then, the Golden Avatar rushed towards the Susanoo, the earth shaking with each footstep, as it clenched its two upper fists. Lion heads made of golden chakra formed around them.

"Six Paths: Twin Lion Fists!"

The Avatar of Kalika slammed one of its lion fists onto the Susanoo's stomach, making it to double over, before delivering a devastating left hook to its face, pushing it upwards. It finished with another punch to the Susanoo's face, which packed so much force, it

produced a sonic boom, sending Madara's Susanoo flying backwards.

Despite the brutal attack, Madara channeled more chakra to regenerate his Susanoo, while it forced it to get back on its feet once more.

"Just how much fight is there in this man?" Hinata asked, part astonished and part frustrated at how much punishment the rogue Uchiha could withstand.

" You have no idea, girl. Madara loves to fight against strong opponents, so he's having the time of his life right now," Kurama answered. **"He won't stop until either he or his enemies are dead, whatever happens first."**

"Then let's make sure it's actually him," Naruto stated.

...

Meanwhile, to the sidelines, from a safe distance, a group of Allied Ninjas, mostly from Konoha, were gathered in order to watch the final battle. Chief among them were Jiraiya, Tsunade, and most members of the Konoha 15.

"Guys!" a familiar voice called.

The group turned towards the direction of the voice, and much to their joy, they saw Shino and Fu coming towards them. Fu looked a bit sick, with her face looking pale and her eyes looking tired, and one arm slung around Shino's shoulder, who was helping her walk. But other than that, she appeared to be okay.

"Fu!" Kiba and Tamaki cried in unison, as they went to greet their friend from Taki.

"Oh man, I can't believe you're awake! I thought you were a goner," Kiba said, with Akamaru barking happily.

"Guess whoever revived all those people revived you as well, huh?" Tamaki asked.

"Chomei," Fu said, ignoring Tamaki's question, as her eyes drifted towards the sky, where the nine planetoids containing one Tailed Beast each were resting. "We need to free her. As well as the others."

"Don't worry, Naruto and Hinata are already on it," Neji said. "Once they defeat Madara, I'm positive the Tailed Beasts will be released."

"By the way, why are we just watching?" Sasuke asked. "Shouldn't we go there and help?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "As they are right now, Naruto, Hinata and Madara are on a completely different league from us. If we intervened, we'd be more of a burden rather than help. But don't worry, I can sense that Naruto and Hinata's combined power is much greater than Madara's. This fight will end soon."

While they didn't like the idea of just being mere observers and let Naruto and Hinata do all the work, they decided to heed Jiraiya's work, and wait until the inevitable victory came. That's it, all of them except Shikamaru, who watched the battle with a critical eye, analyzing every move each of the two chakra colossi made.

"Shikamaru?" Choji asked, noticing his teammate's demeanor. "Something wrong?"

"Yes," was the Nara's reply, his eyes fixed on the seemingly one sided battle. "But right now, I can't discern what."

"What do you mean?" Ino asked, growing a little worried. If Shikamaru saw trouble ahead, it was better not to dismiss his concern. "Don't you believe that Naruto and Hinata can win this?"

"The way the battle is going, yes, I do believe they are on their way to victory, and that's what worries me," Shikamaru said. "This looks

way too easy."

Choji's eyes glanced towards the two titanic battlers. The ground shook again when the Golden Avatar parried a double blow from Madara's Susanoo, as cracks started to spread around their feet. "Well, I wouldn't call fighting that thing 'easy'. Even if I used Super Multi Size Jutsu-"

Shikamaru shook his head. "What I mean is, Madara looks rather confident in his chances to win, despite the fact that he's getting his ass whooped. I'm afraid he knows something we're ignoring. He may have one last ace in the hole that we're not considering. Such as..."

Shikamaru's eyes drifted towards the nine planetoids floating high in the sky.

...

The battle of giants continued, with Naruto and Hinata's Golden Avatar of Kalika still dominating the battle. However, no matter how much they battered Madara's Susanoo, the rogue Uchiha continued to fight. In fact, it seemed as if the beatings gave him additional energy.

"Such power at such young age... I get chills to imagine what will you become in a decade..." Madara said with a manic grin.

"Unfortunately, neither of us will have the chance to see your progress."

"Why are you talking as if you're winning?" Naruto asked, annoyed.

"Because I have won. You simply haven't realized of it just yet," Madara smugly replied.

"We already defeated the Ten Tails. Beating you will be far less challenging," Hinata confidently added.

"Good! Try to keep that aplomb! Or else, this fight will be boring," Madara said, as he started making hand seals. "Wood Release: Deep Forest Emergence!"

The ground around the Golden Avatar quaked for a second, before a large mass of green wooden roots burst from underground, and began to wrap around its legs, body, and all four arms. The chakra giantess tried to break free through brute force, but the roots' pull was strong.

"Now stay still while I deliver the next blow!" Madara said, as his Susanoo started to flap its wings, flying into the air.

The Golden Avatar continued to struggle against the mass of roots as Madara's Susanoo gained altitude. Once it was high enough, Madara commanded it to dive into his golden enemy, both swords aiming downwards. Unfortunately, Madara seemed to forget about the Golden Avatar's tail-like hair locks, which Naruto and Hinata used in time to break the roots immobilizing the Avatar, freeing it in time to block the Susanoo's onslaught.

Despite breaking free, the Golden Avatar was unable to stop its foe or dodge in time, and the blue chakra construct slammed into it. Then again, it managed to use its four arms to grab the Susanoo's wrists while also protecting itself from the impact, even if the slam pushed it backwards.

His attack not having the desired effect, Madara tried to pull back, but the Golden Avatar was still holding onto the Susanoo by its wrists. Then, like Hinata had done with Toneri's giant statue, the Avatar started to spin in place, building momentum. Unlike the aforementioned battle, it only built enough momentum just to toss Madara a couple hundred meters into the sky, and while the blue Susanoo was in the air, the Avatar brought its four hands together, gathering red and blue chakra in the form of a purple sphere.

"Tailed Beast Ball!"

The Avatar thrust its four hands towards the airborne Susanoo, launching the purple sphere at him. After just regaining balance, the Susanoo was unable to dodge the projectile, and was engulfed inside a massive explosion.

"Yes! Direct hit!" Naruto cheered, pumping his free fist.

Unfortunately, he realized that the battle wasn't over when Hinata's expression didn't change, her eyes focused on the cloud of smoke created by the explosion. And indeed, the moment the smoke cleared, Madara's Susanoo was still there. It was far from unharmed, having several chunks of its armor tore off, including half its helmet, while only half of its wings remained.

"What an impressive display of power. I never had this much fun since Hashirama. In fact, I'd say that the two of you together are more powerful than I am right now," Madara admitted. "Should this battle continue as it is, I would inevitably lose."

"Then why don't you surrender?" Naruto asked, even if he knew that Madara would never do such a thing. "Or are you the type of ninja that prefers to go down fighting?"

"You are correct on that regard, boy. I only surrendered once in my life, and it's a moment that will haunt me forever," Madara admitted. "Yes, I would fight you to the bitter end even if I knew that I have no chances of beating you. Unfortunately for you..."

Madara made a hand seal, and both Naruto and Hinata shivered upon sensing the sheer amount of chakra that was being moved.

"... I don't plan to lose today."

The nine planetoids with the Tailed Beasts inside them started to crackle with white electricity. Then, the perfectly round asteroids fired a beam of bluish-white chakra each, the nine beams converging into their shared target, Madara's Susanoo. The blue chakra construct started to swell as the power of the Tailed Beasts was pushed into it,

quickly regenerating into its complete form. Fire-like chakra of the same color poured from the Susanoo's eyes and mouth.

"What... what the hell is he doing!?" Naruto asked.

"His Susanoo... it's using the Tailed Beasts' chakra to power it up!" Hinata said in realization. "Its power... it's so massive..."

" ***Yeah... this doesn't look good...***" Kurama interceded, sounding positively worried. ***"If the chakra of the nine Tailed Beasts is combined into one, you produce pure Six Paths chakra, and he's using that chakra to empower his Susanoo"***

"So, it's like my chakra... but on a much larger scale?" Naruto asked, before gulping.

They continued to watch in horror as Madara's Susanoo absorbed all that power, triggering yet another form, this time looking as if a being made of pure fire and light was growing out of the armor, with the armor changing its shape in order to adapt to it. Lightning bolts shoot from the Susanoo's new form, as the air around it shimmered. Lastly, two swords which appeared to be made of pure lightning appeared on its hands.

"Ahhhhh... the feeling... it's even better than I could have imagined!" Madara said, spreading his arms, basking in the feeling of power of his new form. He then looked down at the Golden Avatar, and smirked. "Do you understand now? You've lost from the very beginning. I might not be able to become the jinchuriki of the Ten Tails right now, but the power of this Susanoo is a pretty close facsimile... at least, it is to wipe you and those other fools trying to oppose me.

"Thanks to the power of the Tailed Beasts, I managed to break the limits of the Susanoo, creating a form that could crush even Hashirama at his strongest. Now, all it needs is a name. Let's see... given the source of its power... how about Six Paths Perfect Susanoo? A bit of a mouthful, but it will do for the time being."

Naruto and Hinata didn't reply, as they came to terms with the fact that their battle was about to turn around. The two of them could feel the sheer power of Madara's Six Paths Perfect Susanoo, and they were painfully aware that the Uchiha's boasting wasn't undeserved. Still, the two of them were not going to give up.

"Naruto, Hinata... that thing might not be as powerful as the Ten Tails, but Madara will use its power much more efficiently than that monster did. You two better fight like you never did before!" Kurama warned, making the two humans tense up.

The streams of energy began to thin until they disappeared, apparently charging Madara's Susanoo completely. The newly empowered Susanoo flexed its limbs, sending a pulse of chakra that crossed the entire continent. It was felt by pretty much every human being, including those that weren't sensory ninja, leaving all of them with a feeling of dread, as if a cold hand grasped their hearts.

Madara's lips formed a deranged smile, as his Rinnegan eyes focused on the Golden Avatar of Kalika. "Shall we dance?"

Despite its sheer size, Madara's Susanoo crossed the distance between it and its opposing chakra construct in little more than a second, and delivered a brutal backhand. The Golden Avatar was flung back as if it was a mere ragdoll, slamming against a rock formation that was shattered into pebbles. The two humans inside the construct didn't experience the whole power of that single move, but they didn't come out of the impact unscathed.

"Uh-Ugh..." Hinata croaked.

"Hinata! Are you okay?" Naruto asked in concern, holding her straight.

"Y-Yes... I wasn't just prepared for that..." Hinata replied, as she watched the Six Paths Susanoo walking towards them at a leisure pace. "I'm not confident the Avatar can withstand many more of hits of such force."

"Agreed. That's why we better go on the offensive," Naruto suggested. "Ready to go?"

Hinata simply nodded.

With their combined effort, the Avatar got back on its feet, and before the Susanoo could deliver another blow, it dashed towards it, using its building momentum to deliver a palm strike so powerful, it produced a sonic boom followed by a strong gust of wind.

Too bad it failed to cause any harm on Madara's Susanoo, who didn't even move. Naruto and Hinata were taken aback, and they had the Avatar deliver more palm strikes at the blue and white chakra construct, each hit having the exact same effect as the one before. It was like watching an ordinary man trying to bring down a steel wall with his bare hands.

The Susanoo then smashed the hilt of one of its lightning swords on the Avatar's head, making it double over, following with a brutal kick to the face, sending the Avatar flying away. Naruto and Hinata screamed in unison, before they shared chakra construct slammed backwards onto the ground. Madara laughed upn seeing how easily he was dominating the fight.

"Does it sink yet, how inferior you kids are to me?" Madara taunted. "Or do I need to beat such reality into you for a bit longer? Normally I'm not one to ask for the enemy to surrender, but I don't enjoy facing enemies that can't fight back."

The Golden Avatar of Kalika got back on its feet once more, its wounds slowly closing down as Naruto and Hinata channeled more chakra into it. Then, the Avatar brought two of its hands together, making Naruto's favorite seal, and four more Avatars popped into existence. Madara simply laughed at the new developments.

"You think that multiplying the number of losers is going to change anything?" Madara asked. "If that's the case, then come and try to strike me down."

Two of the Clone Avatars rushed forward, and flanked Madara's Susanoo before delivering a palm strike each, and like before, it had no effect. The Six Paths Susanoo sank one of its lightning swords into the gut of one of the Clone Avatars, while vertically slicing the other one in half, making both of them disappear. And while he was busy doing this, the other two clones rushed forward, grappling an arm each with their arms and locks of hair, leaving the Susanoo seemingly immobilized.

The real Golden Avatar cupped its four hands together, and started to form a Tailed Beast Ball between them.

"Tailed Beast Ball!"

The Golden Avatar launched the sphere of destructive energy at the Six Paths Susanoo, who wasn't even attempting to break free from the clones keeping it in place. Perhaps Madara was confident none of Naruto and Hinata's attacks could harm his Susanoo in its new form. The Tailed Beast Ball found its mark, resulting in an explosion that, unlike the Golden Avatar's previous attacks, managed to at least make the Susanoo flinch and stumble backwards.

"Look! That caused some harm!" Hinata pointed out excitedly.

"I saw it! Let's do it again!" Naruto agreed.

More Tailed Beast Balls came, each one of them hitting the Six Paths Susanoo, which reacted to the explosions, but leaving only minimal damage. And once again, it appeared that Madara was purposefully testing the limits of his Susanoo's toughness, as once he grew bored of letting his foes play target practice with him, the Susanoo brought its arms together, slamming the two Clone Avatars against each other, before casually tossing them aside.

"Tailed Beast Ball!"

"Yasaka Magatama!"

The Golden Avatar launched yet another Tailed Beast Ball at Madara, while the rogue Uchiha summoned several magatama-like projectiles, and launched them forward. The magatamas slammed into the Tailed Beast Ball, breaking it apart without losing almost any momentum. The Avatar covered itself with its tail-like locks of hair just in time as the magatamas hit, resulting in a chain of explosions that blew said locks into chunks that quickly dissipated into the air, while pushing it backwards.

The Six Paths Susanoo then stabbed one of its swords of light into the ground, sending an underground energy shockwave that traveled in a line towards the Golden Avatar, cracking the earth in half and blowing up chunks of rock and dirt everywhere. The Avatar was unable to regrow its locks of hair to use as protection in time, taking the brunt of the attack and being blasted backwards.

"His attacks are so brutal..." Hinata lamented.

"I know. We can't let him put us on the defensive, or else, he's going to kick our asses really bad!" Naruto said, as he and Hinata commanded the Avatar to get back on its feet again.

"The Tailed Beast Ball appeared to cause some harm. Let's try that again" Hinata suggested. "This time, I'll add to the Ball's power!"

"Got it!"

Once again, the Avatar cupped its four hands together, as it began to form the Tailed Beast Ball. Meanwhile, Hinata's hands formed several hand seals as her Truth Seeking Balls merged into a single, purple glowing orb of chakra.

"Tailed Beast Ball!"

"Amethyst Wheel Reincarnation Explosion!"

As the Avatar fired the sphere of destruction, Hinata released a mass of purple colored lightnings that wrapped themselves around

the ball, giving it a cloak of electricity. The two youths held their breath as their combination attack sailed towards Madara's Susanoo. The Uchiha smirked once again.

"A combination jutsu. Nice. I'm really fond of those myself," Madara replied, as his Susanoo delivered a vertical swipe, slicing the incoming attack in two, the two pieces sailing upwards in opposing angles, before they detonated in the sky. His grin grew wider upon seeing his foes' hopes being crushed once again. "Unfortunately, it won't be enough. Nothing that you do will be enough to defeat me as I am right now!"

"Bullshit! You still haven't seen the best we can do!" Naruto angrily retorted. "Hinata, follow my lead!"

The Avatar brought its hands together once again, except instead of another Tailed Beast Ball, it created a Rasengan, which started to slowly become a Rasenshuriken as Naruto added wind chakra to it, while Hinata added lightning chakra of her own. The air was filled the sound of loud whirrings as well as thunderclaps, while the Avatar held a large spinning shuriken of wind chakra coated with lightning.

"Take this! Sage Art: Double Elemental Release, Spiraling Tempest!"

Madara watched once again as the whirring shuriken of chakra sailed towards his Susanoo. For some reason, he felt this attack packed a meaner punch than the standard Tailed Beast Ball.

"My my, such an interesting jutsu!" Madara said, amused. "That might do some harm to my Susanoo after all. That is, if I allow it to reach that far!"

Naruto and Hinata shivered as they felt the Six Paths Susanoo gathering chakra, lightning bolts firing from its body in every direction, before it slammed both its swords into the ground, launching a vertical slash of chakra as long as the Susanoo was tall, carving a deep crack on the earth as it sailed forward. The two attacks met, and for a few seconds they struggled against the other.

But much to the Konoha ninja's horror, Madara's attack was the one to win the push, breaking their special Rasenshuriken in thousands of tiny shards of chakra, before it slammed against the Golden Avatar flinging it backwards, landing on its back, the impact causing a tremor.

"I imagine that jutsu was your last resort, right?" Madara asked, as he made his Susanoo to move forward, closing the distance between the two titans. "I could see it was quite powerful. Had you used it against my usual Susanoo, it would have destroyed it completely. However-ug?"

For some reason, Madara's Susanoo started to shrink, returning back to its previous form. The confused Uchiha took only a couple seconds to realize what was going on.

"I see," he said, sounding annoyed, as he made a hand seal. The planetoids floating above the ground fired a beam of chakra each into Madara's Susanoo, recharging it, allowing it to return to its empowered form, before it resumed its walk towards its downed enemy.

It seemed that Naruto and Hinata still had some fight in them, as they poured more chakra into the construct in order to regenerate it, while they commanded it to get back on its feet. Except Madara didn't appear to be in the mood to continue the fight, and once it reached them, the Six Path Susanoo kicked it down with great force.

"Sorry, but no," Madara's grin had disappeared, replaced by an unamused scowl. The Susanoo started to brutally kick the golden Avatar while it was down. "I'm tired of this charade. You two will die NOW!"

...

A few minutes earlier

"That's it, I've seen enough!" Sasuke immediately shot forward, ready to assist Naruto and Hinata before Madara could end them for good -and wondering how is that nobody thought in doing so earlier-, but much to his surprise and annoyance, a firm hand kept him in place. Turning around, he saw it was his brother Itachi. "Itachi! What the hell are you doing!?"

"Saving your life, brother. Think for a second! If you went and fought Madara, he would kill you instantly!" Itachi said.

"Then come with me!" Sasuke retorted. "Between all of us, I'm sure we could bring him down!"

"Madara already proved in the past that he's beyond mere numbers," Shisui added, much to the youngest Uchiha's growing annoyance.

"Then what are we supposed to do? Watch how Madara beats Naruto and Hinata down?" Sasuke asked, his Sharingan locked on Madara's Six Paths Susanoo, as he lumbered towards the downed Golden Avatar. "There must be something we can do!"

"I thought in a way that we could provide some support to Naruto and Hinata, but I don't think if it's going to be enough to..." Shikamaru began, but trailed off upon seeing the Susanoo briefly shrinking back to its previous form, before Madara directed more Tailed Beast chakra towards it, reversing the regression. The gears inside Shikamaru's head began to turn once again as a plan, a much improved version of his original idea, formed inside his head, now that he has this new piece of critical information. "Actually, scratch that. I think we may still win this."

"Yeah, I also noticed that Madara's new Susanoo form has a glaring weak point," Jiraiya said, as he walked towards the Nara. "Do you know a way to take advantage of such weakness?"

"I do," was Shikamaru's response. "I'm going to need two things: first, all my former classmates to follow me and do what I say. And two, somebody to keep Madara distracted while we get ready."

"That can be done," Jiraiya said. "Who's going to distract Madara, thought? Because even as a Sage, I'm afraid I don't have the power to even make a scratch on that thing."

"Leave it to us, Hokage-sama," Itachi said, as Shisui nodded behind him.

Hanabi took a step forward. "There's no way I'm standing in the sidelines while my sister and her boyfriend risks their neck for us, I have a Tenseigan too, for Kami's sake!"

"I'll go too. Somebody needs to remind that asshole that he isn't the only one with a Rinnegan," Tsunade said, cracking her knuckles. "Besides, Naruto isn't the only one of my children that son of a bitch has hurt."

As they all moved out, Shino gently helped Fu to sit down.

"I wish I was able to go with you," Fu lamented.

"Don't worry, girl, he has Kiba and I do cover his back," Tamaki confidently stated. "I promise you we will come back in one piece."

Fu forced herself to smile, and nodded. "I know. Please give that guy a punch or two on my behalf, okay?"

The three younger members of the Animal Squad nodded, before they followed the rest of their former classmates.

...

"If it wasn't for you two, I would be the new Sage of the Six Paths, and I would be leading this world to a new golden era of peace," Madara seethed, as his Susanoo continued to stomp on the Golden Avatar. "Resealing the Tailed Beasts on my own may take me weeks... months even! Making sure your deaths are as slow and painful as possible will be a very small consolation..."

The Susanoo lifted its foot, ready to vent Madara's anger on the screaming teens once again. The chakra came down, and then...

"Shinra Tensei!"

Suddenly, the Six Paths Susanoo was pushed back by a gravitational shockwave. Normally, a shockwave of such power wouldn't be enough to move it, but given its precarious balance, it tumbled back several steps, but didn't threaten to fall down. Two emotions filled Madara, the first one being confusion at who else besides him and Obito had access to the power of the Rinnegan. The second being anger, at being interrupted when he was about to finish his prey off.

Enraged, Madara tracked the source of chakra of such attack, and saw a blond woman who placed herself between him and the fallen golden chakra construct.

"Don't you dare lay another finger on those children!" the woman bellowed.

Madara's glare pierced her, unamused. "And who are you supposed to be? Their mother?"

"Of one of them, yes," Tsunade said. "But that's not all what I am. My name is Tsunade Senju, and I am Hashirama Senju's granddaughter! And just like my grandfather did in the past, so shall I protect both my loved ones and Konoha from scum like you!"

Madara narrowed his eyes at her. Thanks to the Rinnegan's enhanced vision, he could make most of the woman's facial features despite how far she was from him. And one thing that drew his attention were those light brown eyes of her. They weren't Hashirama's, but for some reason, they felt familiar to the rogue Uchiha. Then, a memory of the two white haired kids that tried to fight him a few days ago sprung to mind, and the connection was made.

"Oh, I see. So you're the mother of that pair of brats as well, aren't you?" Madara asked. "The ones with white hair. Tell me, woman, do you have any of your kids extraordinary abilities?"

"No, but I don't need Wood Release or an extreme affinity to nature energy to fight you," Tsunade confidently said, as she placed her hands on her hips. "Especially when I'm not fighting you alone."

"Yasaka Magatama!"

"Susanoo: Tsukumo!"

A barrage of green chakra needles as well as red magatama-like projectiles crashed against Madara's Six Path Susanoo. The impact and subsequent explosions didn't do much, but the red and green Susanoos that tackled it in tandem after that managed to push it back, much to Madara's surprise.

"You two again?" Madara said, glaring at Itachi and Shisui, as a look of irritation spread across his face. "You already had your chance to prove your mettle against me on multiple occasions. This fight goes beyond your pathetic level of power and skill!"

"Yeah, excuse us if we disagree on that," Shisui snarked.

Madara snarled, and made his Six Paths Susanoo to slam its fists on each of the opposing chakra constructs, forcing them to release it. Itachi and Shisui's Susanoos stumbled back, but remained firm. The Six Paths Susanoo created a sword of lightning, and swung it down towards Shisui's Senjutsu Susanoo. Shisui's Susanoo summoned its trusty drill-spear while Itachi's Susanoo unsheathed its Sword of Totsuka, and the two of them parried the incoming blow at once.

There was a sonic boom when the chakra weapons clashed, and the Uchiha cousins winced as they felt how their chakra constructs sunk into the ground a little. Madara lifted the lightning sword again, though rather than parrying, Itachi and Shisui decided to dodge by

jumping to the sides. The sword hit the ground instead, releasing yet another slash of chakra that cracked the earth as it traveled forward.

"Regardless of my bravado, Madara is right. We're way above our heads trying to fight him. Then again, we aren't fighting to win," Shisui thought.

While Madara was focused on the Uchiha cousins and Tsunade, he didn't notice Hanabi flying just above him. The young Hyuga cancelled the flight, allowing gravity to get a hold of her as she quickly manifested the Avatar of Kalika, the magenta chakra construct landing on the back of the Six Paths Susanoo, wrapping two of its arms around the Susanoo's neck while using its two free hands to smash its head open. Or trying to smash it open.

"This is for the beating you gave me before! And the beating you gave my teammates!" Hanabi shouted, as she vented all the anger she had gathered inside her. "And my sister too!"

"So you've decided to come out at all once. Very well then! If you're so eager to die, then I'll be more than happy to oblige!" Madara said, as he tried to get Hanabi out of his Susanoo's back, while Itachi and Shisui's Susanoos continued to attack him from the sides.

...

Naruto and Hinata watched as the Tsunade, the Uchiha cousins, and Hanabi engaged Madara, buying them some reprieve from the brutal beating they were getting.

"What... what are they doing?" Hinata asked in horror. "They're not match for Madara! He's going to kill all of them! Hanabi-chan, get out of here!"

"Hinata, calm down!" Naruto said, squeezing Hinata's hand with his own, in an attempt to reassure her. "I don't think they're trying to fight him for real, just buying us some time to recover."

"But-"

"There's no time to protest. We can't waste anymore seconds hesitating, or else they will be risking their lives in vain," Naruto told Hinata. The Hyuga clenched her jaw, but ultimately nodded. "Good. How much chakra do you have left?"

"Sadly, not much," Hinata said, looking down. "I believe between the two of us we could rebuild the Golden Avatar one last time."

"Alright, in that case, let's make sure that-"

"Hey, lovebirds, make some room!" a new voice said.

Much to Naruto's shock, Sasuke leaped inside the downed Golden Avatar, followed by Sakura and Karin. Then, Shikamaru, Ino and Choji joined them, as well as the rest of their former classmates, and Team Gai.

"What the... what are you guys doing here?" a confused Naruto asked.

"What do you think, dumbass? Lending you a hand," Sasuke replied. "Because it surely looks like you need one."

"Besides, Shikamaru has a plan to defeat Madara. But he needs all of us to work together," Sakura explained, before her green eyes drifted towards the people fighting Madara. "They're buying us time for us to get ready, so let's make it count!"

"Indeed. This chakra construct can be the key to beating Madara for good, but it needs some reinforcement first. Let's begin. Ino, link all of our minds!" Shikamaru ordered.

Ino nodded, and made a hand seal. Everybody could feel how their minds were connected towards each other, as if they were sharing a single brain.

" *Done!*" Ino said, their voice sounding inside everybody else's head.

" Good. Now we don't need to talk out loud and we can coordinate our movements much better," Shikamaru mentally said. "Sakura, your turn!"

Sakura nodded, as she brought her hands, forming the Tiger Seal.
"Ninja Art: One Hundred Healings!"

Naruto couldn't help but gape in shock upon seeing his former classmate using one of his mom's most powerful healing jutsu like that. Sakura's body started glow with a red aura, and black lines started to spread around the Golden Avatar, regenerating its missing parts and closing down its wounds.

" With this jutsu active, you won't have to use your own chakra to repair it any time it takes damage!" Sakura mentally said.

" But we're still going to need more chakra as well," Shikamaru added, as he looked at his hand. He smiled upon seeing the small cuts and burns he had gotten over the course of the previous battle quickly closed on their own. *"As I imagined, the chakra of the Nine Tails also heals us as well. In that case, Neji, Tenten, Lee! You should be able to open the Celestial Gates without being afraid of the usual backlash! But open only up to the seventh one, we can't risk you guys dying."*

Team Gai nodded in unison, and the three of them crossed their arms in front of their face before thrusting them to the sides in one swift motion.

"Gate of Wonder: Open!"

A bright green aura flared around their bodies as chakra poured from them like a torrent, channeling it towards the Golden Avatar, who was starting to get back on its feet.

" Good! Now, Choji, your turn! Use the chakra Neji, Lee and Tenten are releasing!" Shikamaru commanded.

" *You got it!*" Choji said, clapping his hands together. "Super Multi Size Jutsu!"

Choji, however, didn't grow any bigger. Instead, it was the Golden Avatar who was starting to slowly increase in size. While it was previously a head shorter than Madara's Six Paths Susanoo, it grew until it was now a head taller, about one hundred and twenty meters in height.

" *Sasuke! Let's give the final touch!*" Shikamaru said.

Sasuke merely nodded, and made a hand seal. His eyes glowed with a red glint as the Mangekyo Sharingan formed, and a deep purple aura washed over his body. "Susanoo: Majestic Attire!"

Purple flames burst at several parts of the Golden Avatar: the legs, its four forearms, its chest, waist and head, the fire quickly coalescing into pieces of armor, partially covering it in Susanoo. Aside from the armor, the Susanoo added an additional pair of arms, each of them holding a sword of chakra each.

Six Paths: Almighty Avatar of Konoha!

" *Maybe Naruto-kun and I alone weren't able to beat Madara,*" Hinata thought, as her Tenseigan focused once again on the rogue Uchiha, who had finally gotten rid of Hanabi, her Avatar of Kalika lying on the ground, and was now pounding Itachi and Shisui's Susanoo with its bare fists. "*But with all our friends fighting alongside us... we might have a chance!*"

"Itachi, Shisui! Get the hell out of there! We're finished here!" Sasuke warned his fellow Uchiha.

"You too, Hanabi-chan! Thanks for your help, but now you should try to find a safe place to stay!" Hinata added.

It seems they heard the warning, as their chakra constructs disappeared, and the three of them, as well as Tsunade, vacated the

battleground. At first Madara attempted to give chase, but his attraction was drawn to the Avatar of Konoha. He smirked in amusement.

"Look at that. You saw me, and decided to add some power to your own construct. The Susanoo armor looks really good on it, I must admit," Madara complimented. "Unfortunately, it will do you no good."

" Alright, here it comes. First phase of the plan: gauge how strong we are compared to Madara," Shikamaru said.

As the two colossi lumbered towards each other, the young Konoha ninjas braced themselves as the Six Paths Susanoo raised one of its lightning swords, and brought it down in a vertical slice. The Avatar's Susanoo arms crossed their swords in front of its face just in place to parry the blow, which produced a shockwave followed by a gust of wind and a tremor, but the Avatar stood in place.

The Konoha ninjas felt a little relief wash over them as they managed to past their first test. But it was only the first of many to come.

" Allow me to deal the first blow," Haku said, as he started to make hand seals. "Ice Release: Freezing Wave!"

One of the Avatar's feet started to glow with chakra, and from it a row of sharp ice as tall as the Avatar itself rocketed towards the Six Paths Susanoo, pushing it backwards and covering it in frosts, slowing its movements down.

" Yes, we did it! We finally caused that thing some harm!" Hinata cheered.

" I call dibs on the next move!" Tamaki said.

The Avatar spread its middle arms to the sides, and three long claws made of chakra grew from the back of its hands. The armored

chakra construct then rushed forward, delivering a multitude of swipes at the Six Paths Susanoo, each swipes pushing the half frozen Susanoo a little back.

Madara, however, decided he had enough. With a flex of all the Tailed Beast chakra stored inside his Susanoo, he instantly repelled all the frost covering it, while pushing the Avatar of Konoha backwards. The Susanoo then slammed the opposing chakra construct, before rushing forward and deliver a series of punches, forcing the Avatar of Konoha to move backwards.

"Your steps are a bit better than before. But not enough to beat me in this dance!" Madara boasted.

"You haven't seen nothing yet!" Naruto said out loud, as he extended the two lower pair of arms to the sides, using their hands to form two Rasenshurikens, and mentally commanded Hinata and Haku to infuse them with elemental chakra. One of the Rasenshuriken took the shape of a spinning shuriken made of pure purple lightning, while the other appeared to be made of ice. "Lightning Release: Spiraling Thunderstorm! Ice Release: Spiraling Blizzard!"

As the two elemental shuriken barreled towards his Susanoo, Madara simply smirked.

"Impressive. But once again, you fail to realize the difference in power between you and me," Madara boasted, as his Susanoo started to make hand seals. "Susanoo: Fire Release Majestic Destroying Flame!"

The Six Paths Susanoo exhaled a gigantic stream of flames, that moved towards the Avatar of Konoha, incinerating the ground it touched to a crisp, until the wall of fire met the two elemental shuriken, both of them exploding into spheres of spinning ice and lightning. While the elemental spheres threatened to overpower Madara's attack, the Uchiha merely empowered his attack with more Tailed Beast chakra. The flames roared, burning brightly, as they

finally managed to overpower the dual elemental attack, and continue its travel towards the Avatar of Konoha unimpeded.

" *Water Release users, protect the Avatar!*" Naruto commanded.

The command proved to be unnecessary, as Sakura, Ino and Haku were already weaving the seals of the same water jutsu.

"Water Release: Water Colliding Wave!"

A second before Madara's torrent of flames could torch the Avatar of Konoha, a massive vortex of water appeared around it, covering it in its entirety. The flames were put out the moment they crashed against the watery shield, but their heat was so intense that most of the water was instantly vaporized into steam, leaving nothing but a few puddles at the feet of the chakra giantess.

Deciding it was their turn to attack, Naruto used the Avatar to channel yet another Tailed Beast Ball. And just when he was about to toss it, the Susanoo arms launched a pair of chakra slashes at the sphere of destruction, combining with it.

"Tailed Beast Chaos Dance!"

"Another combination," Madara said, rolling his eyes. The Six Path Susanoo held up a hand, and lightning gathered on it, forming a very long spear. "Tell me, kids, did you know I was the one who pioneered that combination? You surely don't think you can use my own weapons against me." The Susanoo then hurled the spear towards the incoming attack, piercing it completely, and keeping enough momentum to continue forward.

"Shit!" Sasuke cursed, as he quickly summoned his Susanoo's shield-bow on the left arm, and used it to intercept the attack. The lightning spear connected, blowing up the shield completely, as well as the hand and part of the Susanoo's forearm, making Sasuke wince.

Fortunately, Sakura's jutsu also affected the Susanoo, which began to slowly regenerate its missing limb.

Rather than another ranged attack, Madara has his Susanoo barrel towards the Avatar of Konoha, tackling it backwards with a powerful shoulder slam, before summoning another sword to one of its hands, and delivering a diagonal upwards swipe.

"What the...?"

But much to Madara's shock, before the sword could connect, the Susanoo was frozen in place, being rendered completely immobile. Looking down, Madara could see that the shadows of the two colossi were now linked by a dark thread.

"Come on guys... !" Shikamaru urged, his voice sounding strained, as beads of sweat ran through his temples, as he struggled to keep his hands forming a hand seal. "I can't hold him for much longer..."

They didn't need to be told anymore, as the Avatar quickly lunged forward and delivered a set of punches and palm strikes with its six arms, pushing the Six Paths Susanoo a little back with each blow.

"Fire Release: Great FireBall Jutsu!"

"Sage Art: Lightning Release Thunder Blast!"

"Ice Release: Freezing Wave!"

From within the chakra construct, Sasuke breathed a massive fireball, while Hinata cast a storm of lightning bolts from her extended hands, while Haku did likewise with a wave of ice. The tri-elemental attack managed to cause some harm on the Susanoo, but nothing that actually lasted.

Madara glared at the teens inside the Avatar of Konoha. "I seriously hope that wasn't the best you have."

"Guys... I think he has a point. None of our attacks are leaving much of a mark on that monstrous Susanoo of his..." Hinata inwardly lamented.

"Just as I feared. Our power simply isn't enough to match him in direct combat," Shikamaru gravely said, However, his lips curved into a smirk that hinted this was something he had already anticipated. *"That means that we will have to beat him through indirect means then. Everybody, let's flee to the sky!"*

"On it!" Sasuke replied, as two purple wings appeared on the Avatar's back.

The chakra construct then turned around, began to flap its wings, raising powerful gusts of wind and started to fly into the sky, seemingly fleeing away from Madara. Or at least, that's what the rogue Uchiha was led to believe.

"You dare to oppose me, and now that you find yourselves outmatched, you think you can escape from my wrath!?" Madara asked, scowling deeply. His Susanoo leaped into the air, and started to give chase. *"I DON'T THINK SO!"*

Exactly as Shikamaru had predicted. In his rage and lust for blood, he didn't realize he was being led away from the trapped Tailed Beasts.

"Alright, he's following us!" Karin informed the others.

"But his speed is much greater than ours. He will catch us before we can reach the upper atmosphere," Neji added.

"Not good. We need to be as high as possible for the plan to work," Shikamaru said. *"We need to do something to delay him a little!"*

"I believe this is the moment when I step up to offer my assistance," Shino offered, as a swarm of beetles poured from under his clothes.

He made a single hand seal. "Aburame Secret Art: Giant Beetle Growth!"

The jutsu followed by a multitude bursts of smoke, and from the smoke emerged beetles as large as Akamaru, covered in a golden chakra cloak not unlike Naruto's Kurama Cloak, and dived towards the Six Paths Susanoo.

The swarm of giant golden beetles latched onto Madara's Susanoo, and bit on it viciously, slowly draining it of its chakra, forcing it to slow down.

"Do you think an Aburame trick is going to save you from me?" Madara asked, growing more and more angry with the way these impertinent brats were insulting him by using such ineffective tactics and skills. "Think again!"

Once again, the Six Paths Susanoo flexed its chakra, releasing a powerful pulse that violently pushed all the giant golden beetles away, allowing Madara to continue his chase. Of course, the beetles already did their job, even if Madara was unaware of it.

Eventually, the Avatar of Konoha reached the edge of the atmosphere. All its occupants gasped in shock at the breathtaking view of the Earth below them, and took a second to admire and appreciate how beautiful their planet looked from such an altitude. Of course, a second was all they could afford, as Madara's Six Path Susanoo quickly caught up to them.

"End of the chase, children," Madara said, already tasting victory. "Though, I must wonder, where did you plan to go? Were you thinking in fleeing to another planet? Not that it would be that bad of an idea, since there's no place on Earth where you could escape from my wrath."

"There were plenty of people next to the site we were fighting on," Naruto stated. "Here we can go all out without having to worry of collateral damage."

Even if that wasn't the reason behind the battlefield change, it wasn't a lie either.

"Of course. It shouldn't come as a surprise that ninjas indoctrinated in Hashirama's school of thought would care about saving unworthy lives," Madara said, rolling his eyes. "I guess I forgot about how Obito was the first time I met him."

"Saving unworthy lives?" Tenten repeated, her face morphing into a grimace of disgust. "And we're supposed to believe you want nothing but peace and good for the world?"

"Ignore him, Tenten, and focus on the fight," Shikamaru mentally told her. *"Now that we have him where we want, let's bait him into expending as much chakra and power as possible!"*

The Avatar of Konoha rocketed towards Madara's Six Paths Susanoo at the same time it generated a pair of swords on its purple Susanoo arms, ready to deliver a double vertical slash. Madara's Six Paths Susanoo created yet another lightning long spear on one of its hands, and raised it to parry the dual strike, which was unable to break through the parry.

While the two chakra constructs struggled against the other, the Avatar of Konoha cupped its four remaining hands together, summoning yet another Tailed Beast Ball. Madara, however, noticed this and had his Susanoo swat the nascent ball away with its free hand, before pushing the Avatar of Konoha back with a brutal kick, followed by a swing of the lightning spear, which broke the great swords when Sasuke attempted to parry it.

"Yeah, hand to hand combat is definitely not a good idea. Let's keep our distance," Shikamaru suggested, as the Avatar of Konoha floated away from the blue Susanoo.

Madara then made a single hand seal. "Limbo: Border Jail!"

While the jutsu seemingly didn't do anything, Hinata gasped as her eyes widened.

" Those invisible clones again... and he has summoned four of them this time!" the Hyuga said.

" Invisible clones?" Choji asked.

" An ability of Madara's Rinnegan, it seems," Naruto interceded.
"Those clones are as powerful as he is, and can't be seen nor detected through normal means. Hinata can see them with her Tenseigan, and I can sense them thanks to my Six Paths Chakra."

" While that sounds worrying, I don't know how those clones can be of any help in a fight like this," Ino mentioned.

Suddenly, four additional Susanoos appeared seemingly out of nowhere, flanking Madara. Fortunately, those were Complete Susanoo rather than Six Paths Susanoo.

Ino facepalmed. *"Me and my big mouth..."*

" Forget about it! Focus on the fight" Shikamaru told his blond teammate. *"Here they come!"*

And indeed, the four Limbo Clones, each inside a Complete Susanoo, barreled towards the Avatar of Konoha, each of them carrying a sword on one of its hands. Lion-shaped chakra shrouds that crackled with lightning appeared on the middle hands when they curled into fists, and three long claws sprouted from the back of its lower hands, mimicking Tamaki's bladed gauntlets.

When the first Susanoo arrived, sword ready to skewer it, the Avatar merely moved aside and decked it on its faceplate with a chakra lion-coated fist, sending it sprawling down. Immediately after that, a second Susanoo appeared, delivering an upwards diagonal swift. The sword strike was parried with one of the Avatar's lower hands,

while it stabbed the three blades on the Susanoo's face, before sending it backwards with a kick to the chest.

Unfortunately, the Avatar was unable to dodge the third Susanoo, who slammed its shoulder against the Avatar's chest, reeling it backwards, while the fourth Susanoo delivered a powerful kick to the face, sending it flying backwards.

While the Konoha ninjas panicked upon taking not one but two fairly powerful hits, Karin saw an opportunity to help. She commanded the avatar to dispel the lion fists and to aim its hands towards the two Susanoos.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Two golden chains shot from the extended hands, and arced towards the two nearby Susanoo, wrapped themselves around them, pinning their arms to their bodies, and dragging them with the Avatar. Meanwhile, the rest of her friends worked on regaining balance, and once they did, the Avatar propelled forward, while the two Susanoo limbo clones were still dragged towards it.

Sasuke once again summoned two swords to the Susanoo arms, while some of his teammates channeled elemental chakra to the blades in order to increase their power. Once the two blue Susanoo were in range, the Avatar delivered a dual horizontal chop, leaving a trail of flames and lightning as they moved, obliterating their targets the moment the swords made contact in a storm of elemental fury.

" *That takes care of those,*" Naruto said.

The blond could sense how his girlfriend panicked a little. "*Yes, but now we need to take care of THOSE!*"

Hinata pointed upwards, and they saw several perfectly round meteors falling towards them. Now they realized the Limbo Clones were just a diversion, and while they were fighting them, Madara

used Chibaku Tensei to pull several nearby asteroids into several large meteors.

"Don't worry guys, leave them to me!" Kiba said, excited to finally getting his time to shine, as he commanded the Avatar to move towards the incoming meteors. "Fang Passing Fang!"

The Avatar of Konoha started to spin, slowly at first, but progressively faster, until it turned into a blurry drill of gold and purple. The ninjas inside, however, didn't spin with the chakra construct, remaining completely stationary, much to their relief.

As the meteors came closer, the spinning Avatar drilled through them, grinding them into small rocks and pebbles that burned up when they reentered the atmosphere. Despite the number of meteors the rogue Uchiha had created, the Avatar didn't lose any momentum and destroyed all of them completely, before it stopped spinning once there were no more.

Madara gritted his teeth, and clenched his fist in anger. Images of the green clad Konoha fool who nearly killed him destroying his meteors replayed in his mind, and felt his blood boil with rage. What happened next didn't help either.

"Is that all you have, old man?" Naruto taunted. "You're making me feel kind of bad over the fact that Hinata and I alone couldn't beat you on your own if you're so weak!"

Not happy with being the one responsible to undo his decades-long plan for world peace and unity, this impertinent brat dared to mock him? To call him weak? It was about time for somebody to give that loudmouth blond a lesson. With an angry grunt, Madara extended his hands upwards, creating a single marble sized gravity core.

"CHIBAKU TENSEI!"

The gravity core shot upwards, and began to draw asteroids floating around them towards it, forming yet another meteor. This gravity

core, however, had been empowered with the combined Tailed Beasts chakra of all nine beasts, and thus its strength was much greater than the normal Chibaku Tensei, to the point that Naruto and his friends could feel the gravitational pull.

In a few seconds, the nascent planetoid drew enough asteroids to reach the size of the standard Chibaku Tensei, but it didn't stop there and continued to increase its mass and size at a continuous pace, as more asteroids kept slamming against it, much to the Konoha ninjas' growing discomfort and worry. It was growing so big that Madara needed to hold it together with multiple thick wooden vines created by Wood Release.

Once it was done, the Konoha ninjas were looking up to a meteor that could easily house the entirety of Konoha inside it.

"Naruto-niisan..." Karin stammered, as beads of sweat trickled down her face. "I think you did a too good of a job taunting him into going all out..."

Madara grinned savagely. "Maybe I should have done this from the very beginning and be done with it. NOW DISAPPEAR, YOU MEDDLESOME INSECTS!"

And with an arm motion, he send the gigantic meteor towards the Avatar of Konoha.

" Is that guy insane!? If a meteor that size hits the Earth from this altitude, it will wipe out the entire continent at the very least!" Sakura said in horror.

" That means we can't just dodge it then," Hinata added, trying to stay calm.

" It's okay, we don't need to!" Naruto said, trying to instill his friends with confidence. *"Because we're going to stop it! This is going to be our winning move, guys! Now do as I say!"*

Using the Avatar of Konoha, Naruto started to create another Tailed Beast Ball between its hands.

"Now, pour elemental chakra into the ball, quickly!" Naruto commanded.

Shikamaru, Choji and Tamaki added fire. Sakura and Ino added Water. Shino, Kiba, Neji and Karin added Earth. Hinata, Tenten and Sasuke added Lightning, with the latter also adding Amaterasu flames for good measure. Haku added Ice. On top of Wind, Naruto also added Lava, Steam and Magnet which he still had from the Tailed Beast shards within him. Eventually, the Tailed Beast Ball was bursting with elemental chakra, creating an incredibly unstable mix.

" *And now, the final touch!*" Naruto said, as he sent his own Truth Seeking Balls into the massive combination.

The black orbs merged with the mix, stabilizing it completely, resulting in a huge black sphere with a golden core, with blue sparks of lightning crackling around it, before it was finally fired towards the incoming meteor.

" Six Paths: Almighty Spirit Blast!"

The comparatively tiny sphere of destructive chakra slammed against the colossal meteor, struggling against it while slowly digging into it. At first, the meteor didn't appear to stop anytime soon, but little by little, it started to reduce its speed, until it stopped completely. Then, to the sheer joy of the Konoha ninjas, the sphere of destruction, now deep inside the meteor's crust, began to push it back towards Madara.

"Yes, yes!" Ino cheered, and clapped in joy. "We're going to do it!"

As the combined jutsu dug even deeper into the meteor, the gigantic mass of rock started to turn red, as streams of lava shot across the surface, forming small volcanoes, forming rivers of molten rock.

Meanwhile, Madara couldn't do anything but watch in both horror and sheer incomprehension how his ultimate attack was pushed back at him. And in his disbelief, he hadn't noticed that he had already spent most of the chakra he had drained from the captive Tailed Beasts, and his Susanoo was slowly reversing back to its Complete Form.

"How...?" Madara asked, as the burning meteor slammed into his Susanoo. "How can a bunch of brats could-"

The sphere of destruction inside the meteor finally detonated, producing a blast of fiery burning death twice as big as the mass of rock it was buried under. However, the joy of Madara being finally defeated was short lived as they realized that the explosion continued expanding, and in a few seconds, it would engulf them as well.

Fortunately, Shikamaru had already foreseen this as well.

"Hinata, quickly! Pull all of us towards you, and then form a protective shell around us with your Truth Seeking Balls!" he commanded out loud.

Hinata didn't have to be told twice, and did as Shikamaru asked, with Naruto using his chakra arms to help as well. As the fifteen teens were smashed against each other in a ball of tangled bodies, Hinata's Truth Seeking Balls began to form a sphere around them. They would be extremely uncomfortable for a while, but needless to say, if they survived it would be worth it.

...

Earth

Meanwhile, back on the site where the Ninja Alliance had fought the Ten Tails, the remaining members of the Alliance had their eyes locked into the sky, trying to discern the battle between Madara and the Konoha 15. However, all they could see were brief flashes of

light of different colors, which they could assume were jutsu being thrown at each other.

Needless to say, the fact that they couldn't see if the Konoha 15 were winning or not was quite frustrating.

Then, the ninjas on Earth were blinded by a flash of light so bright and potent, the entirety of the sky turned white for a few seconds, blowing every cloud in the sky away. It was then followed by a pulse of chakra, and a deafening thunder.

"What... what the hell was that...?" Jiraiya asked, praying to whatever deity could hear him that it meant that Naruto and his friends had finally won.

"Hey, Fu, wait!" Jiraiya heard Rin's voice said.

Turning around, Jiraiya saw the former jinchuriki of the Seven Tails running away. Looking in the direction he was running for, he realized her reasons to do so, and chased after her.

Author's Note: And thus, the final battle is here! And yeah, I had Madara do the same thing with the Tailed Beasts Sasuke did in canon (the fact that he also trapped them inside planetoids should have been a pretty big hint), mostly because I liked it a lot. In fact, a good chunk of the final battle was also inspired by the final Naruto vs Sasuke duel as well, since it was a really good fight, at least in a vacuum.

The fact that the final battle would be Konoha 15 vs Madara was something I already decided even before I started to write the first chapter, and boy, you have no idea how happy I am to see this idea finally out of my mind. I know most of you expected the final battle to be between Naruto, Hinata and Madara exclusively, but I wanted to include the rest of the Konoha 15 as well. Not just because for the sake of it, but because it fits with the theme of love versus power. Besides, I wanted the two sides

of the final battle to be as much foils to each other as possible: Madara is the last member of a generation long gone that stayed alive by unnaturally prolonging his life, the Konoha 15 are part of the youngest generation of ninjas; Madara fights alone, the Konoha 15 fight as a group; Madara only saw his associates as either minions or pawns, the Konoha 15 are genuine friends

Did you expect the Golden Avatar of Kalika to have yet another upgrade? Given the swell reception the Golden Avatar got, what do you think about the Almighty Avatar of Konoha? Did it improve even further, or did it ruin a perfectly good jutsu?

Those who played Ultimate Ninja Storm 4 can tell that the last clash between the heroes and Madara is inspired by the game's take on the final fight between Naruto, Sasuke and Ten Tails Madara.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

So, what did you think of the final battle? Are the Konoha 15 going to be ok? Is Madara really dead? Find out next Monday! In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

The Konoha 15

Author's Note: I'm glad you guys liked the final battle so much. Though those who were wanting for more, you might be for a treat here. Enjoy:

Chapter 132:

The Konoha 15

or

The Last Dance

Site of the Battle against the Ten Tails

As Fu ran towards the falling Tailed Beasts, she couldn't help but feel weirdness at her inability to fly. Those wings might have not been part of her body, but for somebody who learned how to fly before she could learned how to walk, not being able to soar the skies felt...

... wrong.

She felt empty. Incomplete. As if something had been stripped off of her. Something very important. And in a way, she was right.

Thankfully, she wasn't foreign to running either. Even if she usually flew to any place too far away to simply walk, she was no foreign to running, given that running was the best way to build stamina up. And if there was something the green haired girl had in abundance, it was stamina.

The Tailed Beasts finally crashed down, producing a huge thundering noise, followed by a small tremor, while raising a huge cloud of dirt and dust. Fu's heart clenched, worrying for the worst. Could Tailed Beasts survive a fall from so high into the air?

However, as the cloud of smoke slowly dispelled and she could see some movement, she started to ease up. And then the calm turned to excitement and joy when she could finally see the form of Chomei, shifting along her siblings.

"Chomei! Chomei!" Fu cried.

Alerted, the giant beetle turned around, and saw her former human host.

" **Fu!**"

"Chomei!" she repeated.

Once she was close enough, Fu pumped chakra onto her legs, and leaped towards the Seven Tailed Beast with her arms spread wide open, as a few tears dropped from her eyes. Chomei spread her four upper arms as well, catching Fu in a hug just as she came close to her.

"Oh Chomei!" Fu cried, as she hugged the giant beetle. "I was so worried! I thought I had lost you forever!"

" **You were worried?**" Chomei asked, incredulous. "**Girl, I'm immortal! What about you? I thought I had lost you ! You got me extracted out of your body, yet here you are, alive and kicking!**"

"It's... well, I'm not really sure of what had happened, but I'm sure somebody can explain to me later," Fu said.

They stayed like that, just enjoying each other's company, as the rest of the Allied Ninjas started to gather and get close around the group of Tailed Beasts. Albeit not too close, given that many of them harbored some well founded fear that the Beasts might attack, even if they looked passive right now. Few of them, moved by curiosity, but still keeping some distance, dared to get closer to the almost mythical and powerful monsters.

" You know... even if we've been apart for less than an hour..."
Chomei began. **"It felt like an eternity since I saw and heard you, girl."**

"Y-Yeah, me too," Fu cried, her lip quivering. "Hey, Chomei... you probably will say no given that you're finally free, but..."

" Go back with you so we can stay together?" Chomei finished Fu's line. **"Say no more, girl!"**

Fu gasped, and looked at Chomei with sparkling eyes full of joy.
"Really!?"

" Of course! What are you going to do without me and my lucky charm?" Chomei said, and the two of them laughed.

" Unbelievable," Son Goku said, as the giant ape shook his head.
"For the first time in almost a century we're completely free, and you want to go back to that human girl?"

" Don't be so quick to turn humans down, Son," Chomei replied.
"I know our history with them isn't that great, but hey, maybe you just need to find the right human!"

" I think I'm going to pass," Son Goku said. Chomei merely shrugged.

"Son Goku," a voice said.

The Four Tails, surprised, looked down and saw the familiar redheaded old man that had been his living prison for more than four decades.

" Roshi," Son Goku said, trying to keep a maybe not friendly, but still calm demeanor. **"What do you want?"**

"If you're worried that I might want you inside me like that girl with the bug," Roshi began, and allowed himself to show a taunting smirk. "Well, I'm here to dispel all of your fears. I can assure you, the

idea of having you inside my body again isn't something that I seek to."

" **Heh,**" the red furred beast chuckled. **"What do you seek then, old man?"**

"This will be the last time we're going to see each other," Roshi stated. Son Goku didn't make any remark about how he's not going to miss the old man. "Our relationship was, to put it bluntly, awful. Except, perhaps, this final battle, when we finally fought as a team for the first time. Looking back, I realize that I could have made some things much better, but that's irrelevant now. I was given a second chance, and I don't plan to waste it."

" **You're rambling old man. Can you stop fooling around and get to the point?**" Son Goku impatiently asked.

"So rude," Roshi said, shaking his head. "Anyway, I just wanted to say goodbye, and, at least part on good terms. Or at least not on bad terms. So, what do you say?"

" **Well...**" Son Goku began. **"Guess I could make you this concession, provided that you're being honest about not seeing each other again."**

"You can trust me on that, Son Goku."

Son Goku nodded. **"Very well then. Goodbye, Roshi. Hope you enjoy what years you still have left."**

As Roshi and Son Goku talked, Gyuki appeared to be in deep thought. He blinked once before suddenly growing excited.

" **I found Naruto!**" said Gyuki's voice all of sudden. **"I sense him to the west!"**

" **Yeah, me too!**" Chomei added, followed by the rest of the Tailed Beasts agreeing as well.

"What about the others? Like Shino? Can you tell me if they're okay too?" Fu asked.

" I'm sorry girl, I can only sense Naruto, and that's because of a piece of my chakra inside him. I can't tell about the others," Chomei apologized. **"Wait, can't you enter Sage Mode to try and sense them?"**

"Hey, you're right! Thanks for reminding me of that!" Fu replied, as she jumped out of Chomei's embrace, landing on the ground, before sitting in the lotus position and closed her eyes. "Alright, let's go..."

As Fu gathered nature energy, her ability to sense chakra began to span little by little. She focused her attention to the west, and indeed, she found them. Naruto and Hinata were the easiest ones to sense, followed by the rest. And much to her relief, all of them were alive, even if they appeared to be close to total exhaustion, given their low chakra levels.

"Yes, I found them! And they're all right!" Fu cried out loud. "They survived the battle!"

Naturally, her good news were met with a round of loud cheers.

"Come on people, let's go and find them! They're heroes of this war, and need to be treated as such!" Jiraiya energetically stated, to another wave of cheers.

Fu was about to stand up and rejoin the group, until she sensed something that felt her blood freeze in her veins.

"No..."

...

Valley of the End

From the sky, an unidentified object fell. It was black with a slight purple gleam, perfectly spherical, of about ten meters in radius. Its

falling speed was fast, almost looking like a meteor that threatened to wipe out the entire valley once it smashed against the ground. However, the closer it moved towards the ground, the slower its descend became, almost as if some invisible force was controlling it.

The sphere's velocity continued to decrease, to the point that the damage a violent impact would cause would be minimal. However, the falling object didn't even touch the ground, but stopped completely mid air, just a few centimeters above the ground, and stayed like that for a few seconds. Then, for seemingly no reason, cracks started to form and spread around the object, almost as if it was an egg ready to hatch.

But rather than cracking like an egg, it burst like a balloon, dropping its contents, fifteen teenagers, to the ground, resulting in a pile of entangled bodies and limbs.

"Ughhhhh..."

"Move! I can't breathe with all of you on top of me!"

"You guys are crushing me!"

"My leg!"

Little by little, the human pile of bodies slowly untangled themselves from each other, as they weakly crawled away. Some of them laid on their backs, and started to breathe heavily. Others sat down, and checked themselves for possible injuries. Others checked on their friends. And one of them found the strength to stay up, and check their surroundings.

"The Valley of the End," Sasuke said, his eyes locked onto the Hashirama and Madara statues that flanked the waterfall, the unmistakeable hallmarks of the place. Good, that means they weren't far away from Konoha or the Ninja Alliance HQ.

Another ninja stood up, this one Naruto. Though rather than checking the place, he was making sure his friends were okay. They appeared exhausted, and their levels of chakra were pretty low - especially the members of Team Gai, who were sprawled on the ground, as if they were in constant pain- but none of them appeared to have serious injuries.

Naruto sighed in relief. "Good, it seems they're all fine. Good job, Hinata-hime! You saved us from that explosion!"

Hinata was among those lying on the ground, breathing heavily. Upon hearing her boyfriend praising her, she merely raised a hand and gave a thumbs up, before dropping the arm again.

Naruto opened his mouth to speak or ask something, but was interrupted when a loud noise came from the sky. Almost like a thunder, but not quite.

"Naruto-kun, look!" Haku said, as he pointed to the direction the noise came from.

The blond turned around, and far into the distance, he saw the nine planetoids Madara had locked the nine Tailed Beast inside falling to the ground. They broke apart as they fell, revealing the Tailed Beasts inside them. The fall would probably be pretty painful, but nothing they wouldn't survive. A smile spread across his lips. If the Tailed Beasts had been released, it could only mean one thing.

Madara was finally dead.

They did it. They finally did it. The war was finally over.

Naruto let out an immense sigh of relief he didn't know he was holding, and plopped down as a wave of exhaustion washed over his body.

"Finally..." the jinchuriki said.

As the group caught their breath, Kiba dragged himself towards Tamaki.

"Hey," Kiba said, wincing a little. Even talking proved to be a little painful.

"Hey," she replied, sounding tired. Even then, she smiled at him. "What's up? You okay?"

"I little tired and sore, but that's expected. I'll live," Kiba said, trying to sound tough. His demeanor then sobered up. "Hey, Tamaki, remember when we were fighting those Ten Tails clones, and I said I needed to tell you something important, but you told me that it wasn't the moment?"

"Yeah, I do remember that," Tamaki said, smiling good naturedly, as she dragged herself towards him as well. "And I think this moment is much better."

Kiba chuckled awkwardly. "Well, that's nice to-"

The Inuzuka was suddenly silenced when Tamaki lunged at him and planted a kiss on his lips. While it only lasted a couple seconds, but it felt much longer for them. They finally broke the kiss, and stared at each other, their faces reddened, and breathing heavily. Kiba just started at her with wide eyes.

"So..." Tamaki began, wiping a strand of hair from her face. "Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Kiba dumbly nodded.

Shino, who had watched the exchange from afar, merely turned their back at them, and adjusted his glasses.

"About time," he said, low enough for nobody else to hear.

While those who had witnessed the birth of a new couple congratulated Kiba and Tamaki, others meanwhile wondered what

they were going to do now that the war was finally over. One of them was Haku, who turned to their unofficial leader for answers.

"Naruto-kun?" Haku repeated, as he walked towards him. "What are we going to do now? Should we return to Konoha? Or should we make our way back to the main army?"

Oh, right. They probably shouldn't stay much longer there. They all have friends or family wondering about their wellbeing. The fact that the Tailed Beasts have been released should tell them of their victory, but they should know that all of them were alive and well. With a little effort, he managed to get back on his feet.

"Okay, first of all... let's rest for a bit. A medic should check on Tenten, Neji and Lee, they appear to be pretty beat up," Naruto said. Karin quickly went to help her boyfriend and his teammates, followed by Ino. "If somebody can lend a hand to Hinata-hime it would be okay."

"No, no, I'm fine. No medic need to waste their attention on me," Hinata protested. "My body aches and I'm a bit exhausted, but I'll pull it off."

What Hinata said made Naruto realize something. "Oh, I almost forgot! If you guys need a refill of chakra, just ask! Remember that I'm an universal chakra donnor, and I still have plenty to spare!"

"Maybe you should come and give us a hand with these three, nii-san," Karin asked, before shooting her boyfriend a disapproving glare. "Even with the fox's regenerative power, opening up to the seventh gate and keeping it like that for so long did a number on their bodies."

"There were too much at stake, Karin. WE couldn't hold back," Neji protested.

"What he said," Tenten added. "Besides, if you want to blame somebody, blame Shikamaru. It was his plan after all."

"Hey!" the young Nara protested.

"Come on guys, Shikamaru's plan lead us to victory. To victory over one of the most powerful ninjas who ever lived," Ino said in defense of her teammate, before giggling. "That's going to look so great on our resume."

"Stop wasting time with pointless babble," Sasuke said, shooting a harsh glare at them. "We aren't done yet."

"We aren't done yet?" Sakura asked, confused. "Sasuke-kun, what do you mean? We've won! Madara is dead. The war is over."

Sasuke, however shook his head. "There's something you don't know. We need to find Madara's body and destroy it completely. Only then the war will be truly over."

"Madara's body?" Kiba asked, and snorted dismissively. Akamaru, lying besides him, whined a little. "I doubt that there's a body to begin with after that giant ass explosion."

"Yeah. Unlike us, he didn't have Truth Seeking Balls to use as protection," Tamaki said. "He's nothing but ashes now."

As Naruto spread some of his chakra around and the medics healed everyone, they started to get back on their feet little by little. Soon they would be ready to leave.

As Karin helped Tenten on her feet, she suddenly gasped, her eyes opened wide, almost dropping the girl on the ground.

"No way..." the redhead said, as her face turned pale.

"Karin? You okay, girl?" Tenten asked, raising an eyebrow. "You're worrying-"

"Everybody, ru-"

Karin was silenced when something exploded in the lake, producing a brief rain that showered over them, just as something leaped out of the water and landed on the ground with the force of a meteor, raising a cloud of smoke and producing a booming thunderclap.

Everybody turned around to the source of the disturbance. However, the other sensors followed Karin, looking at the cloud of dust with a mix of awe and terror, already aware of who was there.

"Did you really think... that I would be defeated... BY A BUNCH OF BRATS!?"

When the cloud dispelled, the members of the Konoha 15 could see a heavily wounded and exhausted, but very much alive Madara Uchiha. His Rinnegan eyes pierced them with an intense and hate filled glare.

"What?" Choji asked in shock, trembling a little. "How can he...?"

"There's no way! No fucking way!" Kiba protested. "You were engulfed by that giant explosion! No one can survive that!"

"Why can't this guy just die already!" Ino said, as she angrily stomped on the ground.

"I have to admit, that stunt you pulled on me was pretty clever. And for a group so young, you're unexpectedly powerful. For a moment, I believed I was truly gone. And that's the second time in a way too short span of time that somebody makes me feel fear for my life," Madara said, gritting his teeth. "But like that green clad fool, you also failed to kill me. And you will pay for it with your lives."

"Don't you dare insult Gai-sensei!" Lee angrily protested, as tears began to stream from his eyes.

"Yes! We will finish what he started, right here, and right now!" Tenten added, as she unsheathed a pair of longswords from a sealing scroll.

"Ah yes... the man had students..." Madara said, remembering Lee. "Don't worry. I can assure you, you'll be seeing your beloved sensei really soon."

Neji didn't say anything, and just scanned the Uchiha from head to toe, assessing his state. "His chakra is dangerously low. But it's slowly building up. I believe that with a cautious approach, we can kill him."

However, Neji himself and everybody else were also low on chakra as well. Naruto sharing his had been of help, but they didn't have enough for a prolonged battle. This needed to end as quickly as possible.

"He'll try to use the Rinnegan to steal our chakra in order to replenish his own," Sasuke informed, as he unsheathed his shoto. "That means you should be extremely careful with ninjutsu."

"The Preta Path also allows to steal chakra directly from the victim through physical contact," Naruto added. "So, let's try not to let him touch us for long."

Naruto tried to activate his Kurama Chakra Cloak, but when he tried, a wave of pain washed over his body, making him double down, as the chakra cloak flickered for a couple seconds, before it vanished.

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata quickly went to check on her boyfriend. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine... just... shit, I have even less chakra than I thought..." Naruto said, as he stood up once again. *"Kurama! I need some help here! Kurama! Can you hear me?"* Naruto mentally asked, but got no answer. He could sense that the fox was still inside him, and he wasn't ignoring the blond. However, just like his, Kurama's chakra level was dangerously low. Naruto deduced he must have passed out. *"Heh. Guess even a Tailed Beast can run out of chakra. We're on our own now."*

"No plan you make, or any precaution you take will grant you victory over me. I can sense how exhausted and sore you are. And unlike me, your wounds won't close on their own and your chakra won't regenerate," Madara said, as he felt his confidence being boosted by those words. He brought his hands together and weaved multiple seals at a blinding speed. "Fire Release: Great Fireball Jutsu!"

Despite his low chakra, Madara cast a deceptively large fireball at the group of Konoha ninjas, forcing all of them to jump in different directions in order to avoid it, scattering across the area. Just as he expected. Now, he only needed to capture somebody with potent chakra to drain and replenish his own. Naruto was the most obvious target, and thus the one they would expect him to target. Fortunately, there was another Uzumaki among them, even if her chakra wasn't as powerful as Naruto's.

Pinpointing her position with his chakra sense, he aimed his hand at her, and let the jutsu bring it to her.

"Bansho Ten'in!"

Karin squeaked in shock as an invisible force quickly pulled her towards Madara's outstretched hand. More as a reflex rather than a deliberated action, a chain of chakra shoot from Karin's back, the redhead praying that somebody would grab it.

Fortunately for her, her prayers were answered as Choji and Tamaki managed to grab the chain and pull backwards with all the strength they could muster, yanking the redhead back, giving her an admittedly painful whiplash. Though not that she was going to complain about that.

"T-Thank you guys!" Karin stammered, as she adjusted her glasses.

Meanwhile, Madara saw how a green blur barreled towards him, raising his hand just to catch a powerful fist covered in bandages. Rock Lee continued his assault, delivering a flurry of punches and kicks that were either parried and blocked by the Uchiha. Despite

this, Madara was being pushed back and was given no chances to attack.

Rock Lee fainted, but much to Madara's confusion, he didn't attack, but vanished before his very eyes. And just behind Lee was a living drill shooting right at him.

"Fang Passing Fang!"

All Madara could do in such short notice was to cross his arms in front of his face in order to block the Inuzuka's signature ability, which grind his arms drawing blood, while violently pushed him backwards, landing on his back. And as soon as he did, a large shadow was cast over him. The Uchiha watched how the bloated form of Choji Akimichi was about to crush him under his weight.

"Meat Bullet Tank!"

Madara rolled to the side just as Choji's spherical shape slammed into the group, opening a crater onto the ground. Choji, however, continued rolling at the long haired Uchiha, who continued onto the defensive. That's it, until a sudden feeling of paralysis washed over his body.

"Mind Disturbance Jutsu!"

"What...?" Madara asked, as his body freeze, as he sensed the source of the jutsu to a nearby blonde he recognized as a Yamanaka.

"I got him!" Ino announced. "Everyone, attack now!"

Not just Choji, but those who were close to Madara, being Kiba, Lee and Sakura lunged at him now that he was finally immobilized and defenseless. Or so they believed.

"Shinra Tensei!"

Madara released a powerful repulsive shockwave that not only pushed his attackers backwards, but Ino as well, breaking the annoying psychic jutsu. Some of those caught by the attack had been landed on the ground, while others had been launched into the water. Though, they were very much still alive.

"Five seconds until he can use Deva Path abilities again!" Naruto reminded his friends, as he lunged himself at Madara, Wind Blade in hand. "Attack now! Don't give him any time to breathe!"

"Of all the bullheaded fools I've met in my lifetime, none compares to you lot," the Uchiha said in disgust, as he generated a black chakra rod from his hand, and raised it just in time to parry a blow from Naruto.

"Well, these bullheaded fools are the one who are going to put an end to your reign of terror for good!" Naruto fired back.

As he and Madara continued to trade blows, he could see and feel small cuts opening on his skin, trickling with thin trails of blood, despite the fact that he wasn't being hit.

"That blade is made of wind chakra, which gives it a range greater than that judged by the eye. An interesting weapon. Did he create...? Oh, of course, I can't believe I didn't think in that immediately!" Madara thought, as a savage grin spread around his face, making Naruto uneasy.

They traded a couple more blows, until Madara feigned a fumble, allowing Naruto a clear opening to strike, which the blond naturally took advantage of. Just like Madara expected, as he held a hand protectively.

"You fell for it, fool! Gakido!" Madara said, as he created a wall of white light. "Even if it's not ninjutsu, I can absorb the chakra you're channeling through your sword!"

But Madara's face fell when, much to his confusion, he didn't absorb the sword of wind, but it phased through him harmlessly.

"What the... a genjutsu!?" Madara hissed, now tracking the source of the illusion towards Haku, standing at a safe distance from the battle.

"And you think I'm so stupid I didn't realize of that?" Naruto said, as he jumped backwards. "Hinata-hime, Neji!"

As Naruto disengaged Madara, the two Hyuga cousins appeared seemingly out of nowhere, and prepared to launch a flurry of palm strikes at their enemy, just as a thread of shadow quickly crept behind him. However, Madara expecting such an ambush and his fine chakra sensing allowed him to notice Shikamaru's jutsu.

"You're not catching me with the same trick twice! Asurato!" Madara yelled, as he jumped into the air, avoiding Shikamaru's jutsu. Two pair of arms burst from under his real ones. The new arms opened up, revealing a myriad of mechanical weapons. "DIE!"

The sound of shots being fired filled the air as a barrage of missiles and chakra blasts rained towards the Konoha ninjas, once again, forcing them to scatter in order to avoid the shower of death. A chain of blasts ensued as the missiles and chakra beams crashed against the ground, sending pebbles and pieces of rock everywhere, while raising clouds of dust and ash.

A barrage of shuriken flew out of said clouds towards Madara, filling the air with a high pitched whirring noise. The Uchiha, still airborne, used his black chakra rod to parry and deflect the incoming steel stars, but the lack of mobility meant that some of them managed to at least graze his skin, making even more cuts that would consume more of his chakra to close.

The moment Madara's feet touched the ground, his Rinnegan saw Sasuke rocketing out of the already dispelling clouds of smoke, gripping his katana with both hands, the blade pointed at the older Uchiha as he ran.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!" as Sasuke channeled his power towards his sword, it started to crackle with electricity. "Try to absorb the chakra of this sword and see what happens!"

In response, Madara ran towards the incoming Sasuke, ready to meet him head on. Sasuke lunged his lightning sword forward, while Madara sidestepped, and let Sasuke's own momentum carry him closer, before Madara sank his improvised weapon into Sasuke's heart.

"One less pe-"

Madara's triumph was short lived, as "Sasuke" smirked, before exploding into a mass of beetles, buzzing angrily as they flew towards the rogue Uchiha, forcing him to fall back once again. However, before he could move any further, he sensed a little tremor at his feet, just a second before Sakura burst from underground, one of her fists winded back and glowing with chakra.

"TAKE THIS!"

In his compromised position, the Uchiha was unable to dodge and the fist connected. While Sakura's current low chakra meant that her punches were nowhere near as strong as when he was at her one hundred percent, the punch still packed enough power to send him flying into the air, leaving a thin trail of blood behind..

" *Shit! Those insects were messing with my sensing ability!*" the flying Uchiha realized, given that he should have noticed that Sasuke wasn't the real one and that Sakura was hiding underground.

Despite the pain that gripped his lower jaw, Madara tried to regain balance while mid air in order to fall on his feet. Unfortunately for him, his enemies didn't plan to leave him a single moment to catch his breath.

"Lightning Release: Multiple Thunder Palms!"

Guessing Madara's trajectory, Hinata flew into the air and intercepted the flying Uchiha before he could fall to the ground, and delivered a flurry of lightning-enhanced palm strikes to him, forcing to move her sore arms as fast as she could, before finishing the combo with a palm strike to the Uchiha's gut, which sent him barreling down towards the ground, pushed by a lightning bolt.

"Keep attacking! Don't let him not even a moment to rest!" Hinata urged.

Madara pushed through the pain and jumped back to his feet just to see Neji and Rock Lee charging towards him.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

Before he could do anything, a chain of chakra appeared from behind and wrapped around his neck, leaving him unable to breathe.

"Well done, Karin!" Neji praised, as he and his teammate, now subordinate, reached Madara.

"This is for Gai-sensei!" Lee cried.

Madara tried to activate the Preta Path in order to absorb the chain made of chakra, but between Karin yanking him backwards and Neji and Rock Lee delivering a storm of punches and finger strikes, he was unable to. Pain started to build up as each of Lee's punches and kicks created a new bruise, and each of Neji's finger strikes closed a tenketsu down. He tried to fight back, but between Karin cutting his breath and Lee and Neji's merciless beatdown, he was helpless.

"SHINRA TENSEI!"

Once again, Madara was forced to resort to one of his most powerful Rinnegan jutsu to get those pests away from him. He didn't need his eyes or chakra sensing to realize that his enemies were expecting that, and were going to take advantage of the five second window in order to come at him with all what they had. That's why he needed to

be faster and attack before they did. In less than a second, his hands blurred through several hand seals.

"Wood Release: Deep Forest Bloom!"

Large green vines burst from both the ground and the water, covering a good chunk of the battlefield in green -albeit Sasuke could notice that this attack was much smaller in scale as the one Madara had used against the Second Division, probably due his lower chakra levels-. Flowers quickly sprouted around the vines, and began to pump clouds of yellow pollen into the air.

"Don't breathe that!" Sasuke warned, as he covered his mouth with his forearm. "You'll be knocked out if you do! Destroy those flowers!"

Sasuke channeled chakra through his sword, setting it on fire, before dashing towards a nearby flower, and destroying it with a vertical slash. The others also focused their attention on the flowers, following Sasuke's advice, and tried to destroy them as fast as they could.

"No matter the time or the situation, people always seem to think that mere flowers are something more dangerous than me," Madara said, as he dashed towards Shino, who was directing his swarm to a nearby flower.

However, before Madara could reach the Aburame, he was intercepted by the least likely of adversaries: two small balls of fur that attempted to slash his exposed skin, before he swatted them back.

"What the... cats?" the rogue Uchiha asked in confusion, upon seeing the two small felines in front of him, one dressed in a blue kimono, the other in a red one, hissing angrily at him. "I see. Ninja cats. But who-"

"Feline Aerial Bomber!"

That moment of distraction was all what Tamaki needed, who leaped towards Madara, ready to smash him with her rear. However, Madara was able to catch her by her legs just before the attack could connect, and tossed her back. Tamaki made a backflip mid air, landing on all fours, before lunging at Madara, ready to slash him with her bladed gauntlets.

"And a girl who fights like a cat," Madara deadpanned, as he parried her blows with his black chakra rod.

All of sudden, Madara disengaged Tamaki and backflipped away from her just in time to avoid Akamaru leaping at him, ready to bite his throat off, as well as Kiba, who attempted to skewer him with a pair of kunai.

And while Madara fought, another of the Konoha ninjas was preparing a way to counter Madara's latest jutsu in a single blow.

"I think can counter this attack on my own! Brace yourselves, though!" Haku said, as he started to make hand seals. "Ice Release: Walking Winter!"

A white aura flared around Haku. Cold wind started to blow from Haku's position, a layer of frost started to spread around him, while the air started to condense into a frigid fog. His friends shuddered as the cold wind started to spread, but they endured. Soon, the vines and flowers fell victim to the ever spreading cold, as frost gathered around them, killing them, and stopping the stream of pollen before they could build up into something harder to deal with.

"And I'm not done yet!" Haku said, as he kneaded more chakra, this time in front of him. "Ice Release: Crushing Glacier!"

Haku slammed his foot down, creating a row of rising large chunks of ice with very sharp edges in Madara's direction. While one would have expected Madara to try to absorb the jutsu, the Uchiha wasn't somebody that didn't learn from experience.

"I know what you expect me to react! And it won't work!" Madara shouted, and much to everybody's surprise, he actually ran towards Haku's attack instead of trying to dodge it.

Madara jumped towards the row of ice chunks, carefully avoiding its sharp edges, and run across them towards the surprised last member of the Yuki clan. However, before Madara could bridge the gap, a flying Hinata dived to intercept him, spinning on her feet as she moved.

"Heavenly Spin!"

Madara was about to jump over the spinning sphere of chakra, however, he felt a pang of pain inside his head as his body was paralyzed. Realized it was the Yamanaka again, he flexed his chakra to break the jutsu. However, Ino had already achieved what she wanted to do, and Madara didn't have enough time to get out of the way before the spinning sphere slammed into him, blasting him backwards, bouncing several times on his back, before he landed into the water.

Taking advantage of the situation, Haku quickly ran towards the lake's edge, as he started to make hand seals.

"I'll freeze him in solid ice and let him die of both sheer cold and lack of oxygen!" Haku claimed, as he slammed his hands onto the shore of the lake.

A sheet of ice started to quickly spread out as Haku began to freeze the water. However, before he could finish the jutsu, Madara burst from underwater with great force, raising a wave, sending chunks of ice everywhere, and knocking Haku backwards. The Uchiha glared at the Ice Release user with hate filled eyes, and dashed towards him.

"Haku!" Tenten cried, as she unsealed a pair of axes from one of her many sealing scrolls, and intercepted Madara in time, parrying his black chakra rod with one of her axes while delivering a swing with

the other one, which the Uchiha grabbed with his free bare hand, drawing some blood. If the pain bothered Madara, he didn't show it.

Tenten released the axe Madara was holding before suddenly disengaging him and jumped backwards. Madara also jumped back just in time to avoid a guillotine kick from Rock Lee that came from above, hitting with such force it opened a small crater on the ground.

A spike of chakra alerted him from another attack. While he was mid air, he backflipped, landed on his hand, and twisted his wrist to spin his body and propel himself even further backwards, allowing him to dodge the shuriken covered in Amaterasu flames Sasuke had tossed in his direction. However, that was as far as he could dodge.

"Rasengan!"

In his compromised position, he was unable to dodge the blond's attack, who close the gap between them at an imperceptible speed, charging a sphere of destructive chakra in his right hand which he slammed against Madara's gut. The Rasengan exploded, blasting the rogue Uchiha backwards, his body spiraling mid air until it violently crashed against a rock wall with a loud boom, before finally dropping to the ground with a dry thud, alongside several chunks of stone that had broken from the rock wall.

The rest of Naruto's friends all landed besides him, their eyes fixed on the spot Madara's body had fallen, watching expectantly the result of the attack. Naruto didn't need to see them to realize that they were all close to their limits.

"Is he dead?" Choji asked.

Hinata shook her head. "If that was the case, his chakra would have disappeared completely."

And indeed, with a primal yell, Madara crawled back to his feet, pushing away the rocks that were half burying his body.

"Oh come on! What does it take for this guy to drop dead!?" Karin screeched, clearly at her wits' end.

"He can't be human... no normal ninja can withstand so much punishment, and still be able to go on!" Tamaki despaired.

"Human? Normal ninja?" Madara snarled, as he dragged his feet forward, while grabbing an injury on his side with one arm, the other falling limply besides his body. "You insult me, brat. Do you have any idea of everything I did, the risks I took, the lengths I went, to achieve all this power? The culmination of a work of several lifetimes! Do you really think that I'm going to let all that work be destroyed by a bunch of naive kids like you!?"

Naruto looked at Madara with pity, and shook his head. "Is power that important to you? To the point of sending the world into chaos and ruining the lives of thousands of people? Just so you can claim the ultimate power?"

"Spoken like a true child with no experience of the world's cruel nature," Madara spat in disgust. "You probably see yourselves as heroes, protecting your home and loved ones from the big bad villain. But here's the thing, brat: Good, evil, heroes, villains... none of those exist! The only division that exists is between the powerful and the weak! The former shape the world as they see fit, and the latter do nothing but lower their heads and follow what they're told. Power is the only thing that matters in this world."

"Well, I have to admit, that all the extremes you went for power paid off," Naruto said, earning a few odd glares from his friends. "You're, by far, the most powerful ninja who ever lived. Though I'm not sure how you'd measure up against Kurama's old man... I mean, the Sage of the Six Paths. He was a pretty tough guy from what the furball told me.

"Anyway, I'm getting off track. What I mean is... for all that power you managed to get, it isn't doing you any good. What do you have? A home? A country? Friends? Family? Anything to call your own? For

all our weakness, every single one of us have all those things. And that's why you will never win against us, Madara. We fight for something greater than us. You fight only for your own. Hell, you might not even know what you're fighting for anymore."

"Ah, the virtues of love and friendship. You sound so much like Hashirama, you make me want to hurl," Madara seethed. "Yes, you probably have a lot of things you cherish. And one day, you will lose all of them, because somebody stronger than you will come and take them away from you, while all you can do is watch impotently. "

"Such thing already happened. I had to fight against people much stronger than I was who threatened to take away my friends and loved ones. And in some cases, they succeeded," Naruto admitted, as his gaze grew a little sadder. "But you know what? I'm not afraid of people stronger than I am. Because I know that I won't have to face them alone. And just like how I beat them, I will beat you too. Love might not be able to be used like a weapon, but it does bring people together. Because we might be weak on our own, but together, we can do anything."

Naruto wasn't expecting to convince Madara with his admittedly corny speech about love and friendship, but he definitely wasn't expecting to anger the rogue Uchiha to such point. His breathing was starting to become heavier and louder as his anger reached critical point.

"Hearing your words... makes me want to rip your tongue out and make you eat it!" Madara bellowed. "Love!? What's love worth!? Nothing! The love I felt for my clan didn't stop them from turning their backs on me! The love I felt for Izuna didn't save him from Tobirama's steel! BANSHO TEN'IN!"

Madara thrust a hand forward, and the blond was overtaken by a feeling of weightlessness, before being yanked towards the older Uchiha at an extremely fast speed. Despite the suddenness of the moment, Naruto was able to react, if barely, and made his favorite hand seal.

"Shadow Clone Jutsu!"

Several bursts of smoke obscured Naruto for a couple seconds, and when the smoke disappeared, a foursome of clones was around the original, all of them sharing the same momentum created by Madara's Bansho Ten'in. The clones managed to use said momentum to their advantage, and prepared to attack Madara. Muttering a curse, the rogue Uchiha took a few step backwards as the clones arrived. He grabbed the first one by the neck, and tried to absorb his chakra before another one reaching him, forcing the Uchiha to destroy the first clone, as he created yet another black rod from his palm, and used it to stab the second clone in his face, destroying it as well.

While he was doing this, Naruto and his two remaining clones launched themselves at Madara from different sides. Madara, however, was already prepared.

"Asurato!"

Under Madara's arms grew an additional pair, and with his four arms, he grabbed Naruto and the clones by the neck, choking them.

"Now give me that chakra of yours! Gakido!"

As Madara prepared to drain Naruto of his chakra, he noticed too late a small tremor under his feet. Just as Naruto and his two clones disappeared, the real Naruto burst from underground, and delivered a savage punch on Madara's chin, sending the evil Uchiha tumbling backwards. With his concentration broken, the extra arms disappeared.

" *They were all clones!? How I didn't sense-*" Madara began to angrily ponder, before he noticed something wrong with his chakra. A very small disturbance created by a genjutsu, so small he hasn't noticed it. He tracked the source of chakra towards the ninja with the Ice Release.

"Tenten, now!"

Gritting his teeth and ignoring the pain of his lower jaw, Madara regained his balance by making a backflip, and focused his Rinnegan eyes forward. And said eyes opened wide in shock upon seeing a mass of shuriken flying towards him, way too close for him to dodge. He instinctively crossed his arms in front of his face. Several shuriken embedded themselves into his arms and shoulders, while others passed by him leaving gashes that quickly began to bleed.

"Konoha Whirlwind!"

Madara felt a foot smashing against the back of his head, forcing his upper body to snap forward and dropping his guard. And as he did, his eyes saw Neji and Hinata in front of him, and rained a storm of palm strikes and finger jabs upon him, the attack perfectly coordinated so they wouldn't get on each other's way.

"Ice Release: Rising Ice Pillar!"

Hinata and Neji disengaged and jumped backwards as the ground around Madara quickly froze, before a column of ice shot upwards, launching the Uchiha high into the sky, screaming in pain. Choji rushed forward as he made a hand seal.

"Partial Multi Size Jutsu!"

Choji's arms grew to giant size, and used them to crush Madara as if he was going to kill a fly. Despite the pain, however, Madara was able to regain balance mid air, and prepared to counter Choji's attack.

"Asurato!"

Madara summoned the Asura Path's additional arms again, and used them to stop Choji's enlarged hands before they could crush

him. Choji struggled to crush Madara, but the Uchiha's strength still matched his own.

"You'll have to do better than that. It seems that you also have quite a lot of chakra left, Akimichi. Gaki!"

"Fire Release: Great Flame Jutsu!"

"Water Release: Water Wall!"

As Madara prepared to absorb Choji's chakra, he was unable to stop the dual streams of fire and water launched by Shikamaru and Ino, respectively. The combo hit him squarely, once again sending him backwards. Karin took a step forward, deciding it was her time to act, and aimed a hand at the flying Uchiha.

"Adamantine Sealing Chains!"

A single chain of chakra shot from Karin's hand, quickly reaching the last remaining Akatsuki and wrapped itself around his body. Using her chakra-enhanced strength, Karin gave a mighty pull, sending the Uchiha flying in the opposite direction.

"Sakura, get ready!" the readhead said.

Sakura merely nodded, as she clenched her fist, a fire-like coat of chakra enveloping it. When Madara was about to reach her, the pinkette delivered a devastating haymaker at the Uchiha, slamming it against the ground with such force, it opened a crater. Before he had the chance to get up, Kiba rushed forward, followed by Tamaki, Shino and Akamaru.

"Our turn! Come on guys! Fang Passing Fang!"

"Cross Flash!"

"Insect Clone Jutsu!"

Kiba, Tamaki and Akamaru blurred past Madara, leaving even more wounds and gashes on his body as they slashed him, pushing him into a different direction with each strike. Shino and his two insect clones would also deliver punches, kicks and kunai stabs just before and after his teammates attacked. Then, they disengaged and jumped away as the sound of crackling electricity reached their ears.

"Lightning Release: Thunder Blade!"

Madara was so dazed and his senses completely numb by the constant pain that he didn't sense nor see where did Sasuke came from, before the Konoha-loyal Uchiha ran his electrified sword through his body, the steel piercing his flesh and the electricity paralyzing his muscles.

"URK!" Madara gurgled, as he choked on his won blood rising up his throat.

And finally, taking advantage of Madara's predicament, Naruto ran towards his hated enemy, Wind Blade in hand.

"Madara... your reckless pursuit and lust for power has caused untold misery and suffering to thousands of people across the continent... but you won't cause anymore pain! We will make sure of it!" Naruto said, as he channeled most of his remaining chakra into his Wind Blade, which glowed with a bright white light, before delivering an horizontal swipe at Madara's neck.

Madara's head was separated from his body, and fell to the ground, rolling for a couple meters before it lost all momentum. Sasuke then stopped channeling Lightning chakra through his blade and pulled it out of Madara's body. His headless body stayed on his feet for another moment, before it, too, slumped on the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut, lifeless.

For a moment, an absolute silence reigned supreme, with only Naruto's heavy breath disrupting it. Naruto's grip on his Wind Blade faltered, dropping the weapon to the ground, before he himself fell

on his knees. Sasuke dropped his sword and rushed towards the Uzumaki, quickly catching him before the blond could hit the ground. The rest of the Konoha ninjas ran towards him as well.

"Naruto!"

"Naruto-kun!"

"You got him, man! You got him good!"

All his friends quickly piled upon him, wrapping their arms around him -and eventually, around each other-, finally being allowed to revel on the sweet feeling of victory.

"Heh, thanks, guys. And hey, I may have delivered the killing blow, but I wouldn't have done it own my own. It was a team effort, " Naruto weakly said. "But, um, could you lessen on the hugs? You're making me kind of hard to breathe."

They muttered quick apologies as they removed themselves from the blond, until only Hinata was close to him -though in her case, Naruto wasn't bothered by her close presence for obvious reasons. As they moved away, the adrenaline of the fight slowly disappeared as pain and exhaustion made their way to their bodies, prompting most of them to just lie down and rest.

Surprisingly, Shikamaru was among the few with enough energy to still stand. He basically dragged himself to where Madara's decapitated body lied, though he didn't dare to get way too close to it.

"So, just to make things sure," Shikamaru began, shooting the headless body a cautious look. "The guy's really dead this time, isn't he?"

"Come on, there's no way he can survive decapitation," Kiba said, raising his hands into the air for added emphasis. "What's he going

to do, regenerate a head? Or is his head going to regenerate a whole body?"

"Kiba, please, don't tempt fate," Tamaki begged, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"No, I can tell the guy's dead," Karin assured. "I detect zero chakra coming from his body. The fucker's death for good."

"My Byakugan can confirm that as well," Neji added.

"Yeah, I know the guy seems dead for good, but I wanted to make sure. After all, the bastard survived that gigantic explosion and falling back to Earth from so far into the sky..." Shikamaru said, shaking his head. "Anyway, we should seal his body inside a scroll for-"

"Amaterasu!"

Shikamaru yelped and jumped back as Madara's body burst into black flames. Turning around, he saw Sasuke, slowly walking towards him, wincing in pain at each step.

"Why the hell did you do that?" Ino asked, as she indignantly stomped towards Sasuke. "Didn't you hear Shikamaru? We could have learned a lot of things by doing an autopsy on his body!"

"Tell me, did you guys know how Madara cheated death the first time, despite the fact that Hashirama killed him, and Tobirama realized a months-long autopsy on his body?" Sasuke asked. All of them looked at him in confusion, as if expecting the Uchiha to explain. "Because the guy told me and Itachi when we fought him," Sasuke said, as he grabbed Madara's head, and tossed it to the black flames, to be destroyed with the rest of his body. "The bastard's waiting for us to make the same mistake. Except this time he isn't going to have a body he can return to," Sasuke said, before he abruptly fell to his knees, and winced. That last Amaterasu had taken the last of his chakra.

"Sasuke-kun!" Sakura said, as she rushed towards him, ignoring her own aching body.

"Don't worry, I'm okay," Sasuke wheezed. "Besides, there's nothing new we can learn from Madara's body that we didn't learn from Rin. They both went through the same rejuvenation process."

"I'm with Sasuke on this one. Hell, even if we *could* learn something new, it wouldn't be worth the risk," Naruto chimed in. "Let all of Madara burn away. He already came back from the dead once, and the less chances we give him, the better."

That seemed to finally put an end to the discussion.

...

For the next few hours, the members of the Konoha 15 stayed on the Valley of the End, resting, since they were too exhausted and sore to move.

Fortunately, they didn't have to. Eventually, Karin and Ino alerted that a large mass of chakra was heading towards them. Everyone assumed that it was the rest of the Allied Ninja Forces, assumption that proved to be correct as many ninjas wearing different uniforms started to appear on the edges of the valley, looking down at them. And much to their surprise, they could also see the much larger silhouettes of the Tailed Beasts as well.

As a multitude of medic-nin rushed towards the group of teenagers lead by Tsunade, they could heard a few murmurs coming from above, first an almost inaudible buzz, which became louder and clearer with each passing moment, making them realize they were cheering for them.

The medic-nin treated their wounds and restored some of their chakra, before loading them into stretchers and taking them away, prompting the rest of the Allied Ninjas to vacate the place as well.

The Fourth Ninja War had officially come to an end.

...

Despite the war was over, there were a few things to do before they could all go home.

The first issue was the last living Akatsuki member, Konan. While everybody agreed that her help had proved to be invaluable for the Ninja Alliance, others still wanted her to be punished. Eventually, while a full pardon wasn't going to be possible, everybody agreed for Konan to be extradited to Konoha, where she was sentenced to ten years of village arrest. Needless to say, Konan was more than surprised to see such a light sentence, given the magnitude of her crimes.

Next were the Tailed Beasts. It was decided that they would be the ones to choose their own fate. Matatabi, Chomei, Gyuki had a strong bond with their jinchuriki, they chose to be resealed inside them once again, as well as Kurama's other half. Shukaku, Isobu, Son Goku, Kokuo and Saiken were granted freedom to go where they pleased.

The same thing went for the resurrected jinchuriki. Yugito Nii rejoined her village, and so did Han. Utakata decided to move to Kiri for Hotaru's sake, while Roshi decided to continue his travels. At the very least, to complete his books. Then, he hinted he might return to Iwa permanently.

In Yagura's case, it was a little more complicated. Despite it was known that the way he ruled Kirigakure was due mind control, Mei was afraid that many people wouldn't be too happy with the idea of the former Mizukage returning to their village as if nothing had happened. Yagura himself seemed to agree with the sentiment, and told Mei that he would leave Kirigakure on a self imposed exile. His wife Aiko decided to accompany him. His son Dagura also wanted to go, wishing to take advantage of this second chance to connect with his father, but Yagura told him to stay in Kirigakure and focus on his career as a member of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist, promising

him to stay in contact and they would see each other from time to time.

With the last loose end tied up, Jiraiya's last act as the Supreme Commander was to dissolve the Ninja Alliance and return the villages that formed it into the independent powers they were before.

...

The next day, a mass funeral was held in Konoha to mourn for those who died heroically during the Fourth Ninja War.

Choji, Ino and Shukamaru were huddling together, crying for the deaths of Shikaku and Choza - the latter was a huge blow to Choji, since the now Akimichi Clan Head thought his dad would be safe on the Turtle Island.

Next to them were Hagane, Kaida and Hanabi, crying for the death of their beloved sensei, Tenzo, whose death was just as unexpected as Choza's.

Asuma, Konohamaru, and the rest of the Sarutobi Clan were crying for the death of Hiruzen, the former Hokage, who had died in the same battle as Choza and Tenzo. They tried to take a little comfort in Naruto's tale of how it was thanks to him that he and his two jinchuriki friends managed to escape from the Turtle Island.

And there was also Maito Gai. While his three students were crying plenty of tears for him, so was Kakashi, surprisingly enough. Not because he wasn't grieving for the death of his old friend, but because the silver haired Jonin had such reputation of a flippant that hardly cared about anything but his beloved dirty literature, it came as a shock to see him shedding tears, even if he did in a more silent way.

The war was over, yes, but it left many scars that would never heal completely.

...

A few days later, Gates of Konoha

Like it happened a few months back, Jiraiya was once again ready to depart for the Land of Iron, as another Kage Summit had been summoned. This time, by the Toad Sage himself. The reason for this was to plan the future of the Ninja Villages in order to make sure the Fourth Ninja War would be the very last Ninja War ever fought. This time around, however, he felt like only taking Tsunade with him, given that tensions were nowhere near as high as they were back then.

Speaking of her, Tsunade was not wearing the cloth patch that covered her left Rinnegan eye anymore, revealing not a Rinnegan, but a hazel eye, the eye that Tsunade had extracted and replaced with a Rinnegan. And true to her word, once the war was over she had the Rinnegan removed and her original eye re-implanted. The Rinnegan, alongside that of Obito's, was then swiftly destroyed.

Obito's body was still preserved in ice under one of Konoha's secret scientific research sites.

And just like then, many people had congregated on the gate to bid the Hokage a safe trip. Though there was a certain somebody who didn't look particularly pleased.

"You know, Hokage-sama, I must protest this decision," Kakashi began. "I'm sure there are other people better qualified and better motivated than me to fill your seat while you're away."

"Nonsense, you'll do fine," Jiraiya said, waving his hand dismissively. "I plan to use the Reverse Summoning and the Toad Portal to return to Konoha once we're done, so you won't even be filling my seat for that long."

"Why don't you appoint Naruto instead?" Kakashi suggested. "He's the one who wants to be Hokage. Plus that way he'd get some

experience for the position."

"I asked him the same, but he said that I'm still 'too young'," Naruto said, making air quotes.

"That, and that you don't have enough patience to sit down and do paperwork," Tsunade interceded in a chiding tone.

"Plus I don't want to be accused of nepotism, you know," Jiraiya added, but his tone betrayed that that wasn't exactly a big reason behind his decision.

"I'm not going to win this, am I?" Kakashi asked, sighing in defeat.

"Come on, sensei, you'll be a great Hokage!" Tamaki tried to cheer him, as she slapped his back.

"I'm with Tamaki here," Rin added. "Besides, our sensei used to be Hokage as well."

"I don't *want* to be Hokage. I never wanted to. That was Obito's dream, not mine," Kakashi protested. "You two better not take any detours once the summit is over."

Tsunade smiled cheekily at him. "We won't promise anything. Ready to go, Jiraiya?"

The white haired man nodded, and he and his wife turned around and rushed into the forest that surrounded the village. Once they were out of sight, the crowd started to disperse.

"I'm sorry you weren't appointed as substitute Hokage, Naruto-kun" Hinata said, as she and her boyfriend walked back into the village.

"Thanks, but don't worry. It's not that big of a deal. Like dad said, he isn't going to be out that long," Naruto replied.

There was a moment of silence as the two of them continued to walk, holding hands. Until Naruto decided to continue the

conversation.

"So... how's your sister doing?" he asked.

"A little better now. She's going to need more time to completely move on, but she's getting there, little by little," Hinata softly said. "Your siblings?"

"Same," Naruto said. "I think they're doing a little better since they rely on each other. I was thinking in talking with Kakashi-sensei about their new Jonin-sensei, but I think they need more time before such thing can happen."

"I think that's the best to do for now," Hinata said. Then, an idea dawned upon her. "Say, Naruto-kun, while Hokage-sama and Tsunade-sama are out, would you like for you three to stay at the Hyuga Estate in the meantime? It would be good for Hanabi and your younger siblings to stay with each other."

"Are our respective younger siblings the only ones you're thinking about?" Naruto asked, shooting Hinata a sly smile.

Hinata blushed, but didn't avert his gaze, and met his smile with one of her own. "I admit I would greatly enjoy to have your constant company as well, Naruto-kun."

Naruto's smile broadened, and placed his arm around Hinata's shoulders. "I thought as much. Let's go!"

All of them would have an enjoyable and memorable stay at the Hyuga Compound, which would help them heal the wounds of the war.

And once the pain of those wounds finally subsided, a new era could finally begin.

Author's Note: Were you surprised that Madara survived the space battle? I mean, I did say that the final battle was inspired and modeled after the manga's final duel between Naruto and Sasuke. Said battle began with Naruto and Sasuke trading continent-destroying jutsu and taking their giant combat avatars to new limits, followed by the two of them sluggishly punching and headbutting each other in a rather unrefined fashion, and I wanted to do that as well with the final fight.

Though, worry not people, Madara is deader than dead for good this time, and he isn't coming back again.

Also, in case it wasn't clear, I'm going to say it again: just because Kakashi is filling in for Jiraiya while he's absent doesn't mean he's going to become the next Hokage. I never liked nor understood the point of Kakashi being Hokage, it added nothing to either his character or the story as a whole. Jiraiya will continue being Hokage until Naruto is ready to take the hat.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

Even if the plot is done, the war is over, the heroes are victorious and the villains are dead, Son of the Sannin isn't over just yet! We still have to see what the future has in store for Naruto and co. in the epilogue! In the meantime, don't forget to review! Reviews make me really, really, really happy!

Epilogue

Author's Note: And here we are. The very last chapter. Man, it feels so weird to be writing this knowing that this is where the story ends. It feels like yesterday when this story just began and I was planning (just planning, not writing) the stages of the Chunin Exams, and thinking about all the arcs that were going to come after that. Yet in the end, we went through every single one of them.

It was a fun ride, wasn't it? Now, let's end this story with style, and enjoy the epilogue:

Epilogue:

The New Era

or

So Long, and Thanks for all the Reviews

Thirty Two years after the Nine Tails attacked

Uzumaki Residence

Hinata blinked as the light that filtered through the windows slowly forced her awake. Suppressing a yawn, she looked at the clock on her bedside to check the hour. She scowled a little, before turning to the other side, where Naruto, her husband of more than a decade, was sleeping, seemingly unperturbed by the growing light.

"Naruto-kun, wake up," Hinata said as she gently rocked her husband, who stirred in return.

"Five more minutes..." the blond grumbled, as he rolled around, giving her his back.

Hinata sighed, and rocked him again, this time less gently. "Naruto-kun, come on!"

This seemed to work, as the blond finally opened his eyes, the lighting making him wince a little, before he looked at Hinata.

"Good morning dear," Hinata smiled, as she kissed Naruto on the lips, a kiss he happily welcomed. "Slept well?"

"Not as much as I wanted, but I'll manage," Naruto said, letting out an unnecessarily loud yawn.

"Today's the graduation day, so you better be ready," Hinata reminded him. She began to undress, removing her nightgown, and started to put on her underwear and her usual clothes.

Naruto mimicked her as well. "Hey, since dad's Academy reform, we had a one hundred percent team approval rate, so I don't expect any problems."

"Perhaps, but it never hurts to be ready, don't you agree?" Hinata asked. "Anyway, can you start preparing breakfast? I'm going to wake up the kids."

Naruto walked towards the kitchen-dinning room, passing a chest of drawers with multiple framed pictures. The oldest one was the picture of Naruto and Hinata with Haku and Kurenai from the day their team was formed. There was also a large photo of Naruto and Hinata the day of their wedding - *Kami, Hinata was so beautiful that day*, Naruto would always think upon seeing the picture-, pictures of their children, and lastly, a picture of Naruto with three young teens no older than twelve: two girls and a boy, both girls being black haired, one of them having spiky hair and red eyes, and the other having straight hair and onyx eyes, with the boy having short purple hair.

A few minutes later, breakfast was already on the table, with Naruto and two other kids sitting at the table. The first kid was a boy of

twelve years old, who looked nearly identical to Naruto, blond and blue eyed, except that he had only four whisker marks on his cheeks instead of Naruto's six. Next to him was a girl, no older than ten, with dark blue hair, blue eyes, and four whisker marks as well.

"So, today's your graduation, Boruto. Nervous?" Naruto asked the boy, Boruto.

"Why should I be?" the boy asked, trying to sound flippant. "It's not that I'm going to start doing A-rank missions, right? Not that they'd be that difficult to me," he haughtily claimed, before deflating a little. "But I know what I'm going to be doing for the next few weeks."

"I know the first weeks of being a ninja aren't that great. I was talking about meeting your future teammates and Jonin-sensei. I certainly was nervous about meeting mine," Naruto confided.

Boruto just shrugged. "Whoever my teammates are, they're people I already know, so no big deal."

"Yes, but your teammates are more than just classmates!" the blue haired girl chimed in. "After all, mom and dad fell in love after they were put in the same team!"

"Exactly, Himawari," Hinata said, as she entered the kitchen-dinning room. She was carrying a toddler of a year and a half, a little girl with pale skin, the Hyuga pale lavender eyes, and most strangely, vivid red hair. She was happily sucking on a pacifier. "Though I was already in love with your father back in the Academy. Then again, I admit that being put on the same team helped the two of us come together," she said with a pleasant smile.

"Eh, I think we would have ended up together even if we were in other teams," Naruto rebuked. "Because I can't see myself being in love with anybody else."

Boruto rolled his eyes. "Come on, it's way too early for you to get mushy. Can you guys wait at least until I'm out?"

"Awww, look at that Urara-chan, your big brother doesn't like when mommy and daddy get loving with each other," Hinata said to the baby, as she sat her on a high chair. "But you don't mind, don't you?"

Barely understanding a word of her mother, Urara giggled at Hinata.

After the Uzumaki family finished their breakfast, Boruto quickly got dressed, grabbed his things, and headed for the Academy.

"Do you want me to give you a lift, son?" Naruto offered.

"Eh, pass. I feel like walking today," Boruto said, before leaving the house. "See you guys later!"

"Goodbye, big bro!" Himawari happily said.

Naruto looked a bit slumped by Boruto's rejection at first, but he quickly pushed those feelings aside, and got up from the table, and gave a kiss to the three girls. "I think I'll be heading to the office as well. See you later!."

"Goodbye, daddy!" Himawari said goodbye to her father in the same cheerful tone.

Naruto's body flickered for a second, before it suddenly vanished.

...

Uchiha Clan Compound

Inside one of the rooms of the large compound, a black haired girl of twelve years of age got out of the bed and began to get dressed. As she put on her glasses, the door of her room was opened, revealing a girl about two years older than her, with pale skin, long staright green hair than fell down her back, and the same onyx eyes at her.

"Hey, Sarada, time to- oh, you awake already?" the older girl asked. "And already dressed no less."

"Of course I am. Did you expect me to be late on such an important day, Naoki?" Sarada fired back.

The older girl, Naoki, just shrugged. "Hey, I just wanted to make sure you didn't miss your big day," Naoki defended. "Everybody else is already awake and having breakfast, so I wanted to check on you. Anyway, let's go."

As the two girls walked, Sarada couldn't help but shoot the older girl, her cousin, a glance of uncertainty. Naoki was Itachi Uchiha's daughter, and fate had her inherit not only most of his sheer talent, but she was also the wielder of two Bloodline Limits, a fact she often loved to remind everybody. Because even if Naoki had the same onyx eyes as Sarada's, the green haired girl's weren't the same: while Sarada had two Sharingan, as every other Uchiha, only Naoki's right eye had a Sharingan; her left eye hid a Byakugan, inherited from her mother Natsu.

Between her sheer talent and two Bloodline Limits, it was no surprise that Naoki's ninja career had been on the rise since the day she graduated from the Academy, becoming a Chunin only a few months after graduation on her first Chunin Exam, and successfully completing lots of B and A-ranked missions afterwards. This made Sarada wonder how would she compare against her older cousin.

" *Don't think that. You already have your path set ahead of you,*" the youngest Uchiha reminded herself.

A few minutes later, the two girls arrived at the large dinning room, where true to Naoki's words, everybody was already there, having breakfast. Sarada took her usual seat, between her mother Sakura and Naoki herself. Next to Sakura was Sarada's father Sasuke, and next to Naoki were her parents, Itachi and Natsu. Next to Natsu was Shizune, Shisui's wife and Sasuke and Sakura's former Jonin-sensei. Finally, Shisui and Shizune's children, Shiro and Shizuka, were sitting next to them.

While they were much older than her, and thus less prone to comparisons, Shiro and Shizuka also had glowing ninja careers. The two of them were already Jonin, with Shiro working alongside his father Shisui as a high ranked officer of the restored Military Police, and not only Shizuka was an ANBU Captain, but her Jonin-sensei was no other than Naruto Uzumaki, the current Hokage.

"How lucky one has to be to have such a legend as your instructor?" Sarada wondered.

"Ready for today, sweetheart?" Sakura asked, smiling brightly at her. "Today you finally become a ninja!"

"And about time! She was the only one in the family so far who wasn't one!" Naoki laughed.

"Naoki, that's not a kind thing to say," her mother chided.

Naoki merely rolled her eyes. "Come on mom, I was just being happy for her. Now she'll experience the joy and thrill of what being a ninja feels like. Well, once she gets through a couple months of D-Rank missions, hehe."

"Even then, it's probably for the better if you don't put more pressure on Sarada. I'm sure she feels nervous enough already," Itachi added.

"Anyway, I heard that your father is going to be one of the Jonin-sensei," Shisui intervened, trying to change the topic. "Maybe you'll get him as your instructor."

"Highly unlikely," Sarada replied, as she adjusted her glasses. "Since it's forbidden to place an Academy graduate under a Jonin-sensei that's related to them." Sarada said almost as if she was reading from a book. Shizune opened her mouth, but Sarada didn't give her the chance. "And before you say how you were with uncle Shisui when you became papa's Jonin-sensei, you weren't married to him, so it doesn't count, aunt Shizune."

Shizune closed her mouth.

"I already know who my students are going to be, and Sarada isn't among them," Sasuke interceded. "Though, it's not that she needs me to be her instructor. I already give her plenty of training at home."

"Agreed. Nothing against you, dad, but I already see you enough at home," Sarada said, smiling a little so she didn't sound like she detested spending time with him.

"Since I'm going to the Academy today, do you mind if we go together?" Sasuke offered.

"Sure thing, dad," Sarada replied.

...

Hyuga Estate

In one of the rooms of the large compound, there were a pair of adults surrounded by a small army of children, no less than six of them, ages from two to nine. The man was tall, good looking to the point of being pretty, with long brown hair that fell down his back, and the usual Byakugan eyes. The woman was a redhead with long spiky red hair and eyes of the same color, sporting a rather large pregnant belly.

All the kids had the same eyes as the adult man. Some had the same red hair as the woman, while the others had brown hair.

"So, how are you feeling, dear?" Neji asked his wife. "Does your body still ache?"

"Ughhhhh..." Karin groaned, as she slumped on a rocking chair. "What do you think, asshole?"

All the kids gasped in shock.

"Mom said a bad word!" a little girl said.

"You'll have to excuse your mother. Her back was in a lot of pain tonight, and she didn't get much sleep," Neji explained their children. She then looked at Karin and smiled at her.

"Everything's okay here?" a new voice asked. Everybody turned to the door, and saw the Clan Head, Hanabi Hyuga, peeking her head through the door.

"Nothing you should worry about, Hanabi-sama," Neji reassured her. "Karin spent a bad night due her aching body."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that," Hanabi said, looking at the redhead with sympathy. "I'm kind of busy, but if you want, I can ask mom to take the kids away from you for a few hours?"

"That would be a blessing," Karin said, letting out a deep sigh. "Sorry kids, mommy loves you, but right now mommy needs time for herself."

Neji held her hand. "Don't worry, it will be over soon. I promise you this will be the last one."

"That's the same thing you said when Osamu was born, before making me another one," Karin huffed. "Once I get this thing out of my body, I'm grabbing the shears."

Neji laughed at her joke. Or at least, he was hoping it was a joke.

...

Yuki Residence

Inside the kitchen of a small but very cozy home, two girls and two women were having breakfast as well, each of the young girls looking like a much younger version of the two women, one who had her long hair loose, and the other had it styled in two buns. Though one of the alleged women, the one with the long hair, was actually a

man, most people wouldn't be able to tell given his feminine appearance.

"Ah, last day of academy, finally," the older of the two girls said, as she ate her bowl of rice. She was twelve years old, and looked like an identical younger version of her father. "This day couldn't reach soon enough."

"Do you want to become a ninja that badly, Miyuki?" the only man asked.

"She wants to get me out of her sight, Haku," the woman replied, though she didn't sound resentful.

"What? Is not that you're too tough on her, are you, Tenten?" Haku asked his wife.

"No, she isn't," Miyuki was quick to point out. "But come on, do you know what it feels to have your mom as your homeroom teacher?"

"Was I really that bad? I always made sure not to say anything that would embarrass you in front of your friends," Tenten softly said.

"I'd love to have you as my teacher, mom," the other girl, the one who resembled Tenten more, happily said.

Tenten smiled at her youngest daughter. "I know you do, dear."

Miyuki gave her little sister a stinky eye. "You say that now, Fuyuko, but you'll change your tune once it happens."

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Lee-Kurama Residence

When Yakumo woke up from her bed, she saw that her husband wasn't there. When she went to check on her children's rooms, they weren't there either. In fact, their beds were even made. Normally, such situation would cause no small amount of distress to anyone,

but for the brown haired woman, it was normal. Her husband and children were early risers. Very early risers. Like, "waking up a full two hours" before her early risers.

Seeing the hour, she just went to the kitchen and started to prepare breakfast. After that, she peeked her head out of the window, as if expecting somebody to arrive. If her calculations were right -and they often were- her family would arrive soon.

Heralded by a trail of dust raised by the speed he was carrying, Yakumo's husband, Rock Lee, running on his hands arrived in front of the house, before leaping to his feet.

Rock Lee was always a source of inspiration for Yakumo, somebody who was able to make his dream of becoming a fine ninja in spite of overwhelming odds. After the war ended, the last bearer of the Kurama clan Bloodline Limit tried to befriend him in order to get to know him better. She first asked him help to train her body -even if Tsunade's treatments improved her physical condition just enough to pass the required medical exam, her physical condition still had a lot of room for improvement-, something the green clad ninja was more than happy to oblige.

As she trained under him and became stronger little by little, Yakumo and Lee started to grow close. She found how incredibly earnest and sweet guy he was, and romance quickly bloomed between them. Said romance was disapproved by the clan elders, since they felt that a man unable to use ninjutsu nor genjutsu would father defective children.

Not that Yakumo listened to any of their complains, and in a few years, the two of them were happily married.

Their son Metal Lee, wearing the same green jumpsuit as his father - but without the torn sleeves- quickly arrived, also running on his hands, looking much more exhausted. The boy was twelve years old, and had a very similar hair to his father, in both color and style.

A few seconds later, a girl, Yakumo and Lee's daughter, Tetsuko Lee, also wearing the same outfit as her brother and running on her hands, joined her father and older brother, and looked just as exhausted as her brother. She was three years younger than Metal and also had short hair, but it was brown rather than black.

None of her children had inherited her Bloodline Limit, but that didn't bother her. After all, said Bloodline Limit only appeared once every few generations. Besides, in her own experience, that was more a burden than a blessing, and she was sure that her children would be happier without it.

"Yosh! Today was a really good morning light training!" Lee loudly gushed. "Now, time for some breakfast!"

"Yes!" the two of them said at once.

"Also, Metal, since starting from today you're finally going to be a real ninja, your training will be more serious now!" Lee announced.

"I'm ready for it, father!" Metal excitedly said.

"If you're going to increase Metal's training, you should also increase mine!" Tetsuko protested. "Or else the gap between the two of us will get even bigger!"

Watching her husband and children's antics, Yakumo just shook her head, and chuckled. Yes, no matter what others might said, she would never trade this for anything else.

...

Inuzuka Clan Compound

Kiba and Tamaki stood in front of the compound's many kennels, the latter holding the former's arm. Behind them was Akamaru, laying at their feet, looking half asleep. The two humans were looking at one of the kennels expectantly.

Inside the kennel was a girl of ten years old, with long dark brown hair and red fang-shaped tatoos on her cheeks, and, strangely enough, a black and white kitty resting on one of her shoulders, checking the cream-colored puppies around her one by one. She would grab a puppy, watch it, touch it, even smell it, before putting it down and move to the next.

She did this many times, until she finally found the one she thought it was the one for her. Nodding to herself, she grabbed it and exited the kennel.

"So, did you finally choose, Tamiko?" Kiba asked the little girl.

"I did, dad," Tamiko said, proudly showing the puppy she choose to her father, then to her mother, before she placed it on her free shoulder, opposite of the cat.

"Congratulations, squirt! You just didn't choose a pet, but a partner that will fight alongside you during all your battles!" Kiba said, ruffling the girl's hair, who giggled in return.

"It really looks healthy," Tamaki smiled at her daughter. "Did you choose a name?"

Tamiko grew pensive, and hummed as she placed a hand under her chin. Then, her face lit up as a name dawned upon her. "How about... Riku!"

"Riku... that's a cute name," Tamaki said, nodding.

"Yes! Between Riku and Sora, no one will be able to stop us!" the little girl cheered, as she hugged her two animal companions.

...

Akimichi Clan Compound

Inside the compund's main building, a dark skinned twelve year old girl with spiky auburn red hair and a hefty build got ready for the day.

"Mom, Dad, I'm going to the Academy! See you later!" the girl said, and as she headed out, she grabbed a couple bags of chips, put them on her backpack.

Karui entered the room, saw the girl grabbing the bags of snacks, and shook her head.

"Chocho, we're going to have a feast later. Do you really need to take those to the Academy?" Karui asked.

"Yep! I need to eat to cope with stress, and today's going to be super stressful," Chocho replied.

"But the exam was yesterday. Today they're only going to announce the teams," Karui said, placing her hands on her hips.

"Exactly! That's why I'm so nervous! Who knows whose my teammates are! They could be a pair of jerks that make fun of my weight?"

"If you're so concerned about your weight maybe you should watch what you eat then," Karui deadpanned.

"Come on honey, let her," Choji said, as he entered the room. "Besides, if you're worried about the feast, I can assure you that she's going to still have plenty of space."

"See? Daddy gets me!" Chocho said. "Anyway, I better get going!"

...

Nara Clan Compound

Just like with the Akimichis, at the entry of the Nara Clan Compound a young boy with black hair styled in a ponytail and big teal eyes prepared to leave.

"Alright, time to go to the Academy," the boy said. "I'll see you in the afternoon."

"Shikadai, wait!" the boy's mother, Temari, called. Besides her there was a nine year old girl with shoulder length sand blond hair, wearing a purple dress. "You're forgetting your backpack."

"He doesn't need it," Temari's husband and Shikadai's father, Shikamaru, walked to his wife. "There's no coursework on the last day, they'll simply tell them the team formations, and then they spend the rest of the day getting to know his new teammates and Jonin-sensei."

"My teammates will be two of my classmates, so I don't need to get to know them," Shikadai pointed out.

"Shikadai-niisan also says that he knows who his teammates are going to be," the girl stated.

"Exactly, Kazane-chan. So no need to make a big deal out of it," Shikadai said with a shrug.

"Perhaps. But not your Jonin-sensei," Shikamaru rebutted. "I was pretty nervous to meet mine."

"Also, remember not to come too late. Tonight the four of us going to celebrate you finally becoming a ninja

"I won't. Anyway, I better get going," Shikadai said, before leaving the house.

...

Yamanaka Clan Compound

Just like her former teammates were doing at the same time, Ino was also bidding her child a good day at the Academy.

"... and remember Inojin, don't get too upset if you're put with somebody you don't get along with," Ino advised her son. "I'm sure that, as you work together, you'll eventually be on better terms."

"And if not, you can always ask the Hokage to put you on another team," a smiling Sai supplied.

"It's okay. I'm not worried. I get along with everybody in class," Inojin said. "Well, I should get going!"

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Maito Gai's Park of Youth

Inside a large park surrounded by lush green trees, bogs and bushes, as well as many benches to sit down and swings and seesaws for children to play, a lone man stood, in front a statue in the middle of the park. A statue of the man the park was named after, giving a thumbs up and smiling energetically. Normally, there would be plenty of people enjoying the peaceful place, but given that it was early in the morning, nobody was there.

Nobody, except Kakashi Hatake. After the war was over, he no longer visited the Memorial Stone, but as soon as the park was made to honor the late Gai, he would spend a good chunk of his time there, just standing still in front of the statue.

"Figured I'd find you here," a new voice said from behind.

Kakashi turned around, and saw the only other living member of Team Minato. Rin Nohara had grown into quite a beauty. While still on the short side, she no longer looked like the young teen he remember unwillingly killing, but an actual woman.

Kakashi chuckled under his mask. "You talk as if you just unearthed a deep secret about me."

"Very funny," Rin said, crossing her arms.

"Though, I'm surprised to see you here," Kakashi said, turning his sight back to the statue. "Shouldn't you be in the Academy?"

"I still have time," Rin said. She then grew a little uneasy, and rubbed her arm. "Though... that's why I wanted to talk with you."

"Still doubting yourself, I see," Kakashi said. "I'd say that you're worrying over nothing and that you'll do fine, but I already told you that several times and it didn't work. Perhaps some reverse psychology should do the trick this time? Rin, you're an awful teacher, and you are going to become the laughing stock of all of Konoha's Jonin if you take a team of Genin, so save yourself the embarrassment."

Even if she wanted to protest, Rin couldn't help but giggle at Kakashi's jest.

"Is it working?" Kakashi asked.

"A little. I'm slowly feeling a fire inside me just to prove you wrong," Rin replied, still giggling.

"Glad I could help," Kakashi said. "But in all seriousness, you'll do fine. All of us worry over how well are we going to teach a new team, and in the end, we find our way. I mean, if Anko or I were able to do it, I'm sure you'll have no problem."

"Oh, right, Anko. I keep forgetting that she used to be a Jonin-sensei too. And to a trio of foreign ninjas!" Rin said in realization. "Hell, if Anko can do it, so can I!"

"That's the spirit," Kakashi said, smiling under the mask.

Rin turned around, ready to leave, but then he turned back at Kakashi, and with a sheepish expression said: "Please don't tell Anko I said that about her."

"My lips are sealed," Kakashi assured her.

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Sarutobi Clan Compound

On one of the compound's several training dojos, a middle aged black haired man with tan skin was sparring with a teenage girl, also black haired, but with paler skin tone and crimson red eyes.

Watching them from afar, sitting on a bench was a middle aged woman, with long raven hair and the same red eyes as the girl.

Both the man and the girl were armed with trench knives, which they channeled wind chakra through in order to increase their cutting power. Their fight consisted almost exclusively in trading swipes and parrys with the aforementioned weapons.

Upon noticing the man's breathe becoming a little heavier, the girl smirked a little. "Tired, dad?"

The man smirked. "Yes. Tired of how you think you still beat me when you're so green, Mirai."

"Come on Mirai, don't underestimate your father," the woman from the bench said. "Your father might not be what he used to be, but he still has a lifetime of battles worth of experience."

"Are you calling me old, Kurenai?" the man asked in a taunting manner. "Because I need to remind you that we're the same age."

The woman smirked. "Women don't get old, Asuma, they mature."

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Ninja Academy

Tenten was standing in front of the class, taking a look at the young ninjas who had been her students for the past year, as a small feeling of sadness gripped her soul over the fact that she wouldn't teach them again. She sighed, pushed that feeling to the back of her mind, and began speaking.

"First of all, let me congratulate all of you again for passing yesterday's final exam. It has been great to have all of you as my

pupils, but from today's onwards, the ninjas behind me," she spread her arms to emphasize the adult ninjas around her, their future Jonin-sensei. "-will be the ones to continue your formation and development. As you probably know, you'll be organized into four man cells, three of you under the supervision of a Jonin. Without further ado, here are the team formations..."

Tenten unfurled a scroll and started to read the names of the teams, followed by the Jonin-sensei they were assigned to. As she read the names, those called would get up from their seats and walk to their respective sensei, and follow them out of the class. Little by little, the class was starting to grow empty as the teams were announced.

Despite looking cool on the outside, Sarada was feeling a little nervous. She knew all the people in her class, but there were some she would prefer to have as teammates over others. Her ideal teammates would be her friends and deskmates Chocho Akimichi and Sumire Kakei, but she knew the chances of them being in the same team were slim.

From time to time, she couldn't help but shot a glance at her father, who was standing among the rest of the prospective Jonin-sensei, and wondered who would be the lucky or unlucky Genin placed under him.

"... Close Combat Squad: Namida Suzumeno, Wasabi Izumo, and Metal Lee! Your Jonin-sensei will be Hagane Senju!" Tenten announced.

The two girls mentioned, one with brown eyes and hair of the same color styled in two long pigtails, and another, taller than the first, with short spiky dark brown hair and green eyes that looked like those of a cat got up from their seats and cheered.

"Yes! We're in the same team together, Wasabi-chan!" the girl with the pigtails said, as she hugged her friend.

"Guess they saw how well we work as a team, Namida!" Wasabi replied.

The two of them, as well as Metal Lee, walked towards their sensei, a man in his late twenties with brown eyes and short spiky white hair, before the four of them left the classroom.

" Lucky. The son of the Fifth Hokage, with a powerful Bloodline Limit, and a war veteran when he was my age," Sarada thought, as she quickly reviewed Hagane's record.

"Tactical Squad: Shikadai Nara, Chocho Akimichi and Inojin Yamanaka! Your Jonin-sensei will be Kaida Senju!"

"Called it," Shikadai said, as he and Inojin got up from their seats.

"Ughh..." Chocho groaned, as she dropped her forehead on her table. "Ino-Shika-Cho again. Do these people have any imagination?"

Sarada, who was sitting besides her, patted her on the back sympathetically. "Guess they're sticking to what it works. Sorry we can't be together in the same team."

"It's okay, girl. We can still hang out when we aren't on the job," Chocho said, as she got up from her seat.

"Look at the bright side. You know Shikadai and Inojin very well, so you won't have problems working with them," Sumire, sitting at Sarada's other side, tried to reassure while smiling weakly at her.

The newest generation of Ino-Shika-Cho walked towards their sensei, Hagane's sister Kaida, who like him also had brown eyes and white hair, except hers was much longer and styled into a single ponytail.

" Lucky Chocho, Kaida's record is as impressive as her brother's. Plus not everybody can have a Jonin-sensei with Wood Release,"

Sarada thought as she watched her friend greet her new Jonin-sensei.

Once they vacated the classroom, Tenten continued.

"Medical Squad: Sarada Uchiha, Hako Kuroi, and Mitsuki! Your Jonin-sensei will be Rin Nohara!"

As the three of them got up, Sarada eyed her two new teammates. She didn't know too much about Mitsuki, other than he was the son of a high ranking Otogakure ninja, and used to hang out with Boruto a lot. However, he was a pleasant individual and competent ninja, so she didn't have any worries about working with him.

Her other teammate, Hako, was a goth girl who wore a long, dark purple dress with a cape, and carried a rather creepy pink stuffed doll with her at all times. Sarada knew that Hako could animate the doll and make it fight for her. She was also proficient in medical ninjutsu, so her choice for the team wasn't that surprising.

Then there was their sensei, Rin. She was a Sage and a good medic, but her reputation as a girl who was brought back from the dead with Wood Release and a healing factor by the infamous Obito Uchiha overshadowed that. Well, Chocho wasn't the only one whose sensei was a living legend with Wood Release anymore.

Before they could leave, Tenten continued reading from the list of teams.

"... Assault Squad, Boruto Uzumaki, Sumire Kakei, and Miyuki Yuki! Your Jonin-sensei will be Sasuke Uchiha!"

"Aw yeah!" Boruto cheered, as he shot up and pumped a fist into the air.

" *So, they assigned my dad to Boruto? Funny,*" Sarada thought, as he watched the excited blond walk down the stairs to meet her father. Following him was the purple haired, sailor fuku-wearing

Sumire, and the brown haired Miyuki. Sarada guessed that, after the incident with the Nue, they wanted a powerful Jonin to keep an eye on her in case something similar happens.

Well, Sarada was happy for her friend. Sasuke was a tough but fair teacher, so she'd learn a lot under him. Plus she'd appreciate being in the same team as the boy she had a crush on. As for the other girl, Miyuki, Tenten's daughter, Sarada knew that her Ice Release made her a fearsome ninjutsu specialist, hence her choice as a member of the Assault Squad. Though she couldn't help but think how the fact that her father Haku and Boruto's father Naruto were on the same team, the very first iteration of the Assault Squad, wasn't a coincidence.

Sarada looked at her father, who introduced himself to his new students, and waved him goodbye before she followed her new sensei and teammates out of the classroom.

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Uzumaki Residence, a few weeks later

As the door closed behind them, Naruto and Hinata got ready for an important day. They left Himawari and Urara under the care of one of the newly minted Genin teams for the rest of the day, given that they would be busy at least until nighttime. Even then, Naruto and Hinata were looking forward what they were going to do next, given that they were going to see a lot of people that they didn't have the chance to see that often.

While Naruto often favored more casual clothes for his everyday life, he was now wearing what he had dubbed his "Hokage Costume", which was essentially a long white cloak with red flames over his usual clothes -a look inspired by his biological father- plus the official Hokage hat. Hinata was also wearing a more formal attire: a light purple kimono blouse with dark blue floral patterns, combined with a dark purple knee-length skirt tied with a red obi.

"You ready, hime?" Naruto asked, offering his arm at her. "Our friends from outside the village awaits us."

"Of course," Hinata replied, wrapping her arms around his.

Naruto and Hinata flickered for a fraction of a second, before they vanished, reappearing somewhere else.

After the war, Naruto and Jiraiya had embarked on a lot of projects regarding fuinjutsu, making a lot of breakthroughs in the art. One of them was the rediscovery of Minato's Flying Thundergod Jutsu. It took them many years of research and trials, but they eventually managed to do it. Though given the power of the jutsu and the advanced knowledge in fuinjutsu required to use it, for the time being Naruto and Jiraiya were its only users.

They reappeared inside a domed building with a single room. Said room had a multitude of circular sealing arrays painted on the floor, similar to the seals that made the Moon Portal. And indeed, those arrays were bidirectional portals to another villages, born out of Naruto and Jiraiya's efforts in reverse engineering the Moon Portal. After that, they created a portal network that linked most ninja villages between each other, making traveling between villages much easier.

They still had noticeable downsides that stopped them from widespread use, such as needing to infuse them with a huge amount of chakra any time they needed to be used, hence they could only be used sparingly, and they were often saved for diplomatic visits and events. Such as the one that was going to happen in Konoha that same afternoon.

"Oh, it seems we're last," Hinata said, looking around. "Everybody else is here."

Aside from ninjas guarding the place, there were also many other people as well, who were waiting to greet the foreign ninjas. Among them, their former teammate Haku.

A portal started to glow with chakra, and from it, the Fifth Raikage, Darui, followed by Omoi, T and Killer B stepped out. Naruto and Hinata went to greet the foreign Kage, as well as Choji and Karui. Karui was wearing both a Konoha and Kumo forehead protectors, identifying her as Kumo's ambassador in Konoha.

Given the lack of tension between ninja villages as well as the Village Portals making traveling much safer, many Kages and Village Heads didn't feel the need to bring bodyguards with them. However, many, like Darui, brought some people with them not as a security detail -even if they were officially- but so they could see the friends they were now living in other villages, such as Karui.

"Raikage. Welcome to Konoha," Naruto greeted him with a smile.

"It's an honor to see you, Raikage-sama," Karui said, making a slight bow. She then went to greet her former sensei and teammates, engaging them in conversation.

"Thanks," Darui replied, tipping his Kage hat. He started to look around. "So, I'm the first to arrive?"

"So it seems," Naruto said with a shrug.

"Hey there Number Nine! I can see you're pretty fine!" Killer B rapped, as he fist bumped Naruto. "And Hinata, as you can tell, I'm pretty happy to see you as well!"

"The feeling's mutual, B-san," the Hyuga replied.

" *And hello to you too, Gyuki,*" Naruto mentally greeted the Tailed Beast sealed inside his Kumo friend.

" ***Nice to see you as well, Naruto,***" Gyuki replied. Upon noticing that a certain somebody remained silent, he added: ***"Hey, Kurama, aren't you going to greet your beloved brother?"***

" ***No. Now let me sleep in peace,***" Kurama grumbled.

" *Heh, classic Kurama,*" Naruto thought, sweatdropping a little. He then addressed Killer B. "By the way, didn't Yugito come this time around?" Naruto asked.

"Sadly, Number Two is busy with a mission, since you know how she likes such expeditions," Killer B said with a shrug.

After exchanging greetings, the Raikage and his small entourage went with Choji and Karui to the Akimichi compound, where they would spend the few days they were staying in Konoha.

A few minutes after that, another portal glowed. From this one, Kurotsuchi, the Tsuchikage, emerged, followed by a couple of Iwa ninjas that Naruto didn't recognize, and one he did: a very tall man wearing a red heavy armor. He and Hinata went to greet them, as well as a kunoichi with short black hair in an Iwa uniform, wearing both a Konoha and Iwa forehead protectors, marking her as Iwa's ambassador in Konoha.

"Welcome to Konoha, Tsuchikage," Naruto greeted her.

"We hope your stay here is a pleasant one," Hinata added.

"Thanks. I'm sure it will be," Kurotsuchi replied.

"And hey, good to see you, Han!" Naruto said, shaking hands with the towering man.

"Likewise, Naruto," Han replied, nodding. "Roshi sends his regards, and laments that he wasn't able to come. A man his age tends to have health problems."

"Hey, no big deal. I can always pay him a visit once the Summit is done," Naruto replied.

"Then again, he's still in better shape than grandpa," Kurotsuchi interjected, sounding a little dejected.

"Honestly, it's amazing that that old coot managed to live that long," Han replied, earning a glare from the Tsuchikage. "What? I'm just saying what everybody is thinking. You know I'm somebody who minces his words."

Before Kurotsuchi could say or do something that he might regret later, she decided to get out of there and head to her hotel room, with her small entourage trailing behind.

Another portal activated. This time, it wasn't a Kage that appeared, but Shino, Fu, and a pair of children: a ten year old boy with spiky green hair, and a seven year old girl with black hair tied in two low pigtails.

Given how powerful she had grown during the Fourth War, Shibuki decided to step down and appoint Fu as the new Village Head of Takigakure. Shibuki's plan was to make Fu into the face of the village in order to improve its standing, while he took care of the administrative side of the job. His plan worked, and Taki received an unprecedented amount of customers, which brought much needed money to not only repair, but also improve the village.

Once the war was over, Shino and Fu continued their long distance relationship, though they put more effort into seeing each other in person. When Jiraiya started to appoint ambassadors to other villages, Naruto was quick to suggest Shino's name for the position of Konoha's ambassador in Taki, much to the Aburame's silent delight. Shino gave up his position as the Aburame Clan Heir and passed it to a younger cousin, and a year later, he and Fu married.

Shino survived the honeymoon without any broken bones, but he spent the next weeks walking with a limp.

Even if Fu wasn't a Kage, she was invited to the Summit. Given that ignoring the minor villages is what caused the walking nightmare that was Pain, the five Kages decided that the minor villages deserved to have a voice in matters that affected them, even if they didn't have

as much influence as the great villages. Hence the Kage Summit was changed to Ninja Summit.

Naruto also extended an invitation to the Land of Iron, but the samurai politely declined, claiming not to want to get involved in the affairs of ninjas unless it was strictly necessary.

Naruto and Hinata, as well as Kiba, Tamaki and their daughter Tamiko walked towards the newcomers.

"Hello. Welcome to-URK!"

"Little bro!" Fu interrupted Naruto's greeting by pulling him in an almost literal bone breaking hug. Then, after noticing Hinata, she dropped Naruto, and gave Hinata another bear hug. "Sky sister!"

"Fu... can't... breathe..." Hinata wheezed.

" ***Your brat is just as a nuisance as an adult as she was as a kid, Chomei,***" Kurama chastised, annoyed at the commotion going outside of his seal that perturbed his rest.

" ***Fu is a very lively girl, and that's the best part about her! Why should I want that to change?***" Chomei asked.

"Oops, sorry!" Fu sheepishly said, placing Hinata on the ground. "You know how happy I am to see you guys again!"

"We can tell," Naruto said, still wincing in pain, as he pulled himself back to his feet. He then saw Shino engaged in conversation with Kiba and Tamaki, while Tamiko was talking to the two kids. "Boy, Daisuke and Sawako have grown a lot since the last time I saw them!"

"Of course they have grown! They have a big mommy after all!" Fu laughed. "And their daddy is no slouch either."

While Shino had grown into quite the tall man, his wife still had a few centimeters on him. In fact, even if Naruto himself had also grown

quite a lot, he had to still to look up to the green haired woman. Though, much to the blond's relief, the Taki leader hadn't grown any bigger since the Fourth Ninja War.

"So, where are Boruto and Himawari? I can't wait to see them!" Fu excitedly said.

"Boruto is on his first mission outside the village," Hinata said, making Fu deflate a little. "Though Himawari and Urara are at home, so you can drop by later to tell them hi."

"Oh, yes! I forgot you guys had another baby! I can't wait to see her!" Fu gushed. "In fact... Daisuke, Sawako, come here!"

Her two children quickly did so.

"Hey, did you hear that Boruto and Himawari have a little sister? Why don't you take Tamiko go and meet her?" Fu suggested. "I'll drop by once Naruto and I are done with all the boring grownup stuff."

"Alright, mom," Daisuke said.

He and his sister grabbed each of Tamiko's hands, quickly run out of the bulding, jumped into the air... and grew two insect-like wings out of their backs, allowing them to soar into the sky while carrying the Inuzuka girl. While it was obvious that Chomei had something to do with this new Bloodline Limit, others thought that their Aburame genes also played a role.

Once the greetings were over, Shino and Fu left the domed building, followed by Tamaki and Kiba. The Takigakure family would spend their stay in Konoha at the Aburame Clan Compound.

Another portal came to life. From this one emerged a trio of women decked in Amegakure uniforms. Naruto and Hinata moved to greet them, as well as Konan.

After Konan's sentence was finally over, she asked the new Amegakure leadership to grant her the job of ambassador so she could continue her work of better relationships between the great and minor villages, something that was granted without much fuss.

After the Fourth Ninja War, Amegakure sadly entered in a period of unrest and instability due Konan not being there to put order. The rest of the villages tried to help, but they didn't dare to interfere too much with their internal affairs, hoping that they could reach a solution on their own. During the first few years, Amegakure went through a multitude of leaders that didn't last very long in the position, most of them retiring.

"Greeting, Ajisai," Naruto told her. "I hope you find your stay in Konoha to your liking."

It seems that things finally were starting to get better when Ajisai, a woman Naruto's age who was one of Amegakure's most promising ninjas, was made its new Village Head.

Ajisai was a pretty woman with purple hair that she often wore tied in a messy bun. Her two escorts were also her former teammates: Fuyo, a girl with black hair styled in a bang so long it covered half of her face, purple eyes, who carried an umbrella strapped to her back, and Suiren, a woman with long, green spiky hair that emerged from beneath her bandanna, whose lower half of her face was covered by a dark blue mask, similar to Kakashi.

"If it's going to be like the other times, I'm sure it will be," the purplette answered. Then, she looked at Konan, and bowed. "We're honored to meet you again, Angel-sama."

Konan was tired of telling them not to call her that anymore, but they would never listen. So she simply replied with a mere "thank you, me too," and offered to lead them to the hotel rooms she had reserved for them.

Once the foursome of Ame kunoichis were out of sight, another portal activated. From this one emerged Mei Terumi, her husband Zabuza, and a truckload of children, making one hell of a racket as soon as they stepped out of the portal.

"Keep your mouth shut, you noisy brats!" Zabuza bellowed, and the kids instantly grew silent.

Unsurprisingly, Mei's clan wasn't happy when her firstborn daughter, Kasumi, was only born with Lava Release. Her first son and second kid, Satoshi, was born with both Lava Release and Boil Release. But just one kid with both Bloodline Limits wasn't enough for them, and they kept pressuring her to have more children, until finally her sixth and youngest kid, a little girl named Haruka, was also born with both Bloodline Limits.

The clan elders pointed out that one in each three children of Mei would manifest both Bloodline Limits, so if she had three more children, at least one of them was bound to have both powers.

Mei's response came in the form of a surgery to ligate her fallopian tubes.

Naruto and Hinata quickly moved to greet them. So did Haku and Tenten, who were patiently waiting for the Kirigakure leaders to show up.

"Hey there, Mei, Zabuza!" Naruto greeted. "It's so great to have you here!"

Mei smiled at the blond. "The feeling's mutual, Naruto. Hinata, it's a pleasure to see you too."

Hinata smiled and made a small bow.

"So, wasn't Utakata able to come this time?" Naruto asked.

"Hotaru-san is almost due any day now, so I don't blame him for wanting to stay close to her," Mei explained. "And before you ask, we got another letter from Yagura and Aiko a couple weeks ago. They just left the Land of Demons, and they're now planning their next destination."

"Good to see that they're doing well," Naruto said, nodding in satisfaction.

Haku then took the chance to greet his former master and his wife.

"Mizukage-sama. Zabuza-sama. Welcome to Konoha," Haku greeted them with his usual politeness.

"I'll never miss a chance to see you again, kid," Zabuza said, patting Haku on the shoulder.

"Uncle Haku!" Mei and Zabuza's oldest, Kasumi, quickly ran to her honorary uncle. "It's so great to see you!"

"The feeling's mutual, Kasumi. You look strong. Have you been training?" Haku asked.

"You bet! I told Kumori-sensei to increase the pace of my training. While mom and dad are busy with the summit, let's have a spar! I want to show you the new jutsu I've been learning!" the young woman excitedly said.

"I can't wait to see them," Haku said. "Perhaps you could also show them to Miyuki, given that she recently became a kunoichi herself."

Haku and Tenten lead the Kirigakure family out of the domed building. Normally, Haku offered Mei and Zabuza to stay at his house whenever they came to Konoha. However, the more and more children they had, the less of a viable option it became, and in the end, they had to resort to hotel rooms like other foreign leaders.

Once again, another portal glowed up. From this one, a small contingent of Otogakure ninjas emerged, lead by a white haired man that looked almost identical to Naruto's adopted brother Hagane: his clone created by Orochimaru, Hebimaru. While most of the Oto ninjas appeared to be escorts, there was a kunoichi with light green hair styled on two long bangs that framed her face, deep blue eyes, and a somewhat gloomy disposition who had her arms wrapped around his.

And once again, Naruto and Hinata went to greet the new party, along with Hebimaru's sister Hebiko, who was accompanied by Dosu, Zaku and Kin.

After Orochimaru's final defeat at the hands of his former teammates, Hebiko and Hebimaru took over the remnants of the fallen Sanin's forces, and they turned them into a legitimate ninja village in the Land of Sound. After a few years, Hebiko was sent to Konoha to act as Otogakure's ambassador. Dosu, Zaku and Kin started to work under her to make sure the alliance between the two villages remained strong.

"Hebimaru. It's great to see you. Welcome to Konoha," Naruto greeted the white haired man. "Looking good, Kagero."

Kagero Fuuma, Hebimaru's wife, merely acknowledged the compliment with a nod.

"Thank you, Hokage. I'm glad to be here," Hebimaru said, before turning towards Hebiko. "Hello, sister. I'm happy to see you. As well as you, Dosu, Zaku, Kin. May I ask where is your sensei?"

"Can't you guess? She went to Kiri to visit her boyfriend," Zaku answered with a snort.

"However, I'm sure she'll return before you'll have to depart to Oto, in the case you want to greet her as well" Dosu told him.

"Then again, if she's late, she can always come to visit. That's what the portals are for," Hebimaru said with a shrug. "By the way, Hokage, how's my son doing?"

"Mitsuki's doing great. He graduated with the rest of his class a few weeks ago," Naruto explained.

"Can we see him?" Kagero asked. "It's been quite some time since the last time we spoke to him."

"I believe he hasn't left the village, so I can't see why not," Naruto said. Kagero nodded once again, pleased with the answer.

"Come. I'll show you where you'll be staying for the duration of the summit," Hebiko said.

Hebimaru nodded, and he and his ninjas followed his sister out of the domed building.

And then, another portal activated. Naruto beamed upon seeing Gaara, the current Kazekage, accompanied his entourage, emerged from the portal. Of course, Naruto and Hinata wasted no time to greet them. So did Shikamaru and Temari -though Temari had to wake up her husband first, who had fell asleep slouching against a wall while they waited.

"Gaara!" Naruto excitedly said, as he greeted his old friend and formerly fellow jinchuriki with a warm hug. "Heh, I was worrying you weren't going to come."

"I may be a little tardy, but you you know I'd never miss such an important event. Besides, I always appreciate a chance to visit Konoha, and its wonderful people," Gaara said.

"Not to mention the hot springs!" one of Gaara's escorts, Yukata, happily chimed in.

"Yukata..." Matsuri groaned.

"It's okay. I'm sure there will be time for all of us to enjoy the hot springs once the summit is over," Hinata said.

Aside from his wife Matsuri, oldest adopted son Shinki and biological twin daughters Asashi and Kairi -who looked like small versions of Matsuri with red hair instead of their mother's brown-, they had also brought Matsuri's old teammates Mikoshi and Yukata, as well as his brother Kankuro and his wife Sari. Sari was a friend of Matsuri that she introduced to Kankuro while playing matchmaker. Much to her joy, the two of them hit it off and got married after a couple years of engagement.

"Hey there, little brothers," Temari greeted Gaara and Kankuro. "Ready to spend some time with your beloved big sister you don't get to see anymore?"

"No, but it's not like we're getting a say in that," Kankuro replied, making Temari fume.

Shikamaru let out a sympathetic sigh. "Man, he's going to pay for that comment so badly..."

After a few more exchanges of greetings, the Suna group followed Temari and Shikamaru to the Nara Clan Compound, where they would stay, while Naruto and Hinata stayed there to greet the leaders of the remaining villages that hadn't arrived yet.

...

Hokage Tower, Afternoon

Naruto walked at a hastened pace as he headed towards the Council Room, where the Ninja Summit was going to be held. He had tried to get some work done before it began, and didn't realize how much time he had spent swamped by the cursed paperwork. He tried to remind himself that it wasn't that late.

"So, you finally show up."

Slouched besides the double doors to the Council Room was Naruto's adoptive father and previous Hokage, Jiraiya. Despite a decade and a half had passed since the ending of the war, the Toad Sage didn't look a year older than he did back then, almost as if the Sannin was frozen in time. The reason, though, is that Tsunade was worried that if Jiraiya continued to age while she kept her true age hidden, the fact that she masked her age would be even more noticeable, so she pretty much forced him to use the same variation of the Transformation Jutsu she used to maintain her looks. Jiraiya wasn't a vain man, but he decided to humor his wife.

"You know, all of them are already there, and they're wondering when do you plan to show up," Jiraiya said.

Naruto cringed a little, and felt a bead of sweat trickle down his temple. "Oh boy... I didn't realize it was this late."

Naruto walked in front of the door, but didn't open it. He just took a deep breath, and stared at the door without making an attempt to open it.

"Nervous, kid?" Jiraiya asked. "This is going to be your first Ninja Summit as Hokage, so it's natural if you are."

"I know. Doesn't make it any better," the blond replied.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Jiraiya offered.

Naruto shook his head. "I'm the Hokage now. I have to do this on my own. Anyway, let's go."

Naruto entered the Council Room, greeted the foreign leaders, apologized for being late, and officially began the meeting. Seeing that he was no longer needed, Jiraiya left the place via Flying Thundergod.

...

Hokage Tower, Rooftop

Jiraiya appeared at the top of the Hokage Tower, where there was already somebody there. His wife, Tsunade, leaning against the railing, watching the village that sprawled in front of her. The place that has been their home for such a long time.

Wordlessly, Jiraiya walked towards her, and leaned on the railing as well.

"So, how did it go?" Tsunade asked.

"I think he has this under control," Jiraiya asked. "I wanted to help him, but he wanted to fly alone."

"He doesn't need us anymore, huh? Good for him," Tsunade softly said.

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence, as they admired the village beneath them. Most of the old buildings were now obscured by shiny, silver-white, tall skyscrapers. Asphalt roads covered what used to be pure dirt pathways. Airships slowly flew above the village below. Tsunade let out a sigh.

"I just don't get used to how much the village changed..." Tsunade began. "Remember the sorry state the village was when we arrived after the Nine Tails attacked? It's hard to believe that this is the very same village as before."

"The village? Heh, if that was the hard part," Jiraiya snorted. "I still need to remind myself that Naruto is a married man with children, and not that hyperactive brat we raised and trained."

Tsunade turned around, and looked at the Hokage monument, Naruto's face carved besides Jiraiya's. "Me too. It still feels weird to see his face on that mountain."

"And the same thing goes for Kaida and Hagane. I never pictured them as having their own Genin team," Jiraiya added.

"Yes. Everything changes and moves forward. And look at us. Looking the same way we did so many years ago," Tsunade said, with a chuckle. "Everything changes except us. The old fossils of a bygone age."

"Perhaps on the outside. But on the inside, I think we did change as well," Jiraiya said, placing an arm around her shoulders. "Remember when we first arrived? Neither of us were in a very good place. Until we got our heads out of the gutter, and started to work to make things better. For us and for everybody."

He then waved his other arm at the village.

"And this is the result," Jiraiya said, smiling at Tsunade.

"Still, I don't feel like this is our village anymore," Tsunade said with some sad nostalgia.

"Because it's not. Now this is the village of Naruto and the younger generation. Which, just like we did before, they will nurture and protect it before passing it down to their own children," Jiraiya explained.

"And where does that leave us?" Tsunade asked.

Jiraiya's smile was a savage one now. "That's the best part! We now get to enjoy the fruits of a job well done in our retirement! We play with our grandkids during the day, get wasted on the afternoon, and have plenty of bedroom fun at night!"

This drew a laugh from Tsunade, who grabbed Jiraiya's hand on her shoulder, while she rested her head on his own. Jiraiya laughed as well. "So, what we've been doing since the war ended? Well, it sounds like a good retirement plan. Say, how about if we drop by

Naruto and Hinata's house and take their kids for a ride? I feel like spoiling them a little."

"You know, Hinata forbade us from taking the kids to casinos again," Jiraiya reminded her.

"Hey, there are plenty of ways to spoil kids. Plus, we need to do something with all the money we have, and I think it will be better spent on them than in slot machines," Tsunade replied.

"Guess I can't argue with that."

Jiraiya made a hand seal, and their bodies flickered for a second before they vanished from there.

The End

Author's Note:... and that's a wrap!

As you can see, the epilogue was split into two parts: the first one, which focuses on the Academy and the formation of the new teams, is to show what the Konoha characters have been up to since the war ended, and the second part, focused on the coming Ninja Summit, is to show how the other villages are doing. I wish I could have included more characters rather than merely mentioning them (like Anko or some of the revived jinchuriki) but the chapter was getting a little cluttered and I wanted to cover most of the bases.

I remember sometime ago that a reviewer suggested the idea of Naruto and Hinata to have a redheaded child on top of Boruto and Himawari, and I said, sure, why not?

Hey, remember how I said that my original plan for Yakumo was to introduce her as Kurenai's replacement, before I ended up scrapping it? Well, as part of her character arc, Yakumo was going to befriend and bond with Lee when the latter offered to

help train the former in taijutsu, as well as their similar predicaments. Unfortunately, by the time I introduced Yakumo, there was no more time for such a subplot to happen. Still, I wanted to keep the couple, so I put an abridged version of what Lee and Yakumo's romance would have been had I written it into the story.

Since Shino no longer lives in Konoha, Tenten takes his place as an Academy teacher. Truth be told, I hated how both Shino and Tenten were treated post-war, with Tenten having a failing weapon shop and Shino having a job he sucks at. I always thought that Tenten could be a pretty good Academy teacher, at least when it comes to the practical side like hand to hand combat, shuriken throw and all that jazz. Plus hey, there's the whole thing with her mentoring Konohamaru in the Hanabi Gaiden.

Is it any surprise that I also ended up changing the teams of the new generation (minus Ino-Shika-Cho)? I don't know if I ever mentioned it here, but Sumire is my favorite character introduced in Boruto, so of course I'm going to put her in the same team as him. Though unlike Sakura, I actually like Sarada a lot, and if it wasn't for Sasuke being Boruto's Jonin-sensei, I would have placed her with Boruto and Sumire as well. I guess there's no surprise here that Konohamaru, Udon and Moegi aren't Jonin-senseis, given that the former is only mentioned a couple times in the story and the latter two not even that, so it wouldn't make any sense to give them such roles. There's also Hanabi, but I preferred other characters to be Jonin-sensei.

I hope you liked the little tribute to Gai's sacrifice in the war. He might be gone but won't be forgotten.

Now, a few things you may feel the need to ask about:

-Yes, Naruto still has Six Paths Sage Mode and a piece of chakra of the other eight Tailed Beasts, and both halves of

Kurama merged into one. Hinata and Hanabi still have the Tenseigan.

-In case you're wondering, Naruto's students are Mirai Sarutobi, Shizuka Uchiha and Seiichi Gekko (Hayate and Yugao's son). Originally their sensei was going to be Hinata, but I felt that Naruto being a Jonin-sensei would make more sense (I had this idea that Jiraiya would task him to train a team first as a requirement to become Hokage, given that every previous Hokage minus Hashirama trained a team).

-Yeah, in the end I managed to salvage Mitsuki despite killing Orochimaru off. He's now the biological son of Hebimaru and Kagero Fuuma.

-Yes, both Haku's daughters can use Ice Release even if I only mentioned one of them having it.

-All of Neji and Karin's children have the Byakugan, but only some of them have Karin's ability to heal others by being bitten. Urara has the Byakugan as well.

-Iwabee Yuino and Denki Kaminarimon still exist and were in Boruto's class, but I didn't feel like featuring them since I'm not that big of a fan of them.

-If it wasn't clear, the stuff with Sumire Kakkei happen exactly as in canon.

-While some characters weren't shown to be in a relationship (like Hanabi) their status is more a "Schrodinger's Cat" kind of thing; just because I haven't mentioned a significant other doesn't mean that they don't exist.

-If you're worried about any character I haven't mentioned like, say, Iruka (again, I couldn't cover everybody), rest assured that they are doing okay and they didn't die offscreen.

And given that the story began with Jiraiya and Tsunade, I felt that it would be appropriate if it ended with them. Plus, since the chapter begins with one of the two main couples, Naruto and Hinata, it would be fitting if it closed with the other main couple as well.

Thanks to Ookami88 for betareading this chapter.

FINAL AUTHOR'S NOTES

And thus, after a long process that lasted more than four years, this story finally comes to an end. On one side, I feel relieved that this monster of a story is finally over, and I can now rest for a little. Seriously, I don't even remember what's to sit down in front of the PC and being able to relax without any writing commitment gnawing at the back of my mind. Though on the other side, I'm a little sad, given that I spent so much time working on this, and for the most part, I had a lot of fun writing it.

Looking back, I see many things that I'm very proud of (like Hinata's character arc), others that I could have done better (like the jinchuriki arcs) and others that I lament I wasn't able to do at all (like the aforementioned Yakumo arc). Though, if there's one thing I didn't regret doing, is the team formations. Or at least, putting Naruto and Hinata in the same team. Had I left the teams untouched (and put Haku, Karin and Tamaki on the same team) I would have to come up with something to switch Hinata and Sakura, because man, I REALLY love to write Hinata, especially with Naruto, while writing Sakura was always such a chore that filled me with dread.

Now, before you ask, I want to get this out of the way: no, I don't plan to write anything else related to this story, or even Naruto in general, so don't ask if I'm going to adapt Boruto, given that I exhausted my last Naruto creative juices writing this. Hell, I was basically writing the last arc while running on fumes, because I didn't want to leave this story unfinished when I was so close to the end.

When I began writing this story, I had many goals that I wanted to accomplish, such as a fully fleshed out relationship between Naruto and Hinata, patching many plotheoles from canon, Hinata getting the Tenseigan, saving Fu and giving her a big role, making Sasuke more likeable and giving him the kind of relationship with Itachi he never had in canon... and while looking back, I can see I could have done some things better, in the end I'm satisfied with the final result, so I don't feel the need to write anymore Naruto.

I know many of you wanted to see more things, like maybe this version's story of Naruto and Hinata's wedding, or the battle against Momoshiki and Kinshiki, but no, the story ends here, at least on my part. As you know from Hanabi Gaiden, I allow other writers to write oneshots/sidestories of this fanfic, so if you want to see the above mentioned events or even write a sequel, you can write it yourself. Before you discuss the details with me first, of course.

Even if I'm no longer going to write for Naruto, I do plan to keep on writing, since it's something I enjoy a lot. My next fanfic more than likely will be about the Pokemon Anime (Amourshipping FTW!), though I'd also like to write stuff for Star Wars, My Hero Academia and Miraculous Ladybug. Though, one thing is sure, even if I do plan to update my stories regularly, I'm not going to keep a regular schedule like with this story. Not only did it cause me a lot of stress and some friction with the betareaders, but I think I spoiled the readers updating so often and always on schedule. I don't want my stories to be taken for granted.

Thanks to my betas Grimlock987, gio08 and especially Ookami88, who betaread more than half the chapters of this story.

Also thanks to FoxBlueReaver, Darth Caesar, Gamemaster and Kagetsuki88 at TVTropes for keeping the TVTropes page of this fanfic always updated, as for their work on the amazing character page (I know other people contributed to the page as well, but those four are the ones that do more often and thus their names stand out the most).

Of course, thanks a lot to all the people who left a review on this story. Seriously, the fact that this story has literally thousands of reviews makes me super happy. When I started writing this, I considered getting more than five hundred reviews a success, so this went beyond my wildest dreams.

And lastly, even if the chances of him reading this are close to zero, thanks to Mashashi Kishimoto for writing Naruto. I know I criticized him a lot regarding plot holes, plot decisions, characters and the like, but even with all its flaws, I still think that Naruto was a great story and I wouldn't have written this fic (which I consider deep down a huge love letter to Naruto) if I didn't like and enjoy Naruto to begin with (and that's part of the reason of why I won't write a sequel covering Boruto).

I guess that's all. I know that some of you expressed sadness of seeing this story ending, but hey, it was inevitable. No story can last forever. It was either that, or being abandoned. Instead, take joy it was the former (I'm sure all of you already know how frustrating it feels when a writer stops updating their story for whatever reason). So I hope once you finish reading, you find at least some satisfaction and closure. Plus hey, I'm going to take your sadness as a compliment: it means that this story didn't outstay its welcome. At least nobody's saying "ugh, thank goodness it's finally over", which was my reaction to the Naruto manga finally ending.

Now, I bid all of you goodbye. Until we meet again.

SON OF THE SANNIN

Written by Ander Arias

October 11th, 2016 - March 24th, 2021

THE END

Thank you for reading!